

# TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

## MARK: JESUS AND THE SABBATH

MARK 2.23 - 3.6

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### **INTRO**

1. We've been looking at 6 stories of conflict and trouble that Jesus experienced in his ministry. Today we'll examine the last two. Mark preaches Jesus as Son of God, and when the Son of God comes to an Israel that suffers from spiritual blindness, pride, and human traditions, we can expect trouble.

2. The first encounter in this series of 6 stories had the scribes merely thinking, not voicing, their disagreement with Jesus. By the end of our two stories today the Jewish leaders will be ready to kill Jesus.

3. What we'll see today is the conflict over Sabbath observance. In addition to the OT, the Jews adhered to man-made traditions which extended Sabbath laws beyond their original intent. The Jews expect everyone to fall in line with their theology of Sabbath and so they are scandalized when Jesus completely ignores it. Let's get started on the first story.

### **SABBATH IN THE GRAIN FIELDS**

1. Mark tells us at the opening of the story that it was Sabbath day, and Jesus with his disciples is walking through a grain field. His disciples are picking the heads of grain and eating them as they make their way along.

2. Now we should realize the disciples are not doing any wrong by snacking on someone else's grain; Moses' Law permitted people to snack on other people's crops so long as they didn't bring a basket and start harvesting it. In that respect this is a perfectly lawful snack.

3. But some Pharisees observe them and they object that picking the grain is not lawful on Sabbath.

4. Now the OT did not prohibit snacking on grain on Sabbath. But it did prohibit work. And the Jewish traditions, which extended the Sabbath rules, forbade harvesting. And apparently it was believed that a man picking heads of grain was harvesting. So, the Pharisees see this as harvesting, which is work, which is unlawful on Sabbath. Accordingly, they challenge Jesus about his disciple's actions.

5. In this first story Jesus will give 3 arguments in defense of his position on Sabbath; in the next story Jesus will give one more. Let's start with his first 3 arguments in defense of picking grain on Sabbath.

6. First, Jesus recounts an event from 1 Samuel 21. In that event David is on the run from King Saul who wants to kill him. David comes to the town of Nob where apparently the tabernacle is set up and the priests are there. David asks the priest for food. The priest has no normal bread, but he does have the holy bread which is set inside the tabernacle, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests. David asks for the bread and the priest gives it to him, which is a violation of Moses' Law. And Jesus is using this story as precedent to defend his disciple's eating of the grain on Sabbath.

7. At first glance, this story about David seems unrelated to the present issue of Sabbath between Jesus and the Pharisees. However, there are indications in the David story that the day he ate the bread was a Sabbath day; possibly that is part of why Jesus chose this story.

8. However, the force of Jesus' defense seems to run along a different line.

9. Notice, Jesus doesn't answer this way, "Hey Pharisees, I'm not breaking God's law; I'm just ignoring your human traditions." Instead, Jesus cites an instance where, to be honest, God's law was actually broken by David, and apparently that was okay! This should intrigue us. If Jesus isn't actually breaking God's law,

shouldn't he answer by showing why his actions do not constitute breaking the law? Why does he answer by pointing to another time the law was broken?

10. If we are familiar with the OT, I think we will be ready with an answer. The fact is that many places in the OT, not to mention the new, we are taught that not all laws are equal. Remember when Samuel tells King Saul that to obey is better than to sacrifice? Remember when Isaiah tells the Jews that God hates their observance of the ceremonial law because they are freely breaking the moral law?

11. Jesus himself tells us in Matt 23 that the Pharisees neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness, while fastidiously observing the lesser matters, such as tithing. Not all laws are equally weighty.

12. And so I believe that the first thing we can say about Jesus citing the David story in defense of his actions is this: Even the OT contains teaching and examples which show that the Sabbath law, and the rest of the ceremonial law, are not absolute in the way which the Pharisees think they are. The proof is that David could just waltz up to the tabernacle and eat the sacred bread, which was a violation of law; how could David do that unless the ceremonial law is not absolutely binding?

13. So Jesus is showing the Pharisees that they do not understand the law, nor the Sabbath, as they think they do. The Sabbath was always important, and in a fashion still is, but it was never absolute. That's Jesus' first argument.

14. Second, Jesus seems to ridicule an implication of the Pharisee's position on Sabbath. Their over-emphasis on Sabbath leads to the ridiculous conclusion that before creation, God was up in heaven one day, and he said to himself, "You know, I'd really love to make a day people have to observe. I know! I'll create the Sabbath! Oh, wait. There's no one around to observe it. I know! I'll create a world full of creatures so there will be someone around to keep Sabbath! Let there be light..."

15. As if Sabbath is the thing God was really after in creation, and man was made for Sabbath. But Jesus says it's the reverse: God made Sabbath for human beings; this means God wanted man to enjoy a day of rest from his work. The Sabbath was meant to be a delightful refreshment, not the grinding burden the Jews had made it out to be. So this defense of Jesus is similar to the last one: The Jews simply do not understand the nature of the Sabbath.

16. Jesus' third argument could be paraphrased this way: "I'm Jesus. The Sabbath is mine. I can do whatever I want with it." Jesus calls himself Lord of the Sabbath. Of course Yahweh made the Sabbath at the beginning of creation; he is the only being who could ever be called Lord of the Sabbath. Which means that, once again, Jesus is claiming things for himself which make it astounding he didn't get killed sooner. Jesus is the Creator, and as such he does with creation as he pleases, and that includes Sabbath. Talk about a way to end an argument.

## **SABBATH IN THE SYNAGOGUE**

1. Mark moves us ahead now to the next story where Jesus is in the synagogue on Sabbath. There is a man with a disabled, withered arm there, and Jesus' enemies are watching Jesus, waiting to see if he heals him. For them, the healing will be further evidence to use against Jesus in getting him arrested and killed. They have no concern about this man's sufferings.

2. Now once more, Jesus forces the issue. Jesus calls the disabled man forward to begin the debate.

3. And Jesus gets things started with a question. "Is it better to do good or harm on Sabbath, to save or to kill?" Now remember above when Jesus said Sabbath was made for man, not the reverse? There Jesus was basically saying the Pharisees' position amounts to the idea that Sabbath is more important than human beings. Here Jesus does something similar: Jesus seems to be saying that the Pharisees' Sabbath position amounts to the idea that it would be better to sin than to break

Sabbath! It would be better to do harm, even to kill someone than to break Sabbath! Jesus is showing the ridiculous position of the Jews.

4. At this point we need to bring in another historical point to clarify something. The Jewish traditions of the time did permit medical aid on Sabbath to someone who might die without it. In other words, the accepted position didn't literally think it better to let someone die rather than work on Sabbath by healing them. But the tradition said that if a medical case was less serious, and could wait until Sabbath was over, then the medical aid must wait. So with this tradition in mind, what sort of case was the man with the withered arm? Would he die without immediate medical aid?

5. It's obvious the man could have waited. He was in no immediate peril. So what does Jesus mean by accusing the Pharisees of holding a position which would rather kill someone than see Sabbath broken?

6. It's possible Jesus is exaggerating. Jesus does that for effect in his teaching elsewhere. However, I think Jesus is getting at something else. The Jews are there watching Jesus, ready to react with murderous conspiracy the moment he heals the disabled man. Then Jesus heals the man, and they immediately leave to make their plans. It looks like Jesus may be comparing his actions to theirs. What does Jesus do on Sabbath? He heals those in need; he goes about doing good. What do the Pharisees do on Sabbath? They take counsel together how to get an innocent man arrested and killed. So who is the one really sinning on Sabbath?!

7. When Jesus asks them his question they don't say a word. At this point in Mark's Gospel the Jewish leaders are already beyond debate. They aren't present to argue with Jesus; they are there to collect evidence against him.

8. And their silence angers and grieves Jesus. Their silence reveals hard hearts, impervious to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; unwilling to see the truth of Jesus' identity and their own mistaken position about pretty much everything. You

realize this conflict is about far more than just Sabbath; Sabbath is big, but it functions as the test case which reveals far deeper conflict between Jesus and his enemies. This is about how a man approaches God and his law and his kingdom redemption. This is about the entire tenor of Scripture, and the nature of Israel's Messiah.

9. So Jesus heals the man and his enemies depart to make plans against him. One last note about the text: Mark says the Pharisees make their plans with the Herodians. Now historically it is hard to know exactly who this group is, but basically they seem to have been supporters of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee.

10. Now that the Pharisees were willing to partner with the Herodians against Jesus probably reveals the intensity of their hatred for Jesus; one commentator points out that if the Herodians are who many think they are, they would not have shared the religious views of the Pharisees. However, the two groups were united on one point: Hatred for Jesus and the desire to see him taken out of the way. The Pharisees are willing to get their hands dirty to kill Jesus.

### **APPLICATION**

1. That's the text. Before we conclude let's spend just a few minutes to make application to our ourselves.

2. I think the most important thing I can say to you is this: I urge you to let Jesus, not Moses, direct you in the matter of Sabbath observance. It is true that under the Old Covenant, before Jesus came, God's people were commanded to observe Sabbath, and anyone who ignored God's command was worthy of death. But the coming of Christ creates a new situation, and we cannot demand that Jesus get in step with all the old forms. We need to let Jesus and his apostles explain Sabbath to us and that means giving the NT first place as we consider the matter.

3. And if we do that, we will arrive at the position that we are no longer required to observe a holy day. Working on Saturday used to be a sin; it is no longer. Sabbath

pictured some part of the reality which Jesus brought in his coming, and once Jesus comes the picture has served its purpose. It's time to take the picture down and embrace the reality. The first part of this application is simply that you should not observe Saturday as a holy day. Nor should you think of yourself as observing any day as a holy day, since the New Covenant Scriptures never direct us to do so, and even speak negatively of those who do.

4. But here's the next part of the application: God commands you to observe Sabbath. Just because you ought not to observe a holy day doesn't mean you shouldn't keep the Sabbath. It just means the nature of Sabbath observance was transformed in the coming of Christ.

5. It used to be you were required to abstain from work, offer extra sacrifice, stay close to home, and not cook a meal. None of that is binding any longer. But God still commands a kind of Sabbath observance. So what is it?

6. God commands you to put your faith in Christ and to rest from your dead works. God commands you to stop thinking you could ever perform any work, whether a moral work, or a ceremonial work, that could ever cover your sin. You cannot. God commands you to acknowledge the work he performed in sending Jesus, and to rest your heart and soul in that divine work, knowing that salvation has been fully accomplished for you.

7. This, and nothing else, is the true Christian Sabbath. This is what the Old Covenant Sabbath always pointed to, though God's people didn't know it until Christ came and revealed it. You can see this idea in Hebrews 4. So God does require you, and all people, to observe Sabbath: Rest your heart in the Grace of God, based not on your works but his works, and you will be observing Sabbath.

8. Now you realize what this means? It means that some churchgoers this morning, who think they are keeping Sabbath by attending church, but who are not resting in Christ, are failing to keep Sabbath. And it means the laborer who has to work on

Sunday during service, but whose heart is resting in the grace of God; that man is keeping Sabbath even while he works! This is the kingdom reality that Jesus brought.

9. Quick side note: Am I saying church attendance is irrelevant? Far from it; I assumed that working man loves God's church and wishes he could be there, and is there every time he can be. God commands church attendance, and anyone who ignores that command reveals a heart that is not resting in Jesus. The resting heart loves God, because God first loved him, and that heart desires to obey God and actually does obey God in many ways, though always imperfectly. The redeemed heart loves God and it expresses that love, in part, through devotion to God's church.

10. But that's a side note. Here's the point: God commands you to keep Sabbath by resting in Jesus alone for your redemption. The people of God no longer observe Sabbath just one day a week; we now observe it every day of the work, whether we are working or not.