

“Absolutes”
Mark 2:23-28 – 3:1-5
(Preached at Trinity, November 3, 2009)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As I’ve pointed out before, this section of Mark contains five narratives that are probably not in chronological order or even the same period of Christ’s ministry but Mark probably places them together because of their common theme – conflict with the scribes and Pharisees.
 - A. In the first section the scribes accused Jesus of blaspheme because He forgave the sins of the paralytic.
Mark 2:7 – “Why doth this *man* thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?”
 - B. After Jesus called Matthew the scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for consorting with sinners.
Mark 2:16 – “And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?”
 - C. As we came to **Verse 18** it would seem that the Pharisees along with the disciples of John the Baptist were taking offense with Jesus and His disciples because they weren’t fasting.
Mark 2:18 – “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?”
2. As we continue with the last narrative in **Chapter 2** we find Jesus and His disciples receiving criticism over the issue of the Sabbath. On this particular Sabbath Jesus and His disciples picked heads of wheat as they walked through a field.
 - A. The Pharisees weren’t questioning the legality of their actions. They weren’t accusing them of stealing. Their actions were completely lawful:
Deuteronomy 23:25 – “When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn.”
 - B. They were accusing them of doing it on the Sabbath.
Mark 2:24 – “And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?”
 1. Was not work forbidden on the Sabbath?
 2. In the Pharisaical mind this was surely reaping. Jesus and His disciples were breaking the Sabbath by reaping.
3. Jesus responds with, “**Have ye never read. . .**” The Scribes and Pharisees were proud of their understanding of the Law. Jesus is implying that in spite of all of their knowledge about the Law their understanding was flawed. Jesus gives an example when David was able to set aside the law because of a situation of necessity.

4. In the opening verses of **Chapter 3** we find another case involving the Sabbath. Jesus healed a deformity on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were ready to condemn Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus responds to the hardness of their heart:
Mark 3:4 – “And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?”
 5. Some use this passage in defense of what is sometimes called, “situational ethics.” Situational ethics describes the ideological belief that ethical obedience to the Law can be adjusted according to the various circumstances that we might face. Situational ethics fits well with Post Modern ideology. We live in a world void of absolutes. Tonight I want us to look at this passage in light of the absolutism of the Law.
 - A. It would surely seem that in this passage Jesus is advocating that there are certain circumstances that can justify the setting aside of God’s Law.
 - B. If this can be proven here shall we not justify other situations where setting aside God’s Law is permissible?
- I. There are basically three positions with regard to human moral responsibility.
- A. Nihilism – there is no God thus anything a person desires to do is permitted. There is moral autonomy.
 1. Many today live this way, at least practically.
 2. If there is no God and man is morally autonomous then he really cannot do anything wrong.
 3. Of course this position will not stand they test of Scripture. It cannot even stand the test of reason.
Everyone thinks its wrong for someone to break into their home and steal their TV or to steal their identity and empty their bank account.
 - B. Relativism – conduct is relative to circumstance. This is the position held by most people today.
 1. While the Law is good there are some situations where disobeying the Law is better.
 2. There are times when one might lie or steal if the circumstance or situation merits. The best example of situational ethics is the German holocaust. You are hiding Jews in your home and the Germans come to your door asking if you have Jews hiding in your home. Do you lie?
 3. The problem with relativism is who decides right from wrong? Morality becomes a matter of subjectivism.
 - a. Do you lie to save your job; to get a promotion?
 - b. You have been laid off. Do you steal to feed your family?
 - c. Someone knows something about you that will threaten arrest and certain jail. Do you kill him?
 4. The point is who decides? It places the Law of God subject to the subjective decisions of man. It places man sovereign over his behavior.
 5. Even Christians can be guilty of this. They break the Law of God but justify themselves in doing it.

- C. Absolutism – There is an absolute, objective standard of right and wrong. God’s Law is an absolute rule of behavior.
1. We are talking about God’s moral Law. It is perpetual and unchanging. This is in contrast to “positive” laws that were given by God’s sovereign prerogative and were often temporary and changing. The ceremonial laws were temporary. The judicial laws were temporary. Although they might provide direction for today they are not absolute laws.
 2. God’s Moral Law is absolute. God demands absolute obedience.
 3. We will be judged according to God’s Law. Any transgression of the Law is sin.
- II. There is a danger in the application of absolutism. There has always been the tendency for religious men to add their traditions and rules to the category of absolute Law
- A. I have warned about this often
1. Trying to place an absolute prohibition upon birth control
 2. Trying to make home schooling an absolute rule
 3. Trying to make total abstinence from alcohol an absolute rule (SBC)
 4. The list is unending – dress, hair style,
- B. The Scribes and Pharisees had a faulty understanding of the nature of the Law.
1. First, they had endless rules and traditions to which they demanded absolute obedience
Mark 7:8-9 – “For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. ⁹ And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.”
They sanctioned absolute obedience to rules that they had invented. The Sabbath prohibits work but the Scribes and Pharisees had incorporated a complex set of regulations that had become an impossible burden.
 - a. The ordinary boundary for a Sabbath’s journey was 2000 cubits (3000 feet) but if food for two meals was deposited at this border on Friday an additional 2000 cubits might be added.
 - b. When a narrow street was connected to a private dwelling that street would be made a part of the dwelling by laying a beam over the entrance or extending a piece of string along the street
 - c. The carrying of a burden was prohibited on the Sabbath – the lowest standard being the weight of a dried fig. It was permitted to carry a child – and if the child was holding a burden it was permissible.
 - d. To kill any insect on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden.
 - e. Water could not be poured on oneself for fear of cleaning the floor which of course would be work.
 - f. Women were forbidden to look into a mirror on the Sabbath lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out which would be a grievous sin. (Men by the way did not use mirrors at all because it was undignified)
 2. Second, they failed to draw a proper distinction between the ceremonial law and moral law

- a. Jesus is reminding them that David was proper in setting aside the ceremonial law due to necessity
- b. They also failed to recognize that the ceremonial laws pointed to Christ who was now among them.
The Lord of the Sabbath was speaking to them.
Mark 2:28 – “Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.”
3. They also failed to recognize that the Sabbath stands distinct and different from the rest of the Law. This is still confusing to many today. Many recognize the distinctness of the Fourth Commandment and then presume the Sabbath has been abrogated completely.

III. In what ways does the Sabbath stand distinct from the rest of the Law.

- A. There were positive or ceremonial regulations attached to the Sabbath.
 1. The Fourth Commandment is unique because it also carried certain ceremonial aspects which were fulfilled in Christ.
 - a. Numerous Sabbaths were established apart from the seventh day Sabbath.
 - b. There were festival Sabbaths that were not necessarily tied to the seventh day Sabbath.
 - c. These ceremonial days were fulfilled in Christ
Because the ceremonial aspects have been abrogated some insist that the whole of the Sabbath has been abolished.
 2. In addition, the Pharisees, notable for their legalism, in an attempt to protect the law actually buried it deep beneath the traditions of men.
 - a. The Sabbath in Jesus’ day was a ritual void of joy
 - b. There were more than 1500 rules attached to this day.
 - c. Jesus set the Sabbath free from these rules and regulations that had been attached to it. Rather than destroy the Sabbath, Jesus came to affirm it, restore it, and enforce it.
- B. Along with being freed from the traditions and legalism that had been attached to it, the Sabbath took on a new meaning with the Resurrection of Christ.
 1. The Sabbath was a part of the Moral Law but it was also a sign of God’s covenant relationship with Israel
Exodus 31:16 – “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, *for* a perpetual covenant.”
 2. With the arrival of the New Covenant the Sabbath has become a celebration of the Resurrection
 3. In accordance with this celebration, the day was changed from the 7th day to the 1st day of the week beginning the very day of the Resurrection
John 20:19 – “Then the same day at evening, being the first *day* of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace *be* unto you.”
 - a. Pentecost in Acts 2 occurred on the first day of the week - the day God chose for the great outpouring of His Spirit

- b. It was the practice of the New Testament church to meet on the first day of the week for worship
Acts 20:7 – “And upon the first *day* of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them”
- C. The Sabbath should be seen as a joyous celebration of God’s grace
 - 1. It shouldn’t be seen as simply a set of rules and regulations
 - 2. The Sabbath was made for man. It is a time for celebrating our relationship with God through Christ. It is truly unique from the rest of the Law. The Fourth Commandment is uniquely a sign of the New Covenant – a celebration of the resurrection and of the rest we have in Christ.
 - 3. Because of this we are granted certain liberties in its observance.
 - a. In other words the believer is free to order the day for the best spiritual benefit of himself and his family
 - b. Liberty, however, never means liberty to sin. The Sabbath is binding upon all people - it is God’s moral law – God has declared it to be a holy day
 - 4. There are certain things that call for exceptions in how we observe the Sabbath.
 - 5. This doesn’t mean the Sabbath can be disregarded. It simply means that in the joyous observance of the Sabbath we must always reflect God’s mercy and goodness to others and it is essential to remember that since the Sabbath was given for our good the keeping of it must also work for our good.
Mark 2:27 – “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath”

Conclusion:

- 1. This passage teaches us much about how we approach the Law. Yes the Law is binding as an absolute principle of obedience.
 But how do you look at the Law with regards to your life?
- 2. We are often incline to look at the Law in terms of is this action sin or not. The Law just becomes a list of do’s and don’ts.
- 3. For the people of Christ the Law has become for us a joyous standard of pleasing Him. Do you see the difference.
 The first attitude places the law as a taskmaster.
 The second sees the Law as that which pleases Christ and becomes a joy and delight.
 Samuel Bolton – *True Bounds of Christian Freedom* – “This is the spirit which God implants in His children, not a spirit of fear, but a spirit of love, which is the spring of all their actions, and which makes those things which otherwise would be tasks and burdens, refreshments and delights.”
- 4. Listen:
1 John 5:3 – “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”
Psalms 119:167 – “My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly.”

Matthew 11:28-30 – “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.”

5. The Gospel has changed everything. Christ has changed everything.
The Sabbath has become a joy. It is full of grace and mercy.
This is why acts of necessity and mercy are permitted on the Sabbath.