

Mark 2:23 - Mark 3:6 Sabbath observation

2 ²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?' ²⁵ He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?' ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.' ²⁷ Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.' ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'

3 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.' ⁴ Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

This account is also found in Matthew chapter 12:1-14.

We see Jesus and His disciples on the move. The text doesn't say Jesus was picking ears of corn, but his disciples were. In Matthew's version it says the disciples were hungry. Now the disciples were men who knew the Law. Everyone was permitted to pick the corn, but not put a sickle to it. It's bit like the foraging law we have whereby we can pick from wild plants (but not the farmers' crops) small amounts for personal consumption, but not to sell or use in a business. This is in Deuteronomy 23:24-25

If you enter your neighbour's vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket. ²⁵ If you enter your neighbour's cornfield, you may pick the ears with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing corn.

There is nothing about picking grapes and ears of corn being forbidden on the Sabbath. The sabbath was a day of rest and no work was to be done. Picking up your food that had already been prepared and eating it was not forbidden. The question under dispute with the Pharisees was whether picking food straight off a growing plant to eat was work as opposed to picking up a knife and fork to eat cooked food! Strict Jews today will have laid the table for Sabbath to avoid "work" involved getting the cutlery and crockery out.

Deuteronomy 5:12-14 *'Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour 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 or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.'*

Definitions of work specifically mentioned were "kindling a fire" Exodus 35:3; "gathering firewood" Numbers 15:32-36; baking "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.'" Ex 16:23; travelling Ex 16:29; ploughing and harvesting Ex 34:21. Over the centuries the scribes and the teachers of the Law decided what was and what

was not work. There were exemptions: hauling your ox or donkey or someone else's animal onto its feet was permissible (Deut 22:4) and hauling an animal or child out of a well was permissible. Applying medical attention in life threatening instances wasn't work but it had to be the life saving part (like digging out someone from a collapsed building but leaving the body if dead) and not making someone better by applying ointments to cuts while washing a wound was allowed... ointment to be applied after sunset Saturday!

Most of the printers in Rotterdam for whom my father supplied artwork were, before the war, Jewish. Some were stricter than others. Only two survived: one because his name wasn't Jewish and he wasn't religious, and no one gave him away, and the other came back after having managed to survive in the labour camps. Nearly all the Jews were given away to the Gestapo by Dutch people. Ann Frank's family was given away by neighbours after being hidden for over a year. The strict Jews wouldn't turn on the gas to heat their food, or turn on the light switches for electricity after sunset on Friday evening, but some had a "Shabbes goy" – a "goy is a non Jew servant or neighbour - to do work for them to turn the lights out before they went to bed and turn the gas on to heat the midday Saturday meal, as well as other tasks. They wouldn't want to keep the lights or the gas on all night and all day until Saturday sunset. Their reasoning was that they weren't in the promised land, so the non Jew (the sojourner) living with them wasn't a sojourner at all. They were living in the land of non-Jews, the Netherlands, none of whose people had to observe their Jewish sabbath laws as they applied to the Jews only. The rules that applied to foreigners or sojourners living with them, was for those Jews living in Israel itself, not outside the promised land.. We looked at debt cancellation this morning, and the same reasoning applied to Jewish money lenders living outside Israel – when the date in the seventh year in which debt cancellation came up, the money lent out would be assigned on paper to a Shabbes debt goy who wouldn't cancel it and a day later be retrieved for lending another seven years without having to be cancelled. Lending to foreigners – i.e. non Jews – with interest got around the lending with interest ban in Exodus 22:25. This wouldn't apply because it says "*if you lend to one of my people who is needy.. charge no interest*" Obviously non-Jews were not "*one of my people*" so charging interest is allowed.

Back to the text – the disciples were eating corn they picked on the Sabbath. The Pharisees who were watching them obviously thought that they should have brought packed lunches with them prepared on Friday. As in earlier verses, these Pharisees were trailing after Jesus and it would appear that quite a few were following Jesus. Mark has only introduced 5 disciples so far - the two sets of brothers (Simon Peter and Andrew; John and James) and now the tax collector Levi /Matthew who just dropped everything to follow Jesus. Literally people were following Jesus. The Pharisees were following him to see what he was up to, and accused the disciples (not Jesus himself) of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath. Without specifying what was unlawful, the Pharisees avoided justifying themselves on the Law as to what work was, what travelling was – after all they were travelling with Jesus. As an aside, travelling beyond your household boundaries is deemed to be unlawful on the Sabbath, which is why there are some long fences built in north London – a 12 foot high nylon string miles long enclosing a large number of Jewish homes so that technically they are all living inside one "household boundary" and can travel to synagogue, friends and relatives on the Sabbath, within the nylon string enclosure. Another "fence" is a very low fence wire half an inch above ground that winds across gardens and is sunk across the road to cross it which is also miles long. We may think it crazy observance which makes a mockery of the sabbath law, but the good people of Hendon, Hampstead and Enfield seem not to mind and have done their bit for embracing diversity and virtue signalling their lack of anti-Semitism.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees with an instance of where the hungry fed themselves from forbidden food reserved for the priesthood. Although Mark doesn't say the disciples were hungry, we know from Matthew's Gospel that they were, and so Jesus explains that David and his men, running around the country for King Saul ate from the temple showbread offered to the Lord because they were hungry. 1 Samuel 21:1-6 says

"David went to Nob, to Ahimelek the priest. Ahimelek trembled when he met him, and asked, 'Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?' 2 David answered Ahimelek the priest, 'The king sent me on a mission and said to me, 'No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on.' As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. 3 Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.' 4 But the priest answered David, 'I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women.' 5 David replied, 'Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men's bodies are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!' 6 So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away."

The Old Testament says Ahimelek the priest and Mark records Jesus saying Abiathar who was his son. Both were alive at the time. David takes what the priest offered because his men were hungry. That the showbread was consecrated and holy and only for the priesthood seems not to have mattered when necessity overrode the strict observance of the Law. The Pharisees couldn't argue against this. They knew that their rabbis said that *"the Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it", "saving life overrules the Sabbath"* and *"Profane one Sabbath for a person's sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths."* The proper function of the sabbath is to promote life and extol God as a liberator from slavery so that people could have a day of rest. Everyone knew that.

Then Jesus added verses 27 and 28 *Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'*

Even the Pharisees accepted that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day of rest for people to rest from work and focus on God, but then Jesus now offends the Pharisees by saying he is lord of the sabbath. Jesus the new teacher among quite a few other new teachers seemed to imply he was lord or master and that the sabbath observance was to honour him. Jesus was implying he was worthy of worship and that was a remark that didn't go down at all well with the Pharisees who didn't accept anyone other than God could be worshipped or override God's commandments.

Moving on the chapter 3, Jesus has arrived at the synagogue – it's not specified where, but it may have been in Capernaum again or a neighbouring small town. In the synagogue is a man with a withered hand, something he probably wasn't born with and possibly a result of what we now call industrial injury. Again the Pharisees were watching Jesus to see if he would heal this man. Jesus takes the initiative and we aren't told why he picks on this man – last time the paralytic's friends were desperate to have their friend healed. Jesus admired their faith and healed to lame man. This time seems to be different. The miracle is done to prove a point in front of the Pharisees.

Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.' 4 Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent.

Jesus asks a question, again knowing what they were thinking. Jesus challenges the Pharisees with a question they know they cannot answer without entrapping themselves. They know it is lawful to do good, but within limits set by centuries of looking for loopholes as to what was work and what wasn't work. Obviously doing evil would be unlawful, but then all sin was unlawful and profaning or breaking the Sabbath was a sin and hence was evil – it deserved the death penalty (Exodus 35:2 & Numbers 15:32-36). It would require listing all the things that could be done on the Sabbath because they weren't work, and listing all the things that could not be done on the Sabbath because they were work, and they would be pulled up if they missed out something. They knew by now that Jesus seemed to know the Law better than they did. This is because Jesus who is God wrote the Law! Yet again in front of everyone in synagogue the people who were supposed to know the Law of Moses refused to answer what seemed to be to everyone there a perfectly reasonable question, and this undermined their status, caused them embarrassment, and made them hate Jesus. Verse 5

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

With the restoration of his hand, the man in the synagogue probably also receives back his ability to work. The man may recover his ability to provide for a family. In other words, we need to avoid seeing the miracle as an act of merely "fixing" something that had gone "wrong" with the man. The event represents a restoration to wholeness, a wonderful and joyful occasion in a society where a disability meant a life dependent on the charity, love, care of others as there was no Welfare State in place.

The insensitivity of the Pharisees moves Jesus to grief and anger in the synagogue. Jesus knows their stony, hard hearts regard something like observing the Sabbath as more valuable than removing suffering and disadvantage before the sun sets. But Mark also has good news to announce. This Gospel tells of God's compassion and how lives are transformed. Verse 6

⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Only 79 verses into this Gospel, and now the Pharisees and Herodians want to destroy Jesus. Even though those two groups are not mentioned at all in connection with Jesus' arrest, prosecution, and execution at the end of Mark, still their partnership here, so early in the narrative, raises our eyebrows. The name *Herodians* is ambiguous. No one knows exactly to whom Mark refers with that term. But the association with Herod — and with the ardent Hellenizing legacy of the Herodian family — makes them unlikely political allies for the Pharisees, who tended to resist Hellenistic influences. After not much time in ministry, Jesus has managed to offend two very different groups.

In this pair of scenes, Jesus does not reject the law. He does not render the sabbath obsolete. He does not even call the Pharisees blind guides, whitewashed walls or anything pejorative.

What we see is the way in which disagreement about living within the law quickly becomes antagonism and outright hostility, a hostility that will eventually lead some — but certainly not all — of the most powerful religious authorities to seek Jesus' debasement and death. Even as the passage emphasizes a commitment to life and vitality abiding at the heart of God's reign, it also illustrates how religious commitments and values — *any* religious commitments and values — can become oppressive in the hands of people who lack love, and are self righteous. These same attitudes that the Pharisees had, have been manifested in the Church over the twenty centuries of her existence. None of us is immune.

Passages like this are reminder how easily the most noble motives can be perverted. It points out how quickly an institution can become an end in itself, stifling legitimate concerns of those outside that may seem to threaten its stability. It illustrates how frequently insidious forces we scarcely notice can transform the best-educated, most well-intentioned among us into insensitive and uncaring self-righteous religious people, out of touch with what Jesus really expects of us: to love Him and one another.

Jesus, who is God, instituted the sabbath so that we may have a day of rest from our labours, and He is committed to preserving life. His ministry exposes the oppressive tyrannies of fear of breaking legalistic rules, fear of offending people with power, fear of being exposed as a religious hypocrite. Jesus's mission is to deliver us from fear of what others may think, believe, say or do by following Him and His rules. His mission is to deliver us from evil however manifested.