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

Discussion: Can you identify any examples where the law is far too stringent or demanding, perhaps to the point you would consider breaking those laws?

Mark 2	Matthew 12	Luke 6
<p>Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath 23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"</p>	<p>Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath 1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."</p>	<p>Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath 1 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. 2 Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"</p>
<p>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."</p>	<p>3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests."</p>	<p>3 Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."</p>
	<p>5 Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? 6 I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.</p>	
<p>27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."</p>	<p>7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.</p>	
<p>28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."</p>	<p>8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."</p>	<p>5 Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."</p>

This is the next in the succession of five controversies. So far, we have seen:

- the occasion when Jesus declares he has the authority to forgive a man's sins;
- Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners at the feast held by Levi, to demonstrate who it is he's actually come for, also confounding his critics by showing no concern about a lack of piety or becoming ritually unclean by such encounters; and,
- Jesus' disciples are questioned because they are not fasting, which would also demonstrate their piety. Jesus declares that he is introducing "a new way", and that his followers must leave behind "the old" as the two don't mix.

This fourth controversy involves the Sabbath and Sabbath Laws, once again concluding with a pronouncement by Jesus.

Comparison

- Luke notes that as well as picking the heads of grain, the disciples also rubbed them in their hands.
- Matthew adds that the disciples were hungry.
- Mark refers to the Davidic episode as being at the time of the high priest Abiathar.²⁹
- Matthew adds that the priests themselves desecrate the Temple, then repeats Jesus' challenge (from Matt 9:19) about him "desiring mercy, not sacrifice".
- Mark adds that the Sabbath is made for man, not the other way around.
-but all three Synoptics conclude with the shocking pronouncement by Jesus that he is also Lord of the Sabbath.

Context

- Picking grain was itself an entirely legitimate activity; certain areas of a field were reserved for travellers and foreigners. The issue is that this was occurring on a Sabbath, a serious breach of piety rules. *Picking* the grain could be understood as *reaping*, while *rubbing the grain* could theoretically be claimed as *food preparation*.³⁰
- These activities were prohibited on the Sabbath as they were considered work.³¹ It was a day of rest, the 4th of the Ten Commandments, mirroring the Creation when God himself rested. It was to be kept holy, so people should do no work (Gen 2:3, Ex 20:8-11, Lev 23:1-3, Deut. 5:12-15). How could Jesus' disciples be allowed to violate this?³²

Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

- Israel understood themselves to be 'set apart' by God as a nation, and this distinctiveness was particularly expressed by a) circumcision, b) the Law, c) the Temple, and d) keeping the Sabbath.³³
- Some Jewish sects, such as the Essenes, took the implementation of the Law so far that, on a Sabbath, one could not even help a stranded animal or human, carry a child, or assist an animal to give birth.³⁴ For ordinary Jews, the Mishnah was a collection of oral traditions that were written down in about 200 BC and described 39 classes of work that would profane the Sabbath.³⁵
- The Pharisees raise the question of *halakha* (what is legally permitted or prohibited).³⁶ However, Jesus does not reply using this format of rabbinic debate (which might establish or confirm a legal precept) but instead with *Haggadah* which is an appeal to or from history. Jesus saw this as a sufficient response.³⁷ His example is when David took food from the Temple that had been reserved for the priests and gave it to his men (1 Sam. 21:16). His reasoning was that his men had need, they were hungry. This act went unpunished by God.³⁸ David set a precedent.³⁹ Jesus simply responds with "Have you not read this?" Another factor other than keeping the Law was more significant.⁴⁰
- Matthew's addition that the priests themselves desecrate the Temple refers to the work they do on a Sabbath, of sacrifice, preparations, butchery, and so on.⁴¹ If their position as priests is all that is required to overrule the Law, Jesus states that "something greater than the Temple is here." This would have been shocking to hear. The Temple was far more than just a place of worship. It was a symbol of nationhood, the closest thing Israel still possessed to a government, given the political power assumed by Rome. The audacity of Jesus' claim that there is "something greater" would have sounded like an attack on their sacred institution, and this would become a recurrent theme that turned many away from him, such was their regard for the Temple. Later, in Mark 13, Jesus speaks of the destruction of the Temple. This symbolises the end of the old order and the beginning of a new era, which recalls his recent statements on cloth and wineskins.⁴²

Key Points

- Mark is explicit in that the Sabbath was made for mankind so that we might rest, find joy and be refreshed.⁴³ It is not the other way round where the people are made for the Sabbath, something to hinder them and cause them to conform to its Laws.⁴⁴ The Law is not absolute and it does not need to be followed “without exception”. In times of need, it is permissible to break the Law. What David did was “unlawful”, but it was necessary.⁴⁵
- Jesus concludes with the proclamation that he is Lord over the Sabbath; he has sovereign authority over it.⁴⁶ Once again, Jesus puts himself squarely in the place of God.⁴⁷ He has come to put things right; this is part of “the new way”.

Discussion: What do you think about keeping one day in seven a “holy day”? What do we consider *work*? Which habits might we need to adopt in order to better introduce the idea of Sabbath into our own lives?