

Mark 2:23-28
Lord of the Sabbath
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Introduction

In today's passage we will see that Jesus gives Himself a new title - the "Lord of the Sabbath". The pinnacle of Judaism centered on keeping the Sabbath. Twenty-four chapters of the Talmud were dedicated to rules and regulations of what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. The Rabbis also created a series of creative ways to get around those requirements. Many of the accusations raised against Jesus had to do with His violation of their Sabbath traditions. We will see this conflict and Jesus' response in today's study.

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Mark 2:23-28

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.”

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The Sabbath Incident

Mark 2:23

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.

Jesus and His disciples were walking through fields where grain was growing on the Sabbath. It appears that the Pharisees were watching so they could find fault and accuse Him. As He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, some of His disciples became hungry (Matt. 12:1). And so, they began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. Luke adds that they were “rubbing them in their hands and eating the grain” (Luke 6:1). The crop being grown in these fields were probably wheat or barley.

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In Jesus' day, it was normal for pathways to cross through fields. As people journeyed, they walked alongside the crops that lined both sides of the path. In light of this, God had prescribed a provision for His people. According to Deuteronomy 23:25, "When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain." To harvest someone else's grain (with a sickle) was not permitted for obvious reasons. To pluck a few heads of grain while walking beside a ripened field of wheat or barley was a provision made by God Himself.

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Jesus' disciples were doing exactly what the Old Testament permitted them to do. When they picked off the heads of grain, rubbed the heads in their hands to remove the husk and shell, and then ate the kernel, their actions were perfectly allowable within the purposes of God, but not in the minds of religious Jews.

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The Accusation

Mark 2:24

And the Pharisees said to Him, “Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

The Pharisees observed Jesus’ disciples violating rabbinic law and charged the disciples with doing what is not lawful. Jesus and His followers had not transgressed any biblical law. The Pharisees had elevated their own man-made tradition over Scripture. They established themselves as the authority over Sabbath-day observances, usurping the rightful position of God.

A question arises, did they Pharisees violate their own tradition to find fault with Jesus. The Pharisees taught that you could only take 3000 steps outside your house on the Sabbath.

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When the Pharisees saw what the disciples were doing, they were outraged. Offended that Jesus would allow His followers to commit such a blatant violation, they were saying to Him, “**Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?**” According to Luke 6:2, they charged Jesus as well. By rabbinic standards, the disciples were guilty of several forbidden actions: reaping (by picking the grain), sifting (by removing the husks and shell), threshing (by rubbing the heads of grain), winnowing (by throwing the chaff in the air), and preparing a meal (by eating the grain after they had cleaned it). None of those activities were permitted on the Sabbath as they were considered work.

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The Illustration

Mark 2:25-26

But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: ²⁶how 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 responded by challenging their authority and exposing their ignorance of the Old Testament. He said to them, "**Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: 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?**" The Pharisees knew the facts of the story but were ignorant of its true meaning. Thus, He responded to their question with one of His own: "**Have you never read?**" In effect, Jesus was asking them, "If you are such students of Scripture, why don't you know what it says?"

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The story was found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 and recounts when David and his men were fleeing from King Saul, how Abiathar the High Priest gave David and his men the showbread from the temple to eat as they were tired and hungry. This was not lawful for David and his men to eat as it was only for the priests. However, Abiathar seeing the need, set aside the ceremonial law to meet the physical need before him. God did not punish Abiathar nor David and his men for this transgression.

The Pharisees were so intent on their law and traditions, they failed to see then need before them. They showed no compassion with regard to hunger. Their traditions were placed over human needs.

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According to Matthew's account (12:5–6), Jesus also told the Pharisees, "**Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple.**" Jesus demonstrated the inconsistency of the Pharisees' own legalistic standard. Each Sabbath, the priests were required to light fires for the altar and slaughter animals for sacrifice. These activities violated the rabbinic restrictions for what was permissible on the Sabbath. Yet, the Pharisees exonerated the priests of any wrongdoing. Even under the Pharisees' own legalistic standard, some Sabbath violations were allowable and even considered necessary.

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Jesus' statement in Matthew that "**that in this place there is One greater than the temple**" was nothing less than a statement of His deity. The only One greater than the temple (which symbolized the presence of God among His people) was God Himself. As the One greater than the temple, Jesus wielded the divine authority to condemn the practices of the Pharisees.

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The Correction

Mark 2:27-28

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

God never intended ceremony, ritual, and tradition to stand in the way of mercy, kindness, and goodness toward others. Thus, Jesus explained to the Pharisees that originally “**the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath**”. God’s purpose for the Sabbath day was to give His people a weekly rest. But the Pharisees had turned a divine blessing into a dreaded burden.

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Jesus escalated the conflict forcing them to look at who He was. He declared to them, “**Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.**” Without apology, Jesus claimed to be the sovereign ruler over the Sabbath. If there had been any ambiguity about His earlier claim, that “something greater than the temple is here” (Matt. 12:6), it was gone. **Jesus was clearly claiming to be God, the Creator, and the One who designated the Sabbath in the first place and the sovereign over it.** He was the **Son of Man**, a messianic title from Daniel 7:13–14, the divine King who created the Sabbath and defined its parameters. The Pharisees prided themselves on being the authoritative interpreters of God’s Word and will. In their midst stood the One whose interpretation was infinitely more authoritative: the Son of God Himself.

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As God in human flesh, Jesus condemned their self-righteous attempts to please God. Jesus was characterized by grace; the Pharisees prided themselves on their works. He demonstrated mercy and compassion to people; they cared only about protecting their petty customs. He exemplified the true purpose of the Sabbath; they twisted a divine blessing into a dismal day of drudgery.

For the Pharisees, the Sabbath belonged to them. For centuries they had been working out its rules. When Jesus elevated Himself far above them and their rules by declaring Himself to be the Lord of the Sabbath, their hostility and hatred could not be satisfied until they had Him murdered.

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So What ...

There is always a battle with our flesh. It wants to sin and rebel against God's standards. At the same time, it wants to create its own standards of what is right.

Jesus reinforced all of the Ten Commandments except the Sabbath (Saturday). The early church moved the celebration of the Sabbath to Sunday (the first day of the week) in honor of Jesus' resurrection.

Today we celebrate our Sabbath Day, but not with rules and regulation, but by celebrating God's goodness and entering into His presence in worship.

We learn His Word and seek ways to apply it to our lives.

Take this day, slow down and rest awhile. Spend time with family and friends and reflect upon God's Goodness!

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