



Rev. Frank Wang
Mark 2:23-3:6

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English Standard Version

Obedience and Joy

The 6th Sermon in a Series on The Gospel of Mark entitled
“The King and His Cross”

1. Welcome

- a. Good morning! Welcome to Potomac Hills, we’re so glad you’re with us this morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Mark 2. We’ll be starting in verse 23 and reading all the way to chapter 3 verse 6. As you’re turning there, I want to take the time to remind you that next Sunday is our 25th Anniversary celebration. The church is never perfect. It’s full of sinners who sin all over the place and against each other. A church that lasts isn’t a testament to us, but to the persevering grace of the Lord. Praise God for all that He has done over the last 25 years. I’m really blown away by it when I think about all that He has had to do to keep us going, through turmoil, drama, sin, financial lean times, and people coming and going. Wow. But let us turn our attention to the Word now.¹

2. Read Scripture

One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” 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: 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?” And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

¹ The background and exposition of this text is adapted from the commentaries Mark by R. Kent Hughes, pp. 73-78; The Message of Mark by Donald English, pp. 73-80; The Gospel of Mark by William L. Lane, pp. 114-26; and a sermon by Tim Keller, The Gospel of Mark, Part 1: The Coming of the King delivered to King’s Cross Church on February 19, 2006.

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

3. Pray

4. **Introduction: Organic Beauty**

- a. Organic Chemistry. It's often the bane of pre-med students. Each year, it crushes the hopes and dreams of thousands of college students hoping to become doctors. It crushed my long-held dream of becoming a pediatrician in the spring of 2005. This came at the chagrin of my father, who is an organic chemistry professor at WVU.
- b. Each year, he teaches hundreds of students organic chem, and each year he tells them the same thing. Don't bother trying to memorize everything. You can't. You have to learn and understand the concepts beneath the details. It's there, in the theory, that you'll find the beauty of organic chemistry and learn to love it. It's there where he sees the handiwork of God in the way things work and fit together beautifully.
- c. I was skeptical. I couldn't see how it could possibly be beautiful. It either worked, or it didn't. I mean, you pour some stuff into some other stuff to make some new stuff, right? I can hear my dad sighing as he listens to this. I really should have gone to him for his help in that second semester.
- d. But at the end of the day, I didn't think that it was something to be admired, but rather something to be overcome through sheer force of will. **I** was going to conquer organic chem, and then **I** was going to leave it in the dust as **I** saved lives as a hotshot doctor. You can guess how that turned out.
- e. Naturally, my father was right. I got trampled by organic chem as I buckled under the volume of things to memorize. I barely managed a C+ in the second semester and developed a real distaste for the chem lab.
- f. I essentially wanted to learn, in detail, the letter of the laws of chemistry so that I could master it. But there was too much. And I'll bet that my father was shaking his head because he knew the beauty of creation that I was missing. I was missing the joy that organic chem brought him. I was missing the beauty of how God put things together, and because of that, I was approaching His Creation as something to be conquered rather than looking for Him in it, enjoying it, and worshipping.
- g. And that's exactly what the Pharisees do in our two stories this morning. They are so absorbed with doing things their way, they miss the beauty of the Sabbath. They're so locked into obedience to the Law of the Sabbath that they miss the joy that the Sabbath is supposed to bring them. And, because they are so intent on keeping the Law, they miss enjoying the one who gave them the Law for their own good.

Roadmap: So, this morning, we're going to look at 3 things that will hopefully change our perspective from one of mechanical obedience to one of joy that leads to obedience. So first we're going to look at the obedience of the Pharisees. Then we're going to look for the blessing of the Sabbath, and finally, we will finish up with the Lord of the Sabbath.

1. **The Obedience of the Pharisees**

- a. Let's start with what this is all about: the Sabbath.

- i. Jesus and his disciples were well within their legal rights to do **what** they did, but because they did it on the Sabbath, the Pharisees took issue with **when** they did it.
 - ii. You see, the law prohibits work on the Sabbath. But that's all it says. It just says, "work". Now that was far too ambiguous a word for the Pharisees, so they came up with 39 different categories of "work" that were unlawful on the Sabbath. To them, they were merely defining in meticulous detail what the Law required.
 - iii. So, for the Pharisees, the disciples aren't just grabbing some food to satisfy their hunger. They're **reaping crops**. And in chapter 3, Jesus isn't just healing a man, he's **promoting a potential business venture** since healers used their gifts to make money, which could be construed as work. The man with the withered hand had lived his whole life with a withered hand. Surely he could wait one more day until it wasn't the Sabbath.
- b. If you're anything like me, I hear that, and I'm like, "That's kind of a stretch to say that plucking heads of grain is **reaping**. *And saying that Jesus is looking to make money is ridiculous.*" It makes me think of the Pharisees as those sticklers for technicalities that always ruin everything.
 - c. But we need to understand some things about the Pharisees. The Pharisees often get a bad rap within Christian circles. I get it. They're the religious elite that opposed Jesus, and generally, when you go against Jesus, you don't come off well in the Scriptures. But what we need to remember is that the Pharisees didn't appear in a vacuum. They arose to prominence within the context of what God's people had experienced. Remember, God's people had spent the last few hundred years reaping the consequences of the sinfulness of their forefathers. We just finished our time in Jeremiah back in August. Remember how sinful they were back in the day? Well, the Pharisees **remembered**, and they decided, **wisely**, that it would be a good idea to avoid being so sinful ever again. So, in a misguided effort to avoid transgressing the Law, they set up their own laws around God's Law so that you wouldn't even come close to transgressing it. It was like here's the line that God draws, and then way over here is another line that I'm going to draw for myself so that I can't even come near the real line. Then I'll know for certain that I'm keeping the Law.
 - d. And that's not an unreasonable practice. We, as Christians, are against thinking of legalism as a way to God, but some personal legalisms are useful.
 - i. We set up personal legalisms all the time to avoid even the temptation of something sinful.
 1. For instance, an alcoholic might refuse to attend parties where alcohol is present because he doesn't want to relapse. The actual rule is to avoid drunkenness, and he absolutely has the right to go to the party. But he makes another rule to help keep him from the temptation of breaking the real rule.
 - e. But the Pharisees take it way too far. They're so wrapped up in making sure that they don't transgress the Law, that they begin to think of themselves as **law-keepers**. They pride themselves on their **law-keeping**. They think of themselves as the antithesis to those lawless, sinful forefathers. No, they were **obedient**. **Good**. **Righteous**.

- f. But the purpose of God's Law isn't to justify people as **law-keepers**, but to expose them as **law-breakers**. Romans 3:20 says, "*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*" The Law **exposes** the sin that dwells in everyone, and so it **condemns** everyone, bringing them to a place of needing grace through faith.
 - g. It's kind of ironic right? They spend so much time in the Law, parsing out minutiae to avoid transgressing the Law, and they miss the first and primary use of the Law.
 - i. Quick aside. Theologically speaking, there are 3 uses of the Law:
 - 1. To expose sin
 - 2. To restrain evil
 - 3. To show us what pleases the Lord.
 - a. But the first is probably the most common and is its primary function. The Law is meant to reveal sin. It's meant to expose that which is lawless. It's meant to hold a mirror up and show you the ugliness of the sinner that you are.
 - ii. And the Law loves you by forcing you to see the truth, which is that you're not any good. It would be loveless to leave you ignorant of your sin. And the truth that you're not any good drives you to Christ, to God, desperate for mercy and grace. It drives you to the truth that we, as humans, have run from since Genesis 3 and the Garden: We need God. We can't do this ourselves.
 - h. And on top of it all, the Pharisees' approach to the Law isn't really human. We instinctively know that we're not made to be so rigid, so consumed with the fear of breaking the Law. We instinctively sense the burden that the Law is when we approach it this way. And we instinctively sense that living life that way isn't much of a life at all. It takes all the joy out of life to be only about rule-keeping. We're not mechanical obedience robots that only care if we're on the right side. We weren't meant for that **kind** of obedience.
2. Transition: You see the Pharisees didn't only miss the main point of the Law. They also missed the intent of this particular law that they were trying so hard to keep. Which brings us to look at the blessing of the Sabbath.
3. **The Blessing of the Sabbath**
- a. When we talk about the Sabbath, we could get into the details of what we should or shouldn't do. But I want to skip over all that and try to get a sense of **why** God gave us the Sabbath in the first place.
 - b. I think we get a few clues right here in these stories. You see, in 3:4, Jesus notes that the Sabbath isn't just for abstaining from work (which is how the Pharisees saw it). There are some things that fit in with the Sabbath's purpose. Listen to 3:4. *And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" And they were silent.* And in 2:25-26, we see that the law is **sometimes** trumped by the needs of people. David did what was **ceremonially** unlawful because of his dire need to eat. And so, the letter of the **ceremonial** law is subordinate, at times, to the intent of it. That's possible because the ceremonial law wasn't intended to be timeless, but to be fulfilled in the Messiah. It was intended to show our need for redemption that would be accomplished in a Savior who would restore us to the way we were meant to be: acceptable and intimate with God Himself.

- c. And when we see that the Sabbath's for doing good, for saving life, and subordinate to the needs of the people it was given to, we can see that the law was given primarily as a blessing for those who receive it. It was meant to be a blessing, not a simple command to be obeyed at all costs. In Luke 14, Jesus pointed out that the Sabbath law against work had exceptions even for the Pharisees. It wasn't a black-and-white, cut-and-dried, one-size-fit-all law. He said, "*Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull them out?*". Of course, the ceremonial aspect of the Sabbath, which is the prohibition against work, is subordinate to the needs of man.
 - d. So, it makes sense that Jesus says in verse 27 that "...*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*". The Sabbath was meant to **ble**ss us, not to burden us
4. Which begs the question, "How does the Sabbath bless us?"
- a. I think that the Sabbath blesses us in 2 big ways, in keeping with the negative and positive elements of it.
 - i. **First, it restrains our impulses to secure ourselves through our own efforts and work.** That's the negative. We are to **not** work. You know, ever since the Fall, man has been wildly insecure. The curse put us at odds with Creation, and we no longer had a right relationship with the Lord. Who was going to look out for us knowing that we deserve only wrath from God? The answer is us.
 1. And so, we work. And we work hard. We work to secure our reputations with others. To secure our financial situations. To secure the futures of our children. We all know the rat race that is life, especially in this area that worships work. It's an approach to life that says, "It's up to you to make yourself secure. It's up to you to get all the things in life that you want."
 - ii. But the Sabbath, by rule, keeps us from running ourselves ragged in the pursuit of security and happiness. It forces us to stop working, to stop chasing our self-righteousness, and to stop practicing pride as we delude ourselves into thinking we can actually do it all ourselves. It forces us to trust the Lord for that one day, and that's the first way the Sabbath blesses us. It also clears the way for us to receive the 2nd way the Sabbath blesses us.
 - iii. The second way the Sabbath blesses us is positive. It blesses us by calling us to do something. We're not "not working" just for the sake of "not working". We're not being idle simply because we need a break.
 - iv. **We're not working for a reason. We're not working so that we can consider God and His handiwork, just like He did at the Creation.**
 1. Think back to Genesis 2, when we see the first Sabbath. What was God doing on that first day of rest? He blessed it, made it holy, and rested. He wasn't idle. Rather, he was looking out upon His Creation and **enjoying** it. He was considering the works of His Hands and the fact that it was **very good**.
 - a. And that's what we are to do. We can use those 3 things to give us a framework for how to "do" the Sabbath.
 - i. **He blessed it.** And so, we can consider the works of God's hands, all the ways He has blessed us. That

6. The Lord of the Sabbath.

- a. These two stories hinge on how we understand Mark 2:28. “*So the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath.*” What does that mean?
 - i. Surely it means that he has authority over it. This was what threatened the Pharisees. They thought that with this self-declared authority, he would come for their positions, their titles, their power, their influence, and their security.
 - ii. But I think it means something more than simply that He’s the Lord **over** the Sabbath.
- b. Because Jesus says that He’s the Lord **of** the Sabbath. As in he’s the source of it. He’s the one who came up with the idea. He’s the one who, at the creation, made all things and then rested the 7th day. He’s the one from whom the Sabbath rest flows.
- c. Remember in Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says
 - i. *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and **I** will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find **rest** for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*
- d. Jesus is the source of rest. He **is** our rest in the Gospel. And it all rests, pardon the pun, on this truth. In the Gospel, in Christ, we have a true rest. We are so totally secure in Him that all of our cares and worries are silenced.
- e. How does that work? Because I have a ton of cares and worries, and I’d love to have some rest for my soul. And here it is. Jesus gives us the bliss of this glorious thought. My sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. That’s what makes it well with my soul. We’re no longer sinners deserving of wrath, but now sons and daughters of the Most High. We’re secure in Christ, yesterday, today, and forever.

7. Conclusion: Being Satisfied

- a. Let’s wrap up with the way Tim Keller looks at it. He comes at this idea of resting in God through the language of satisfaction. And I’m going to paraphrase him:
 - b. You can only be done with something when you’re **totally satisfied** with it. That’s the only time that you can walk away completely and be at rest, when you’re so totally satisfied with the work that you’ve done. And we are often not satisfied **with life**, it’s **never** good enough. Which is why we work so hard.
 - c. But Jesus **has** lived a life that has satisfied the **highest** of standards. He has lived the life you **should** have lived, but don’t. He has died the death that you deserve, but are terrified of. And now it’s **finished**. He has **satisfied** God himself. And because we now have Christ in us, because we are **united** with Him, one with Him, we know that God is satisfied **with us**. And so, we can be satisfied with life. Now, knowing that we have a God that looks on us with satisfaction, with joy, and with blessing, now we can **REST**.
8. And as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table, I want to ask if you’ve come to rest in Christ. You might not be good at it, but have you experienced His rest? Do you look to Him to provide you a rest that almost defies expectation? If not, today is the day. Christ is inviting you to come and find rest in Him.
9. Let’s pray.