

Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath – Mark 2:23-3:6

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was initially intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please contact Pastor Derek at Derek.berry1990@gmail.com.

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 2:23-3:6....

*²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him:²⁶ how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" ²⁷ And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." **3** ¹ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." ⁴ And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*

Growing up, my family often used items in ways they were never meant to be used. The best example is how my mom frequently sprayed raid on geckos that would find themselves in our home. On the front of the can, the makers of the raid have indicated the types of creatures their product is meant to kill, namely roaches. Nevertheless, she would waste an entire can on one gecko. Butter containers are another example. In particular ethnic minority homes, you'll find anything but butter inside butter containers.

It's interesting how we so often distort the original use of products for our purposes. This is what the Pharisees found themselves doing with the Sabbath. They completely missed the reason God gave the Israelites the Sabbath, and they've now twisted it for their purposes. Thankfully we have the creator himself on the scene setting the record straight regarding both the original intent of the Sabbath and a hint at the future fulfillment of the Sabbath. So, let's dive into the text and see what God has to say.

We'll start with the second pericope found in chapter 3 and then work back to chapter 2. The final verse of chapter 2 provides a perfect landing spot for the sermon this morning. We'll briefly review these six verses making quick applications in the process, then transition to chapter 2, where we'll spend the bulk of our time this morning. Let's reread verses 1-2 of chapter 3.

Similar to what we find in verse 21 of chapter 1, Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath, assumedly to teach God's Word, as was his custom. In verse 2, we see the Pharisees watching Jesus like a hawk, hoping they could find some accusation against him. Brothers and sisters, beware of possessing a pharisaic critical spirit. Are you always on the lookout for what's wrong? And seldom on the lookout for what's right that you may encourage and honor another? In this area, at least, you may resemble the Pharisees more than you do Jesus. There's nothing wrong with pointing out errors or offering constructive and godly criticism. And we, as God's people, must learn how to receive and give godly criticism. However, there's a vast difference between offering criticism to another to build them up and always being on a witch hunt to point out how things can be done better because you want to get something off your chest. The Pharisees were enslaved to their critical hearts, and they did their best to enslave others as well. Beloved, avoid this error. Be charitable to others. Don't be known as one who lurks in the corner, happily pouncing on every mistake in others.

Let's keep reading verses 3-4. This question should be a no-brainer. Yes, doing good and saving lives on the Sabbath is lawful. As we'll see, nothing in the Torah would prohibit these acts. However, their non-response shows that they don't honestly care about people. They lack compassion. They've forgotten that the second greatest commandment is love for neighbor and that all of the commands flow from this one. Therefore, if your Sabbath produces a callous heart for your neighbor, you have a flawed understanding! The Sabbath had lost its true meaning with these Pharisees. It was more of a competition than a means of connecting with God's heart to bless his people. God forbid that we do the same with our local churches!

Let's read verse 5. This is holy and righteous anger displayed by the Lord Jesus at their hardness of heart. As we'll discover in detail soon, the Sabbath was about restoring the diminished and replenishing the drained. Therefore, to heal this man's withered hand is to do exactly what the Sabbath is all about!¹ However, the Pharisees were more concerned with their tradition and hatred for the Lord of glory. Their posture is a clear rejection of the life-giver himself. Consider what Bible Scholar Rick Watts says,

“The Torah, which offered life and good, is perverted to keep a man crippled, to turn the synagogue into a house of bondage, and so it makes them mortal foes of the one who himself gives the life and does the good that the Torah promised.”²

Jesus is angry at the self-righteous disposition of these religious leaders. The problem is that they didn't see themselves in the story of this disabled man who needed a savior. The redemptive themes on full display went over their head because they didn't believe they needed saving. They should have taken the opportunity to find solidarity with a man whose only hope is the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. If you're here this morning and this is your first time hearing the Christian gospel. You, too, must understand your need for this Jesus, not to heal a withered hand but a withered soul. He's the only sacrifice for sin that you desperately need. I'd love to discuss the gospel and how to respond by faith in more detail after service with anyone who wishes.

¹ Tim Keller, *Jesus the King: Understanding the Life and Death of The Son of God*, p. 41

² Rikk Watts “Mark,” in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, p. 144

Let's read verse 6. Here we find an unlikely alliance. But as the adage goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Pharisees and the Herodians were at odds with one another. These were wealthy and influential supporters of Herod. They liked Rome being in power. Therefore, too much political unrest was bad business for these individuals. They supported Roman culture and governing and didn't desire the rule of a Messiah. The Pharisees were waiting for Messiah because they hated the authority of Rome. So, for different reasons, both groups could agree that they needed to eliminate Jesus. So, they plot against our Lord.

Now let's set this entire Sabbath conversation in further context. Please turn with me to chapter 2, verse 23. Before we dive into the text, I'd like to set the scene. We're about to go on a journey. This is the journey of biblical theology regarding the Sabbath. Let me define biblical theology. This is an actual discipline. Although it may sound like I'm referring to theology that's biblical, it's referring to an existing paradigm or way of studying the Scriptures. When summarizing biblical theology, New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner says,

“[biblical theology] asks what themes are central to the biblical writers in their historical context and attempts to discern the coherence of such themes.”³

In other words, biblical theology traces the development of a theme throughout all of Scripture. It's continually asking how texts in one part of Scripture relate to all other texts. Biblical theology is concerned with the big picture. And as Christians, we should be good biblical theologians. When you read a text in the Old Testament, ask yourself how this fits into the bigger message of the gospel. How does this theme unfold and find its culmination in the Lord Jesus and his work?

So, let's start by considering some Old Testament background concerning the Sabbath. The first occurrence of the Sabbath is in Exodus when Yahweh commands the Israelites to rest on the seventh day from gathering food. This anticipates the Sabbath command in the Ten Commandments in the following few chapters.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. -Exodus 20:8-11

And then, we see a continual reoccurrence of this command, particularly in the Torah or the first five books of the Old Testament. These reoccurrences provide further detail and development concerning the Sabbath. For instance, in Exodus 31:12-17, the Sabbath is called a sign and covenant between God and his people, so capital punishment resulted from disobedience. To break the Sabbath meant to violate the covenantal relationship with God, and hence the penalty was death.

³ Thomas Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10 (2006): 22

Some would argue that the Sabbath is a universal moral command, similar to lying or stealing, in which all nations will be judged. However, I'm not convinced of this conclusion based on the Scriptures. Especially when you consider that the institution of the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant God made with Israel alone. So, although the command was based on the creation account in Genesis 2, it was aimed at Israel as a nation, similar to the dietary restrictions given to Israel. Therefore, the Sabbath is not a universal ordinance for all of mankind. That'll come in handy later.

If I could summarize the particulars of the Sabbath law⁴,

1. All daily work must cease by everyone.
2. Those who profane the Sabbath must die.
3. Plowing and harvesting must cease.
4. No fire could be kindled in homes.
5. No one could carry wares and goods into the community to sell.

And since the land was also God's possession in connection with the covenant with Israel, it too must be given a Sabbath every seventh year, which acts as a rest from its seasonal cultivation. So, what's the reason for the commandment? There seem to be both vertical and horizontal, theological and social, reasons for the Sabbath. Again, this was a perpetual covenant between God and his people. The sign was a reminder of Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt and, therefore, a sign of God's grace and authority. But this also provided workers, servants, foreigners, and even animals a regular rest from their work. So, there's a social element that's meant to be a blessing and relief for the people of God. Therefore, hearing this command should've caused the assembly to rejoice in thanksgiving and not lament because of a heavy yoke. Who here gets upset about a day off? That is unless the day off ends up being more burdensome than your typical day at work, which is what happens with the Jews.

Now, what about the observance of the Sabbath? The celebration is not detailed in the Old Testament, but we have bits and pieces. There was a special burnt offering that took place on the Sabbath. And Psalm 92 lists activities the Israelites could engage in on the Sabbath. This includes giving thanks, singing praises, declaring God's loyalty and faithfulness, rejoicing with instruments, and trusting God's justice. I like what John Murray says,

“...the sabbath... is not to be defined in terms of cessation from activity, but cessation from that kind of activity involved in the labor of the other six days.”⁵

And there were other legal activities spelled out in the Old Testament that Israelites were free to do on the Sabbath.⁶ So don't mistake this as an absence from all activity. Unfortunately, the Israelites failed to observe the Sabbath properly. Even if they kept the letter of it, they profaned the spirit of the command. D.A. Carson sums it up nicely,

⁴ Exodus 20:10, 31:14, 34:21, 35:3, Jer. 17:21-22, Neh. 13:15-22

⁵ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p 33

⁶ Military Campaigns, marriage feasts (Judges 14:12-18), dedication feasts (1 Kings 8:65; 2 Chron 7:8), visiting a man of God (2 Kings 4:23), changing the temple guards (2 Kings 11:5-9), preparing the showbread (1 Chron 9:32), offering sacrifices (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 8:13) duties of the priests and Levites (2 Kings 11:5-9; 2 Chron. 23:4, 8).

“Instead of understanding it to be their privilege to rest on the Sabbath, they viewed it as deprivation; instead of recognizing their opportunity to commune with God, they saw only inconvenience and hardship.”⁷

During the time between Malachi and Matthew, 400 years, Jewish rabbis began to add stipulations and new parameters to Sabbath observance, hoping it would keep their people from stumbling. But the problem was that they began to elevate their tradition to the point where it was on par with Scripture. With that background laid out, we can now return to our text.

Let’s reread verses 24-26. So, in verses 23 and 24, the Pharisees accuse Jesus’ disciples of breaking the Sabbath. Now it’s crucial that the Scripture clearly distinguishes who plucked the grain. It’s the disciples, not Jesus himself. So, if this is indeed a violation of the law, the Sabbath in particular, Jesus can’t be charged as a violator. Whether or not Jesus breaches the law here is not in question. Jesus fulfills the law perfectly on our behalf. But what are we to make of his defense of his disciples?

Here we consider verses 25-26 carefully. He utilizes an example from King David, who did something forbidden. To be clear, the point is not that David did something forbidden on the Sabbath but rather that he did something forbidden in general. Verse 26 says, “which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat.” So, does that mean that what the disciples did was indeed unlawful? Why else would Jesus use this example where David does something prohibited unless the disciples also did something forbidden? Well, I think the Scripture is clear that the disciples didn’t do anything unlawful. In Matthew’s parallel account, Jesus says as much.

⁷And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” -Matthew 12:7-8

So, Jesus declares his disciples guiltless in this matter. Now it gets a bit tricky as to why they’re guiltless, as scholars hold different views. However, if one were to ransack the Torah, they’d find it extremely difficult to point to a particular law broken by the disciples. In the words of Don Carson:

“The Sabbath entailed a sweeping rest from regular work. But in this instance the disciples are neither farmers nor housewives who are trying to slip in a little overtime on the sly; they are ex-fishermen and ex-businessmen, itinerant preachers doing nothing amiss.”⁸

The laws about harvesting were given to the farmer and therefore didn’t have the typical Sabbath stroller in mind. Now they did violate the fence that had been placed around the Sabbath by the rabbis, but that’s precisely the kind of legalism that Jesus constantly combats. But there doesn’t appear to be an explicit Torah regulation broken by the disciples, which should lead you to ask another question. If that’s the case, why would the Lord Jesus use an example where David did indeed do what was unlawful? Why not simply state that the disciples are guiltless and leave it there? I’m glad you asked.

⁷ Don Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, p 34

⁸ IBID p 61

Jesus is seeking to prove a larger point with this example. Once again, let's consider the parallel account in Matthew 12. In this text, Jesus offers an example of the priests along with David to prove his point. To this we turn.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath."³ He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him:⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. -Matthew 12:1-6

We'll consider the priests' example before David, as I believe it'll help with the bigger picture. Technically speaking, the priests break the law every Sabbath because of their work in the temple. So, there are two principles at play here. First, some laws, by their very nature, conflict with other laws. Second, the more important law or principle takes precedence. Think of the Hebrew midwives who were told to kill the male Hebrew children. They deceived and lied to the Pharaoh to preserve the male children's lives. As a result, the Scripture says,

²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. -Exodus 1:20-21

Similarly, Jesus is pointing out that the priests repeatedly break the Sabbath, yet they're innocent. And with David, regulations to safeguard what is holy were set aside for one who held a unique position, namely the office of King. In other words, within the law concerning the priests and the bread was a special allowance for the king. Think of the game Checkers. The rule is that the pieces can only move forward and not backward. That is the law. However, within that law, there's an allowance for the kings to move forward and backward. And this is solely due to the kingly position of the check piece. This is what Jesus is getting at.

He's not suggesting any, and everyone is free to use or abuse the Sabbath as he sees fit. His point is that if the Old Testament made provisions for a certain class of individuals with authority to override the Sabbath or the law concerning priests in the temple, how much more can the Lord Jesus override the traditions of the Rabbis? His kingship is far greater than David's, and his authority is far higher than the priests of the Old Testament. That's the point Jesus makes by providing this example of David in verses 25-26.

Now let's reread verse 27. The Pharisees seemed to think that the Sabbath was merely a legal point, which was an end in itself. They missed that the Sabbath was a gift to the Israelites that came with a beneficial privilege. However, with all the rules and regulations they had added to this law, it became more of a burden.

They missed the original purpose and intent of the Sabbath, which is why verse 27 is such a rebuke.

And then we get to verse 28, which is pregnant with meaning. This verse will move us forward in our biblical theology journey through the Sabbath. Let's reread and then dissect. This is a momentous claim that goes much further than just being able to tamper with the Jewish regulations concerning the Sabbath. Jesus is actually claiming that he has authority, for which the very concept of the Sabbath will undergo a transformation. The Sabbath itself has always been associated with the theme of the messianic age of continual rest. God created the heavens and the earth in six days, then rested on the seventh. His rest was grounded in the completion and perfection of his work. This was meant to point forward to a future state of rest that would be shared with all of humanity. If Adam hadn't sinned, we would have never experienced death and pain, but instead, we would experience eternal rest here on a perfect planet. I believe we can speak of this seventh day in an eschatological manner due to how the author of Hebrews utilizes Genesis 2:2.

³For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,' "although his works were finished from the foundation of the world." ⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." -Hebrews 4:3-4

Notice how the author connects our current resting in Christ as a fulfillment of Genesis 2:2. Remember that biblical theology is tracing a theme from its inception to its total growth to see how it relates to the entire narrative of Scripture. That's what we're doing here. So, it all starts with Genesis 2:2, as humanity was invited to share in this eternal state of rest. However, this prospect was shattered by sin, so God began to work to restore it, which of course, was a part of his divine decree from the beginning. As a part of that work in history, the Sabbath was appointed for Israel as a day of rest and a sign of participation in God's rest.⁹

Even within rabbinic Judaism, the perfect age to come, in which the kingdom would be consummated, was often described as the "world which is entirely Sabbath." So certain rabbis understood that the Sabbath had cosmic overtones. So how does the coming of the Messiah, the gospel of the Lord Jesus, impact the Sabbath? First, by Jesus stating he's Lord of the Sabbath, he's claiming authority to override or reinterpret it. That doesn't mean Jesus is breaking the Sabbath here because he's not. However, he can give it a new meaning, and he does.

Let me give some examples to see if that'll help, and then we'll return to our Sabbath biblical theology. Consider how he changes the dietary restrictions in Mark 7:19.

¹⁹since it enters not his heart but his stomach and is expelled?"¹⁹ (Thus he declared all foods clean.) -Mark 7:19

Jesus, how can you declare all foods clean when the law clearly spells out what's unclean? Well, because he's Lord and has the authority to do so. He's laying down a new law, the law of Christ, written on his people's hearts. This is different from the law of Moses; although there is some overlap, it's an entirely different law.

⁹ A.T. Lincoln, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* p 199

Or consider the temple. Jesus isn't against the temple per se; however, his coming introduces a new temple, his body, which ends up being the body of Christ! The point is that the coming of the Lord Jesus changes everything, back to our Sabbath talk. It's no coincidence that this pericope comes directly after the section on new wineskins. Remember, last week, we considered how the gospel has changed how we fast. Therefore we can't put the old cloth on a new garment, nor can we put old wine in new wineskins. Directly after that teaching, Mark wants us to understand that the gospel, the coming kingdom of the Lord Jesus, now changes the Sabbath. He doesn't go into full detail here; instead, he whets our appetite by stating that Jesus has the authority to transform it.

And his transforming the Sabbath is merely bringing it to its intended purpose. Jesus is now our Sabbath rest. He fulfills the Sabbath, and we observe the Sabbath by placing our faith in him. Notice what he says directly before this Sabbath passage in Matthew 12.

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. ” -Matthew 11:28-30

This is no coincidence! Jesus employs sabbatical language to show how those who find themselves hidden in Christ have found the true Sabbath. So, the physical rest of the Old Testament Sabbath has become the salvation rest of the true Sabbath. This idea is picked up and developed by the Apostles' writings. Paul never equates Sunday as the new Sabbath. You won't find that anywhere in the New Testament. Although there are similarities between the Sabbath and the Lord's Day when Christians worship, however, we mustn't think that the way we observe the Sabbath today is by coming together on Sundays. Hear the words of Paul:

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. ¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. -Colossians 2:13-17

So, because of the gospel, we no longer need to observe the Sabbath like the Israelites did in the Old Testament. That was a shadow, but now Christ is here! And we are in Him! And the most explicit teaching on this is found in Hebrews 3:7-4:13. I recommend you read that text this evening, but I'll just read a couple of verses as we close.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said... -Hebrews 4:1-3a

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. -Hebrews 4:9-11

So, the idea of Sabbath fits with the already but not yet. We've already entered the rest of God through Jesus, but we also await an eternal rest that will be brought upon his return. Just as the Israelites observed the Sabbath but were awaiting to enter the rest of the promised land. We, as the church, have Christ as our Sabbath, yet we await to rest in the New Heavens and Earth.

So, in closing, what does it mean for Christ to be our Sabbath? What it doesn't mean is that we must still observe the Sabbath on Saturdays. It doesn't mean Sunday is our new Sabbath; therefore, you're not in sin if you must work after service. It doesn't mean that we're commanded to take one day off a week or that we're in sin; that's more of a wisdom issue.

Our Sabbath in Christ includes the good news of deliverance, liberation, and forgiveness preached by Jesus in Luke 4. We've been released from the burden of the law, according to Matthew 11. We can, therefore, now rest from seeking to accomplish salvation through our works and rest in the finished work of Christ.

Are you here this morning burdened by the weight of thinking you can earn your way into heaven through your good deeds? Rest in Christ! Are you filled with fear, not knowing what happens after you die? Rest in Christ! Are you fraught due to the moral failures of yesterday? Rest in Christ! Do you feel oppressed due to the devastation of past sinful decisions? Rest in Christ! Is your body not working how it is used to? Rest in Christ! Or are you burdened by the weight of the anxiety this world brings? He bids you as well to rest in Christ!

Let's pray.