

With Christ, the Sabbath Rest of God Is Here

Mark 2:23-28

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Introduction

In our sermon series on the gospel of Mark, we have been looking at the excellent things that Christ our Saviour brought to us from heaven when He came.

- He brought God's word with full authority to us.
- He brought God's authority to cast out demons and free us from Satan.
- He brought God's compassion among us.
- He brought God's agenda to spread the gospel in the world.
- He brought God's willingness to cleanse us from defilement.
- He brought God's forgiveness to us.
- He brought God's restoring grace to sinners.
- He brought God's presence to us.
- And this week and next week we are going to see that He brought God's Sabbath rest to us.

That He brought the Sabbath to us is a wonderful blessing and one that is often missed in our day.

- It is the very sad misunderstanding of many today that Jesus abrogated the Sabbath when in fact He restored it for us.
 - He set it free from all of the ridiculous rules that the Pharisees had added to it making it into a grievous burden instead of a delight.
 - In our day, Satan has so deceived us as to make us think that Jesus was freeing us from the Sabbath when in fact He was restoring it to us as a precious gift.
- There are many Christians who have fallen for this.
 - The Devil appeals to our flesh that is reluctant to spend time with God, and he says to us, "Surely you don't want to spend a whole day devoted to God."
 - "What a weariness that would be!"
 - "Jesus is a kind Saviour and He came to set you from entangling laws like that."
 - "In these passages in Mark, He tells you that you can do whatever you like on the Lord's Day... He makes you free from the observance of days."
 - This error is equivalent to supposing that when Jesus healed, He healed by amputation.
 - You have a man with a withered hand and Jesus says, "I can take care of that old ruined hand," and rather than restoring it to be a useful hand he cuts it off and says, "There now, you will never be bothered with that old hand again!"
 - Or someone with bad sight comes to Him and Jesus says, "Those eyes of yours are no good," and He plucks them out and says: "There, now you are free."
 - It is the error of confusing the restoration of good thing that had become corrupted beyond recognition (the Sabbath Day) with the abolition of the thing (the Sabbath Day) as if it were a bad thing in itself.

In these two passages that we are looking at this week and next week, Jesus is not doing away with the Sabbath, but restoring it to its original purpose.

Listen as I read to you our text for this week... Mark 2:23-28.

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.”

May the Lord bless to us the reading and the preaching of His holy Word.

➤ Let’s begin by looking at what is going on this passage.

I. The Pharisees complained to Jesus that His disciples had done what is unlawful to do on the Sabbath.

A. What is the Sabbath?

1. The Sabbath is the day of holy rest that God appointed when He created the world.
 - a. He created the world in six days and the seventh day He stopped creating because He was completely finished.
 - He did not stop because He was tired and needed a break, but He stopped because He was finished with making everything He was going to make.
 - Sure, things were made so that they would grow and many of them so that they would multiply, but that is not creation—that this reproduction.
 - b. But as God had made the world for man, He appointed that the seventh day of the week would be a day set apart to God as our creator who finished (rested from) His work on that day.
 - This is where the seven-day week originated.
 - The Bible does not have just-so stories to explain things like the seven day week, but it has history that tells us how the seven day week got started.
2. Genesis 2:1-3 (which we read earlier) gives us the history of the institution of the Sabbath.
 - Let’s take a look at that passage again. Genesis 2:1-3:
 - **“Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. ² And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”**
 - Notice how it says that God blessed the day and sanctified it.
 - a. To *bless* it means that He made the day to be a day that would be a blessing to us.
 - God does not bless inanimate things like *days* for their own sake, but He blesses them for man’s sake... for example, if He blesses a farmer’s crops, that means that He makes them grow for the farmer.

- So it is a day that we can expect to find a blessing—things that are for our good.
 - This is surely what Jesus meant when He says that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.
 - God blessed the day not so that we could do good things for the day, but that the day might do good things for us!
- b. That He *sanctified* it means that He set it apart from the other six days as a day that was holy to Himself.
 - Now once again, when God sanctifies something as holy, He makes it holy with respect to our use of it.
 - For example, the holy vessels of the temple were not be used to cook your turnips in for supper.
 - A holy day, then, is one that we set apart from other days to be the Lord's day—a day that is devoted to Him.
 - In that respect, all sabbaths are the Lord's days.
 - We typically used that term for the New Testament Sabbath, but the Old Testament Sabbath was also the Lord's Day... a holy day of the Lord.
- 3. Now of course, when God instituted the Sabbath as a holy day of blessing, we were not yet fallen into sin... it was before the fall.
 - a. Before the fall, we would have been very pleased to have such a day to set apart to our Creator.
 - The Lord did not need to tell us to keep it free from other things.
 - It was not a day for working in the garden or (I might add especially today) playing football.
 - It was not a work day or football day but it was the Lord's Day.
 - b. However, after the fall, we did not care about keeping the day for the Lord, nor did we care about looking to Him to bless us...
 - So when God called Israel to be His people and gave them His law, He had to call them to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy, and He had to specify that that meant that they should do their work on the other six days.
 - This is what He says in Exodus 20:8-11: **Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.**
 - He did not say anything about refraining from work in Genesis 2:3 because there was no sin, and it was obvious that you don't use God's holy day for ordinary things—it is devoted to worshipping Him.
 - The command not to work only became necessary after we fell into sin... just as it became necessary to command us not to steal or commit adultery or worship God by idols.

- B. So what are Pharisees accusing the disciples of when they say that they were doing what was not lawful to do on the Sabbath day?
1. They are complaining it was a violation of the Sabbath for them to pick heads of grain to snack on as they were walking through a field.
 - The disciples were hungry, so as they walked by, they grabbed a head of grain and rubbed it in their hands to separate the barley from the chaff and then ate the grain to satisfy their hunger.
 - a. The Pharisees did not regard this as stealing.
 - They knew that God has stipulated in Deut 23:25 that you could pick something to eat as you walked by—you were not supposed to take a sickle and harvest grain to put in storage, but you could satisfy your hunger.
 - b. The Pharisees objected, however, that on the Sabbath, picking heads of grain was violating the sanctity of the day and doing work that was forbidden.
 - They were “harvesting” it, and that was forbidden, they were “separating” or “threshing” it and that was forbidden, and then they were blowing the chaff away and that was “winnowing” which was also forbidden labour.
 2. The Pharisees had added many rules to the command of the LORD not to work on the Sabbath day.
 - a. The Jews had neglected the Sabbath before the exile, but during the exile they improved—they actually had help from Babylon in remember the Sabbath because the Babylonians also kept the Sabbath—but the Jews also had some bad influence because the Babylonians kept it in a superstitious “pharisaical” kind of way.
 - b. But as I mentioned last week, in later years, during the period of Greek dominion (before the Romans came into power) the Greeks had tried to secularise the Jews and force them to abandon their Sabbaths.
 - The Pharisees formed out of some of pious Jews who boldly defied the Greeks... they were in fact a godly movement at first.
 - But as it often goes, they had morphed into something else—a movement that was all about external forms of religion and that endlessly multiplied rules and regulations.
 - c. The Sabbath was one of the main institutions about which this had been done.
 - There were rules and regulations about everything pertaining to the Sabbath—from the 2000 paces rule for how far you could walk, to rules against lighting a candle or dragging a chair leg on the ground because you would be making a furrow. There were about 1500 rules.
- C. Mark points to three defenses that Jesus used to defend what His disciples had done.
1. First, He points out that David had, when hungry, eaten the showbread at the tabernacle that only the priests were allowed to eat by the ritual law of God.
 - Like the Sabbath day, this bread was holy.
 - It was replaced on the Sabbath with fresh bread and the old bread that was removed could be eaten only by the priests.
 - However, Jesus points out that when hunger pressed David and there was no other bread available, he ate the showbread and bore no guilt for it.

2. Second, in verse 27 He asserts that **the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.**
 - God gave the Sabbath to mankind as a gift.
 - It was not meant to be a sacrifice, but a day of joyful freedom from normal responsibilities to turn your eyes to the Lord.
 - There was to be a holy convocation (gathering) in all their communities for worship every week.
 - The focus was not on giving up things for God, but on putting aside things that got in the way of devoting the day to the LORD.
 - It is like people put aside things to watch a football game and they will not think of letting anything stand in their way—it is a day for them.
 - Who would want to go to work when God made a day for you to meet with Him?
3. Third, in verse 28 He points out that **the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.**
 - He was the One who instituted the Sabbath.
 - That means that He was the one who could discern quite apart from their list of regulations what was appropriate and not appropriate to do on the Sabbath. He has authority over the day.
 - This, of course, would have infuriated them most of all, for it was one of the many times when He made Himself equal with God.
 - That was, of course, because He was equal with God, being Himself God the Son, coeternal with God the Father.

TRANS> There are important lessons for us in all of this.

- We will look first at what we learn from the Pharisees about how to ruin the Sabbath.
- Then we will look at how Jesus leads us in restoring the Sabbath.

II. From the Pharisees, we learn how to ruin the Sabbath.

- A. First, if you are a person that likes rules, you can ruin the Sabbath by imitating the Pharisees and make the observance of the day all about rule keeping.
 1. Think of different things that you can give up for the sake of the day.
 - Look at it like sacrificing things for God.
 - The more you can give up, the more you show your devotion and your faithfulness to Him.
 2. Create a list of things that you will not do on the Sabbath and then keep them even when it is highly inconvenient.
 - For example, God said not to light a fire on the Sabbath.
 - The context of the prohibition was not to light a fire for work, but make it into a prohibition of turning on a light or an appliance.
 - By doing this, you will show God how committed you are to Him.
 3. And be sure to get together with others to keep each other accountable.
 - As a group, you can agree together on rules and on how wrong it is to break them, and then you can challenge those who do not keep them.
 - You can make a little team of Sabbath police.

- You can take encouragement from how much more devout you are than other Christians and you can take it upon yourself to try to correct them, even though they probably won't listen because they are not as committed to God as you are.
- B. And then for you who are not rule keepers... you can ruin the Sabbath by holding that in this text Jesus is opposing the Sabbath—not the Pharisees, but the Sabbath itself.
1. Look at the Sabbath as part of the Old Testament ceremonial law instead of as something that was given at creation.
 - Look at Jesus in our text here not as the one who is correcting a wrong view of the Sabbath but as one who is getting rid of it altogether.
 - It is like a broken jar or a dead battery that He is tossing out because it has no place for Christians in the New Testament.
 - You can give thanks that as LORD of the Sabbath, He is abolishing it so you can be free of it forever.
 2. Now you can look at anyone who wants to keep the Lord's Day as a legalist.
 - You can dismiss them as someone who does not understand the grace of God and the liberty that we have in Christ.
 - You can feel good that you are one who understands grace and are not in bondage to all those rules and regulations of the Old Testament.
 - You are free to work or to watch the Super Bowl because you are not one of those legalists.
 3. Sadly, this is the popular understanding of the Sabbath in the church today.
 - Most of us are not in danger of adding rules and regulations like the Pharisees did, we are more in danger of ignoring the Sabbath and setting it altogether aside.

TRANS> But in our text, Jesus is actually restoring the Sabbath to its proper place!

III. From Jesus, we learn how to restore the Sabbath.

- A. Recognise from Jesus' teaching about David eating the showbread that keeping the Sabbath is not about depriving yourself.
1. The purpose of the showbread was not to take bread away from those who needed food.
 - The bread was set apart as holy because its purpose was to show that God is the one who provides bread for His people.
 - Ordinarily, the rules were to be kept, but if one of the people He provides for was in urgent need of nourishment, would God the Lord then deprive them of what was needed for their body with that which a symbol of that provision?
 2. In the same way, observing the Sabbath day is not meant to be burdensome.
 - It is not meant to make it hard to feed ourselves and our children because it is Sunday—that is not the purpose of the prohibition against work.
 - The purpose is to make the day as free and easy as possible of ordinary things so that you and others can turn your attention to God.
 - For example, with the manna, the LORD provided them with twice as much on the day before the Sabbath so they would not have to gather it on the Sabbath... it was to make it easier, not more difficult to eat.

- People watching the Super Bowl often prepare food and drink in advance so they will not be distracted during the game.
3. Growth in Sabbath keeping does not come by multiplying regulations and making them more and more binding, but rather by finding ways to free yourself up so you can turn your attention more and more to the Lord on His day.
 - The ritual observance is not an end in itself, but a means to enable you to draw near to God without hindrance.
 - You are to measure how the Lord's Day went not by how well you kept the rules, but by how refreshed you were in the Lord—whether you communed with Him...
 - by knowing that you heard His voice in your soul,
 - that you praised Him,
 - that you came to know Him and His grace
 - and that you renewed your trust in Him.
- B. Jesus shows us that the day is a gift of God for us.
- In v. 27, He says that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath.
1. It is not a day of deprivation, but of enhancement and rejuvenation.
 - It is a much needed vacation from our everyday work and recreations to encounter our dear Saviour.
 - We are such a distracted people with so many cares and so much entertainment that we hardly ever get to think of Him...
 - And we miss the best part of life when we are distracted from God.
 - I mean, what are we doing without Him?
 - Just running in the rat race from one thing to another until we are old and worn out?
 - What kind of life is that?
 - A life without our glorious gracious God is a wasted empty life.
 2. I wish we were able to persuade people of what they are missing when they don't commune with God.
 - Even some of you—you make service to God sound like a burden and drudgery.
 - It is not... this is the God whose law is a law that teaches us to love one another deeply and to love Him with all our heart and soul.
 - It is about learning of the height and breadth of His love who spared not His only Son, but freely gave Him to die for our sins so that we could be pardoned and welcomed into His house.
 - It is about knowing Him... gaining a view of glory and power... as the one who made the world... who sustains us... who gave us all that we have.
 - It is about feeding upon His grace at church and in our homes, about gaining new strength to serve Him, fresh hope in His promises, courage and resolve to lay down our lives for Him and to pour out our lives for others.
 3. If you do not know Him as the God of grace in Christ, then of course... coming to Him in a focused way for the whole day will indeed be a burden to you.

- How can you even bear it when you come short of His requirements and do not know Him as the one who met His holy requirement for us by Christ?
 - You cannot bear it—you will want to avoid Him.
 - You find church a drudgery—something that drags you down.
 - But Jesus says that day was made for us—how can it be?
 - It can be for you when you know Him as the one who receives you in love and mercy, who is there to guide you... yes, to correct you, but in the same way that you get corrected when you take cooking lessons...
 - not to beat you down, but so you can do it better.
 - But above all, so that you rest in what He is as your provision of grace.
 - So that you see His excellence as your righteousness and your helper.
 - You see that you are accepted in the beloved.
 - You see His glory and beauty in His goodness and mercy as the true God who is over all blessed forever.
 - That Lord’s Day is about freeing ourselves to come Him.
 - The day is made for you.
- C. Lastly, you restore the day by remembering that it is indeed His day.
- As verse 28 says, “The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.”
1. The day is for you, but that doesn’t mean that *you* are the lord of the day. He is!
 - It is His day to regulate, not yours.
 - a. He tells us to have a holy convocation in all our cities, and He tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.
 - And in our worship, it is not worship as we please by images and icons and man-made ceremonies and rituals, it is by continuing steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, in the prayers...
 - And it is in singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with grace in our hearts to the Lord.
 - It is a day for feasting with our brothers and sisters before the Lord and for encouraging each other in our walk with Him.
 - It is a day for private prayer and meditation, for service and encouragement to and from each other.
 - It is not for a day for us to decide how we want to rest.
 - It is a day for us set aside our normal work and recreations so that we can come to Him as He has appointed.
 - b. He tells you to regulate the day not by binding regulations, but rather by keeping the purpose before you—that it is His day!
 - Keep the day in a way that enhances the purpose of communing with Him and you will do well.
 - If you turn it into a day that is only about not doing things and forget that it is a day for communing with Him, you have ruined the day.

- It is the same as it is when you set time apart for anyone that you love—your goal is to be free to spend time with them.
2. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus came both to restore the day and to enhance the day.
- a. He restored it by purging it from stifling external man-imposed regulations.
 - It was abused in His day by external observance and external regulations, and that is what He addressed, not because He hates the day, but because He loves it.
 - He did not toss it out, He restored a proper observance of it.
 - He did not amputate, but healed the day.
 - But as the Lord the Sabbath, He not only restored it...
 - b. He also enhanced it—by giving us another reason to keep it: *His finished redemptive work!*
 - This was so significant, that as Lord of the Sabbath, He changed the day of observance from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week (the day He rose).
 - Do you know that He also enhanced the Sabbath when He brought Israel out of Egypt?
 - He told them not only remember Him as their Lord and creator, but also as their Lord and redeemer.
 - It is in Deuteronomy 5 where the Ten Commandments are repeated, except that the fourth commandment says: **Deut 5:15: And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.**
 - And when He came to redeem us by the cross and was raised on the first day of the week, He added to the Sabbath the remembrance of that great saving work in addition to creation.
 - The LORD of the Sabbath did not abolish the Sabbath, but rather first purged it of man-made regulations and then enhanced it by adding the remembrance of His redemption on the cross.
 - And because the LORD of the Sabbath has made this the chief reason for the Sabbath, He, the LORD of the Sabbath, changed the day to the first day of the week because that was the day He rose from the dead.

Conclusion: Let us therefore keep the day unto Him with holy joy.

- As our Lord of the Sabbath said in Isaiah the prophet, 58:13-14: **“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, ¹⁴ then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

A holy day... a blessed day... the Lord’s Day.