**Lord of the Sabbath** 5/23 dkm

Read: Isaiah 58:6-14, Mark 2:23-3:6

Text: Mark 2:23-3:6

Psalms: 95, 1, 119:33-40, 134a

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, well away from the temple in Jerusalem where the religious teachers congregated. He began preaching, ‘The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel’ (1:15). In addition to preaching, he healed the sick and cast out demons as signs that the kingdom of God was indeed at hand. People started following Jesus, more people that followed the Pharisees or politicians. The Pharisees and scribes, some of whom may have come for Jerusalem when they heard about Jesus, opposed Jesus because of his popularity and because he was not following their rules about religion.

Here in chapter 2, Mark continues recording the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth but notes the opposition that he started to face, particularly from the scribes and Pharisees. They accused Jesus of blasphemy when he told a paralytic his sins were forgiven, they objected to him eating with tax collectors and sinners, they questioned him about his disciples not fasting, and finally they accused Jesus and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath. These opponents became so hardened against him that they plotted to destroy him (3:6).

Before we look more closely at the ‘breaking the Sabbath’ accusations, note the positive things we have learnt about Jesus. It is not uncommon for teaching and laws to emerge from times of difficulty and persecution in a society. Even as Jesus was refuting his accusers, he is teaching us about himself. We have learnt that, ‘The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’, that Jesus ‘did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance’, that Jesus is the bridegroom ushering in a new dispensation, and finally, that ‘The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath’ (2:28).

May the Lord enable us to understand these amazing truths about his Son, Jesus, and keep us from hardening our hearts against him? Too easily, and too often, we proudly try to impose our own ideas and our own will on people, rather than submitting to the truths of the Bible and the will of almighty God. Let us now look at these two encounters Jesus had with the Pharisees as they sought to impose their rules regarding the Sabbath. We have two subheadings: ‘The Sabbath and necessity’ and, ‘The Sabbath and mercy’. It is no accident that the Westminster Confession of Faith XXI.8 declares that ‘duties of necessity and mercy’ are allowed on the Sabbath, along with God-ordained rest and worship:

**1. The Sabbath and necessity**

One day Jesus and his disciples were walking through grain fields (wheat or barley) on the Sabbath day- for the Jews this was Saturday. The disciples were feeling hungry, so they plucked some heads of grain as they went along (2:23, Matt 12:1). They rubbed these heads in their hands, blew off the chaff, and ate the grain. Jesus did not rebuke them, but the Pharisees did. They were watching Jesus everywhere he went, even out in the fields, and that on the Sabbath! Presumably they did not walk further than a Sabbath day’s journey!

These religious leaders protested: ‘Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ (2:24). The disciples were guilty of picking grain, threshing, winnowing, and then preparing this food for eating - four Sabbath laws broken in one hit! The Pharisees knew the Law of Moses - the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law. They thought that by keeping the law they could become righteous in the eyes of God, and more so if they could make others obey the law. In order to avoid breaking a law they made lots of related laws just to make sure. To avoid working on the Sabbath they made up thirty nine categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath, laws prohibiting travel, carrying anything, and cooking on the Sabbath. Hence their law declaring picking heads of grain as work. The disciples might be forgiven if they did not know all their laws, but Jesus did, and he did not approve of them adding to God’s holy law.

There are Christians today who say that the Sabbath law no longer applies, but last time I checked it was still there in the Ten Commandments. I had a friend who tried to convince me that Jesus endorsed every other commandment but not this one. I reminded him that the Sabbath command is actually a creation ordinance. What Jesus says to the Pharisees may seem like he is dis-endorsing the Sabbath command, but if we listen to what he actually says we will understand that this is not the case (2:27, 28). In fact, what Jesus says is that he did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfil it- the Sabbath law presumably included (Mat 5:17). What Jesus hates is men adding to or subtracting from God’s holy law (Rev 22:18, 19).

How did Jesus answer this accusation of doing work on the Sabbath? Did he enter into a debate around the finer points of the law? The Pharisees would have loved that. What Jesus did was point them to the Scriptures, the Scriptures they thought they were enforcing, and asked, ‘Have you never read’ (2:25)? Jesus reminded the Pharisees of what David did when he was in need of food. David was the greatest king in the history of Israel. He was a great man of God, honoured by all Jews. David went into the house of God and ate the showbread or ‘bread of the Presence’, and also gave some to those who were with him (2:26 cf. 1 Sam 21:6). This was ‘in the days of Abiathar the high priest’ (2:26). Only Mark records this detail, and you may notice that in 1Samuel it is Ahimelech who gave this showbread to David. But this does not mean that his son, Abiathar, was not with him at the time; Abiathar became high priest when Saul assassinated Abimelech shortly after this meeting with David.

David was running from King Saul at the time. He was hungry, as were his friends. He asked the priest for some food. The priest said the only bread in the place was the bread that was consecrated or made holy as an offering to the Lord; only priests were allowed to eat this bread. Nevertheless, the priest gave some of this bread to David so he might satisfy his hunger. He needed strength to escape from Saul.

David ate consecrated bread because of necessity. Are you asking what a work of necessity is? We must be careful not to go down this track because Jesus didn’t, and neither does our Confession. Suffice to say that if you trust in an almighty and merciful God you will know what is necessary and what is not. A believer will seek first the kingdom of God, knowing that God is our great provider (Mat 6:33). ‘My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus’ (Phil 4:13). Those who think they have to work on the Lord’s Day to provide for their needs are not really trusting the Lord. The Lord has given us six days in which to work and one in which to rest and worship. Why do we feel the need to work on that one special day? Is it really a necessity?

The last word in this encounter belonged to Jesus, as we might expect. Only Mark has Jesus he declaring, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (2:27). Every commandment, including the fourth, was given by God as part of the covenant he made with Moses and his chosen people, a covenant of grace and goodness. God rested on the seventh day of creation and blessed this day. He made it a day of rest for everyone, including the animals. For man it became a day to remember the Lord, a day of worship as well as rest: ‘The Sabbath was made for man’.

The Pharisees turned the Sabbath on its head by thinking man was made for the Sabbath. Sure, the Sabbath is God-given, which is what Jesus goes on to declare, but let us not take God out of the Sabbath because Jesus is Lord, even of the Sabbath. Jesus, the Son of Man but also the Son of God, declared the Sabbath day holy; he, not the Pharisees, nor any other man, is Lord of everything in heaven and on earth, even of the Sabbath (2:28, Matt 12:8, Luke 6:5 cf. Col 2:16).

**2. The Sabbath and mercy**

As Jesus’ disciples went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, they picked some heads of grain and ate them. This was an act of necessity. They were hungry. The next incident that Mark records, as do Matthew and Luke, is an act of mercy performed on the Sabbath.

On another occasion during his Galilean ministry Jesus went to the synagogue. The synagogue was the place where Jews gathered on the Sabbath to worship God. Jesus was always in ‘church’ on this holy day. He was there to join with the people of God in worship. He was often asked by the ruler of the synagogue to given the lesson. The people loved listening to this man who spoke like no other. The Pharisees however, came along to find fault with what Jesus said or did. Sadly, some people seem come to church to find fault with what is being preached or done in the service.

In the synagogue that day was a man with a withered hand- Luke tells us it was his right hand (Luke 6:6). We usually use the word ‘withered’ with regard to plants. In Greek the word is ‘*xeros*’ meaning ‘dry’. A xerox machine is a dry copying machine. The man’s hand was ‘withered’ because of some disease or injury. He was unable to use his right hand, so not able to work and provide for his family; Jewish writings indicate he was a plasterer or stonemason. Wherever Jesus went he showed compassion for the sick and healed them (Mat 9:36). Was he going to stop showing compassion and doing good on the Sabbath? Here was Jesus in the synagogue and there was a sick man before him.

Also in the synagogue that day were some Pharisees who were watching Jesus closely (3:2); Luke tells us they were scribes and Pharisees (Luke 6:7). They had their rule book stating what could and could not be done on the Sabbath; most rules were about what could not be done. They apparently judged that this man’s sickness was not life threatening. They would have told this sick man to come back after the Sabbath was over if he wanted help (cf. Luke 13:14). What would Jesus do? Would Jesus tell this sick man to come back the next day because of the Pharisee’s rules about the Sabbath? Would he allow this poor man to suffer another day because it was the Sabbath?

Matthew tells us that Jesus challenged these legalists and hypocrites regarding what they would do if one of their animals fell into a pit on the Sabbath. Would they leave it in the pit till the Sabbath was over? (Mat 12:11). Of course not. Yet they wanted Jesus to leave this human being in his suffering! We have politicians and activists today who regard the life of an animal as of more value that a man, but surely no Christian is among them!

Jesus called the sick man to ‘step forward’ (3:3). He then turned to his accusers and asked, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill’ (3:4). He put the lawyers and learned men on the spot. The choice was clear; either do good by helping this man, or do evil by not helping him; sins of omission can be just as serious. They were putting their Sabbath rule against the wellbeing of this sick man. Would Jesus do such a thing? No. Remember his words when they criticised his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath: ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’. ‘But they kept silent’ (3:4); they refused to answer the question.

Jesus ‘Looked at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts’ (Mark 3:5). Jesus knew the evil intent of their hearts. They cared nothing for this sick man. All they cared about was their own importance. They were victims to pride, pride which hardens a person’s heart against other people, and tragically against God, or in this case against the Son of God.

These religious leaders left the synagogue in a rage after Jesus demonstrated that he truly was Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus told the sick man to stretch out his hand, and it was healed instantly and completely (3:5). We are not told how he felt or how the other worshippers reacted but presume they went home praising God. What we are told is that the hard-hearted Pharisees went out plotting to how they might destroy Jesus. How tragic! They called upon their arch enemies, the politically minded Herodian’s, to join them in getting rid of Jesus (3:6). Jesus certainly is a divisive figure. On which side do you stand when Jesus calls for the doing of good, for showing compassion on your fellow man- for or against?