

# The Sabbath (Part 1) - Mark 2:23-28

by Travis Dean

May 29, 2010

Our story today centers around the Sabbath. It takes place on the Sabbath. The topic of discussion is the Sabbath. Before we consider our story today, it would be helpful to have some background. How did the Jews spend the Sabbath at the time our story takes place? What did they do, and what did they not do? Around 200 AD, the Jews compiled what is called the Mishnah. This is a collection of oral traditions, which Jews claim came from Moses himself and are equal to the written law, the Torah (The first five books of the Old Testament). Some of you may have heard of the Talmud. Well, the Talmud was written several hundred years later than the Mishnah and a significant portion of what is in the Talmud is actually the Mishnah. The Mishnah explains appropriate and inappropriate conduct for the Sabbath. In these traditions are 39 major Sabbath prohibitions. Eleven of these deal with the production and reparation of bread. These include sowing seed in the field down to baking the bread in the oven. Twelve deal with the preparation of clothing. These include shearing sheep all the way down to the actual sewing of the garment. Seven of these 39 prohibitions deal with preparing a deer's carcass for food or leather. And nine deal with various other actions, such as building, writing, building fires, and transportation. Besides these 39 prohibitions there were countless other stipulations that are even more detailed and specific. We'll consider one of these briefly as it is a term used in the New Testament. Has anyone heard of a "Sabbath day's journey"? This refers to a distance that was a little under 2/3 of a mile. It defined how far someone could travel on the Sabbath. This distance could be increased if food was placed at the appropriate intervals along the way. As long as the stored food was not more than a Sabbath day's journey from the place of origin or from the last supply of food, a Jew could lawfully continue on his/her journey. As a result of all these rules, in Jesus' day the Sabbath was more of a burden than a blessing. It will be helpful to keep this in mind as we consider our story today. Before we open God's Word, though, let's bow our heads for prayer.

Let's begin with a summary of our story: *As Jesus and His disciples walked through fields of grain, His disciples were plucking and eating the grain. Since it was the Sabbath, the Pharisees were offended and asked Jesus why His disciples were doing what was unlawful. Jesus directed them to the story of David who ate the showbread in the sanctuary. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus corrected the Pharisees further by stating that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*

There are several individuals mentioned in our story today: Jesus, His disciples, and the Pharisees (along with David and the priest). But for the sake of time, we will only consider in detail what Jesus experienced in this story. First of all, Jesus experienced His disciples' liberation. As we have already learned, the Jews were put under many heavy burdens on the Sabbath. But in our story today Jesus witnessed His disciples being free from these. They were enjoying the Sabbath. They were not worrying about what they could or couldn't do. They were casually eating while they walked through the fields of grain. What Jesus witnessed was a direct result of His own labors and influence. As a result of the time they had spent with Jesus, His disciples had been liberated from the burdensome traditions of the Pharisees.

Second, Jesus experienced an angry confrontation. I invite you to turn with me to Deuteronomy 23:24, 25. In Jewish culture the disciples' actions were lawful. They were not stealing. If they had taken a sickle and harvested the whole field, that would have been stealing! So, why were the Pharisees so upset with Jesus? They were defending one of their traditions. They were outraged that one of the 39 prohibitions (now listed in the Mishnah) was being violated. Third, Jesus experiences exposing ignorance. He answers the Pharisees confrontation with a question: "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry...?" In fact, it was a story the Pharisees had read many times. They may have even memorized it. The story is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. We won't take the time to turn there now, but in this story David is running from King Saul. He has left without food. And he arrives at the sanctuary hungry. He asks the priest for five loaves of showbread. According to Leviticus 24:5-9 there were always two stacks showbread on a table in the holy place. Each stack had six loaves. These loaves were only to be eaten by priests. Despite this, the priest grants David's request. In making reference to this story, Jesus revealed a contradiction in the Pharisees' theology.

No one condemned David for taking the showbread – not the priest, not the Biblical author (Samuel), not Jesus, and not even the Pharisees. And yet the Pharisees were condemning the disciples for an action allowed by the law of Moses.

Fourth and last, Jesus experienced asserting His own authority. Some of you may remember that we discussed briefly the history behind the Sabbath in a previous sermon. We looked at Exodus 16, where the first mention of the Sabbath is made. We learned a few things about the Sabbath. First, it is the seventh day of the week. Second, it is a day for resting from our labors of the week. And third, the Sabbath predates this story, even though the word is not previously used. We know this from the words God speaks in verse 28 of Exodus 16: “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?” In reality the Sabbath dates back to Genesis 2 where the seventh day is mentioned in the creation week. At this time God rested from His creative work and blessed the seventh day. Since the Creator made the Sabbath, when Jesus stated in our story today that He was the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), He was in fact claiming to be the Creator. As the Creator, He had the right and authority to determine what was lawful to do on the Sabbath.

Now that we have considered what Jesus experienced in our story today, let’s consider how this story reveals Jesus as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian. First of all, this story reveals Jesus as our example in that He made reference to the Old Testament. In answering the Pharisees, Jesus questioned them, “Have you never read...?” The unstated fact is that Jesus had read this story. And by referring to a story in the Old Testament, He showed that it still applied to His day. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 5:17. It seems that Jesus was viewed as someone who was destroying or abolishing the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets). Jesus corrects this misconception by stating that He had in fact come in order to show its full meaning (fulfill it). How was going to do this? By the way He lived. Many Christians today believe the Old Testament has no say on how they live. It is common to hear, “It doesn’t apply to us.” Or “That’s the old covenant. We’re under the new.” It may surprise you what Paul says in Romans 8:3, 4. I invite you to turn there with me. Paul says the reason God sent His Son was so that the Law (part of the Old Testament) might be what? “Fulfilled in us....” This is the same word that was used in Matthew 5:17. The same Spirit who was at work in Jesus Christ, is at work in the life of a healthy and dangerous Christian. By the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ lived in a way that showed the full meaning of the Law and the Prophets (the major part of the Old Testament). By that same Spirit’s power, healthy and dangerous Christians are enabled to show the full meaning of the Old Testament Law by the way we live.

Jesus is also revealed in our story today as our example of a healthy and dangerous Christian in that He set people’s needs above tradition. The Pharisees cared more about their traditions than the disciples. But Jesus set the disciples’ needs above tradition. To Him it was more important for His hungry disciples to eat than to uphold oral traditions which prohibited this. Jesus further illustrates His priorities in Mark 2:27 – “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Here Jesus reveals the relationship between people and the Sabbath. Both of them were made. Does anyone know which one was made first? Man was created on day six in the creation week. The Sabbath was made on day seven. So, when the Sabbath was brought into existence, man already existed. Jesus is saying that the Sabbath was created in order to be a blessing to mankind, who was already in existence. He emphasizes this point by stating what the relationship between mankind and the Sabbath was not. Man was not created on day six so that there would be someone to honor the Sabbath. The Sabbath didn’t exist yet. Jesus showed in our story today that people mattered more than days or traditions. He wanted His people to realize that He had made the Sabbath to be a blessing to them. He didn’t make the Sabbath to be mankind’s master, demanding obedience.

Healthy and dangerous Christians realize the value of someone created in the image of God. They realize that people matter more than days or traditions. God sent His Son for people. And so He has shown that they are what really matter.

As I’ve considered our story today, it has become clear that Jesus cared a lot about people. As we have gone through the book of Mark, we have found Him often standing up for people. And in our story today He doesn’t condemn David for eating the showbread. Neither does He condemn the disciples for picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. What about us? Does He condemn us when we find ourselves unprepared when the Sabbath arrives? “Oh, you should have planned ahead. You should have prepared that food ahead of time!” Does He

condemn us when we come to church empty, needing to be fed. "Oh, you should come full of praise and gratitude, ready to worship Me!" No, Jesus doesn't condemn us in these times either.

If you find that your spirit is empty with nothing to give, I pray two things for you. (1) That whenever you come to God's house hungry, you will leave fed. And (2) As a result of the time you spend here each Sabbath, you will learn how to be fed from God's Word every day. I pray that as a result of you being here you will learn how to read God's Word and gain nourishment from it. May you find God's Word to be a never-failing supply of all that your heart craves.