

Debate over the Sabbath

Mark 2: 23-28

Have you dealt with a season in life when others acted as if you could do nothing right? Surely we have experienced times when people criticized our efforts or challenged our motives. It seems as if everything we tried to accomplish was met with skepticism and resentment.

If you have dealt with such difficulty, you are not alone. We have discovered, while moving through the second chapter of Mark, that Jesus faced such an environment. His every move was closely watched, and His every word was carefully examined. The Pharisees had no desire to learn of Jesus, or follow Him. Their primary goal regarding Jesus was to examine His life and ministry, in hopes of finding fault and justifying their accusations.

Rather than allowing the actions of the Pharisees hinder His work, Jesus remained committed to the task at hand. He refused to allow the criticism of others divert His attention from fulfilling the plan of God. As we examine the [observations](#) within the text, I want to consider the thought: [Debate over the Sabbath](#).

I. The Confrontation with Jesus (23-24) – As we begin this paragraph, we discover that Jesus was immediately confronted by the Pharisees again. Notice:

A. The Activity of the Disciples (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.](#) As Jesus and the disciples journeyed on the Sabbath day, they made their way through the fields. Often paths were located through the fields of harvest, and travelers were permitted to gather handfuls as walked through the fields. Likely this was some type of grain, wheat or barley.

- As the disciples followed Jesus, ministering with Him, they grew hungry. This is natural within humanity to desire something to eat. They were well within their right to gather something as they journeyed, but these men dared to gather on the Sabbath day. Granted, they were not laboring in the harvest of grain, but they did pluck a few handfuls as they passed by.

B. The Accusation of the Pharisees (24) – [And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?](#) As was typically the case, the Pharisees were never far away, closely scrutinizing every move Jesus and the disciples made. After their observation, they immediately confronted Jesus about the actions of His disciples. These men were accused of acting unlawfully in gathering grain. The Pharisees weren't upset that the disciples had gathered a

few handfuls from another man's field; they were upset because such activity took place on the Sabbath.

- While God had forbidden men to “work” on the Sabbath day, this activity did not constitute work as defined by God. He forbade men to work for their profit. Harvesting the grain to make a profit would've been unlawful on the Sabbath, but not gathering a few handfuls to eat.

- The problem was that the Pharisees had added tremendous burdens to the law of God that our Lord never intended. Over the years, anything that had the slightest appearance of work had become forbidden according to the laws of men, but not according to the law of God. Consider a few of the ridiculous expectations of the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath.
 - People were forbidden from traveling more than 3,000 feet from their homes on the Sabbath.
 - A Jew could not carry an object that weighed more than a dried fig. But, an object that weighed half that amount could be carried twice.
 - One could eat nothing larger than an olive.
 - You could not throw an object into the air with one hand and catch it with the other.
 - If the Sabbath came upon you as you were reaching out for some food, you would have to drop the food before you pulled your arm back, otherwise you would be guilty of carrying a burden on the Sabbath.
 - Nothing could be bought or sold.
 - Clothing could not be washed or dyed.
 - A letter could not be sent.
 - A fire could not be lit or extinguished. If you failed to light your lamps before the Sabbath, you had to sit in the dark until the next evening.
 - Jews could not take a bath on the Sabbath. If they did, some of the water might splash onto the floor and this would be considered “washing it”.
 - Chairs or other heavy objects could not be moved because dragging them might make a furrow in the ground, and that would be considered plowing.
 - A woman could not look into a looking glass because she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out.
 - A Jewish tailor could not carry a needle on the Sabbath lest he be tempted to mend a torn garment.
 - It was against the law to tie or untie a knot; sew two stitches; or prepare food. ⁱ

- This seems ridiculous to most in our day, and yet the same Pharisaical tendencies remain. Well-meaning people often demand and expect actions or behaviors that have no basis in Scripture. We must be careful that we don't become legalistic in our expectations. The Bible is our sole authority, and it alone! We will be judged according to the Word, not men's preferences.

II. The Communication of Jesus (25-26) – Following the confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus responded to their accusation. Notice:

A. His Response (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?* It is interesting that Jesus doesn't engage in a heated discussion with the Pharisees or even mention the accepted laws of the day. He doesn't try to justify the actions of the disciples, nor does He condemn them. He simply asks if they had never read the account of David and his men being hungry. Jesus is making a profound point – how does the Word of God handle this matter?

- Sadly, many people in our day possess the same toxic, legalistic attitude of the Pharisees. While much of what they demand has no biblical basis, they continue to demand others to conform to their demands. Often such bias is rooted in the thoughts or teaching of popular preachers or movements. I have shared that one of my instructors stated that in the 1970's, if a man didn't preach on short skirts on women, or long hair on men, he hadn't preached. While I'm not advocating immodesty or lack of respect for the Lord, it is easy to develop "hobby horse" doctrines that are widely accepted and expected, but have no biblical basis!

B. His Reference (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?* Just in case the Pharisees were unfamiliar with the passage, Jesus offers specific details to a reference in Scripture, [1 Sam.21:1-6](#). David went into the Tabernacle and ate of the showbread, reserved for the priests alone to eat. He also gave his men to eat of the same. David had not acted in rebellion toward God, but desired to meet the immediate need in a life or death situation. If David was justified in the eyes of God for eating bread reserved for the priests, then the disciples would certainly be justified in disregarding man-made laws and expectations.

- Jesus did not encourage or condone willful disobedience, but the point remained – how does the Word of God handle the matter? I would never encourage anyone to willfully disobey the direct teaching of Scripture, but we must have Scripture to back up our claims. Some preachers believe a man must wear a white shirt if he is to stand in the pulpit and preach. Occasionally I do wear a white shirt, but where exactly is that demand recorded in Scripture? I have been criticized for growing a beard, when the vast majority of Baptist preachers have been clean shaven for the past seventy five years. My response is – book, chapter, and verse please! We must be careful that we don't add legalistic preferences to what the Lord expects. Such activity wreaks of legalism and robs believers of the liberty they should enjoy through grace! Many today avoid the church due to legalistic expectations. May that never be the case with us!

III. The Clarification of Jesus (27-28) – Here Jesus offered clarity regarding this issue of the Sabbath. Consider:

A. The Purpose of the Sabbath (27) – **And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.** Jesus addressed the major error in their thinking and theology regarding the Sabbath. When God originally instituted the Sabbath, commanding people to observe the Sabbath, He did so for man's benefit. God made the Sabbath day for man; He didn't create man simply so He would have someone to observe the Sabbath. God desired man to have a day of rest and communion with Him. He wanted to benefit humanity, not create additional burdens. The Pharisees had so restricted the Sabbath that it was no longer an enjoyable day of rest and reflection.

- I feel I need to address the difference in the Sabbath and the Lord's Day. The Sabbath was observed on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. It was commanded as a ceremonial observation. It is the only one of the Ten Commandments that isn't reaffirmed in the New Testament. As born again believers, we meet on Sunday, the first day of the week. We meet on Sunday because our Lord rose from the grave on Sunday. We don't meet on the Sabbath, we meet on the Lord's Day, Sunday.

- So, that brings us to a question that is still debated today. What is acceptable on Sunday, the Lord's Day, and what isn't? I was raised and taught that Christians are to treat Sunday as the Jews observed the Sabbath. There was to be no work done on Sunday, and you were not allowed to purchase anything on Sunday. Many refused to eat in a restaurant on Sunday. As far as I can see biblically, these are matters of preference. If you are not convicted by eating out on Sunday, then I see nothing wrong with that. However, we must be careful that we are not a stumbling block to unbelievers or weaker Christians. If my eating out on Sunday hinders my witness in some way, then I should refrain from that. You must let the Spirit be your guide, but never try to force your preferences on another. If a fellow member sees nothing wrong with going to a restaurant after church on Sunday, we should not condemn them, even if we choose not to do so. I do believe Sunday ought to be a day we set aside to worship our Lord, rest from our labor, and reflect upon His blessings.

B. The Priority above the Sabbath (28) – **Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.**

Jesus revealed the great tragedy in this debate. The Pharisees were so concerned with keeping every tradition regarding the Sabbath, in an effort to keep it holy, and yet they failed to see Jesus as the Christ. They placed much more emphasis on a particular day of the week than they did the Savior and Redeemer of men's souls. He should have been their priority instead of a commitment to keeping the demands and traditions of men.

- Sadly this tragedy remains today. I know people who attend services every Sunday, but they cannot enjoy worshipping the Lord because they are so consumed with meeting the demands and expectations of others. Some can't focus on the Lord because they are so busy "policing" the behavior of others. I am thankful for Sundays, and I believe every believer ought to look forward to being in the house of God and reverence the Lord's Day. However, if our demands and expectations regarding Sunday cloud our view of the Savior, then we have missed the purpose for Sunday all together! We must come in an attitude of worship, desiring to hear from the Lord through His Word, not to observe or examine the behavior of others. I like to enjoy Sundays at the house of God – and I plan to continue doing so, whether others do or not.

Conclusion: I hope our discussion has been informative. Maybe it has addressed some concerns or questions you have. I want to emphasize that Sunday should be a special day for every believer. I would encourage you to do as little work as necessary, and enjoy a day of worship, rest, and reflection upon the Lord. However, we must guard against developing an attitude like the Pharisees possessed. Let's continue to make Jesus the priority in our lives, striving to serve Him each day we live. If we will commit to obedience to Christ, everything else will fall in place.

If there are needs in your life, bring them to Jesus. He alone can provide for our needs.

ⁱ The Sermon Notebook - The Sermon Notebook – Mark.