

# “The Son of Man is Lord Even of the Sabbath”

## The Ninth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 2:23-3:6; 1 Samuel 21:1-6*

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So far in the opening chapters of Mark’s Gospel, we have seen that Jesus has defeated Satan and that he has authority over demons. Jesus has the authority to preach the good news of the kingdom and to call people to believe his message and repent of their sins. Jesus has the authority to call men to drop everything and to follow him. Jesus has authority to heal all manner of disease and sickness. He even has the authority to forgive sin. All of this demonstrates that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. Jesus will now demonstrate that he has the authority to interpret Scripture so as to instruct us in the true meaning the purpose of the Sabbath. Ironically, Jesus will be hated for doing all of these things, because in addition to demonstrating that the kingdom of God is at hand, his ministry has also served to expose both the self-righteousness and the self-interest of those who were supposed to correctly handle Scripture and who have not.

This morning we are continuing our study of Mark’s Gospel and working our way through Mark’s proclamation of the good news about Jesus. As we wrap-up Mark’s discussion of the opening phases of Jesus’ messianic mission, three things have become painfully clear. One is that Jesus is preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand and he is casting out demons, healing the sick, calling disciples, and forgiving sins to prove that his preaching is true. Another is that huge crowds are now following Jesus everywhere he went. People are curious about Jesus and the rumors about him that he’s a prophet or even the Messiah. Sadly, however, large numbers of sick and suffering people are seeking out Jesus because of his power to heal and cast out demons. These people didn’t much care about Jesus’ message. They just wanted relief from their suffering. And then, finally, there is the reaction from Israel’s religious leaders (the scribes and Pharisees), who have witnessed Jesus perform the same miracles and exorcisms but have come to see Jesus as a subversive. Since Jesus is not one of them, he’s a blasphemer and a threat to their power and prestige. Jesus has become such a problem for them that it will not be long before those who claim to champion the proper interpretation of God’s law, will start seeking ways to take Jesus’ life.

As we saw last time, Jesus created quite a ruckus in the area around Capernaum when he called Matthew Levi to be one of his disciples. Levi was a tax-collector who manned one of the customs houses on the road running south along the Sea of Galilee coming from the Decapolis toward Jerusalem. Levi would have been regarded by the Pharisees as someone who scoffed at Jewish religion and was more like a Gentile than a fellow Jew. Given the political climate, the scribes and Pharisees believed that people like Levi were aiding and abetting the pro-Roman king Herod, whom the Pharisees felt was nothing but a Roman lackey. To the Pharisees, people like Levi were collaborators, if not traitors.

Tax-collectors were among the most despised people of that era. Such people were often excommunicated from their local synagogue and very likely disowned by their families because of their unsavory occupation. When Jesus called Levi, the tax-collector dropped everything and followed his new master. Levi was so grateful that he invited Jesus and his disciples to his home for a meal, along with a number of his tax-collecting buddies. That Jesus accepted the invitation surprised and shocked the Pharisees. In first century Palestine, to eat with someone in their home was to form a bond of fellowship with them. The very fact that Jesus and his disciples would accept the invitation to eat with Levi and his friends, completely mystified the Pharisees. In their eyes, such “tax-collectors” and “sinners” were

beneath contempt. They ignored the Pharisaical interpretation of dietary laws and so were not in a state of ritual purity and therefore, unclean. These tax-collectors and sinners refused to pay the tithe to the synagogue which had kicked them out. They were regarded as Gentiles. How could Jesus eat with such people? Why did Jesus ignore the distinction between the righteous and sinners?

When Jesus heard their objection, he replied with a proverb. *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”* Just as Jesus forgave the paralyzed man before he healed him, Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners precisely because they were in such desperate need of God’s grace. Jesus came as the great physician to extend God’s grace to those people, who, once they followed Jesus, left their former way of life behind. That the Messiah dined with tax collectors and sinners was not only a sign that the messianic age had dawned, this also pointed ahead to both the institution of the Lord’s Supper (wherein Jesus invites us—repentant tax collectors and sinners to a fellowship meal), but also to the great marriage supper of Christ the Lamb which occurs on the great day of our Lord’s return. Everything Jesus does has a purpose—if only we see it through the eyes of faith.

When asked about why it was that his own disciples did not fast, Jesus replied by telling those who asked him that now was not time to mourn. Instead, since the kingdom of God had come in his very person, this was a time to rejoice, because the bridegroom had at long last come to his people. You don’t mourn at a wedding! But Jesus also hinted in his reply that the time will come when weeping will be appropriate, making the first albeit somewhat veiled reference to his death upon the cross. Jesus further confounded the Pharisees by telling them if his own disciples fasted like the followers of John the Baptist (as a sign of mourning), or fasted on Mondays and Thursdays as did the Pharisees, it would have been like sowing a new piece of fabric on an old garment, ruining both the patch and the garment, or by trying to patch a wineskin in such a way as to end up ruining the wineskin. Unless the scribes and Pharisees learned to see our Lord’s ministry through the eyes of faith and through the lens of Scripture, they would never be able to understand the meaning of Jesus mission. They would see him as a threat, rather than as a blessing and the fulfillment of everything God had promised in the Old Testament.

The growing tension between Jesus and the Pharisees serves as the context for what follows next. The scribes and Pharisees were deeply offended by Jesus’ willingness to eat with “unclean” sinners, and because Jesus and his disciples did not observe the fast as they did, the issue now becomes Sabbath observance. This will be the fourth conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and a fifth is soon to follow.

The gospels record at least five instances in which Jesus’ view of the Sabbath was challenged by the religious leaders of Israel (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:-16, John 5:1-18 and 9:1-41). Sabbath observance not only was something which distinguished Jews from all their Gentile neighbors,<sup>1</sup> the topic would have also been of great interest to the early church,<sup>2</sup> given the fact that Christians no longer observed the Jewish Sabbath. Instead, the early Christians worshiped on the Sunday (the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day) since this was the day of Christ’s resurrection and the redemptive-historical sign

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<sup>1</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 142-143.

<sup>2</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 114.

of the new creation.<sup>3</sup> Sabbath observance was a pillar of Jewish culture, but was so closely monitored and regulated by the Pharisees that if Jesus had not observed pharisaical practices to the letter he would have been roundly criticized. This was a conflict waiting to happen.

It was at some point early in Jesus' ministry that the following incident took place. Mark gives us a vivid and concise report. *"One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?'"* What is striking about the charge made by the Pharisees is that according to Deuteronomy 23:25 there was absolutely nothing unbiblical about what the disciples were doing. Moses had written, *"If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain."* Jesus' disciples picked some grain by hand, they did not use a tool like a sickle. Yet the Pharisees reasoned that plucking grain was an act of reaping and therefore violated Exodus 34:21. Reaping was one of the thirty-nine main categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath. Such a violation, could actually be considered a capital crime and could lead to stoning, if the person had been warned and continued to violate the commandment.<sup>4</sup> Since the scribes believed that a teacher (Rabbi) was responsible for the conduct of his disciples, the Pharisees bring their objection to Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus answered the Pharisees much like he did the devil in the wilderness—Jesus appealed to Scripture, more specifically to 1 Samuel 21:1-6, our Old Testament lesson. Mark reports Jesus' response in verses 25-26 as follows. *"[Jesus] answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.'"* When we read that Jesus answered with a question we get the sense that this incident took the form of a debate.

While the issue here is Sabbath observance, one matter which needs to be addressed is the fact that Mark quotes Jesus as referring to the incident with David as occurring in the days of Abiathar. But according to Samuel, Ahimelech (Abiathar's father) was high priest. This text is often mentioned when people attempt to demonstrate that the Bible contains errors.<sup>6</sup> While there is some confusion over these names and David's identification with Abiathar in the Book of Samuel, there is an easy solution to this problem. The phrase "in the days of Abiathar" may be a general reference rather than a specific one. For example, we can speak of the days of president Reagan, and yet actually be referring to something he did while still governor of California before he became president. Not only does it appear that Abiathar was present at the time of the incident with David, even though he was not yet high priest (cf. 1 Samuel 22:20), it could also be the case that Mark was referring to Abiathar, because his was the key name in the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example; Lee Irons, "The Sabbath as an Eschatological Sign of the Covenant" ([http://www.upper-register.com/mosaic\\_law/sabbath\\_eschatological\\_sign.html](http://www.upper-register.com/mosaic_law/sabbath_eschatological_sign.html))

<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 115.

section in the Samuel scroll where this account could be found.<sup>7</sup> In any case, there is no contradiction or error in the passage.

When Jesus appeals to the account of David and his companions eating the consecrated bread it is not because Jesus views this as a matter of necessity. In other words, “it is OK to break the law, if the situation requires it,” as in so-called “situation ethics.” Rather, Jesus is exposing the fact that the Pharisees so buried the proper understanding of the Sabbath under their own rigid and narrow interpretation which tried to address every possible contingency through case law, that they missed the whole point of the Sabbath! What David did was not in conflict with Scripture, but the Pharisees had boxed themselves in so tightly through their man-made rules and regulations, they missed the whole point of the text!<sup>8</sup> And so Jesus now exposes weakness of the Pharisees’ argument. If what David did was not unlawful, then what Jesus’ disciples were doing was not unlawful either. As R. T. France points out, Jesus was not interested in refuting the Pharisees point by point, but in showing how the self-appointed champions of the Law and morality, could not make sense of the very Scripture they claimed to be defending.<sup>9</sup>

In asking this question, Jesus is reminding the Pharisees that the Sabbath was not to be a day in which God’s people were burdened with a list of regulations governing every detail of their conduct. The Sabbath was given by God to be a day of rest, a time of joy and refreshment. Certainly, the commandment did not prevent people from people from picking grain so that they could eat. This is why Jesus “*said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’*” Jesus does not repudiate Sabbath observance. What he does is put the Sabbath back into its proper context and show us its true purpose. God gave the Sabbath for our benefit. It is a day of rest and a day for us to focus upon the things of the Lord. God did not give the Sabbath so that a bunch of self-professed Bible scholars could create volumes of rules and regulations about what should and should not be done. The pharisaical mind set destroyed the whole purpose of Sabbath—it was no longer a day of joy and rest, but a day of making sure that you did or did not do what was on their list of permissible and forbidden activities.

It is what Jesus says in verse 28 that would have stunned the Pharisees the most—although Mark does not record their reaction. “*So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*” In effect, Jesus is saying that since the Sabbath was graciously given for the benefit of God’s people, and since Jesus is the Lord of all, then he is the one who can tell us with divine authority, just what exactly, the Sabbath command actually entails.<sup>10</sup> In saying this, Jesus not only claims divine authority, Jesus is exposing the sinful human propensity to take the good gifts of God and turn them into a means of demonstrating self-righteousness. All the while, the scribes and the Pharisees are so corrupting the original intent of the commandment to the point that what was intended to be a blessing for God’s people, has instead become an intolerable burden. Jesus now asserts his authority over that commandment and returns it to its proper role as a blessing for God’s people, a time of joy and rest, and a day to enjoy the good things of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 115.

<sup>9</sup> France, The Gospel of Mark, 142-144.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark, 219.

The first conflict with the Pharisees about the Sabbath, inevitably led to a second. Jesus' teaching regarding the Sabbath set the stage for the Pharisees to watch what Jesus and his disciples did on the Sabbath even more closely.

Mark doesn't tell us where or when this next incident happened—it may even have occurred some time later. This conflict probably occurs in Capernaum because Mark does not give a location. But since this debate specifically addresses the debate over the Sabbath, it certainly fits here topically. This incident also indicates just how intense the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees had become. In chapter 3:1, Mark describes the scene of this second incident as follows. *“Another time [Jesus] went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.”*

It is important that we notice that Jesus' reputation as a healer has grown to the point that people are no longer surprised at his ability to heal—they are expecting it! The people who Mark mentions are waiting to see what Jesus would do under these circumstances, were clearly the scribes and Pharisees who were now decidedly against Jesus. Between the previous incident and this one, the scribes and Pharisees have made up their minds about Jesus. They are now actually hoping that Jesus would do something provocative so that they could accuse him of misconduct. They clearly view Jesus as a subversive and a threat. They believe that Jesus is a violator of the Sabbath and so they lie in wait to catch him.<sup>11</sup>

Sure enough, once again Jesus demonstrated his compassion on a man who was handicapped. *“Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, ‘Stand up in front of everyone.’ Then Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’”* As is Jesus' custom, he asks his critics a question designed to not only force an answer from those trying to trap him, but also to expose their hypocrisy in seeing Jesus' act of compassion in helping this poor man as somehow a violation of God's law. Jesus undoubtedly knew that the Pharisees own interpretation of the law allowed for life-saving measures on the Sabbath. Yet, this man's life was not in danger. Jesus is, therefore, making the point that if he does not do the good he could, he would be breaking the sixth commandment. To allow this poor man to suffer when he could do something about it, was to sin.<sup>12</sup>

According to Mark, after Jesus asked them this question, the Pharisees *“remained silent.”* Jesus had exposed their hypocrisy and gave them a good reason as to why he need not wait to heal the man until the next day. There was nothing the Pharisees could say. We also learn that Jesus is genuinely grieved by what he knows is in the hearts of those seeking to trap him. But this will not stop him from helping the suffering. *“[Jesus] looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.”* God was merciful on this poor suffering man, and the supposed shepherds of Israel were indignant. In their zeal to defend the minutia of their wrong-headed interpretation of the law, they had lost all sense of the mercy and grace of God!<sup>13</sup> How utterly tragic! Jesus felt anger—not sinful human anger, but true, righteous anger. Jesus is clearly moved at the thought of how far Israel had fallen. When Jesus showed the people what it meant to do good on the Sabbath and preserve life, the Pharisees hated him for it. It is

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<sup>11</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 121-122.

an utterly tragic scene.

But their silence is not nearly as tragic as what Mark reports next in verse 6, “*then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.*” The Pharisees were so offended by what Jesus had done and so worried about his influence, they turn to their enemies for help. As the Pharisees saw it, Jesus and his disciples had been warned about the Sabbath and they had not heeded the warning. He continually challenged them and left them silent. By now, in their minds, Jesus deserved the death penalty. They had warned him but he would not listen. Given the huge crowds following Jesus he was now someone with whom they must reckon. They could no longer let him go unchallenged. They need help. The Herodians were the political party which supported Herod—people whom the Pharisees otherwise despised.<sup>14</sup> In all likelihood the Pharisees appealed to their political enemies on the basis that Jesus was some kind of subversive who was a threat to the nation of Israel as a whole, not just to them. That the Herodians joined with them probably stems from the fact that Herod had John the Baptist arrested because Herod feared John would lead a revolt. And now here comes Jesus, making an even bigger impact than John.

Here is the irony of ironies. Those who claim to be defending the Law of God, now seek to kill the very one whose righteousness is reflected by the law itself! Already, it is clear that Jesus’ messianic mission will take him to the cross and that Israel will never see Jesus for who he is.

**W**hat application can we take with us from this conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over the nature and character of the Sabbath. Given Jesus’ view of the Sabbath, as Christians, how then should we understand and observe the Sabbath?

We are Christians so, obviously, we no longer observe the Jewish Sabbath. Jesus was raised from the dead on Sunday and from that time on Christians met for worship on Sunday, the first day of the week. This tells us that worship on the Lord’s day (Sunday) reflects the fact that this day is, in part, the day of celebration of the new creation. Therefore, the Lord’s Day (Sunday) becomes the Christian Sabbath, now stripped of all types and shadows and as well as pharisaical rituals and regulations.

The Sabbath is not only a creation ordinance—God worked for six-days and rested on the seventh day—it is also enshrined in the Law of Moses. As a creation ordinance, this means that God intends for us to work for six days and then rest on the seventh. Even though the day of rest has shifted from Saturday to Sunday, the reality remains. We are still to work for six days and rest on Sunday as a sign of the new covenant and its blessings. The Lord’s Day is not only intended to provide rest for our bodies—so we are to cease from working on this day—it also reminds us that because of Christ’s death and resurrection we can rest every day from the labor of trying to earn our salvation. The Lord’s Day is a picture to us of what awaits us in heaven, when we at long last enter into the glorious presence of the Lord, where there are no more labors from which to rest. In this sense, the Lord’s Day is an eschatological sign that God will renew his creation and that he has saved his people from their sins. It is also a day in which we can demonstrate our gratitude to God by simply enjoying all the benefits of this wonderful day.

This means that for a Christian, Sunday is not just like any other day of the week. Sunday is that day God himself has ordained so that we might receive his blessings. That being said, our focus should not be upon things forbidden to us on this day by checking off a list of things we cannot do—that is to risk

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<sup>14</sup> See the helpful discussion in; Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 124-126.

falling back into the religion of the Pharisees. Instead, it is better to focus upon what we should do on this day which God has given to us as both a sign of his favor, and as a day which we in turn dedicate unto him.

Simply put, the Lord's Day is a day which should be devoted to the things of the Lord—that means attending church, where we hear God's word and receive the sacraments, where we learn the things of God (which is why we have a second service devoted to the catechism on this day), and where we enjoy the fellowship with God's people. This is a day to hear the gospel and worship our God. Our Lord's Day celebration points us ahead to eternity. As our catechism so helpfully puts it,

**103. Q. What does God require in the fourth commandment?**

First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God, to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

This is exactly right. The focus is where it should be—not on what is forbidden, but upon enjoying this wonderful blessing given by God to his people. And how can we enjoy this blessing if we treat Sunday as another day to work, and another opportunity fill our lives with business and things of the world. If you are too busy—and who isn't?—this is the biblical solution. This is a day to rest. This is a day to read your Bible and pray. This is a day to read that theology book you never get around to reading. This is a day to discuss the things of the Lord with your family. This is a day to nap and relax. The Lord's Day is a gift given to us because the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Where the Pharisees went off on the wrong track was to make the Sabbath centered upon what people were not supposed to do and then having not done the things on their list, regard it as righteousness. They missed the whole point that is a day focused upon God's gift to us—a day to worship our God and rest our bodies as a sign of our salvation in Christ and of what lies ahead in heaven. When Jesus says that he is Lord even of the Sabbath, we should see this as confirming the fact that the Lord's Day is a wonderful gift which God gives to us. The celebration of this day flows out of that glorious redemption that is ours in Christ. The Lord's Day is not to be a burden. It is a gracious gift. And so it should be with a grateful heart that we devote this day to the worship of our God and in which we rest from our labors.

In doing so, we honor Christ's Lordship over the Sabbath and we bask in the knowledge that one day we will enter that rest he won for us on the cross and in the empty tomb.