

**One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."**

(Mark 2:23–28)

## Introduction

The lordship of Jesus Christ, for the believer, changes everything. In their excellent book, *Reformation Worship*, Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey observe:

In sixteenth-century Europe, when the Reformation gospel began to take up residence in the hearts and minds of believers, the biblical truth that Jesus was Lord took on a whole new significance. Art, culture, music, civil laws, government structures, school curriculums, church architecture, and even church furniture, were all affected. The gospel permeated the whole of life, including church life. Not only were physical structures outside and inside church buildings altered, so too were spiritual structures inside the church. The liturgy of the church service was renovated and reinvigorated in such a way that the Reformation gospel shone brightly, from the opening words to the closing benediction.

This serves as a wonderful introduction to the passage we will consider in this study. In this passage, Jesus claims lordship over one of the most defining of all Jewish peculiarities: the Sabbath. Essentially, Jesus brings into open conflict two opposing worldviews: living on God's terms and living on human terms.

Sadly, the Sabbath had been desecrated from being the Sabbath of the Lord to the sabbath of man—and primarily of self-righteous, religious man. There was little delight because little devotion. And this was due to an absence of *relationship*. But with the arrival of Jesus, the Son of Man, it would take on a very different, and a much better, form. The old was passing away and—look!—all was becoming new.

## Significant Signs

It is often noted that circumcision and Sabbath observance were two religious practices that uniquely defined the nation of Israel.

Whereas other cultures also practiced circumcision, for the Jews it was more than merely a cultural rite of passage. Rather, for the Jew, circumcision was a statement of covenantal relationship with God. Circumcision signified that Israel, as a people, belonged covenantally to Yahweh, Creator of heaven and earth.

Likewise, the weekly Sabbath observance signified the same (see Exodus 31:12–13; Deuteronomy 5:12–15). It was a weekly sign of God's unique setting apart of this nation to himself.

So, when the followers of Jesus apparently violated this most sacred of days, especially as conflict towards Jesus was intensifying, we should not be surprised at the pushback from the Pharisees. "After all," they surmised, "who does he think he is?" His answer: "I am Lord of the Sabbath." And with that, the old wineskins were being shattered. Because Jesus was the Sabbath (Hebrews 4), the new wine of his person and work required a same and yet a different approach to the weekly Sabbath. In fact, just as the old covenant Sabbath was *Yahweh's* day (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14), so the first day of the week under the new covenant is the *Lord's* Day (Revelation 1:10). Jesus is God. And Sunday is his day (Hebrews 4:9–10).

Yes, Jesus claimed authority over the Sabbath. He claimed it as *his* day. From now on, the Sabbath was to be *celebrated* as the Lord's Day. In this historical episode, we learn that "new occasions teach new duties...One should be paying attention to what God was now saying and doing" (Witherington).

We will study this scene under three headings.

## A Cynical Confrontation

The text begins in vv. 23–24 with a cynical confrontation: "One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'" (Mark 2:23–24).

The story is told of a pristine golf course that was so magnificent that the club put a fence around it and required those playing to hit their shots from the rough grass rather than leaving divots in the beautiful fairways. The course remained a distant beauty, but not very delightful to play. That is precisely what the Pharisees had done with the magnificent gift of the weekly Sabbath.

Lest anyone ruin the grass, so to speak, the Pharisees erected 39 fences. They hope to protect the Sabbath against any potential divots of deviation. What was the result? Nobody could

enjoy this special day of the Lord. That which was to be a source of blessing became a day of drudgery.

The Pharisees had turned a special day into a miserable day; a day of rest into a day of restlessness. Jesus came to change that. He came to fill his people with new wine, thereby enabling them to experience sabbatical delight (Isaiah 58:13–14). Jesus came to remove the fences, and ultimately the *veil*, to provide access to what is the greatest day of the week: the Lord's Day.

Thankfully, today we have this access. And we are meant to enjoy it. May our time in this text aid us in this.

We might very aptly title this section, "Where There's Food, There's a Pharisee." In this pericope, the revolutionary principle articulated in the previous verses is illustrated once again. As mentioned, "Jesus tells them to judge the new reality of God's rule (new wine) by new standards (new wineskins)." The wineskin of the old covenant Sabbath, including its Pharisaic modification, could never contain the delight of the new wine of Jesus and his gospel.

### Food Fight!

Interestingly, this new conflict arose, once again, in the context of feasting – or, at least, in the context of *eating*. Every time Jesus and/or his disciples opened their mouths, there was conflict! They could not even have a snack without being criticised!

Religious, yet lost, people have a nose for trouble. Here again, and again in 3:1–6, we observe the cynical spirit of the Pharisees. We see their hardness of hearts, their callousness of conscience, their smallness of spirit, their deadness of devotion. In short, this reveals the emptiness of their religion. It reveals their need to be saved *from* their religion.

One wonders what these Pharisees were doing in the grain field. Clearly, they were following Jesus and his disciples. Jesus called people to follow him as their Master, as their King; these Pharisees were following him like private detectives who aimed to find some dirt on him.

So, there they were, perhaps with their little notebook, filing away what they concluded were the faults of Jesus and his followers. Especially his followers, because if they could fault them, they could fault their teacher.

It was the Sabbath day, and the disciples were walking with their Master. (What a wonderfully fruitful way to spend that special day of the week!) They were probably within the acceptable Sabbath Day's journey of roughly 800 metres. (After all, the punctilious

Pharisees had not raised that issue.) Perhaps they were on their way to the synagogue (3:1–6), or perhaps they were on their way home from that weekly gathering. Like you and me, they were hungry after church, and so they grabbed some “takeaways.” They could do such gleaning (Deuteronomy 23:25), and there was no reason to assume that they could not do this even though it was a Sabbath. But the Pharisees had other ideas.

Probably with a bit of glee, they thought they had come upon a “gotcha!” moment. They had caught the Lord's disciples in the very act of breaking the fourth commandment. They were working on this sanctified day of rest. In direct violation of the law, the Lord's disciples were reaping when they should be resting (Exodus 34:21). Or were they?

### Fencing Off the Blessing

Anyone with common sense would not accuse the disciples of breaking the law. But the Pharisees, largely, traded fair and common sense for the nitpicky, manmade Mishnah.

The Mishnah was a compilation of the myriad oral traditions arising from Rabbinic study of Torah. There were several sections to the Mishnah including one dedicated to the proper observance of Shabbat. This section included 39 prohibitions or fences to protect what was actually pretty clear in the Torah concerning the fourth commandment. As Edwards comments, “Amplifying Ex. 35:1–3, the Mishnah lists thirty-nine classes of work that profane the Sabbath, including those we might expect, such as ploughing, hunting, and butchering, and those we would not, such as tying or loosening knots, sewing more than one stitch, or writing more than one letter.”

One of these 39 prohibitions concerned precisely what the disciples were doing. Luke's account (6:1ff) includes the picture of them rubbing the grain in their hands. This was forbidden by the Mishnah. To grab grain was one thing, but to rub it in the hands was to do work: the work of reaping. The disciples were in trouble! And the Pharisees were there to help! Well, perhaps not.

Their emphatic “Look!” betrays their belief that they had caught the Lord's disciples, and he himself, in the act of law-breaking. They did what they had been doing all along: asked a question to the Lord. They wanted to know why Jesus' disciples were breaking the law, and they asked it in such a way that they were aiming for him. They aimed to prove that he should not be followed for, clearly, he broke the rules.

This episode illustrates well the point that Jesus addressed in the parable preceding this. It should be noted that Mark puts this episode in the context of much feasting (vv. 13–22). And now they were eating again! They were hungry, and the Lord led them through a path where they could easily snack. This was a time of feasting, not a time for fasting.

Again, there was nothing in Sabbath laws calling for a fast. But the religion of the Pharisees was such that it was more gloom and doom rather than something to celebrate.

Let's consider a few things here.

First, these men were so blinded by their self-righteousness that they believed their own rules were the same as God's revelation. There is a lesson here for us: Be careful how you construct your fences of convictions and preferences.

Be careful about fences: They might impale you. Adding to Scripture is always dangerous. Remember the golf course? Deuteronomy 5:22 says it well: "These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain ... with a loud voice; and he added no more." Be unmoveable on what is clear, but flexible on what is not clear. God's righteousness makes the Christian restful; self-righteousness will make us restless.

Second, consider the danger of being over-righteous (see Ecclesiastes 7:16). Were the Pharisees really concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of these men? Or were they more concerned about guarding their religious position of power and influence? In other words, was their concern driven by love for God and neighbour or love of self? As someone has observed, "It was, in the last resort, the professional jealousy of the theologians of Israel that hounded Jesus to death. None were so blind as those who boasted themselves of their theological insight" (Cole).

Beware the condemning spirit—the evil eye. Look for the best, not for the breach—especially, perhaps, on the Lord's Day. Remember: The law is about loving our God and loving our neighbour!

Third, it is so sad that a gift from God was so encrusted with manmade additions that it ceased to be a blessing. How could someone call the Sabbath a delight when it was covered with the ugly barnacles of legalism? The day of feasting had become a day of fasting. Can you see a Pharisee writing Psalm 119? I can't!

Beware when your traditions miss the point! As we will see, the Sabbath pointed to the ultimate rest that we have in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3–4). The disciples were enjoying this rest. The Pharisees missed it completely. When we become obsessed with our fences, we will not see what God wants us to see.

We should spend the Lord's Day resting and reflecting on the gospel of Jesus Christ in a celebratory manner.

Fourth, we should be very careful about jumping to unwarranted conclusions. We who have been graced with reformation need to be careful of suspiciously looking into grain fields to

catch those who do things differently than us. I don't mean erroneously different; I just mean different. You might, for example, visit a church with a different liturgy or policies. Don't go looking for a fight.

Fifth, be careful that, when you interpret and apply Scripture, you don't miss the point!

### A Cutting Answer

Second, in vv. 25–27, Jesus answers a cynical question with a cutting question.

And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

(Mark 2:25–27)

With all their biblical knowledge, the Pharisees were astoundingly ignorant.

### Meeting Suspicion with Sarcasm

Jesus was not averse to sanctified sarcasm. In fact, a cursory reading of these opening chapters of Mark reveal that Jesus used *lots* of sarcasm. If one was stubbornly, self-righteously snippy with Jesus, he would respond with sarcasm intending to highlight that he was on to them. So here.

The phrase "have you never read" was used frequently by Jesus when confronting the self-righteous (see Mark 12:26; Matthew 12:5; 21:16, 42; 19:4; 22:31). That must have gotten right up their noses. After all, they were the esteemed guardians of orthodoxy. Of course they had read!

No doubt, they had indeed read it, but they had not read it correctly. This often our problem: We see the text, but we miss the point.

I can imagine the Pharisees scrambling at this point, perhaps huddled together asking, "Where do we find that? Of course! He has told us: in the section of the historical books where Abiathar was the high priest." Perhaps one of them looked in his briefcase to find the scroll containing what we know as 1 Samuel 21. They quickly read the opening six verses. "Yes, Jesus is right. The priest on duty in Nob did give the bread of the Presence to David, by which he fed those who with them."

By this point in history, the general belief was that David had done this on the Sabbath. That is interesting.

The law that David “broke” is found in Leviticus 24:5:9, and it reads as follows:

You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the Lord. And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the Lord. Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the Lord regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due.

Clearly this bread was to be set aside for the priests and their families. But that is true technically, not absolutely. Let me explain.

According to old covenant law, this bread (twelve loaves) was to be replaced each Sabbath with fresh bread. The loaves being replaced were earmarked for the high priest and his family.

It is very likely that, when David went to Nob, he did so asking for these soon-to-be-eaten loaves to be given to him and to his men. The priest allowed it, David and his men were strengthened and moved on.

Now, what must be reckoned with at this point is that, although the law identified this bread for the priest and his family, it did not *limit* it to the priest and his family. In other words, if the priest chose to share this bread with those in need, he could do so. Ahimelech chose to do so.

So, at least on the surface, Jesus was making a parallel comparison. Just as Ahimelech did no wrong, neither did the disciples. Jesus was appealing to this as precedent, not as excuse. The Pharisees had read the text but mused the point.

## Technicalities and the Text

This is not the only instance in the Old Testament when a legal technicality was set aside to fulfil the larger point of the law.

After the death of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10), Aaron neglected a technicality concerning the sin offering. Rather than bringing its blood into the holy place, and then eating the meat, Aaron and his two sons burnt it in its entirety. When confronted with this violation of the rule, Aaron explained to Moses that, considering the disaster regarding

Nadab and Abihu, he felt it would be sacrilegious to feast. The chapter ends with these words, “And when Moses heard that, he approved” (v. 20).

Consider one more example. In 1 Chronicles 30:17–20 we read,

There were many in the assembly who had not sanctified themselves; therefore, the Levites had charge of the slaughter of the Passover lambs for everyone who was not clean, to sanctify them to the LORD. For a multitude of the people, many from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the good LORD provide atonement for everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though he is not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary.” And the LORD listened to Hezekiah and healed the people.

Again, a technicality was overlooked for a higher purpose. So it was with David. Lane helpfully explains:

The fact that God does not condemn David for his action indicates that the narrowness with which the scribes interpreted the Law was not in accordance with the tenor of Scriptures. Jesus argues that the tradition of the Pharisees is unduly stringent and exceeds the intention of the Law.

As Calvin comments, “The ceremonies of the Law are not violated where there is no infringement of godliness.” As the referee said, “No harm, no foul.”

### Don't Miss the Point!

There is an important lesson for us: Be careful of allowing the technicalities to blind you to mercy; be careful of becoming so chapter-and-verse that you miss the point of the book! And the point of the book is to love God and to love your neighbour. When you think about it, Jesus could have legitimately answered the question, “Because they are hungry, and God has lovingly provided for them.”

Concerning their actions, the only technicality they ignored was a manmade one. But here is the punch: If David, the anointed king of Israel, was considered blameless concerning a technicality, how much more blameless is he who is the greater David? In fact, the truly and fully anointed King does not break any rules – not at all!

### The King Caring for His Subjects

Jesus was not primarily comparing his actions with the actions of David; rather, he was comparing himself to David. Jesus is the Son of Man, the fulfilment of the Davidic covenant.

He was revealing that he is David's greater Son. He was saying that he is greater than David. If David could break the rules, so could he.

Now, we need to be careful. Jesus kept the law perfectly. It is erroneous to say that Jesus came to change the law of God. He most certainly did not! Rather, he came to *fulfil* the law of God. And that is precisely what he was doing here in the grain field: restoring the law to its original intent. He was fulfilling its purpose. The purpose of the sabbatical law was never to exist only for itself. No, like all of God's laws, the fourth commandment was to serve the welfare of mankind. Original intent was blessing; sadly, the Pharisees perverted it into bondage and burden. Jesus came to restore it to delight. How he did this will be seen later.

It has been argued that Jesus was making the point that the moral outweighs the ceremonial and therefore the disciples, and Jesus, were justified in breaking the law of God. Though it is true that the moral outweighs the ceremonial, I don't believe that this was the point. Again, Jesus never broke any of the Ten Commandments, nor their related case laws. That is to over-think the passage before us. No, Jesus was using Scripture to highlight to these experts of the Law that they may have read, but without *truly* reading.

Jesus' answer, in the form of a question, aimed once again to drive home the point that, though tradition is not always bad, and though fences can be helpful, nevertheless, when they take on a life of their own, trouble looms.

The Pharisees were so busy paying attention to obedience to their own traditions that they missed the point of what they *professed* to protect. Their precepts became more important than the people the precepts were originally intended to protect. Most importantly, they were so concerned (supposedly) about pleasing God that they forgot all about God!

Jesus' reply – "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" – reveals the heart of God behind all his laws: the blessing of his people. Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, "Just as you missed the point about fasting (vv. 18–22), so you are missing the point about the Sabbath. These were intended by God to help one's relationship with God, not to get in the way of it."

What about our fences – our traditions? Do they help, or do they hinder? What about rules set by parents? What about elders and their exercise of authority. Jesus, the true King, provides for his people. Chew on that!

### A Cryptic Revelation

Finally, in v. 28, we read a cryptic revelation: "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

This statement by Jesus really is the crux of the matter. That is, it highlights that he came to provide a relationship with him and with God, not merely a religion. It is about relationship, not merely rules. This would require his righteousness, not ours. And this would require his cross.

As in 2:19, the question arises whether these words were spoken by Jesus or simply Mark's editorial comment. It seems that they are the words of Jesus due to the wording of the parallel in Luke 6:5, "And he said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'" It is possible that Jesus said this to his disciples later, but, in the light of the next passage (3:1–6), where the hostility is palpable, it seems that perhaps Jesus was deliberately lifting the veil on his identity.

## Lord of the Sabbath

As Lane paraphrases, Jesus was saying, "So then (in light of verses 23–27) the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

It has been well noted that,

as God's anointed Servant, Jesus had the right to provide for His disciples' physical needs even though that meant violating a tradition governing ritual worship. Since the Sabbath was made for man, He who is man's Lord ... has authority to determine its law and its use. Since in the Old Testament the Sabbath was the Lord's day in a special sense, Mark's statement about Jesus in verse 28 identifies Him again for the reader as God.

In other words, "God had instituted the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3), and Jesus now presumes pre-eminence over it! Once again Jesus puts himself squarely in the place of God" (Edwards).

Mark was intent on driving home to his readers the theological point concerning the identity of Jesus: He is the Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is indeed the Lord's Day, and Jesus is Lord!

It is often claimed that Jesus abolished the fourth commandment, because he repeated the other nine commandments, but not the fourth. At the risk of sounding sarcastic (though I am in good company!) I wonder what New Testament they were reading? Though it is true that Jesus never repeated, word-for-word, the fourth commandment, he addressed the Sabbath issue more than any other issue. And in no case did he ever abolish it. On the contrary, he took the fourth commandment, transformed it into new wine, and then put it into a new covenant wineskin. Listen to Charles Spurgeon's comment:

I honestly believe that this commandment is just as binding today as it ever was. I have talked with men who have said that it has been abrogated, but they have never been able to point to any place in the Bible where God repealed it. When Christ was on earth, He did

nothing to set it aside; He freed it from the braces under which the scribes and Pharisees had put it and gave it its true place. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” It is just as practicable and as necessary for men today as it ever was.

### Jesus, the True Sabbath

So far in Mark, the Pharisees had missed the reality that Jesus was the King, the one who forgives sinners, the great Physician, and the Bridegroom. Now they missed the reality that, since he is the Son of Man, he is the true *Rest* that all the preceding Sabbaths pointed to. They were so close to the text they missed the truth. Be careful.

Hebrews 3–4 offers a reasonably full treatment of the Sabbath. Time will not allow a full examination of these chapters but, for our purposes, we can note that the author was making the point that the Sabbath law, like all of God's laws, was to point us to Christ – and it *continues* to point us to Christ.

The good news is that the rest we so badly need – rest from our rebellion – is found in the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the true rest, at least for those who will confess their sin-produced restlessness and will come to Jesus Christ, repenting of their sins and trusting him to make them right with God.

Because Jesus Christ lived a life of perfect obedience to the law of God, we are freed from the bondage of trying to justify ourselves before a holy God. Such self-justifying-work is both exhausting and futile. We need the rest that Jesus secured when he died on the cross, suffering the wrath of God which we deserved. When he rose from the dead, he sealed the deal once for all. When we repent of our sin, trusting in Christ Jesus alone for forgiveness of sin, then – and only then – will we find the rest that comes from being reconciled to God. And with that rest will come the joy of feasting with him.

Those who believe on the Lord Jesus can enjoy the feast of fellowship every day, at any time. But we are blessed that we have one day a week – our weekly Sabbath – in which we gather to feast on and with Jesus Christ together. We call this Lord's Day. I believe that the author of Hebrews had this in mind when he wrote, “There remains therefore a Sabbath rest to the people of God.” The word translated “Sabbath rest” can legitimately be rendered “Sabbath day.” No longer Saturday, but Sunday – the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, assuring the eternal rest he purchased on the cross.

He who is the Lord of the Sabbath claims this day as his own. For that reason, as the psalmist prophesied long ago, “This [day of resurrection] is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:21–24). And because of that, you and I can also pray, “Save now” (v. 25).

## The Lord's Day

Mark 2:23–28

Doug Van Meter

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Pray that today. Praise God for the Lord's Day – the day pointing us to all the rest that we need – provided by the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath.

AMEN