

## Mark 2:23-3:6 (NLT)

### The Gospel of Mark Jesus, Lord of Sabbath, King of Mercy

**Introduction:** We're back in Mark's gospel and since it has been sometime I want to remind you of some things about this gospel. Mark's gospel is an invitation to discipleship to Jesus. An invitation to be with Jesus, to become like Jesus, and to do what Jesus did. That means then that as we walk through the Gospel of Mark we should be looking for rhythms, habits and disciplines of Jesus' life that we as disciples can follow.

Another is, that you can't just take Mark at face value - Mark is a book of deep mystery and if we don't sit with that mystery if we don't search the scripture, and mull over mark's story - we will miss out on a powerful revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and therefore our discipleship to him will be anemic and ineffective...

We pick up the story in the middle of 5 controversial encounters that Jesus has with the religious leaders. The charge against Jesus and his disciples is that they are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, though it predates the Law of Moses, is a command that on the seventh day of the week (Saturday) no one in Israel was to do any work.

Exodus 20:8-11 reads, **“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.”** You can see here and in other OT passages that the original sabbath commands was

an act of mercy - to give rest to all within Israel's society from the rich to the poor, the powerful to the weak, all the way down to even your animals. Sabbath was a legislated merciful rest from Yahweh.

By the time of Jesus, Sabbath and Law observance had become something else altogether. After the Babylonian exile the sabbath had been elaborated to include thirty nine types of activity that were regulated or forbidden.

As I've mentioned before, observance of Jewish Law and custom were not just simply seen as being a compliant or pious Jew but, especially in the first century Jewish context of being under occupation of Rome, it would have been a signal or sign of loyalty - To Yahweh and the Nation of Israel. A loyalty that in their mind affected their salvation as a nation. Some later rabbis said that Messiah would come only when and if all Israel kept the Sabbath - so you can begin to see why they are taking such issue with Jesus this highly influential rabbi.

What is Jesus doing that is so bad? - Him and his disciples are traveling and winnowing grain or foraging on the Sabbath. And by the way Jesus doesn't argue that he isn't breaking the Sabbath

In the religious leaders view - Jesus and his disciples are very popular among the masses and are clearly not upholding the strictness of Sabbath Law - which in their view affects the future and state of the nation - If Israel does not observe strict observance of the law and especially their interpretation of it - they remain in exile, cut off from hope and longed for salvation.

How does Jesus answer and what does it mean for us?

### **1. The Lord of the Sabbath**

- a. The story of David - David took and ate the bread of the presence which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him.

- b. At first glance it seems that Jesus is disregarding the sabbath law altogether, and his excuse is -because David did it so can he.. (Which is unfortunately the way many view the Sabbath today) But in fact Jesus is comparing himself with David who at the time was **the anointed yet unrecognized king of Israel.**
- i. There is a valid analogy between Jesus' situation and David's for in both cases we have a band of men that represent a new, as yet unrecognized, "regime" in emergency circumstances.
  - ii. In the context of this story - David's breach of religious rules was necessitated by the urgent situation, and Jesus is saying that the urgency of his mission (Remember how Mark employs the word Immediately again and again to describe Jesus' actions) demands that he too must violate religious custom by traveling and foraging even on the Sabbath.
  - iii. Jesus' reference to this incident in defense of his actions means the Pharisees, and the reader, are forced to decide whether Jesus, like David, has an authority and calling that justifies his actions. The real question is - does Jesus have this authority to violate sabbath by virtue of his calling and mission?? The text presents a decision about Jesus...(Who is Jesus? Is he also the anointed, unrecognized king of Israel on an urgent mission??) The story is less about Sabbath and more about Jesus identity and authority
- c. So, What is Jesus' calling and Mission? - Remember Mark tells us in chapter one that Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; turn around and give your allegiance to the Gospel!"**
- d. From here on we have Jesus both proclaiming and demonstrating the Kingdom of God! God's restorative work of justice, of righteousness, of mercy and of peace. Everywhere in the story where the curse of sin shows up, Jesus is there with

compassion and mercy to heal and to restore, doesn't matter the situation or the person..

- i. Nothing can stand in Jesus' way of his mission, not religion or Law. Therefore Jesus sees his mission of the bringing of the kingdom of the heavens as overriding the authority of Sabbath.
- e. We see this same thing in the next story. It's the sabbath again and Jesus enters the synagogue and there is a man there with a withered hand - We're told by the author that this is a set up - to see whether or not Jesus will break the sabbath by healing this man or not. Jesus first asks a series of questions - to get at the heart of the matter, and the heart of Sabbath - Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? But they were silent, and it says Jesus was grieved at the hardness of their hearts.. and said to the man stretch out your hand..
- i. In Jesus day there was great debate as to whether you could even defend life (Save it) on the sabbath (we don't have time to look into this today) But I would like to point out that Jesus could have totally avoided this whole scenario - This man's life is not in danger, he's not being threatened here, there is no urgency. Jesus could easily have told this man to meet back up with him at sundown so he could keep the sabbath, and not offend the religious leaders - Jesus could have done this behind closed doors, in private company. But Jesus will have nothing to do with a fallacious interpretation of scripture that leaves off mercy and goodness for even an hour! Jesus will do this work in broad daylight, in the face of religious leaders in order to showcase the true character of God. Or maybe another way to put it is - Jesus will not observe sabbath until he has brought the true mercy of sabbath to a suffering and oppressed humanity For he is the Lord of the sabbath. The God of mercy will not rest until he has brought his mercy to those in need. (John's

Gospel - My father is working and I am working) - Jesus' mission of mercy will not rest until he has brought the true rest of redemption through his cross and resurrection.

## 2. Following Jesus the Lord of Sabbath and Mercy

- a. In Matthew's Gospel these stories are paired together as well, but in Matthew's retelling of these stories Jesus tells the religious leaders to go and learn what Hosea 6:6 means - "**I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**" As followers of Jesus we must beware of any religious observance, mindset, teaching or practice that would keep us from mercy. We should beware of theologies that cloud the heart and character of God - we should beware of seeking the gifts of the spirit over the fruit of the spirit - sacrifice over mercy, holiness devoid of compassion and love
- b. You think of all the people that Jesus interacted with and associated with even within his disciples and yet Jesus is most grieved and angered at the religious leaders who turn a blind eye toward human suffering and need - there doesn't need to be an emergency, there doesn't need to be a life threatening situation for people, in order to be merciful. God wants mercy. Jesus' followers are to be a people of mercy.
- a. I think Jesus is saying the same basic thing when he says, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus, and his followers will have nothing to do with a sabbath, a biblical interpretation or practice that oppresses people, and leaves off mercy.
  - i. In scripture mercy is of course used in terms of forgiveness of wrong or financial debt but more than anything else Mercy is used as a description first of Yahweh and his kindness or good will towards humanity but especially the miserable and the afflicted accompanied with action to help them.

- ii. Mercy is not weak, like niceness or tolerance. It is very strong with concrete actions of love, compassion and sympathetic grace to those who are oppressed to those who have failed, to those in need...The idea in Scripture is closely connected with social justice..
    - 1. I love my professor's definition of mercy - *"Mercy or Justice" is inconveniencing yourself for the sake of the "worthless person" especially the widow, orphan, stranger and poor. Injustice is keeping my stuff for my own comfort.* - Dr. Gerry Breshears
  - iii. Where might Jesus be calling us individually and collectively to merciful action? Where are the places, and where are the people in our city and county who are devoid of Mercy?
  - iv. May the mercy that God has shown to us through Jesus be manifested in our lives to them!
  - v. I leave you with Jesus' challenge - Go and learn what this means - I desire mercy and not sacrifice - let us give thought, weight and prayer to these words of our master this week.
- b. Prayer: Jesus, Lord of Sabbath, King of Mercy help us to follow you wherever you go. To not fear to defend those who you defend, to befriend those who you befriend and to offend those who you offend. Amen