

THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

Mk. 2:23 And it came to pass, that he went through the corn fields on the sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn. ²⁴ And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful? ²⁵ And he said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? ²⁶ How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him? ²⁷ And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: ²⁸ Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.

As we study through the Gospel of Mark I trust we are taking account of a very real Saviour in the midst of a very real people. It is not an inflated narrative that defies the ordinary, but we are dealing with the true account of one Who is not only a man, but He is also the Son of God. Through these pages we learn about His ministry and His purpose ... we see God in human flesh, Who made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:7).

Thus far He has been presented to us as the Son of God (1:1), the beloved Son (v.11), He Who has authority over the devil (v.13), the Gospel preacher (v.14), He Who is the Holy One of God (v.24), He heals (v.29-32, 40-42), He has the power to forgive sins (2:7), and He can read minds (v.8).

Another troublesome aspect to His ministry, - as far as the Pharisees were concerned, - was His next claim, v.28 *the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath ... Lord of the Sabbath. That was incredible!* That was an awful thing for any human being to claim! That is a title that belongs to God alone. To apply it to anyone else is blasphemous! The Pharisees did not miss the full weight of what Jesus was speaking about ... that *He* claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. They knew that title belonged to *God* for *He* had ordained the Sabbath at the beginning, Gen. 2:2 *And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.* ³ *And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made. ... Therefore, God is the Lord of the Sabbath ... and for Jesus to claim the title, Lord of the Sabbath, was to claim equality with God ... In effect, He was even claiming to be God!*

The subject of the Sabbath in the Old Testament was a fundamental pillar of Judaism ... Ex. 20:10 *the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God ... 31:13 Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep ... 15 Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. ... The Lord and the Sabbath are inextricably linked! It is His day, - all days are His, - but the Sabbath has a particular resonance because that was the day set out in the creation ordinances that God claimed as His own.*

So, the Pharisees could see what Christ was saying, but for Him to claim to be the Lord of the Sabbath was essentially to claim to be God. ... And either this was true, or Jesus was the greatest blasphemer! ... They believed He was the second option!

Jesus, therefore, was ‘lancing a boil’! He was cutting deep into the heart of these religious men. To belong to the Pharisees, you had to commit yourself, - without any question and without any hesitation, - to a system of rules and regulations that depended upon your works and self-righteousness. By this means, you hoped to achieve a relationship with God through ceremony, ritual, and external law-keeping that ultimately found its focal point in the Sabbath. By Jesus being so direct, He entered into *another* showdown with the Pharisees. ... It was the seventh day of the week, - a Saturday, a Sabbath, ... actually a Sabbath runs from sundown on the Friday evening to sundown on the Saturday evening, - and as the disciples were walking through the countryside with Jesus they reached out and plucked a few ears of corn. Now, that constituted work ... in the minds of the Pharisees. However, Jesus didn’t say a thing! He did not utter one single word of rebuke to His disciples! ... There was *no way* a real Messiah would allow that to happen ... And in fact, He wouldn’t have chosen disciples that would have done the likes of that!

On the other hand ... what about the Pharisees? Well, an example of their application of the Sabbath is in John 5. There, Jesus had travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (v.1). He went along to the pool of Bethesda where people with all types of illnesses and conditions lay ... hoping for an angel to come and stir up the water. Then, the first person into the pool was made whole of whatsoever disease he had (v.5). ... This was what they believed.

Lying there, was a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. He has been at that pool for a long time. Then Jesus simply asked him a most obvious question, v.6 *Wilt thou be made whole?* ⁷ The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. ⁸ Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. ⁹ And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath.

Great! If we had been there, we would have been overjoyed ... *However, the same day was the sabbath* and this man who hadn’t been able to walk for thirty-eight years picked up his bed *on the sabbath* and walked off! ...

He picked up his bed *on the sabbath* and he walked off! Instead of the Pharisees being happy for him, they pounced on him, v.10 *it is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed. ... He hadn't done it in all of thirty-eight years ... and there they were, telling the man off! No compassion, no mercy, no grace, no kindness, no tenderness ... simply, you haven't walked for thirty-eight years, and you shouldn't be walking and carrying that bed with you today!* They lambasted the man! ... He pointed them to Jesus, v.11 *He answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.* ¹² Then asked they him, *What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?* ... He said, *Walk, and I walked ... and it was the first time in thirty-eight years! ... And that was their problem ... Jesus told the invalid man to walk, he rose up off his bed healed ... but the Jews thought it was terrible what Jesus did, v.16 And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day. ... In their eyes, - with their religion, - Jesus was wrong to heal the man on the Sabbath because Jesus was responsible for him desecrating the Sabbath! ... What a warped theology!*

The Pharisees had added all kinds of restrictions to their laws regarding the Sabbath. They had invented impossible and silly rules that had no foundation in the Law of Moses. But, they reckoned the more you deprived yourself, the holier it would make you! This then became like a measuring rod, and it defined how religious they were ... and Jesus rejected it all! He would never conform to the conditions of men to manmade rules that had taken the place of the Law of God ... and to add to God's Law was every bit as wrong as to take away from them! ... On another occasion, when the scribes and Pharisees were at Him again over a similar issue, saying, Mt. 15:2 *Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.* ³ But he answered and said unto them, *Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?*

... So, that describes the Pharisees ... cold-hearted, callous, compassionless, and fanatical slaves to their own fabricated traditions! And on the basis of such, Jesus was a condemned man, - they condemned Him because He defied their rules about the Sabbath. Notice, He didn't sit down and try to reach a position of neutrality or a place of compromise or accommodation ... He simply told them straight, Jn. 5:34 *I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved ... 37 Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape.* ³⁸ *And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. ... Explosive!* ... You are religious, but you're not saved!

By the way, the incident in Jn. 5 happened just prior to the closing verses in Mark chapter two ... In Mk. 2 Jesus has returned to Galilee, and the ‘war drums’ of the Pharisees have been ‘beating’ all the way from Jerusalem back to Capernaum ... So, these Pharisees in Galilee would have heard what had happened in Jerusalem, and they reckoned they were ready for Jesus ... *but they weren’t!* They were ‘having a go’ at Him, ²⁴ And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful? ²⁵ And he said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? ²⁶ How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him? ²⁷ And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: ²⁸ Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.

The word ‘sabbath’ (σάββατον) comes from the Hebrew word *shabbath*, and its root means “to cease”. It was God Who defined Sabbath in Gen. 2:3, *And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested [ceased] from all his work which God created and made.* The seventh day, therefore, was the day of rest. There were no further details prescribed in the creation ordinance, other than you were not to work, you were to rest. It was to be a day of enjoyment, recuperation, and worship ... It was a day set aside for man.

However, the Pharisees (unsurprisingly!) had a detailed document called the Talmud that added to the Law. It contained a number of ridiculous additions that weren’t even hinted at in the Scriptures. For example, it said you were only allowed to take nineteen hundred and ninety-nine steps on the Sabbath ... If you dared to take another step, - the two thousandth step, - you would violate the Sabbath ... And there were even more ludicrous restrictions! ... Concerning the Sabbath alone, there were twenty-four chapters of laws. They covered every eventuality. It actually defied logic how someone could come up with such legalism. ... Another example ... If you put an olive in your mouth and rejected it because it was bad, you couldn’t put a whole one in the next time because the palate had tasted the flavour of a whole olive. If you threw an object in the air and caught it with the other hand, it was a sin. If you caught it in the same hand, it wasn’t. ... The whole system was so unbelievably oppressive, it was unscriptural, it did not relate to the Law of Moses, it was so brutally ungodly ... And here in Mk. 2, the Pharisees who were steeped in it charged Jesus with being a sinner because He allowed His disciples to pluck the ears of corn on the Sabbath. Incidentally, this would have been in the late spring - early summer season when the grain is ripe. The fields were laid out in rows, with paths criss-crossing through them ...

By the way, to notice all that was going on, the Pharisees were following Jesus, and that actually meant *they* were in breach of their own Talmud because they would have been travelling more than the permitted distance for a Sabbath ... But it was a case of one law for us and another law for them!

Now, the fact was, though, the Law of Moses made provision for travellers, - people like Jesus and His disciples, - Dt. 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.* ... Obviously, they weren't allowed to bring a trailer in and remove bales of barley ... but the Law did permit them to pluck the ears of the corn as they passed through the field. The Law wasn't harsh, for it allowed for provision for the hungry. ... Also, nowhere did the Law stipulate you could not pluck the ears of corn on the Sabbath. It simply says you can do it, and that was applied to all seven days! ... Neither does the Old Testament restrict how far a person can walk on the Sabbath, or how heavy the burden they can carry ... It simply called on them to stop working, to rest and to spend the day with God.

So, the disciples were breaking no laws, in fact, they were doing exactly what the Old Testament allowed them to do. They picked the ears of the corn, peeled away the outer layer, and ate the tiny fruit inside for, - wrote Matthew (12:1), - they were hungry. ... They were hungry, and the graciousness of the Law permitted their hunger to be satisfied ... even on the Sabbath.

Skulking along behind Jesus and His disciples in the field were the Pharisees. They were watching everything! Sad people! They had nothing more to do in life than to follow and harass Jesus, v.24 *Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?* ... Can You not do anything to stop Your disciples? Don't you see what they are up to ... violating the Sabbath! ... That was what their Talmud taught them. ... If you roll wheat in your hands to remove the husks, it is sifting and that is forbidden. If you rub the heads off wheat, it is threshing and that is forbidden. If you clean off the shell, it is sifting and that is forbidden. If you throw the chaff into the air, it is winnowing, and that is forbidden. So, to sum it up, Jesus and His disciples, - by plucking the ears of corn on the Sabbath, - were reaping, threshing, sifting, grinding, winnowing, and preparing food! ... And the Pharisees were quick to condemn them!

Jesus didn't let them off with it, though, v.25 *Have ye never read,* - they would have hated that! Of course, they had read!! They were Pharisees, students and doctors in the Law ... *educated people!* How dare He insinuate otherwise!

Who was *He*, but nothing more than a carpenter from Nazareth! However, no matter how much they had read, they had no understanding of God's Word. Ask them what a passage of Scripture meant, and they couldn't tell you. They would tell you what the Talmud and the rabbinical writings said ... but they couldn't tell you what it means for their eyes were blinded and their hearts were calloused towards the truth of God and His Word.

And so Jesus referred them to a passage in I Samuel 21 that describes how David fled from Saul. He went to a holy place called Nob, - a priestly city to the north of Jerusalem, - where the tabernacle was located. ... He was starving for he was a fugitive on the run, and he had no food. There he met Ahimelech the priest and asked him for food ... for at least five loaves of bread. However, the priest told him there wasn't any available. Yes, he had bread, but the bread he had was holy and only for the young men who had kept themselves away from women (v.4). This was *hallowed/holy* bread. David assured him that was the case (v.5), So the priest gave him hallowed bread: for there was no bread there but the shewbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away (v.6).

What was the hallowed bread? ... Every Sabbath, twelve loaves of fresh hot bread were brought inside the tabernacle and set on a golden table, in the presence of God. The twelve loaves symbolised the twelve tribes and their requirement to have continued fellowship with Jehovah. ... The following Saturday, the bread that had been on the golden table for a week would be removed and replaced with more hot bread in order to keep the symbolism fresh, Lev. 24:5 thou shalt take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake. ⁶ And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the LORD. ⁷ And thou shalt put pure frankincense upon [*each*] row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, [*even*] an offering made by fire unto the LORD. ⁸ Every sabbath he shall set it in order before the LORD continually, [*being taken*] from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. ⁹ And it shall be Aaron's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in the holy place: for it [*is*] most holy unto him of the offerings of the LORD made by fire by a perpetual statute.

Returning to Mk. 2:26 ... Jesus explained another incident that occurred after Abiathar replaced Ahimelech as high priest (Abiathar had a lengthy priesthood during David's reign). David was really hungry and he went into Abiathar who took the consecrated, - holy/hallowed, - loaves from the golden table ... the bread that normally only the priests in this priestly city were allowed to eat ... and the priests, along with David and his men, ate the hallowed bread. ...

What was happening? ... God did not intervene and strike down dead David and his men ... So what was happening?

Well, Abiathar the high priest understood that no ceremony should take precedence when lives are at risk, and so he gave David and his men the consecrated bread to eat. ... It is also suggested that since Jesus was relating this story on a Sabbath that it was a Sabbath when Abiathar gave David and his men the bread ... and it would have been the bread that had been on the golden table for the previous week. The bread that was symbolic of the twelve tribes before God that previously was only to be eaten by the priests met the human need of David and his starving men.

Let's look at it like this ... This building is where the people of God meets. It must be kept in a way that is honouring unto the Lord. It would be completely wrong if it wasn't looked after. It would be wrong for us to open it up to anyone for any purpose, other than the worship of the Lord. How this place is kept is testimony to how we reverence and honour Him when we come to worship. This building is the house of God, in that sense ... However, this building is also *only* a building. There is no superstition attached to it, - we don't believe it has any supernatural properties, - ... it's a building of bricks and mortar where God's people meet. ... If the dirtiest, most stinking sinner from off the streets of Kirkcaldy wandered in here, we would offer him food for his body and food for his soul. No matter how dirty and no matter how stinking, he would be welcome into this place because he needs to be saved ... Similarly, Abiathar saw beyond the ceremony of the twelve loaves and he, - through grace, - saw the needs of David and his men. ... Similarly, again, as Jesus walked through the fields of corn ... man wasn't created for what was in those fields, but what was in those fields was created for man, [Gen. 1:26](#) And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. ²⁸ And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. ²⁹ And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which [*is*] upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

God's law was being vandalised by the Pharisees for their ceremonies, and traditions were an obstacle to mercy, kindness, and grace. Those cold-hearted religious legalists did not care about people ... and they couldn't stand Jesus because He cared too much! They had no concept of tenderness, and no willingness to be obedient to what Jesus said in His sermon on the mountain, Mt. 5:7 Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

So, what was Jesus saying to these Pharisees? He was explaining to them that since Abiathar the high priest permitted David to eat the hallowed bread, then the disciples are permitted by the *Great* High Priest to disregard a regulation of the Sabbath that wasn't even in God's law. It was merely a law of men.

At the conclusion of His conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus explained it correctly, v.27 *The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath. That is what Gen. 1:26-30 teaches! It was set aside as the day for man's rest in the presence of God, - God's special day out of the whole week. And since it is God's day, there wouldn't be a better day in the week to heal someone ... neither would there be a better day in the week to enjoy His provision ... the corn in that field.*

And then, He once again made a concluding declaration that, ²⁸ *Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.* ... What He was saying declared Himself to be the Messiah, and the Lord of the Sabbath ... In other words, He instigated the day ... In other words, He was present when it was set apart from the other six ... In other words, He is the sovereign God Who created it!

The Pharisees understood completely what Jesus was claiming. They didn't like it and they didn't agree, but they heard clearly what He was saying and they couldn't argue ... Jesus was declaring, *I* designed this day, and *I* am the Creator, Jn. 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* ² *The same was in the beginning with God.* ³ *All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made* ... ¹⁴ *we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father*

They didn't like it, but He said it because it is true! Many people don't like what we believe, because what we believe God says in His Word, and it is not always acceptable to the world. They don't like what He says about how there is only one way to come to Him and to enter Heaven, and they don't like what He says about sin, about sinful lifestyles, about sinful goals ... They don't like it, and they would argue with Him. ...

They don't argue with Him 'to His face', but they argue with Him by arguing with the people who uphold what He says. They accuse us of being bigots and narrow-minded, but really, they are accusing Him because we are simply believing and passing on what He says in His Word!

Others might choose to reject it, but they will answer for it someday ... but we as believers believe that what He says in His Word is truth and it is for the good of His people to obey.

We don't live by men's systems that change and compromise so that no one knows where they are and what they are ... We live by the sure testimony and word and Gospel of God's Grace that is forever the same, and that has its source in our Creator, Sustainer, and Saviour. He is Lord of the Sabbath ... Yes, He is the Lord, - in fact, He is the King of kings and *Lord* of lords! He is the final authority! He is the Law-maker, the Law-giver, and the Law-keeper. It is His side we are on, and it is His teachings we work to keep. ... I say 'work', but it is work within the confines of His grace.

There is one final thought we conclude with, and it is this ... It is a bad thing to argue against God! What His Word says is our responsibility to keep and to be obedient to ... that is, if we want to enjoy His pleasure. The world, of course, doesn't see it like that, - they don't care. However, the Lord has saved us out of the world to be a people holy unto Himself. Peter wrote to the church about laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings (I Peter 2:1), and then he went on to write about how we are disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious (v.4). Therefore, he continued, v.21 even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps ... That is what we are to do ... follow his steps ... and that was what the disciples did as they followed Jesus through the cornfield that day. Amen.