

The Sabbath For Man

Mark 2:23 - 3:6 ²³ Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: ²⁶ "how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat, except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?" ²⁷ And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ "Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." ^{NKJ} **Mark 3:1** And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. ³ And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward." ⁴ Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent. ⁵ And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him.

If there is a living God behind a religion, then His commandments will not be mindless rules given to serve His own selfish interests. If there is a true God behind a belief system, then His commands will not be arbitrary, ridiculous or foolish. They will enable people to know Him. They will enable people to love Him.

False religion makes gods out of its rules and practices, burdening people with obscure, oppressive and meaningless commands. When you drink in false religion, obedience becomes heavy, driven by fear, and emptied of any real engagement with God.

If you have embraced the true faith of the Bible, then you will have a very different view of commandments. You and I need to know how the true faith views obedience and commandments and law. You can't get away from them. If you want a Christianity where there is no obedience, submission or law, then you will have to invent your own, because the Bible, from cover to cover, enjoins obedience from God's people. We don't want to fall into the ditch of legalism. We don't want to fall into the ditch of libertarianism, so how should we view obedience and submission? This is crucial to knowing if you are a Christian, and if you are living 'Christianly'.

Mark has already shown us two great contrasts between true and false religion. Put Jesus in the presence of the Pharisees, and like oil poured into water, the two separate out into distinct approaches. Jesus' religion contains free grace and calls sinners to come to Him. False religion leaves sinners and expects them to reform on their own. Jesus' religion is a celebration of life in Him. False religion is an ongoing ceremony of mourning. Grace and works. Joy and gloominess.

Here we find a third contrast. What is Jesus' view of commandments and of the Law of God? How does the true faith see obedience to God's commands, and how does false religion see it? Once again, Jesus' encounters with the Pharisee are a perfect science experiment to see the true from the false. This passage will show us two comforts about God's commands. Two right truths about commandments and obedience in the true faith will emerge against the dark background of Pharisaical views on obedience.

I. God's Commands Are Made For Us, Not the Other Way Around

²³ Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

Jesus and His disciples are walking through a grainfield. This must have been around the feast of Pentecost, when the wheat was ready for harvesting – sometime in May or early June. They are strolling through the field, and they are hungry. According to Deuteronomy 23, a man was allowed to eat some of the fruit or grain in a neighbour's field, as long as he did not fill a vessel, or use some kind of harvesting tool. That's what they did, and it was perfectly lawful.

But that's not what the Pharisees had a problem with. They saw them doing this on the Sabbath, and essentially cried out, "Lawbreakers! Criminals! Jesus, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath before your very eyes!" This was no small thing. Sabbath violations were considered among the most serious offences, and were punished with death. In the Pharisees' eyes, these men have committed a capital offence.

Had they? Was Jesus a lawbreaker?

Well, according to the Law of Moses, work was not allowed on the Sabbath. Moses did not give specifics. In the Ten Commandments, the Lord simply said, you shall do no work. The only specifics were that you could not kindle a fire for cooking (Ex. 35:3), gather fuel (Num. 15:32ff), carry burdens (Jer. 17:21ff), or transact business (Neh. 10:31; 13:15, 19).

So how could they say that what the disciples had done was wrong?

Well, what the scribes had done was do some creative maths with the Hebrew words of :

Exodus 35:1 "These are the words which the Lord has commanded you to do: Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord."

They took the Hebrew letters of 'These are the words', and by some very creative maths, they counted the letters as totalling thirty-nine. Then, because the next verses in Exodus have to do with the Tabernacle, they connected these to thirty-nine kinds of work that they saw being done in the Tabernacle. So from there, they forbade the following works: sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sifting (selecting), grinding, sifting in a sieve, kneading, baking; shearing the wool, washing it, beating it, dyeing it, spinning, putting it on the weaver's beam, making a knot, undoing a knot, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches; catching deer, killing; skinning, salting it, preparing its skin, scraping off its hair, cutting it up, writing two letters, scraping in order to write two letters; building, pulling down, extinguishing fire, lighting fire, beating with the hammer, and carrying from one possession into the other.

So according to rabbinic Judaism, these hungry men, who were picking individual stalks to sustain themselves on the Sabbath day, were actually guilty of reaping, and if they rubbed the grains, then they were guilty of threshing.

That's just the tip of the iceberg. Those 39 invented categories became 806 pages in the Talmud, the Jewish commentaries on the Law. So you will find pages upon pages of discussion on whether throwing an object up in the air and catching it is a violation of the Sabbath, on how you could exceed your daily limit of walking 2000 cubits by placing some food at that mark on Friday, making it part of your house, so you could walk on for another 2000 cubits. Discussions drone on about whether it was lawful to take your child in your arms, especially if the child had a stone in his hands; whether it was lawful to lift chairs, so long as they did not have four steps, in which case they became ladders, and it was not lawful. You could lift a chair, but not scrape it, because if you scraped it on the ground it became like ploughing the soil, which would be a violation of the

Sabbath.

And so it went. So, with 806 pages examining the tiniest of possible details of Jewish life, the Talmud had definitely ruled that the disciples had undoubtedly worked, and broken the Law.

How did Jesus respond to this? Amazingly, He doesn't begin debating what constitutes work on the Sabbath – which would be to fall into their trap.

Instead, look what he says:

²⁵ But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: ²⁶ "how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat, except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?"

Jesus refers them to an incident involving David, recorded in 1 Samuel 21. David was being chased by Saul, who wanted to kill him. He arrives with his men at the Tabernacle, and asks for food for himself and his men. There was no bread there, except the bread that was consecrated – the bread of the Presence. In the Tabernacle was a small table, about 1 meter wide, half a meter long, almost a meter high, made of wood, overlaid with gold. It was in the Holy Place across from the lampstand. The priests would bake 12 loaves, put them in two rows, and place them on the Table for a week. On the Sabbath day, the priests would remove them, eat them in the Holy Place, and put fresh bread on the table. Only the priests could eat that bread. On that day, the priest Ahimilech (his son was Abiathar, but Ahimilech was killed shortly afterwards by Saul, so this really did take place in the days of Abiathar), gave David some of the shewbread.

Did the Bible condemn David for doing this? No. Here was a hungry king, who was allowed to eat holy bread because he and his men were in need. The need of David's men was more important than the strict letter of the Law. The purpose of the law was always more important than the strict literal application of the law. So if a hungry king and his men could break the clearly written words of Moses, how much more could another hungry king and his men break the mere traditions of the Pharisees?

And then Jesus sums up the principle:

And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ "Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."

What does He mean?

The Sabbath was for man's benefit. Man was not created as an object to serve the Sabbath. God's rules are for man, man is not just something for the rules to work upon. God's commands are made for us, not the other way around.

The Sabbath did two things. You rested so as to worship. And when you worshipped, it pointed you to your rest in God. That was the principle behind the Sabbath. Stop labouring, trading and being occupied with the business of making money and trading and paying. Stop, worship. For in worshipping God, your soul will rest. That was why the Sabbath was given. That's why the priests were blameless when they worked on the Sabbath – they were worshipping. Jesus was saying – don't you understand – the Sabbath is there to serve the purpose of worship. The Sabbath is for man, not man for the Sabbath. Here my disciples are following me, serving me, finding rest in me on this Sabbath day. They have eaten because they are hungry. Have they really broken the purpose of the

Sabbath?

To deny hungry men the permission to pick food on the Sabbath is not the idea of keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath exists to restore and heal man, not weary him. The Sabbath is there to serve man's need, not destroy him. By the way, that's the only Sabbath principle that we, New Testament Christians, have to take. The Sabbath was a sign of God's covenant with Israel. We don't keep Sabbath. But the principle, of taking one day in seven to rest, and to rest for worship with God's people, so as to find rest in Christ, remains.

The Sabbath is there to serve man's need, not destroy him. And if the Sabbath is subject to man, then what control does the Son of Man have over it?

²⁸ *"Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."*

The Son of Man has Lordship over how the Sabbath is to be celebrated!

False religion and the true separate like oil and water on this question. True religion looks to the purpose of the commandment – the spirit of the commandment, and consider that this command somehow enables a person to know and love God better. False religion takes the command, disconnects it from the living person of God, and begins to become an end itself. The commandment itself becomes a god, a master we serve, a mini-religion on its own. And then the obedience becomes mindless, and even ridiculous.

The teachings of the Pharisees are alive and well 1900 years later.

Jesus said it was like straining out a gnat, while swallowing a camel. Washing the outside, while the inside is filthy. Whitewashing the tomb, but deadness is within. This is what happens when we lose sight of this truth – God's commands are for His people. The Sabbath is made for man.

As extreme as that may sound, we Christians must beware lest we fall into the same trap. We have our practices and they may be good and necessary – Bible study, prayer, church, evangelism. But whatever it is we do in our Christian lives, we must not do it in mindless compliance. We must not fall into mere letter-obedience.

We overcome legalism not by saying we have permission to do everything in Jesus' name, because we don't. We overcome legalism by considering the meaning of what we do. We must think – if this command is given for me, how is it for me? What does it protect me from? What does it enable me to do? What does it make possible?

Don't just read the Bible - read the Bible to know God. Don't just recite prayers - say prayers to know God. Don't just come to church - come to church to know God. Don't just not watch certain films - watch what you do to please God. Don't just shun certain kinds of dress - do it to honour God and to love your neighbour.

Go beyond letter, not to obey less, but to obey better and deeper. Go beyond ritualistic performance to a conscious act of pleasing God.

Here is the true faith distinguished from the false. True faith realises God's commands are for us, not we for them. We obey not mindlessly, ritualistically, faithlessly, but to know and love God more.

God's commands are for us. Not only are God's commands for us, but the second thing we learn

from Jesus second Sabbath confrontation with the Pharisees is that:

II. God's Commands Are For Our Good, Not For Our Harm

And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

Jesus was in the synagogue, probably in a prominent place, teaching or reading. In the synagogue was a man with a badly deformed hand. Whether the Pharisees had planted him there, or whether he was simply there of his own choice, the Pharisees watched Jesus closely. They scrutinised him, ignoring his teaching, waiting to see if He would break their Sabbath traditions. The word *watched* actually means to lie in wait for an opportunity. They wanted to charge Him, prosecute Him.

They regarded healing as work. Except in life-threatening situations, healing was forbidden. Once again, a complicated system of laws – remedies which were placed on the outside of the body were forbidden, but certain internal remedies could be taken. “A person suffering from toothache might not gargle his mouth with vinegar, but he might use an ordinary toothbrush and dip it in vinegar. The Gemara here adds, that gargling was lawful, if the substance was afterwards swallowed.” (Edersheim)

Now step back and think about this. Here is a man in real need. His life has probably been hard up to this point, and he has no doubt suffered financially without the use of his hand. But for the Pharisees, he is nothing more than a human mousetrap to get Jesus. They know how compassionate Jesus is, and this man is to them like bait on a hook. Jesus is drawn to need, moved with compassion. Aha! Thinks the perverse heart, He'll go and heal this man on the Sabbath, proof positive that He is a sinner!

Now Jesus is not going to fall for their trap, nor is He going to ignore real need out of the fear of man. He calls the man to come and stand in the middle. Couldn't Jesus have waited one more day before healing the man? He could not ignore need in front of Him. He was not afraid of rabbinic traps, and wanted to expose their false teachings. Jesus is not going to do this in secret. He calls the man up and then asks the Pharisees this question:

⁴ Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent.

Here's the thing. To do nothing was not a choice, to have left him would be evil (Prov 3:27). It would have been an act of neglect, of indifference. To heal him would be good. So, Jesus says, since you are meticulous and particular about the lawfulness of Sabbath-day activities, is it lawful to do good or evil? The question is filled with irony. Is it lawful to sin on the Sabbath?

By their twisting of God's Word, evil on the Sabbath was lawful, nay mandated, while good was forbidden. They had no answer - they had no answer, because the only answer would have been, “You are right, Jesus. We repent of our evil attitudes.” But they did not. They remained committed to their proud principles. Their hearts were hard, merciless, and cruel to one needing help.

Hard-heartedness seems to be more of a temptation for the religiously minded than it does for the publican. All too quickly we forget the purpose of the commands, and insist that others keep commands to their detriment. Here is a warning for all of us who are used to religion, to be on guard against those attitudes taking root in us.

And that explains the next verse:

⁵ *And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand."*

This is the only place in the Gospels where it is said of Jesus that He had anger. Of course He had anger. Here was a loving God looking at these men filled with malice. He was grieved, pained by their calloused hearts towards their fellow-men. He was filled with indignation that these so-called religious leaders could be so heartless, so indifferent to someone's need, and so committed to their own system. So he said to the man, stretch out your hand. He stretched out his hand, and it was restored. And you know what is most amusing of all? He healed the man without touching him, applying a remedy to his hand, or using any other action which they could classify as breaking the Law. He had healed as God heals, He had worked as His Father works – sustaining life every Sabbath.

What do the Pharisees do? Immediately they leave, and consult with people who were usually their opponents – the political party of the Herodians, plotting as to how they could kill Jesus. Now how's that for a Sabbath day activity? Feeding hungry men is breaking the Sabbath, healing a withered hand is breaking the Sabbath, but planning a murder – that's keeping the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was meant to encourage good, healing and health, not prevent it! To deny a deformed man healing on the Sabbath is not the idea of keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath is an opportunity to do good, not evil. The Sabbath command was meant for man's good, not for his grief and prolonged pain.

For the hard-hearted Pharisees, obedience meant some more suffering for that man. But the true faith says that God's commandments are for our good. The commandments are there to protect, heal, provide and bring blessing. At the same time, the Bible is not anthropocentric. God and His Word is not an agent to meet my needs. Obedience and holiness are not a way of getting what I want. However, God is glorified in His people's joy and satisfaction. He does want to bless us and protect us.

Commandments are there for our good, not for our harm. Jesus said of the Pharisees,

Matthew 23:4 ⁴ *"For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."*

And then he said of Himself:

Matthew 11:28-30 ²⁸ *"Come to Me, all you 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."*

Perhaps you're one of those people who has been burned by a kind of mindless religion, which never communicated the goodness and health of God's commands. They were all seen as oppressive and burdensome. Maybe you've either retreated to where you involve yourself very little with God's people, or maybe you reacted with the idea that freedom in Christ is freedom to do what I want. I'm sorry to tell you, but that idea is just another kind of bondage, and will probably harm you even more.

The right perspective is to see that God's Word communicates God's loving will. God came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.

1 John 5:3 *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.*

God's Word is not a cage that locks you in. It is a guardrail that keeps you from going off the edge of a mountain. God's Word is not handcuffs on your hands, it is brakes on your car. God's Word is not the whip of a slave-driver, it is the Shepherd's staff. God's commands are not a prison, they are protection. They are not burdens, they are blessings. They are not restrictive, they are protective.

Perhaps you ask, if Christ's commands are for my good, why don't I feel that way? Why don't I enjoy them as life giving? Why do they feel burdensome?

Sometimes, a shoe can chafe our heels not because of how it's made, but because of how you put it on and tie its laces. Too many times a Christian feels the yoke of Christ as burdensome, not because of what it is, but because of how he responds to it. Instead of submitting to it with deep trust, seeing the commands as gifts of love, he tries to get out of it, suspecting that it is clipping his freedom. And with all the thrashing between trying to get free and then getting back in, and then trying to get back out, there is some chafing.

It's when you believe by faith that the commands are for your good, that the Sabbath was made for man, that you could stop thrashing and submit. Not mindlessly, but not sceptically either. Full of faith. You trust, and obey out of love. When the thrashing ceases, the yoke feels easy, and the burden light. You start to see the wisdom of the commands. Psalm 119 starts to make a lot of sense.

So two questions: have you embraced the yoke of Christ? Have you come under Him, or are you still living under your own lordship?

Second, if you have, how is it feeling? Does it feel like it fits perfectly, is light? Or does it chafe? If it is chafing, then hear Christ's words to you today about the Sabbath, applying to all commands – they are for you, they are for your good. Trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.