

"Lord even of the Sabbath"

In our last two sermons on Mark, we've seen three different scenes where Jesus faced opposition, primarily from the scribes and the Pharisees. In our passage for today, we see two more scenes where Jesus faces more opposition, again from the Pharisees. This makes a total of five scenes in a row in Mark chapters 2 and 3 where Jesus faces opposition. This is part of the early framing of Mark in his gospel to show the mounting opposition against Jesus.

In the first scene of opposition, we saw two weeks ago that Jesus was opposed when he proclaimed the authority to forgive sins when he healed the paralytic. In last week's sermon we saw two more scenes of opposition, that dealt with issues of eating and drinking, first with Jesus' eating and drinking with sinners, and second, with his disciples not fasting. In those episodes, we again saw how Christ's work on the cross, securing the forgiven of sins, gave him the authority to do what he was doing in this eating and drinking.

And in our passage for today, we see again that Jesus' authority is being questioned, this time with regards to the Sabbath. Our passage for today has two different scenes in it, both with opposition against Jesus, and both dealing with the question of his authority concerning the Sabbath. The question that is being raised is, "Who has authority to interpret God's law on what is permissible to do on the Sabbath?" Who has authority to declare God's purpose and intentions of the Sabbath? Is it the Pharisees with all their man-made laws which they had erected around the Sabbath?

Now to be fair -- obviously the Pharisees would appeal back to God. They would say that God alone has the authority to tell us how to observe the Sabbath and to tell us the intention of his laws concerning it. To the extent that they say that, then they are correct. And yet what the Pharisees actually did in practice is create their own man-made laws and interpretations about the Sabbath. For example, they identified 39 categories, each with sub categories, of actions that were not allowed to be done on the Sabbath. And it is when they began to impose these man-made laws on Jesus and his ministry, that they came into conflict with Jesus. It is then which Jesus spoke authoritatively on the Sabbath.

You see that was ultimately the question: authority. The scribes did not teach as ones having authority, because they did not have authority. They may have tried to enforce their man-made rules, but they did not ultimately come with God's authority. Jesus, on the other hand, as God come in the flesh, came with the authority of God himself. And so when Jesus taught on the Sabbath, his teaching was authoritative. Mark has been showing us already about the authority of Jesus and the authority of his words. For example, Mark showed us that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. And so Mark is showing us here in this passage, that Jesus has authority also on the Sabbath. Mark is showing that Jesus is "Lord even of the Sabbath", chapter 2, verse 28.

And so as we study this passage today, look to see Christ's authority, and look to see what he is telling us about the purpose of the Sabbath. This should challenge us to make sure we understand the Sabbath according to Jesus' perspective. And it should also challenge us to do that for everything - that in all aspects of our Christian living, we must look to Christ and his authority.

Look with me now at this passage. We see two scenes. In the first scene, we see how Jesus claims to be Lord of the Sabbath through his authoritative teaching on the subject, and then in the second scene we see him demonstrate that he is the Lord of the Sabbath through his miraculous healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. And so let's look now at this first scene in chapter 2, verses 23-28, and see Jesus' authoritative teaching concerning the Sabbath.

In verse 23, we find Jesus and his disciples walking through some grain fields on the Sabbath. As they are walking through these fields, Jesus' disciples pick some grain with their hands from the field, rub it with their hands to remove the chaff, and eat the heads of grain. Verse 24 tells us that there were some Pharisees observing them who took exception to their behavior. The Pharisees weren't concerned that they were stealing someone else's grain - the Law actually permitted people to pick their neighbor's grain with their hands to eat right then and there, as long as they didn't take a sickle to it and actually begin harvesting it for themselves. No, The Pharisees were concerned with the fact that it was the Sabbath, the day of rest. They and their man-made laws believed that it was sinful to pick grain on the Sabbath. Their view was very loosely founded on Scripture. Scripture in Exodus 34:21 says that even during the harvest season, the people were to rest on the Sabbath; and so the law prohibited the actual work of full on harvesting. And yet, clearly that is not what the disciples were doing here. Deuteronomy 23:25 even distinguishes between casually plucking a few grains by hand and the actual work of harvesting, using a sickle. And so the disciples were not in violation of any actual Law of God, but the man-made fences put up around God's laws by the Pharisees.

And so the Pharisees bring this question to Jesus. They ask in verse 24, "Why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" Notice the word "lawful". You could also translate that as "permitted". The Pharisees were challenging Jesus on what is permitted behavior on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, by their opposition, raise the question on what is "lawful" to do on the Sabbath.

Jesus answers their specific question on what is lawful in verses 25-26 when he refers to David and his men. Jesus is referring back to an incident that happened in 1 Sam 21. In that passage, David and his men are allowed by the high priest to eat the holy showbread, because of the urgency and necessity of their situation. This showbread was holy bread set out as an offering before the Lord on a table. And this bread was regularly replaced with fresh bread, and whenever that happened, the old bread, because it was holy unto the Lord, was to be eaten by the priests.

And yet in 1 Sam 21, when David came to the high priest with his men, he came in great haste and need. He and his men were on the run from King Saul. They fled for their very lives. As they fled from Saul, they evidently became hungry, and they came upon the high priest and other priests who were stationed at a sanctuary in a place called Nob. David explained to the high priest that they were on an urgent kingdom mission from the king - which was of course not true, something which ultimately cost the priests their lives and which David later recognized was wrong - that's another aspect of David's story that not directly relevant to Jesus' point here. So we won't delve too much into this matter of David's lie here. But what David does present as his need, is very true. He and his men needed food. And though David presented to the priests a false sort of kingdom mission, they really in retrospect were on an urgent kingdom mission. They were on a mission to preserve the life of the future King David until he could take the throne as the Lord had anointed him to do. And of course, it would be through the line of King David, which the Messiah, the Savior of God's people, would come. And so the significance of their kingdom mission, to preserve David's life, had redemptive-historical significance.

And so look at how Jesus then applies this Old Testament event to this objection by the Pharisees in our passage. In verse 26 Jesus points out that when David and his men ate of the showbread, that this was something only "lawful" for the priests. Did you catch that word? "Lawful". Jesus uses the same word that the Pharisees had used. The Pharisees had accused the disciples of doing what was not "lawful" on the Sabbath. And here Jesus points to an example from Scripture of David doing something not "lawfully" permitted, yet clearly deemed acceptable by the priests, because of the circumstances. The priests were willing to give the holy showbread to David and his men, which would in some sense break a ceremonial law, in order to keep another commandment, the importance to preserve life as we see in the sixth commandment of "thou shalt not kill". Elsewhere Jesus points out that there are other times where that happens as well. For example, Jesus appeals in John 7:22 to an exception that the Pharisees deemed acceptable. In John 7, Jesus says that the priests break the Sabbath when a baby's 8th day falls on a Sabbath, by circumcising the child on that day. He says they break the Sabbath law in order to keep another law, the law to circumcise a child on the 8th day.

And so Jesus applies this event with King David by showing that David and the priests thought it was acceptable to set aside this ceremonial law in order for the greater good to preserve life. This shows that God's laws cannot be understood in a vacuum. We must understand not only the letter of the law, but the spirit and the intention of the law. Jesus challenges the Pharisees with this example in Scripture, because surely they would have recognized the validity of this exception with David, but Jesus applies it here to the disciple's situation.

But notice the important difference between Jesus' example of David and the issue with the disciples. David's situation was a setting aside of an actual law of God in light of a need. The disciples' situation was not setting aside an actual law of God, but the man-made interpretation by the Pharisees. Jesus is basically saying, if David could set aside an actual law of God to meet an urgent need, how much more should the disciples not be constrained by a man-made law; especially in light of their own need and in light of their own kingdom mission that they were on with Jesus? And if David and his men's kingdom mission in fleeing from Saul was important and urgent, how much more important is the kingdom mission of Jesus with his disciples!

Jesus continues his response to the Pharisees in verse 27 when he says, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath". The way that verse 27 is worded in the Greek suggests that this was a broader summary of Jesus teaching at this event. In other words, Jesus example of David and his men was his specific response to the Pharisees' question on what is "lawful" behavior on the Sabbath. Then his words in verse 27 suggest that he continued to authoritatively teach them about the Sabbath, with the conclusion that the "Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."

This conclusion by Jesus would have challenged the Pharisees' understanding and interpretation of the Sabbath. The Pharisees, with their 39 categories of Sabbath restrictions, had reversed the Sabbath. They had made it a burden, as if man was made for the Sabbath. They reduced the Sabbath into a set of legalistic requirements, being zealous to keep only the letter of the law. And yet Jesus' broader teaching here on the Sabbath shows that they had missed the spirit of the Law. They failed to understand that the Sabbath was to be a good thing! The Sabbath was made for man! It was to be a blessing. It was to be a time of enjoyment and rest. It was to be a time for man to worship and enjoy his God and creator! It was a time to rest in the finished work of God in creation. And now,

especially after the fall, the Sabbath ultimately looked forward to our eternal rest in the finished work of God in redemption.

And so Jesus taught authoritatively here on the Sabbath. This was a confrontation between Jesus' authority and the Pharisee's authority. Who was the authority? Here Mark shows us that Jesus claimed authority. In light of the Pharisees' accusations against Jesus and his disciples, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees with Scripture, and from his authoritative teaching, declaring that he is Lord even of the Sabbath.

And so this first scene in our passage has shown us how Jesus claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath through his authoritative teaching. Let's now look at the second scene, in chapter 3, verses 1-6, and see how Jesus demonstrates his authority on the Sabbath through this miraculous healing of the man with a withered hand.

Here we see Jesus enter a synagogue on the Sabbath. Verse 1 tells us that there is a man with a withered hand present, probably some paralysis of the hand that made it unusable. Again, the Pharisees are observing Jesus, according to verse 2. This time they are watching him closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath. They were hoping to catch him doing something which they deemed unlawful on the Sabbath, so that they could find a basis to accuse him -- notice their mindset on the Sabbath.

And in this scene it is Jesus who questions the Pharisees. Jesus first calls the man with the withered hand over to him, having him stand in the midst of them, verse 3. Jesus then in verse 4 questions the Pharisees, asking them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" There's that word again "lawful". Jesus' use of the word "lawful" connects this scene with the last one. Again, the question is about what is permitted to be done on the Sabbath, and ultimately about who has authority over the Sabbath.

Jesus' question here clearly has an implied answer. It is lawful to do good and to save life, not to do evil or to kill! But notice the Pharisee's response. Verse 4 says, "But they kept silent." You see, the Pharisees would have generally agreed with Jesus' statement. They allowed in their Pharisaical laws to perform medical treatment upon someone on the Sabbath, but only in the most urgent cases when someone's life was immediately at risk - in fact they identified a list of such acceptable cases. So they would have agreed with the general principal here, at least in some way. But Jesus was not talking mere theoretical philosophy with them. This question was in light of the man who stood before them. Jesus had called the man with the withered hand to stand in front of them all. Jesus called the man up who needed to be healed, and then he asks the Pharisees this question. Clearly Jesus' question applied to this man. If they agreed with Jesus that it was lawful to do good and save life, then their response might have seemed supportive of Jesus healing this man with the withered hand. But they did not support that. They thought that man should come another day to receive healing - not on the Sabbath. And so they may have generally agreed with Jesus on this question, but not in how Jesus was applying it to this man. Of course, their attitude seems to reduce Jesus' power to heal to just some medical act, some physician's service that could have waited to another day.

Yet, in their legalistic attitude, they seemed to have missed the point of the Sabbath. Just look at Jesus' response to their silence. At first he is angry - verse 5 - and then his anger turns to grief, as he becomes saddened by their hardness of heart. The Pharisees were not treating the Sabbath as a blessing to man - if they did, then compassion should rule their hearts here toward this man with the withered hand.

But this man with the withered hand ultimately found himself in the midst of a greater conflict here. Yes, Jesus would compassionately heal this man on that Sabbath day. But what was ultimately happening here was part of this larger conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus. They were in a conflict of authority. Who had the authority to interpret God's word? Who had the authority to say what is lawful on the Sabbath and what is not? Who had the authority to declare the intention and purpose of the Sabbath? Jesus did. That is what we saw Jesus claim in the previous scene. And now here he will demonstrate to the Pharisees that he is indeed the Lord of the Sabbath. In verse 5, Jesus commands the man to stretch out his hand, and he stretches it out, and he is healed.

Jesus' healing of this man is not the general work of some medical practitioner. This was a supernatural miracle! How could Jesus accomplish this, except by divine power and authority? How could Jesus perform this miracle unless he was from God? Think about that - if this healing on the Sabbath was a sin, and Jesus was just some sinful man, then God would not work miraculously through him to heal this man. If the Pharisee's view on the Sabbath was right, then God would not do something that would be sinfully breaking his law! And so Jesus' miracle on the Sabbath validates his teaching about the Sabbath. It validates that we must not only be ready to save life on the Sabbath, but to do all sorts of good on it. It should especially be a day of compassion for those who are hurting and afflicted. For it is even in this miraculous healing where Jesus pictures what he ultimately came to do - to declare the coming of the kingdom - a kingdom which in many ways is a kingdom of compassion; a kingdom that would, in its fullness, bring complete healing in heaven for all God's people.

And this miracle ultimately validates not just Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath, but it also validates Jesus himself. It validates the authority he claimed. He claimed to be Lord even of the Sabbath. Here he shows that to be true. I think back to the incident with the paralytic man in chapter 2. Jesus did something similar there. Jesus had told the paralytic man that his sins were forgiven. There the scribes accused him of blasphemy. But Jesus then proceeded to heal the paralytic to show his divine power and authority, and to verify that he had the authority to forgive sins. Here, Jesus does the same thing. Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath was not just in words, but in power and deed. Jesus' claim to be Lord even of the Sabbath is vindicated here with this mighty miracle.

And the Pharisees' condemnation stands confirmed at the end of this scene. These self-proclaimed protectors of the Sabbath show their true hypocrisy. They would have claimed that the Sabbath is for doing good and saving life, and yet what are they doing on the Sabbath? We already mentioned that they were closely watching Jesus on the Sabbath, just waiting to find some reason to accuse him. And then look at verse 6. It says, "Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him." Is that how the Sabbath is to be consecrated? Is that "lawful" on the Sabbath, to plot someone's destruction? Look at the irony. They were the ones doing evil on the Sabbath. They were the ones looking even to kill on the Sabbath. They were not looking to do good or to save life. Their actions speak where their silence did not. They didn't answer Jesus question with words, but their actions here show the true nature of their hearts.

And so Jesus vindicated his authority here on the Sabbath. This was a confrontation between Jesus' authority and the Pharisee's authority. Who was the authority? Jesus. Here Mark shows how Jesus displayed his authority through this miracle. By healing this man, Jesus shows his divine power, demonstrating that he is Lord even of the Sabbath.

And yet, why is this even significant, that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath? Why is this important to know? Is it only to condemn the Pharisaical abuses? Is it only to make a few corrections to how God's people keep the Sabbath? Well, surely, this passage does that - it does tell us the importance to see how the Sabbath is a blessing, how it is something good for man, and so it should be kept in such a way that remembers this purpose and intention of the Sabbath. But Jesus being Lord even of the Sabbath, looks beyond just the ways in which the Sabbath is kept. It looks beyond to the cross. For we see again in our passage in Mark, yet another veiled reference to the cross. This passage ends in verse 6 with a foreshadowing of the cross, when we see these Pharisees plotting to destroy Jesus. For we know the end of the story; we know that this will result in the cross. We know that the Pharisees would destroy Jesus on the cross.

And it's interesting to note that Jesus died on the cross on the eve of the Sabbath, just before sundown on that Good Friday, when the Jewish Sabbath was about to begin. Jesus then remained in the grave, under the power of death, for the entire Sabbath day, and then early the next day, that Easter Sunday morning, Jesus rose again. It's interesting to note that Jesus' only full day while dead was on the Sabbath. The Sabbath day in Genesis on which God rested to mark the completion of creation, is the very day when the Lord of the Sabbath would rest in the grave. It is the very day he would rest in the grave to mark the completion of the old creation and the start of the new. For early the next morning, Jesus would break forth in new life on that Easter Sunday, on that first Lord's Day, the 8th day, the day after the Sabbath. That is, of course, now when we rest and worship together: on Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day of his resurrection. The old creation was commemorated by resting on the last day of the week, looking backwards at the finished work of creation. The new creation is now commemorated on the first day of the week, for now we look forward. We look forward to the final fulfillment of the work done by the Lord of the Sabbath.

For on that cross, Jesus' work secured for us the eternal Sabbath rest. On the cross it was necessary for him to die, for him to take on evil by bearing the sins of God's people. He did this so he could save life, so he could bring good to his chosen people. This was Jesus' kingdom work. Unlike David whose kingdom work required that his life be preserved, ultimately Jesus' kingdom work required that his life be given as a ransom for many. The Lord of the Sabbath, died on the cross, remained under the power of death during the Sabbath, that in his resurrection on the Lord's Day, we too could have the hope of the resurrection. And so now, Jesus, as Lord of the Sabbath, calls us to look forward to our eternal Sabbath rest in heaven for all eternity.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, our passage for today has challenged our perspective on the Sabbath. It has challenged us to see the Sabbath as how Jesus sees the Sabbath, that the Sabbath is for man, not man for the Sabbath. Yet, two dangers, two extremes, exist when we consider the Sabbath. One extreme is what we see the Pharisees doing - that you make man for the Sabbath. That basically you do nothing on the Sabbath, making it all about rules, about dos and don'ts and miss the beautiful blessings and goodness intended in the Sabbath. The other extreme is to do evil on the Sabbath, again like the Pharisees. We saw the Pharisees full of hatred and hardness of heart on the Sabbath. That attitude is desecrating the Sabbath. And of course, we can fall into the same trap if we make the Sabbath just like any other day, not setting it apart, and not seeing it as especially a day to worship God, and to celebrate the eternal rest which he secured for us on the cross.

Instead, we must see the Sabbath as for man. Our Sabbath rest which we celebrate on the Lord's Day, on Sunday, should be a blessing to us. In our busy schedules, we are called to rest and enjoy God. As Christians, we live in this world, even though our true home is in heaven; and yet on the Lord's Day, we in a sense escape from the world for a time, to have a foretaste of our eternal rest in heaven. So set this day apart from all others. Value this time. Do not forsake it. Rejoice in it. And see it even as a day to do good. To love your neighbor. To have mercy and compassion on others, just as Jesus has had mercy and compassion on us.

And of course, this passage, as it tells us about Jesus' authority on the Sabbath, ultimately tells us about his authority over all the Scriptures. The Pharisees erred because they exalted their own interpretations over Jesus' interpretation. Since Jesus is God himself, the scriptures are his word. He has the final authority and the final word to tell us how to understand them. And so as Christians, we must be careful to not fall into the same trap as the Pharisees. This does not mean that we shouldn't try to interpret and understand his Word. This doesn't mean that we can't speak authoritatively about what Scripture says. But it does mean that our authority in interpreting Scripture is derived from God's Word itself. Scripture itself is the authority, and so we must look to Scripture to help us understand it. So God's Word must interpret God's Word for us. We use easier passages in the Bible to help us to understand the harder ones. The Bible itself is a commentary on itself, having passages throughout that show us how to read and understand the Scriptures.

And so as we read the Word and apply it to our lives, we must seek to interpret it and understand it. But we must not read our own man-made ideas into Scripture. We must use the Bible to help us understand the Bible. That means, of course, you need to be reading your bibles, and sitting under the preaching and teaching of the Bible, so that you can know the fullness of God's words. This will enable you to more rightly understand and apply God's Word correctly - on the issue of the Sabbath, and on everything revealed in Scripture.

Saints, in closing, I would like to cast your eyes once more on our Lord. He is the Lord even of the Sabbath. The word Sabbath means "rest". And so we can say that Jesus is the Lord of the Rest. We receive a foretaste of that rest all the time by Christ's Spirit dwelling within us. But we especially experience a foretaste of that rest every Sunday, when we gather together on the Lord's Day to rest together in the worship of our Lord. And so let us all look forward to the final appearing of that rest when our Lord, the Lord of the Rest returns. Amen.

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