Mark Lesson 8 (2022)

**THE SABBATH IS FOR MAN, NOT MAN FOR THE SABBATH**

Mark 2:23-3:6

Key Verse: 2:27

“Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Today’s passage records Jesus’ fourth and fifth confrontations with Jewish religious leaders in his Galilean ministry. It’s ironic when Jesus spoke the truth, and he was not welcomed but rejected by Jewish leaders. At first, they only grumbled in their minds (2:7), then started to complain about him to his disciples (2:16), and then criticized him for his disciples' lack of fasting (2:18). In today’s happenings, we see them directly challenging him and start to plot with each other how they will kill him.

Today’s incidents occurred on two different occasions, but both dealt with the same issue, the observance of the Sabbath. Jesus told them that the Sabbath was made for man, not the other way around (2:27). He even said that he was the Lord of the Sabbath (2:28). Then he healed the man with the shriveled hand right in front of everyone. What Jesus did and said to the Jewish religious leaders was like throwing a bomb at what the orthodox Jews blindly believed. Instead of giving some time to think about what Jesus said with an open mind, they tried to get rid of him. Unfortunately, they hardened their hearts, and fear led them into more destructive behaviors.

This morning, may we open our hearts and think about what Jesus said concerning the Sabbath and how we can have true sabbath-rest in our lives.

Look at verses 23 and 24. “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?’” Food is a source of energy for our body, so we don’t feel energized if we don’t eat properly. In the previous passage, the Pharisees criticized Jesus’ disciples for their lack of fasting. Of course, Jesus defended his disciples. Yet, they might have felt guilty for overeating and not fasting enough. So, they probably tried not to eat for a while. By the way, they didn’t always have a chance to eat.

On one Sabbath, Jesus and his disciples went through the grainfields on the way to the synagogue, and his disciples did what they were not supposed to do. What did they do? They picked some heads of grain, rubbed them with their hands, and put them in their mouth. And as they tried to swallow them, the Pharisees suddenly appeared and said to Jesus, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” It’s good that Jesus didn’t do what his disciples did.

Were the disciples guilty of doing what they were supposed to do on the Sabbath? According to the Mosaic Law, particularly Deuteronomy 23:25, people were allowed to do what the disciples did, picking the grain even on someone else’s property, as long as they didn’t use sickle or other tools. So what Jesus’ disciples did was not violating the law. But they were not allowed to do so on the Sabbath. So, Jesus’ disciples were guilty of violating the Sabbath.

The Jewish Sabbath rules were extremely strict and demanded people to follow them. I live in a Co-op apartment complex with some Jewish neighbors. Some Fridays, I see a couple of old ladies who live on the 5th or 6th floor of the building sitting in the lobby. They stand up as soon as they see me approaching the elevator. Why? They are not allowed to push the elevator button on the Sabbath. Strange rules! According to the Mishnah, the first written collection of the Jewish oral traditions, the 39 main things are forbidden on the Sabbath, including plucking, reaping, and harvesting. When the Pharisees’ criticized Jesus’ disciples for doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath, they were blaming Jesus as well, saying, *“You, who is their teacher and master, are supposed to teach them the right way, aren’t you?”*

How did Jesus respond to their accusation? Was he able to defend the case? Yes. It’s incredible how Jesus defended his disciples in such a complex case, based on century-old Jewish traditions. Jesus first referred to an incident in the Scripture, particularly1 Samuel 21:1-6 (25-26), and then he gave an underlying principle. (27-28)

Look at verses 25 and 26. “He 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.’” The incident occurred when David was running for his life from King Saul, who was jealous of him. One day, David and his men became hungry and exhausted. They needed food. So they went to Abiathar, actually Ahimelech, a high priest at that time, and asked for help. But Ahimelech didn’t have anything to give to them except the consecrated bread, which was lawful for only priests to eat. Yet, he understood David’s situation and gave him and his men to eat the consecrated bread. It’s a well-known story. And the Pharisees were aware that no Scripture condemned David or Ahimelech for what they did.

David’s case shows the exception to the rule; if there is a human need, it overrules the ceremonial regulation. David’s uncondemned act reminded the Pharisees that their strict demands concerning their blind observance of the Sabbath were inconsistent with David's case. Jesus wasn’t saying that it’s okay to violate all the Sabbath rules. He just used David’s case as a defense for his disciples. There is an exception to the rule; sometimes, human needs overrule the ceremonial laws and regulations.

Jesus goes further than that. In verses 27 and 28, Jesus lays out his position on the Sabbath by announcing a fundamental principle. Look at verse 27. “Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for men, not man for the Sabbath.” Jesus’ assertion, “the Sabbath was made for men, not man for the Sabbath,” is recorded only in Mark’s account, not found in other Gospel narratives. According to Mark’s account, God originated the Sabbath for the enefit of man. It meant to give them proper rest and renewal physically, mentally, and spiritually. Therefore, the application of the Sabbath law must be flexible to ensure the well-being of people. The disciples didn’t have to be charged with guilt for doing what they did.

Yet, the Sabbath law in Jesus’ time, added and amplified by the Pharisees and elders, became a heavy burden to people. The minute and arbitrary regulations of the Pharisees made people unnecessarily feel guilty and suffocated. The fact is that the Pharisees were preying on people with their religious authority. Their authority did not liberate people, but it enslaved them. That’s unhealthy. When Jesus said, **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,”** he might mean, ***“the church is for man, not man for the church” and “religion is for man, not man for the religion.”*** Jesus didn’t end there.

Look at verse 28. “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” Here, Jesus again identified himself as the Son of Man, the messianic title that emphasizes human nature. By saying, “the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath,” Jesus extends his authority even over the Sabbath, indirectly declaring that he is God. Because the Sabbath was the Lord’s day in the Old Testament, Jesus’ claim to be the Lord of the Sabbath was his indirect claim to be God himself. It does not mean that he would abolish the Sabbath or permit his followers to violate the Sabbath law. Instead, he was using his authority to set aside the restrictive regulations of the Pharisees, which perverted God’s intention for the Sabbath. New wine into new wineskins.

It also means that Jesus himself became our rest. In other words, we can find proper Sabbath rest in and through Jesus, the Son of Man, the Messiah. The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for about forty years and didn’t find proper rest in the soul. Why not? It’s because of their hardened heart. Hebrews 4:6-7 explains the occasion by stating, “Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it ‘Today.’ This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: ‘Today, if you heart his voice, do not harden your hearts.’”

Why can some people not find proper rest? It’s none other than the stubbornness of their hearts. It does not matter whether we are conservative or liberal. If our hearts are hardened, we cannot find rest in our souls. People bound by so many things tend to ignore their inner lives. That’s a huge mistake. We need to pay attention to our inner life, no matter how busy we are. We can discover good rest as we soften our hearts before the Lord. How?

It reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." We often misunderstand that it’s easy to rest our souls properly. But it’s not easy at all. We live like a hamster in a cage and don’t come to Jesus just as we are. To come to Jesus, we need to slow down and get out of the cage. We need to walk with the Lord, the Spirit, through meditation of God’s words and prayer. Spiritual self-care involves self-discipline.

3:1-6 is a record of Jesus’ fifth conflict with Jewish religious leaders. The antagonism of the Jewish religious leaders toward Jesus had reached a point of grievous danger. They wanted to frame Jesus with an evil scheme behind the curtains. It occurred on another Sabbath day.

Look at verses 1-2. “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.” We are not sure if the man with a shriveled hand was placed there on purpose by the Pharisees. But they indeed wanted to take advantage of the situation to find a ground for their formal charge against Jesus. And they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

Being aware of their evil intent, Jesus could have avoided the situation. He didn’t have to get himself into trouble by healing the man. Jesus could heal the guy later or any other time when it was safe. In other words, Jesus didn’t have to be a hero by risking himself. But Jesus didn’t hesitate. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone!” (3) Jesus was getting ready to heal the man. Yet, it was not simply because he was compassionate for him or because he wanted to prove his divine power in the presence of these religious leaders. He also wanted to challenge the Jewish religious leaders so that they might do what he did instead of burdening people with their spiritual authority.

Look at verse 4. ‘Then he asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they remained silent.” Let me ask a question. *“What do you think is the lawful and right thing to do on the Sabbath?”* Of course, it’s self-evident. To do good and save, never to do evil or kill! It’s a common-sense question concerning universal truth. With this question, Jesus was saying to them that saving lives or doing good things on the Sabbath, which might be conflicted with some of the traditional Jewish regulations, is not against God’s will. The overarching principle of the law of God is to do good and save, not to do evil and kill. That’s the spirit of the law. But if we are too legalistic, focusing on only the letter of the law, not the spirit, we are burdening and killing people, not liberating and saving people. 2 Corinthians 3:6 states, “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

But how did they respond to Jesus’ question? They knew that Jesus was right. He was telling them the truth. It was a moment they should sit down and examine themselves and their legalistic practices. Yet, they hardened their heart.

Look at verse 5. “He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, and said to the man, ‘Stretch your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.” We all make mistakes and do wrong things. We are also weak and vulnerable. But that does not make Jesus upset at all. He accepts and loves us just as we are. Yet, nothing makes Jesus more saddened and angry than seeing people who harden their hearts.

It’s so sad to see the Jewish religious leaders harden their hearts and continue to do evil. Look at verse 6. “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” Usually, the Pharisees and the Herodians didn’t get along. They were political enemies because the Pharisees were anti-Romans while the Herodians were pro-Romans. But they became friends to get rid of Jesus, whom they considered a threat to their survival.

Let me close the sermon today. Where can we find the good and proper rest of our souls? We need to slow down, relax and take a vacation from time to time. But Jesus our Lord is the Lord of the Sabbath, which means we can find proper and good rest in and through Jesus. For this, we should not let our hearts remain hardened. We need to humble ourselves and open our hearts toward the truth that God reveals through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For that, we need an open mind. We may feel vulnerable and fearful to keep our minds and hearts open. But we will not be humiliated and disappointed. The light of truth can set us free. The world we live in has become a dangerous place. But we can make a difference as we struggle to do good and save lives, just as Jesus did in today’s passage. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”