

Mark 2:23-28, Jesus Lord of the Sabbath

23 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" 27 And 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."

In our last lesson, we saw that Jesus is our Bridegroom who brings in a New Age. In this lesson, Jesus is revealed as the Lord of the Sabbath.

I. Jesus Accused of Breaking the Sabbath Law -

1. Making a Path Through the Grainfields

a. Jesus is Walking Along a Path - On this particular Sabbath, Jesus was "going through the grainfields" and the disciples were with him. NT scholar Kenneth Wuest explains that the Greek word translated 'going through' in the ESV (*paraporeuomai*) "seems to combine the ideas of going through and alongside. Jesus went through on a footpath with grain on either side."⁽¹⁾ As we will see, though Jesus is mentioned first (because he is the focus of the text), he is actually following the disciples as they make "a way" for him.

b. The Disciples are Making the Path - The ESV states that the disciples "made their way" (*hodon poiein*), a phrase which is not found in either parallel account (Matt. 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5). This is more literally rendered, "his disciples began to make a way" (Young's Literal translation and the old American Baptist Union translation), or, "his disciples made a path" (from, ironically, "the Message," normally a very paraphrastic translation). Indeed, one scholar attests, "It would be possible to translate the Greek in the sense: 'they began to make a road by plucking the ears of corn'..."⁽²⁾ They were walking through the field, pushing the grain aside and trampling it as they went, and stopping now and then to pluck and eat some of the grain.

c. Jesus is Walking Behind the Disciples - If the disciples are making a path and Jesus is walking in a path with them, it follows that Jesus is uncharacteristically walking behind the disciples, for why would they make a path if there is one already there? They would simply follow Jesus through the ready-made path. Scottish scholar A. B. Bruce writes:

"[The] disciples began to make a path by pulling up the stalks...or perhaps by trampling under foot the stalks after first plucking off the ears ... [They] began to do that when they saw the path was not clear, and wished to make it more comfortable for their master to walk on."⁽³⁾

This begs a further question: Why is Jesus walking behind the disciples when he normally leads them?

d. Echoes of Isaiah: The Royal Procession - "Mark's choice of grammar may rather reflect a desire to suggest (without pressing) the notion of the disciples clearing a path for Jesus ... If so, the disciples' action would become a partial fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that is cited in 1:3 ["Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"]. This picture presents a contrast to the usual one of Jesus leading the disciples (e.g. 10:32), but it is appropriate in a pericope that hints at Jesus' royal authority, since royal visits were often prepared for by roadworks..."⁽⁴⁾

2. Reaping and the Sabbath -

a. Jesus the Rabbi - There is nothing in the passage to suggest that Jesus was also plucking grain and eating it. It was assumed that disciples do nothing without the approval of their Rabbi; therefore, the Pharisees confront Jesus rather than the disciples.

b. Provision for Plucking Grain - The Law of Moses provided that a person in need of food could eat from a neighbor's crop field as long as he didn't harvest any to take with him:

"If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain" (Deut. 23:25).

The problem was not with picking grain, it was doing so on the Sabbath.

c. Sabbath Law and Pharisaic Hedges -

"[When] the theologians of the Pharisees examined the Sabbath law, they noticed that it forbade working (*Exod.* 20:8-11; *Deut.* 5:12-15). They therefore asked the question: What exactly is involved in 'working' and how can we make sure that we avoid such 'work'?

Characteristically, their answer involved a lengthy list of regulations which would surround the individual with a 'hedge' to make sure that he was never in danger of breaking the commandment. In actual practice, the breach of these man-made regulations was equated with disobedience to God's law."⁽⁵⁾

"The action of plucking grain was interpreted as reaping, an act of work in violation of the Sabbath rest. Reaping on the Sabbath was formally prohibited by the Mosaic Law (*Ex.* 34:21), and of the 39 main categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath in the Mishnah, the third is reaping."⁽⁶⁾

II. Defense Exhibit A: The Example of David

1. Have you never read...? - The implication is that the Pharisees do not know the Scriptures. Jesus reminds them of an example from the life of David in I Sam. 1-6. In the OT context, David, who had been anointed as king by Samuel the prophet in ch. 16, was on the run from Saul, who despite his rejection by the Lord, was still *de facto* king, and sought to kill David.

"1 Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, 'Why are you alone, and no one with you?' 2 And David said to Ahimelech the priest, 'The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.' I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. 3 Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.' 4 And the priest answered David, 'I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women.' 5 And David answered the priest, 'Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?' 6 So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the Lord, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away."

The "bread of the Presence" was the 12 loaves of bread the priests were to bake and set out on a golden table in the Tabernacle every Sabbath. Only the priests were allowed by Law to eat the bread of the Presence (*Lev.* 24:5-9).

One may note that in the above quotation from I Samuel, the priest whom David interacts with is Ahimelech, but Jesus mentions Abiathar, who was Ahimelech's son who succeeded him as high priest. There are several ways to explain why Jesus cites Abiathar and not Ahimelech. Probably the best explanation is that Jesus is citing the most well-known priest living at that time ("in the time of Abathar," *Mark* 2:26), who soon after (and in connection with the incident referred to) became David's close associate and, later, the high priest in Jerusalem. Ahimelech is killed a mere chapter later in I Samuel, along with all the priests and their families at Nob, a Levite city in Benjamin north of Jerusalem. Saul ordered the massacre because of the assistance rendered to David, and only Abiathar escaped.

"20 But one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. 21 And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. 22 And David said to Abiathar, 'I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house. 23 Stay with me; do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safekeeping.'"

“The fact that when Abiathar does appear in I Sam. 22:20-23, he does so in connection with the foregoing incident at the house of God makes it easy for Jesus to use his name in blotting out Ahimelech for the sake of a link with Jerusalem.”⁽⁷⁾

2. The Parallels -

a. Need - Jesus describes David as “in need and hungry.” (v. 25). While Jesus is not said to eat, and therefore does not appear hungry, his disciples are. It is true, as Calvin noted, that the Pharisees were not properly regarding the hierarchy of values that must be observed in applying the Law:

“God declares aloud, that he sets a higher value *on mercy* than on sacrifice, employing the word *mercy*, by a figure of speech, for offices of kindness, as *sacrifices* include the outward service of the Law. This statement Christ applies to his own time, and charges the Pharisees with wickedly torturing the Law of God out of its true meaning, with disregarding the second table, and being entirely occupied with ceremonies.”⁽⁸⁾

b. Company of Men - Both David and Jesus have men in their charge, for whom they are responsible. In the OT account David appears alone before the priest, but claims to have “an appointment with the young men for such and such a place” (I Sam. 21:2). The claim seems sketchy in the Samuel account, as David is lying about his royal commission and there is no mention of him actually meeting anyone. But the authority of Jesus should be enough to convince us otherwise, for he says that David gave the bread “to those who were with him” (Mark 2:26).

c. Violation of Holiness Law - Jesus is accused of breaking a commandment concerning a holy day, but David broke a commandment about a holy object. The Bread of the Presence was only to be eaten by sons of Aaron by law (Lev. 24:9); David transgressed the law by taking the bread.

d. Royal Authority - Though David’s claim to be on a mission from Saul was a lie, he could actually claim royal authority of his own, because he had been anointed king by Samuel (ch. 16). But his royal authority was not yet recognized by all. Similarly, Jesus had been anointed by the Spirit (Mark 1:9-11) but his authority was not recognized by many.

“He cites David’s violation of the Torah not as an excuse for his action but as a *precedent*. In making the allusion to David, Jesus is inviting a comparison between his person and Israel’s royal messianic prototype ... The appeal to David in our passage begins to define Jesus’ authority as the royal Son of God anticipated since the reign of David...”⁽⁹⁾

This is where the emphasis in Mark 2:23-28 falls, on the authority of Jesus. The humanitarian application of the Law is a subordinate concern.

III. Defense Exhibit B: The Purpose of the Sabbath

“The Sabbath was *Made for Man*, Not Man for the Sabbath.”

As he always does in disputes concerning the Law, Jesus ignores the traditions of the Pharisees and argues from *sola scriptura*, always going back to find the divine intent in any legal pronouncement. In the case of the Sabbath, he notes that it was “made for man”. The Sabbath did not precede the creation of man; it is not something eternal to which man must conform but is a benevolent provision conferred on him to enable him to enjoy his blessings in communion with his Creator.

This does not deny the legal character of the provision found in the form of it as given in the Law of Moses (Exo. 20:8-11; 31:13-16; 35:1-3; etc.). As sinners, our greed and ingratitude tempt us on that day to work in order to “get ahead”; our lust and self-indulgence tempt us to engross ourselves in the pleasures of this world. God knows that spending all our time working and recreating will be to our detriment. We must have God-time. The Sabbath is a blessing to those who walk with God, but God gives it the force of Law that it may be a curse to those who rebel against him and have no time for him.

IV. The *Coup De Grace*: Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

“So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

1. “So” - “The function of the introductory particle is not to link verse 28 narrowly to verse 27, as if the pronouncement that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath is somehow being deduced from the more general principle that God instituted the Sabbath for the sake of man. Its function is rather to introduce a declaration which follows from the incident as a whole. Its significance can be expressed by translating “So then (in light of verses 23-27) the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”⁽¹⁰⁾

2. “The Son of Man” - This title is from Dan. 7:13-14. There Daniel saw a vision in which “one like a son of man” came before God and received an everlasting kingdom of all people and nations. Jesus fulfilled that prophecy when he ascended to the Father to sit at the right hand of Power, and became “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16). Jesus highlights his unique and superlative authority, as if he had said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). The authority of Jesus is far above David’s.

3. “Lord Even of the Sabbath” -

“Reflection on Jesus’ act and word, through which he established the true intention of the Sabbath and exposed the weakness of a human system of fencing the Law with restrictions, revealed his sovereign authority over the Sabbath itself. With this word Mark drives home for his readers the theological point of the pericope. These things were written that they may understand Jesus’ true dignity: he is Lord of the Sabbath.”⁽¹¹⁾

“2:27-28 preserve an important clue concerning the relationship of Jesus and the Torah, gospel and law, which have long been a point of controversy in Christianity. The extremes of both legalism and antinomianism are avoided. The law is not here regarded as an autonomous revelation, which in legalism tends to replace the person of God. Nor is Jesus a free agent who abrogates the Sabbath or the moral order or the revealed will of God, as in antinomianism. Rather, the sayings of vv. 27-28 teach that the righteous purpose of God as manifested in the Torah can be recovered and fulfilled only in relation to Jesus, who is its Lord.”⁽¹²⁾

Notes

1. Wuest, Kenneth S. Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament, Vol. I: Mark, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians, p. 58.
2. Taylor, Vincent. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Thornapple Commentaries], p. 213.
3. Nicoll, W. Robertson, ed. The Expositor’s Greek Testament, Vol. I, p. 355.
4. Marcus, Joel. Mark 1-8 [The Anchor Bible], p. 239.
5. Ferguson, Sinclair B. Let’s Study Mark, p. 35.
6. Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], pp. 114-115.
7. Gundry, Robert H. Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross, p. 142.
8. Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Vol. II, pp. 49-50.
9. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 96.
10. Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], p. 120.
11. Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], p. 120.
12. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 97.