

**Mark:
The Sabbath Issue**

Mark 2:18–3:6

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

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Our Scripture reading continues in the gospel of Mark chapter 2 and verse 18, and we're reading through into the third chapter. There are three different stories, but as we shall hopefully see in a moment all of them having the same or a similar story point. Before we read the Scriptures together, let's come before God in prayer.

Once again, O Lord, we bow in Your presence. We humble ourselves before You. We are a needy people. As each Lord's Day comes around we find ourselves hungry yet again. We find that the food that You feed us with is from Your Bible, is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing asunder the joints and the marrow, the soul and the spirit. It is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of our hearts. We thank You especially for the inspiration of Scripture, that it is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. We ask especially now as on this Lord's Day evening we turn to the gospel of Mark that once again by Your Spirit You would write these words upon our hearts. Help us, we pray, to understand them. Help us, we pray, to heed that which You have to say to us in instructing our minds, in challenging our wills, in motivating our affections. We ask especially that Christ might be glorified. And hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hear now the word of God:

John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" 19And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 21No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. 22No one puts new wine into old wineskins;

otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins as well; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins." 23And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. 24The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; 26how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?" 27Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." 3:1 He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. 2They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. 3He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!" 4And He said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?" But they kept silent. 5After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.

Thus far God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to the reading of it.

I've joined together these three stories mainly because the fundamental lesson is similar if not the same in all three. The Pharisees are trying to find some occasion to score points against Jesus. They're watching Him. They're comparing His teaching and His practice with their own teachings and their own interpretations of the Law of Moses. And they find Him to be at fault. People are always judging holy people. I suppose we find that in ourselves, don't we? There's a secret joy in discovering a good man falling. It sort of boosts our confidence a little. It sort of says to us in some mean spirited and petty way, "Well, if he can do that" or "If she can do that, then I'm not so bad after all."

With Jesus, of course, it's altogether different. There was no sin in Him. There was no transgression. There was no falling short of the demands and righteousness of God. The motives of these Pharisees were mixed. The gospels seem to indicate here and there that at least a part of their motivation was jealousy. They were jealous of His popularity. They were jealous that people were now coming, flocking from all over northern Galilee, perhaps coming from further afield to hear Him preach, to listen to His teaching, to be healed of their myriad diseases and ailments. And the Pharisees are jealous. And, of course, they're concerned for orthodoxy—their understanding of orthodoxy, their interpretation of orthodoxy, the tradition of the Jews. And Jesus is making His

own observations, and He seems to be making some accusations here in these three passages. And three of them I want to point out tonight: Namely, that they were ignorant of the Scriptures; they were ignorant of what the Sabbath was for; and they were ignorant as to who Jesus actually was.

I. They were ignorant of the Scriptures.

Let's look at the first one: They were ignorant of their Bible. It's the story of Jesus and the disciples going through the grain fields. You can imagine it. It's perhaps early summer, perhaps late summer; the grain has begun now to form. It may be two, three feet high. As the disciples are walking along...as you and I have done perhaps on different occasions. You've allowed the grain to touch your hand as you pass by and you feel the grain, the hardness of it, the ripeness of it. You hear the sound that it makes against your hand as it brushes against your hand, and every now and then you pluck some. Maybe it's been awhile since you actually tried to eat some corn freshly picked off its stock, or some wheat...it doesn't taste so good. The disciples were hungry. And this isn't lunch at a restaurant now. It's not much. It's just a few grains of wheat or corn or barley, whatever it was. That's all it was: just something to stave off their hunger until they got to wherever it was they were going to.

But it's the Sabbath; that's the problem. It's the Sabbath. And the Pharisaical Police are there, and the blue lights are flashing. They've consulted their best-selling manual: *The Sabbath and How Not To Break It*. It's a large book, and in chapter four and paragraph six and section 15 and subsection 347 it said, "No picking heads of grain on the Sabbath."

So what does Jesus do? He takes them to the Bible. He takes them to the Bible. He takes them to this wonderful story, fascinating story in 1 Samuel chapter 21. It's the time of King David and some of his men, and David had done something in the time when Ahimelech was high priest. Yes, I know Mark says and Jesus seems to say *Abiathar* who was Ahimelech's son. That's given Bible critics a heyday to suggest once again that the Bible cannot be trusted. The answer to that seems to be very simple. It's actually something that is true not only of the succession of priests in the Old Testament, but it seems also to be true of the succession of kings in the Old Testament: that the son, the heir-apparent, was also considered and often named as the king or priest even though technically the father was still king or high priest. The point is that David ate the consecrated bread, the showbread, from off the table in the Holy Place. Twelve fresh loaves of bread were placed on this table every Sabbath day. The priests ate the old bread. We'll see the significance of that in a minute. But it wasn't lawful for David to eat. It wasn't lawful for David's men to eat.

The point now is that Jesus is saying to these Pharisees, 'You don't know your Bible. You err because you don't know the Scriptures. You don't know your own

Scriptures, the regulative principle of behavior.”

Let me say that this is the question that you and I need to ask all the time, whether it's about fasting or whether it's about the Sabbath or whatever it's about—what does the Bible actually say? Teach me from the Scriptures. Not “I don't care because I'm going to do it my way,” not “What are other people doing?” not “What can I get away with?” not “What is the minimum amount of obedience necessary” but “What does the Bible actually say? What does the Bible actually teach?”

You remember the words of Martin Luther in April of 1521? Martin Luther, Augustinian monk that he was, on trial by the Roman Catholic Church. He had been severely critical of the Pope. He had questioned the validity of some of the sacraments. He had denounced church corruption. The Archbishop was examining Luther, asking him once again to speak plainly and clearly and to recount of his errors. You remember Luther's famous reply, “Since then your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless Scripture and plain reason convict me, I do not accept the authority of Pope's and counsels for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other, so help me God.” That's what Jesus is doing here with these Pharisees. He's taking them to the Bible. He's taking them to the Old Testament Scriptures and he's asking, ‘Do you know what they say? Do you know what they teach?’

II. They were ignorant of what the Sabbath was for.

Not only is there a criticism here of their ignorance of the Scriptures; there is also by Jesus a criticism of their understanding of the Sabbath. “The Sabbath,” He tells them, “was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Of course it's possible to use that text of our Lord and to use it as a means of license and to justify anything, and it has been used in that way.

Let's take a look of what Jesus means here in the story that follows. Note that for Jesus there is such a thing as the Sabbath. Whatever Jesus is going to say about what the Sabbath is for and how the Sabbath is to be used and utilized, there is such a thing as a Sabbath. And Jesus seems to be saying it isn't just something that belongs to the Old Testament economy; it's not just something that came in with Moses; it's not just something that came in with Sinai. True, there were certain rules and regulations that were added to the Sabbath by Moses and even more by the Pharisees, but Jesus is speaking of the Sabbath here as a creation ordinance, the Sabbath was *made* for man. It was made. It was something instituted by God in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall. Before there was any consciousness of the need of redemption, God instituted a Sabbath. He instituted a principle of one day in seven that was different from all

of the rest of the days of the week, a day of rest, a day when you cease from the labor that has occupied you for the other six days.

So for Jesus the Sabbath isn't merely the sign and the seal of the Mosaic Covenant—it is that in part. And Moses alludes to that in Exodus chapter 31: That there's an aspect of the Sabbath...there were certain rules and regulations about the Sabbath that belonged to the time of Moses; it belonged to the ceremonial aspect of the Old Testament. But Jesus is saying, 'There's another aspect of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man.' It was part of God's creation ordinance. It was part of the wisdom of God for men and women, apart from any consideration of sin and apart from any consideration of redemption. Like marriage, it was given to meet a continuing human need—a day set apart for the worship of God. It was for man's good, for man's welfare.

That's the point: We need the Sabbath. This principle of which Jesus is now speaking and which the Pharisees couldn't see to save their lives: there's something in the Sabbath that was made for us and for our benefit. It isn't something essentially negative and restricting and foreboding that needs to be hedged in with 10,000 rules and regulations. We're still doing this today. The casuistry that enters as soon as we begin to talk about the Fourth Commandment, the observance of the Lord's Day, and what it might mean and what it might not mean. We still find ourselves immediately asking questions, "Can I do this? And "Can I do that?" And Jesus is saying, 'That's the wrong way to approach this issue.' You need to see it, first of all, as something that God made, God in His wisdom made. This is part of the divine plan and will of God for men and women apart from sin. In the Garden of Eden there was a Sabbath day of rest, a day that we're free from, yes, the tyranny of the obligation to work and to work with the sweat of our brow in a context of thorns and thistles.

Here's the issue. Here's the focus. It comes to a head here in this story in the opening section of chapter 3, the man with a shriveled, withered hand. Jesus is in the synagogue. He's worshipping, as was Jesus' custom. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, this is where Jesus would be found. He would go whenever the service was held at the synagogue—Jesus was there. It was His regular custom, and there's a man there with a shriveled hand, a withered hand. He's worshipping in this synagogue (it's probably in Capernaum), and these Pharisees are there and they're watching. The "synagogue police" are there, and they're watching. Will Jesus heal this man on the Sabbath day? And they're ready to pounce on him. And Jesus tells the man to stand up and to come forward. He's not going to do this in a corner. He's not going to do this in secret. He doesn't take the man outside behind a wall somewhere and quickly heal his hand and bring him back in—"Abracadabra!" No, he's going to do this before everybody.

There's a lesson to be taught here, an important lesson to be taught. This is not some secret thing. And you note in verse 5 this extraordinary statement that He

looked around at them *with anger*. This is Jesus now. He's looking at the Pharisees sitting there in their seats in the synagogue, and He looks around *with anger*, the Bible says. This isn't the darling little lamb of the women's quilting circle now. This is the Lion of the tribe of Judea. This is the incarnation of Mount Sinai. This is the Lord of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction who is in the synagogue. This is the Lord who passed over Egypt and took their firstborn. And Jesus turns to His critics and He asks them this question, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?" And the Pharisees are thinking. Their minds are spinning now. "Is it right to do good on the Sabbath? Is it right to save a life on the Sabbath? Now what does that manual say? What does that interpretation of Rabbi So-and-So say? It's a trick question. It all depends. How ill is this man? Is he pleading to death? Has he had some accident with a knife? How much blood is pouring out? Can it wait until tomorrow?"

The Pharisees were experts at case law. They measured and they weighed, and they came up with all kinds of answers for all kinds of contexts and situations...but they're silent. They can't answer this question. "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath day?" They can't answer this question.

It's a simple question. It's so simple it takes your breath away. You don't need a PhD in theology to answer this question. Is it okay to do good on the Sabbath day? And Jesus is angry. How rarely was Jesus angry. Jesus didn't say a word, not a word. His anger ended as He looked around at them. And the Greek seems to suggest that He took a long, hard, determined look at each member as He scanned the faces that were staring at Him in absolute silence. He said more without words than other men can say with a word. And Mark tells us there are two emotions here. He looked around at them with anger, and deeply distressed at the stubbornness of their hearts...anger and distress, indignation and inward sorrow, and yes, grief—grief because their hearts were so hard.

Why is Jesus outraged and distressed? And Mark tells us, "Because of the stubbornness of their hearts." That's what turns the loving, patient, gracious Savior into the righteous Lord of light. They had calloused consciences. I love it when I go and preach out in the country somewhere up in the Delta. And you come to the door afterwards and these big burly cotton farmers from the Mississippi Delta, and they'll shake your hand, and it's a grip that'll kill you. And they've got rough, calloused hands. I've got soft hands. All I do is type. I occasionally mow the yard, and that's about it. These men had calloused, rough hearts, and it angered Jesus.

Is Jesus angry with some of you tonight? He walks up and down these pews of First Presbyterian Church and He knows your heart. He knows your indifference. He knows your sin. He knows your unconfessed and secret sins. "Which is lawful on the Sabbath? To do good or to do evil?"

Recently, a female reporter was interviewing William Taylor, Anglican, was at Bishop's Gate in London. He was being interviewed by a secular newspaper. She asked him some questions. Oh, he had criticized the appointment of Rowan Williams as the Archbishop of Canterbury. She asked him, "Do you believe in the literal truth of everything in Genesis?" Now there's a question. It's the \$64,000 question. She quoted 1 Corinthians 11:6, "For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered." "Is that an unchanging moral truth," she asked him. Now do you think she wanted to know the answer? No. Was she seriously perplexed by any of these questions? Probably not. She was so sharp-sighted and eagle-eyed to spot a challenging verse in the Bible, and perhaps blind as a bat as to the way that makes for peace.

'The Sabbath is for doing good,' Jesus said. Yes, come to church on the Sabbath day because it'll do you good. To sing the praises of God, to pray together collectively as the corporate people of God, to hear the word expounded and explained—it'll do you good. It'll do you good to fellowship with others in Sunday school. Yes, rest on the Sabbath day because it'll do you good. You don't have to live a life in tyranny to the oppressive nature of work in our modern society. You can take a day off and rest from that tyranny because it'll do you good. Yes, visit that neighbor who's lonely on the Lord's Day afternoon because it'll do *you* good. Yes, visit those who are in the hospital on the Lord's Day because *it'll do you good*. Because "the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath."

III. They were ignorant as to who Jesus actually was.

But there's a third issue here and it's the most important issue. Because whatever the Pharisees might have been ignorant of as far as their knowledge of the Scripture was concerned, whatever the Pharisees might have thought in terms of what the Lord's Day was for and what it was not for, it was their ignorance of who Jesus was that was their condemnation. It's about this issue of fasting. The Pharisees fasted twice a week, and apparently the disciples of John fasted...but Jesus' disciples were not fasting. 'What kind of leader are you?' they were saying to Jesus. 'What kind of leader are you when you're not teaching the elementary principles of discipleship and maturing? We are fasting; John's disciples are fasting; but Your disciples are not fasting.'

Fasting was mandated on only one day of the year in the Old Testament; that was the Day of Atonement. Now people might fast for all kinds of good reasons but it wasn't actually something the Bible mandated. True, Jesus warns in the Sermon on the Mount not to fast like the Pharisees do, but it wasn't a prohibition on fasting altogether. You remember that after His resurrection, the church of the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles fasted on occasion. At the beginning of the First Missionary Journey in Antioch, before they set apart Paul and Barnabas and sent them off to Cyprus, the church met to fast. In the next

chapter, Acts 14, in Derbe and Iconium, when Paul is establishing elders, the church was fasting. And Jesus says in verse 20 of chapter 2, "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." Now true, some people have interpreted that as meaning that they will fast in that period between the crucifixion on Friday and the resurrection on Sunday, but Jesus probably meant something different. The bridegroom is still away. Jesus as the bridegroom is still to come. And Jesus is saying, 'Yes, when I'm gone you will fast.'

Jesus says something very interesting about Himself and the significance of His coming. He puts it like this: He talks about putting a new patch on an old wineskin, or pouring new wine into an old wineskin bag. There's something about the coming of Jesus...there's something about the presence of Jesus in which fasting was altogether inappropriate. And the kind of fasting that John's disciples were doing...Just as there were many things about John the Baptist and his ministry that belonged to the Old Covenant. Even his baptism wasn't a Christian baptism; it was *John's* baptism.

And Jesus seems to be saying, 'Look, when I am here...when I am here, it's inappropriate to fast. It's like a wedding,' he says, 'when the bridegroom is present.' And you know in ancient society they didn't often honeymoon for a week or two weeks. They actually stayed in their home for a week. They were attended by their friends. Sometimes the bride and groom would go around wearing crowns for the week. It was a time of enormous joy and celebration. The rabbis allowed these attenders to be free from any law about fasting during that period. Jesus is saying, 'I am here. The Son of Man is here. The Messiah is here. The kingdom has come in Me. There are many things about John the Baptist that are now inappropriate now that I have come.' John did many strange things. He abstained from strong drink. He abstained from certain types of food. He lived in the wilderness a very ascetic form of life. He ate locusts and wild honey. But the king has come. The bridegroom has come.

And the fundamental problem of the Pharisees, and the reason for Jesus' anger with them is because they failed not simply in their understanding of the Bible, and not simply in their understanding of the Sabbath day, but they failed to understand who He was, who Jesus was. Donald Grey Barnhouse, shortly after the First World War, visited some of the cities of Belgium that had been destroyed during the First World War. He came to that great city of Mons. He noticed on the western side of the city that the street was filled with tanks and armored vehicles and artillery which the Germans had left behind in their hasty retreat from the city. And as he stood there, it was a spring day and the sun was shining and there was a warmth about the day, and all of a sudden he was conscious of falling leaves. One or two got attached in his apparel and he took the leaf in his hand and squashed it, and it crinkled. It was dry but it was springtime. And he looked at the trees and he suddenly realized what was happening. Those leaves which hadn't fallen in the winds of the previous fall

were now being pushed away because the sap was beginning to rise in these trees as the sun began to shine on that beautiful spring day in Mons in Belgium. For Barnhouse it was indicative of another kind of spring that was to be short-lived to be sure. But there's a sense in which Jesus is saying that here. 'My disciples don't fast because they understand that this is wedding time. Jesus is here. The bridegroom is here. When I'm gone it may be appropriate to fast then, but not now.' But their eyes were blind, and all they could see were their manmade laws and impositions. And something tells me that we can so easily slip into that mentality too. I wonder tonight if our hearts are rejoicing the way we rejoice at a wedding ceremony, because the bridegroom has come, and is here, and is coming again. May God bless His word to us. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You now for Your word. We ask that You would bless it to us. Make us, we pray, students of the Scriptures, and give us an abiding love for all that You teach us. And bless us in this week that is before us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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