

Mark 2.18 – 3.16

Jesus is... Lord of the Sabbath

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Mark: Seeing Jesus (4)

The line

Have you ever crossed a line you wished you hadn't?]

Perhaps in the heat of an argument you've said something you regret saying. Or perhaps you've been teasing someone and you then you say something that actually hurts you.

Maybe there are other lines you've crossed, in relationships, at work – from the age of about 2, we excel at pushing boundaries, testing limits, skirting the line.

Well none of that is new. It's what we human beings do!

In Jesus' day the people who were most concerned about *not* crossing the line were the Pharisees. And one of the lines they were most concerned about *not* crossing, was to do with the Sabbath.

The Sabbath

The word *Shabbath* in Hebrew means ‘rest’ or ‘desist from exertion’ – and is closely related to the word for ‘sit’.

When the Bible describes how God created the world, it tells how he worked for six days, and rested on the seventh §:

Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Genesis 2.3 (NIV)

And I’m sure you can all quote the Ten Commandments, in full and in order – but in case you can’t, here’s the fourth §:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Exodus 20.8-11 (NIV)

The key word here is **ᵊ** 'holy'. God **made** the seventh day **holy** because on it *he* rested from *his* work of creation (Genesis 2.3) – as an example to us. Then he *commanded* his people to remember it **by keeping it holy** (Exodus 20.8).

The pattern of resting on the seventh day is baked right into the pattern of creation itself – we won't go into it now, but that pattern of regular rest comes up time and again in the Old Testament.

And God didn't simply command it – he deemed it *so important* to keep the Sabbath, that he included it in the list of the top ten commandments he wanted his people to keep.

That is quite a line.

The Pharisees

And so we come to the Pharisees. In Mark 2 Jesus and his disciples were **going through the cornfields** (2.23). Presumably there were other people there too, because the Pharisees got wind of the fact that his disciples were picking **some ears of corn** to eat (2.23).

Do you like **ᵊ** corn on the cob? It's one of my favourites – warm, and spread with a bit of butter – it's delicious! No wonder the disciples were helping themselves...

But the Pharisees weren't happy – the disciples were breaking the Sabbath law. Except, the keen-eared among you will notice that the commandment I read out earlier mentioned nothing about corn fields at all.

That's because, on top of the Fourth Commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, God's people – especially the Pharisees – had added thirty-nine *additional* rules, designed to stop anyone breaking the Sabbath. I expect they started out as guidelines, to give people an idea of what they should and shouldn't do – but they themselves became treated as law. And the third one? It forbids reaping on the Sabbath.¹

Jesus' answer reminds the Pharisees of another part of the Bible, where **David and his companions were hungry and in need** (2.25). They had no food – all that was available was the special **consecrated bread** (2.26). This was baked fresh, laid out on the altar in two piles **¶**, together with some incense, every Sabbath day, and was to be eaten by the priests (see Leviticus 24.5-9).

David **ate** that bread – and also **gave some to his companions** (2.26). But David didn't *take* it – he was *given* it, by the priest who was in charge at the time (1 Samuel 21.6).

You see, that priest knew what Jesus was trying to tell the Pharisees – that the Law is about more than what lines you cannot cross – the Law is also about meeting human needs.

The same question comes up at the beginning of chapter 3. Notice that already in Mark – we are only four weeks into our series – Jesus already has enemies; even at this early stage of his ministry, people **were looking for a reason to accuse** him (3.2).

But Jesus was more concerned **to save life** and **do good**, than to keep human rules and regulations (3.4). When he challenged those rules – effectively showing them to be **evil** because they stopped people from doing good – the Pharisees **remained silent**.

Jesus was **angry, distressed, indignant** with them because they so spectacularly missed the point. So he commanded a man whose hand was withered to **stretch** it **out** – and as he did so, he was **completely restored** (3.5).

Keeping Sunday Special

¶ So what are we to make of all this? For most of us I suspect that Sunday is our day of rest, our Sabbath – but it doesn't have to be. It isn't for me, for example! But I do – almost without fail – take one day a week where I rest from my work.

┌ Should we work on a Sunday?

Should we go shopping on a Sunday? Should we go to restaurants – both of which require other people to work on a Sunday.

Should we stay at home all day? And if we stay at home, should we do chores, like washing or mowing the lawn?

Is Sunday simply another day of the week – no different to the other six days, except that you go to church for a bit?

Do you ever ask yourselves these questions?

I suspect that most of us don't think about it as much as perhaps we should. Perhaps we hear Jesus' words in the gospel, and think it doesn't matter what we do on a Sunday:

‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’

Mark 2.27-28 (NIV)

Great, we can do what we like! Right? Wrong.

Jesus was not doing away with God's command to keep the Sabbath holy – he was correcting the way it was being abused by the religious authorities.

Jesus was telling them that God gave human beings the Sabbath as a *gift*. They were taking that gift, and making it a burden.

God knew that life is full. Life was busy in the days before email and smartphones, in the days before shopping lists, to-do lists and Post-it notes. People have always said, 'I can never find the time...'

The antidote to being too busy... the antidote to never having enough time... the antidote to feeling rushed... the antidote to feeling like your life is too full...

It's the Sabbath.

God knows what life is like, and he gave us a wonderful gift – one of many wonderful gifts – *permission to take a day off*. Sometimes when I say this to people, they look at me like, 'You don't know what it's like, it's impossible for me to take a day off.' **J**

If that's your reaction – I couldn't possibly find the time to take a whole day off every week – then you need to know that you're not being told to do this by a young idealistic and unrealistic vicar. You are being told to take a day of rest every week by God himself. And he *does* know what it's like.

Too often Christians ignore God's Sabbath, thinking that Jesus said we don't have to bother with it. But that isn't what he meant at all – the Sabbath is a gift, it is good for us!

So what does it mean for us to keep Sunday special? ¶

Well I'm not going to answer any of those questions for you.

Because all that does is what the Pharisees were doing – all that does is set down a load of extra rules that ultimately miss the point of the Sabbath in the first place.

Instead, I'm going to give you two questions to ask yourself ¶:

1. Do I *have* a weekly day of rest?
2. Is that day *holy*?

The word 'holy' means 'set apart for God'. Do you have a day like that?

On that day – which may or may not be Sunday, though I think for most of us it makes sense for it to be Sunday – on that day, do I set aside time to thank God for the good gifts he's given us? Instead of running around like a headless chicken, do I *make* time, do I *spend* time, do I *give* time back to God, perhaps in quiet, in stillness, in peace?

I have a confession to make – although I take my day off every week, when I don't read my emails or answer my phone – I'm not very good at using the time well. It's something I'm working on.

If you find yourself scoffing at this, I'm going to stand firm here – please think seriously about what Sabbath time means for you. This isn't some airy-fairy nice idea for people who don't have enough to do – the Sabbath day is baked into creation itself, part of the pattern of life, part of God's pattern for creation.

And if it's good enough for God, it's good enough for us.

¹ Donald English, *Mark (BST)*, 78.