

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Mark		Pastor/Teacher
Text	Mark 2:23-28		Mason Depew
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THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

Introduction: Much like fasting, the Sabbath is one of the most widely misunderstood features of biblical religion among American Christians today. This was not always the case, as we will see in the next sermon of this series, but today almost no evangelicals see the Sabbath as having any relevance for them at all. I myself thought that no one could convince me that Sunday was the Christian Sabbath and was even bothered by the fact that we recite the fourth commandment here each week, before I went to seminary. What I have come to realize, however, is that I actually *agreed with the Pharisees*, in the sense that I thought the Sabbath was simply about a long list of things I can't do. I rejected that list, whereas the Pharisees embraced it, but we both saw the Sabbath fundamentally as not much more than a bunch of thou-shalt-nots. When I was pushed at seminary to really search the Scriptures more deeply on this subject, however, I realized that this is missing the forest for the trees. Here in Mark 2:23-28, Jesus completely reframes the whole issue and points us to this simple fact, that the Sabbath was made *for us*, as a gift! Now we must investigate how this can be true.

1. The Pharisees Rebuke Jesus's Disciples

- a. Much like in the previous episode in Mark 2:18-22, where people asked about Jesus's disciples fasting, the Pharisees here seize on the fact that Jesus's disciples pick grain to eat on the Sabbath.
 - i. This naturally strikes most American Christians as the Pharisees being absurdly strict and nitpicky, but actually, if you are focused entirely on the strict rules around the Sabbath, the Pharisees' accusation isn't crazy. Numbers 15:32-36 records a shocking story where the Lord tells Moses to have a man stoned to death for *picking up sticks* on the Sabbath!¹ So at least on the surface, the disciples do seem to be doing something out of line here.
 - ii. Again, recall from the previous episode concerning fasting that Jews did *normally* fast quite a lot, so it was not a crazy question to ask! The issue with both these stories is that the Jews have forgotten why these laws exist, and therefore cannot recognize that what Jesus is doing is intentionally *not normal*. He is not here just to enhance our life in this fallen world, but to drastically overhaul and transform the whole creation. Just as Jesus's disciples do not fast because fasting belongs to the old creation and Jesus is making all things new, so also his presence changes the way that the Sabbath works, too!
- b. The story that Jesus tells from the life of David in verses 25-26 is an effective response because it shows there is more to the Sabbath than the detailed rules of its observance. There are two connections between David's situation and Jesus's here.

¹ "And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him.

35 And the LORD said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the LORD commanded Moses." - Numbers 15:32-36

- i. First is the need, obviously. David's men were hungry and did not have another ready opportunity to obtain food, and Jesus's disciples were in the same position.
 - ii. Second is the closeness of God's presence. The fact that David did this inside the Tabernacle itself shows it was not something he was doing secretly, shamefully, trying to hide from the Lord. The high priest, knowing that David was uniquely favored by God, allowed it. Similarly, as Jesus just emphasized in the controversy over fasting, his presence with the disciples is a special occasion that calls for celebration. Jesus is even more favored by God than David was. In fact, he *is* the presence of God among his people, as Mark's quotation from Isaiah showed in the previous chapter.² So it would actually be *less appropriate* for Jesus's disciples to go home for the Sabbath and find food there, because that would mean leaving the presence of the one they most ought to spend the Sabbath with! The Pharisees appear to have forgotten that the Sabbath is not merely about the absence of work, but actually enjoying spiritual rest in the presence of God.
2. The Sabbath in the Old Testament - We need to review what the Pharisees appear to have lost sight of, namely the reasons God instituted the Sabbath in the first place. Once we have a better grasp on the Old Testament, it will be much clearer to us what Jesus means when he says in verses 27-28, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."
- a. First we have to understand what the Sabbath meant as the final day of the Creation week. Obviously, the Lord is not a man that he would *need* to rest, so he did it in order to establish a pattern for his image-bearers: Adam and Eve. God worked for six days, creating all things, judged his own work to be "very good" (Genesis 1:31), then rested on the seventh day. Adam likewise had work to do, tending and guarding the garden, and if his work had been "very good," he would have had rest, too!³ But it wasn't. He failed to guard the garden and his wife from the serpent, so he was cursed with toil apart from God rather than blessed with rest in peaceful fellowship with God.
 - b. When you read the chapters of Genesis following the Fall in chapter 3, you cannot help but feel weary of all the violence and misery that starts with Cain and Abel and climaxes with the Flood. I am convinced that Noah's name, meaning "rest,"⁴ reflects the fact that the line of Seth reflects the fact that the line of Seth was still looking for a mediator to bring them God's Sabbath rest.
 - c. The Israelites were to follow this pattern in their weekly lives, too.⁵ This would reinforce in their minds that they are still made in the image of God and called to mirror his work in their own labors. Like Adam, if they worked hard and kept their covenant with the Lord as a nation, they would earn rest in Canaan, and if they failed, they would be cast out.⁶
 - i. Remember, however, that on the individual level, earning a living in the ancient world was not easy. Even in a good land, there was intense pressure to work as much as possible so

² Isaiah 40:3 says a voice in the wilderness will cry out to prepare the way of the Lord, the God of Israel. We know that the voice crying in the wilderness is John the Baptist, so whoever he is preparing the way for can only be the Lord God of Israel, and that is obviously Jesus of Nazareth.

³ "The archetypal sabbatical pattern is...one of works-judgment-rest. Since the sabbatical pattern that structures human existence is a replica of God's archetypal sabbatical pattern, man too comes to the promised consummation only by way of work and (favorable) judgment." - Meredith Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Mageddon*, 63.

⁴ "When Lamech had lived 182 years, he fathered a son and called his name Noah, saying, 'Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief [rest] from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.'" - Genesis 5:28-29

⁵ "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." - Exodus 20:9-11

⁶ Note the Sabbath language in how God condemned the wilderness generation: "For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.' Therefore I swore in my wrath, '**They shall not enter my rest.**'" - Psalm 95:10-11

your family would be as secure as possible in a dangerous world. To take even one day off in seven was a sign of faith. The Sabbath law encouraged Jews to ask themselves each and every week, “Who ultimately provides for me and my family? Is my life in my own hands or in the Lord’s?” The most extreme form of this was the Jubilee, which would have required every fifty years that the Israelites take **three full years off** of planting crops.⁷ That would seem like complete madness!

- ii. This is why you often find that the Lord treats the Sabbath as representing the core of his covenant with Israel.⁸ The idea is if they had real faith they would want the blessing of rest he was holding out to them and trust him to provide. If they could not care less about the Lord, on the other hand, then obviously they would not want to take a day off and spend it in his holy presence.
- iii. It is fascinating, however, to note that at certain times the Israelites were also commanded to rest on **Sunday** as well as Saturday. Why were they sometimes given a two-day weekend? This represents something *beyond* the original creation. An extra day of rest, unrelated to their work in this world, pointing to a great, more perfect rest than they could ever obtain. It is also worth noting that two of these special Sunday sabbaths, the feasts of Firstfruits and Weeks, were tied to the annual harvest. So devout Israelite farmers would naturally feel a profound sense of relief and gratitude that God has provided them a bounty to live off of for the next year. They would feel their lives renewed, as it were. Since in Mark 2:23 the disciples pluck heads of wheat, this story must have happened sometime in between the Feast of Firstfruits and Weeks, likely in our month of May.

d. What key New Testament events happen on these special Sunday sabbaths?

- i. The first one of them each year, the Feast of Firstfruits, is the Sunday after Passover,⁹ so that is, of course, the day Christ rose from the dead! In fact, Paul makes a very clear reference to this feast in 1 Corinthians 15:20, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the **firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep.”
- ii. The second Sunday sabbath of the Old Testament calendar was the feast of Weeks. You would count a week of weeks, seven times seven equals 49, then observe the Feast of Weeks as a day of rest on the fiftieth day, which is a Sunday, known in Greek as Pentecost.¹⁰ Can it be sheer coincidence that the Holy Spirit is poured out, and the first Christian sermon delivered on another one of these Sunday sabbaths? This also fits the “harvest” theme very well, since at Peter’s preaching about three thousand souls are added to the Church! That’s a massive haul into the Lord’s barn, so to speak.¹¹

⁷ The first year of no planting would have been before the Sabbath year because you would not be able to harvest it anyway, the second in the Sabbath year itself, and the third in the year of Jubilee. Imagine if the whole nation had such great faith that they would trust the Lord as they effectively shut down their economy for three whole years! The Israelites never once kept this law, so 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 tells us: “He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia,

⁸ For example, Isaiah 56:6-7 says that the Lord will bring foreigners who observe the Sabbath, as a symbol of the whole rest of the covenant, to his holy mountain and welcome them into his house: “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, **everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it**, and holds fast my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

⁹ “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, so that you may be accepted. **On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.**” - Leviticus 23:10-11

¹⁰ “You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the LORD. ... **And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work.** It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.” - Leviticus 23:15-16, 21

¹¹ “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” - Acts 2:41

- iii. What are Easter and Pentecost combined? The beginning of the New Creation! The Old Creation, which was finished when God rested on Saturday, fades into the background as Christ shows he is doing something marvellously new here. He has triumphed over death in the Resurrection, and he has triumphed over the blindness of his disciples by giving them new life in his Spirit! After Pentecost, we begin to see how God's grand plan of redemption is all coming together: the Son has accomplished it, and the Spirit is applying it to all God's people, from every nation. These are the beginnings of Christ making all things new, and they both happen on Sundays that were days of solemn rest for the Israelites. Now we can see why Jesus says he is the Lord of the Sabbath. His coming does not destroy the Sabbath, but transforms it and renews it!¹²
- iv. This also explains why John could say he was "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" and expect his audience to know what that means in Revelation 1:10. Calling it "the Lord's Day" implies that when we worship each Sunday, it is a foretaste of the final Day of Judgment, when the Lord will appear again, the entire New Creation will be finished, and we will enter our everlasting Sabbath rest.

3. Two common objections to Sunday as the Christian Sabbath

- a. Objection: Colossians 2:16 seems to say that the Sabbath is as much a matter of Christian liberty as what we eat or drink.
 - i. Response: Modern English translations slightly obscure the original Greek of this verse when they translate "Sabbath" as singular. In fact, all the other nouns Paul uses in this verse are singular, but "Sabbath" is actually plural, "sabbaths."¹³ The plural form of sabbaths, in the Old Testament, typically refers to the whole Mosaic calendar of feast days and years. Therefore Paul is actually making a broader point, that Christians ought not to pass judgment on each other over the observance of holidays.
 - ii. Furthermore, even if Paul does also intend to include the weekly Sabbath in this verse as part of this larger group of sabbaths, that would only mean we should refrain from imposing specific rules on each other for observing the Sabbath. Just as Paul clearly intends us to keep on eating and drinking *something* even as he tells us not to judge each other for what we eat or drink, he would also have us continue to observe the Sabbath in *some way*. This should be different than under the Old Covenant, where there was a greater emphasis on the details of outward behavior because they were trying to earn God's blessings as a nation, in the land of Canaan. But it is not *entirely* different, because we are still pilgrims who need the Lord to give us rest on our wearisome journeys through this fallen world. So Paul's point would be that instead of judging each other on peripheral questions, we ought to call one another back to the central truth of the Gospel.
- b. Objection: Christ fulfilled the Sabbath, so it no longer applies to us, just like the sacrificial system, Kosher food laws, etc.
 - i. Response: This is too simplistic a way of understanding Christ's fulfillment of the Law. Christ completely fulfilled some laws and prophecies in his first coming,¹⁴ but there are

¹² One of my seminary professors, David VanDrunen, made this argument in a fuller form to us in class, and it is what finally convinced me that our Sunday worship is rooted in the Old Testament Sabbath pattern. He has told me his forthcoming book on Reformed moral theology will include these arguments in a dedicated chapter on the Sabbath. This book is scheduled to be published in late 2027.

¹³ The KJV and NKJV do translate this verse correctly with the plural of sabbaths, but most other English translations, like the ESV and NIV, do not.

¹⁴ Most obviously, we no longer offer animal sacrifices to the Lord because Jesus has offered himself, once and for all, as an infinitely more valuable sacrifice for our sins. After the Cross, any other sacrifice is pointless. "He has no need, like those high priests, to offer

also others that he either transformed or only partially fulfilled until he comes a second time.¹⁵ We need to ask not simply whether something was fulfilled, but *how* it was fulfilled and whether it still serves any purpose.

- ii. When we then reflect on what the Sabbath represented for God's people in the Old Testament, which is nothing less than everlasting rest in God's presence, we are forced to recognize that is still ahead of us. To say that the Sabbath rest has been fully fulfilled would mean this life is as good as it is going to get! I can hardly imagine a more depressing conclusion to draw, than that God is not going to give us any more rest than he has given us already. We must remember, instead, that the best is yet to come! There is infinitely better, sweeter rest that awaits us when Christ returns to bring us home!¹⁶ We will have rest from our enemies in the world, from diseases, from burdensome labor of all kinds, from strife in our families, and from everything else that gives us grief and pain.¹⁷
- iii. Hebrews 4 tells us explicitly that there is still a greater rest ahead of us that we must strive to enter into. The way we strive to reach that rest is by faith, not by our Sabbath-keeping itself, but still, it proves that Christ has not yet given us the final fulfillment of the Sabbath. This life is still full of labors and trials for us, until we reach our final rest by God's grace.¹⁸

- 4. Until we enter into the Lord's final rest that he has purchased and prepared for us, it is fitting for us to keep Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. In the next sermon of this series, we will see more clearly what this means for us practically. But for now, it is enough to simply realize what an incredible joy and privilege it is to be invited into God's presence for rest in sweet, peaceful fellowship with him as he nourishes us with his Word. This is what it means that the Sabbath was made *for man*, not man for the Sabbath. Instead of policing each other's outward behavior as if our collective salvation depends on Sabbath observance, we should rather give thanks that God has designated one day a week for us to gather and revel in his glorious presence. When we understand what an amazing privilege this offer is, we will no longer see it as a burden we cannot bear, but instead as an invitation we would be fools to refuse!

sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself." - Hebrews 7:27

¹⁵ For example, the New Testament places a stronger emphasis on self-sacrificial love as the core of all true obedience. This was always there in the Old Testament, as well, but the New Testament makes it front and center because it is an essential part of our witness to the way Christ has loved us. "Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling." - 1 John 2:7-10

¹⁶ Revelation 14:13 is a good reminder on this point: living the Christian life is wearisome, and even the most mature and fruitful Christians reach a point where they just want to go home to be with the Lord and *rest*. In other words, they want a more perfect Sabbath! "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may **rest** from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'"

¹⁷ "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." - Revelation 21:4

¹⁸ "In a word, the works of 4:10 are *desert-works*, the works of believers in the present wilderness, that is, *non-rest* situation, looking forward to the future, hoped-for, promised rest. They are the wilderness-works of the church on the way between exodus from Egypt/redemption (cf. 3:16; *here* in this passage, and in terms of its controlling model, is justification by faith) and Canaan/rest. ... And the clause as a whole describes a future state of rest with the wilderness left behind, that rest toward which the writer immediately goes on to exhort his readers to *exert* themselves (v. 11)." - Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 45.