Rev Archbald

Lord of the Sabbath

1 Sam 21:1-6

Mark 2: 23- 3:6

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we ask You to work in us by your Holy Spirit so that the scripture will reach and transform the whole person, not just our mind or our emotions, but everything that we are – body, soul, mind, emotions and will, brought more and more into conformity to Your word and transformed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ in as much as that is possible for us. We pray this in His name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, we have been seeing how in this section, the writer of this gospel, Mark, shows us the increasing tension between the Lord Jesus and the Pharisees. We have seen the Lord Jesus forgiving sins that hugely bothered the Scribes and the Pharisees, we have seen Him associating with the untouchables – those who were excommunicated – to bring the gospel to them and how much that upset the Pharisees. We have seen Him refusing to fast and that upset the Pharisees, and now we see Him, in what appears to be – at least as far as the Pharisees are concerned – a case of Sabbath breaking.

But Mark is not only showing us the escalation of tensions. He is also busy in each one of these incidents, showing us that Jesus is Lord. And we see it also in this section, the escalation tension, but also that Jesus is Lord also Lord of the Sabbath, as the Lord Jesus Himself said. These are truths that we also wrestle with today.

How do we use the Sabbath to show that we accept the lordship of Jesus Christ. How do you reflect that in your use of this day – of the Christian Sabbath, the Lord’s Day? How do you acknowledge the Lord Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath? These are things that we wrestle with. How we do that, at the same time, fending off the pressures that we get from society to make this day just as exactly the same as any other day of the week. That’s a hard balance to achieve, and probably all of us err on one side or the other in some way at least.

Three points as we look at this text. First of all the Sabbath doctrine, secondly the Sabbath practice and thirdly, the Sabbath Lord. The Sabbath Doctrine, Practice and Lord.

In the first place it might help us to understand a little bit about what the Pharisees thought of the Sabbath – how they viewed that, their doctrine of the Sabbath you might say. So we understand the contrast that comes in the Lord Jesus’ teaching. And there were three main problems in the approach of the Pharisees. One of those was the addition of a huge number of man-made rules added on top of God’s law regarding that day. As is fairly well known, the Pharisees had something like thirty nine categories of forbidden work on the Sabbath, and each of those 39 categories had another huge list of specific examples of what was forbidden. And that is a lot of rules. Each of those examples was often worked out in the most legalistic, and from our perspective even ridiculous manner. You could walk no more than one thousand nine hundred and ninety nine steps on the Sabbath day, which by the way the Lord Jesus and His disciples might well have done as they walked through the grain fields – but to the Pharisees, that’s breaking the Sabbath. You go one step over that – breaking the Sabbath.

Plucking a stalk of grain, or wheat as you walk through the fields (walking less than your 1,999 paces) if you would reach out and pluck some of that grain and pick off the head of that grain and grind it in your fingers until you could pick out the individual grains of wheat and then put those in your mouth and eat them – that would be classified as reaping, harvesting, which to the Pharisees was forbidden work on the Sabbath day. And then there is the question of healing. According to the Pharisees you were allowed to heal someone on the Sabbath day, as long as it was a case of life threatening situations. If someone’s life was in immediate danger, you could heal, but anything other than that was doing medical work. Doctors work on the Sabbath and it was forbidden. So that is one problem – the addition of all of these rules many of them man made which then resulted in a second problem, the consequence of that – that they made this day a burden for the people. Because it became a day when you would have to watch yourself the whole time. You had to be constantly fearful that you might inadvertently break one of these hundreds of rules and find yourself in very, very hot water – potentially even the death penalty. And then the third problem, as we usually find with these things with the Pharisees, they actually regarded the keeping of these rules as a kind of end in itself which, if you did it, you would be automatically blessed, you find favour with God because there was merit attached to it.

On this wrong basis the Lord Jesus and His disciples were clearly, (from the Pharisaic point of view) guilty of breaking the Pharisees law. Hence their rhetorical question in verse 24 – it’s really an accusation to the Lord Jesus – “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?” Look at how the Lord responds to that, how He replies – and He does that by referring to 1 Sam. 21:1-6, which we read, which tells about how another one of God’s anointed ones – in this case his beloved anointed King David. Another anointed of God, who came with a band of followers as the Lord Jesus was, and who was in need. In this case with the same need as the Lord Jesus and His followers – hunger. And also coming as those who were persecuted. David was persecuted, the Lord Jesus likewise. David fled to Nob to the House of God in the time when Ahimelech and also Abiathar were priests and he asked for some food. And as we read, Ahimelech gave him some of the leftover shew bread, or bread of presence which had been placed before God in the house of God, and which according to Lev. 24:5-9, only the priests were allowed to eat the leftovers. And the point that the Lord Jesus makes by raising this is that this is a matter of ceremonial law. These details about what goes on with the shew bread and so on, it is a matter of ceremonial law which is a kind of teaching model of the Lord Jesus Christ and His work, in a shadowy Old Testament way. In this case the shew bread pointed to the fact that for those who come into God’s presence and draw close to Him, He provides everything we need for the whole man. But that is fulfilled in Christ because we can only come into the presence of God and receive that provision for the whole man through the Lord Jesus Christ. So the shew bread pointed to Him. But you see the ceremonial law could be temporarily interrupted for pressing needs. Such as giving another pointer to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It’s a little bit like in catechism class where if I am in the middle of giving an illustration to the students, as I often do, I interrupt myself and then I might give another illustration because another point might come up in the middle of it, and I give another illustration about something that needs to be addressed, and then come back and finish off the first one. It’s a bit like that with the ceremonial law. Things come up that have to be addressed, and so there is a temporary interruption before things resume again. And there are many examples of that in the Old Testament. Interrupting it also, not only sometimes it’s to say something else about the coming of the Lord Jesus, and sometimes it’s simply because of a great and pressing need. And it’s that same principle that lies behind the works of necessity and mercy in regard of the Sabbath – that exception regarding the Sabbath day. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath day was a combination of moral law, abiding principals that stretched from creation, the creation Sabbath and go right through and continue on into eternity, the eternal Sabbath – those are the abiding principles – but also in the Old Testament it contains some ceremonial elements. Such as the fact that in the Old Testament it had to be specifically on the SEVENTH day. It had to involve sacraficial rituals of an Old Testament kind. It had to involve the Old Testament priesthood, it involved a huge number of detailed rules. Also very typical of the Old Testament. But even then, those ceremonial details could be temporarily interrupted by pressing concerns, either about spiritual life such as when the priests broke the Sabbath as the Lord Jesus says in the parallel passage in Matt. 12 that the priests broke the Sabbath because there was a spiritual need for their work. They broke those ceremonial details. Or, it could even be interrupted for physical needs such as when the life of a man is at stake, or even if a beast falls into a pit – it can be pulled out on the Sabbath day, as the Lord Jesus explains in Matt. 12:11-12. Because you see, there are moral principles at stake here as well. And one of those moral principles is that we must love our neighbour. And another moral principle is that we must look after God’s creation. And so if man or beast are in great and pressing need, you can interrupt those ceremonial details in order to uphold the moral law of God.

The moral law should never be placed under the ceremonial law, let alone under man-made additions to that ceremonial law. We can understand then why the Lord in verse 27 explains that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. In other words, the Sabbath was made for man to find it a delight and a joy as Is. 58:13 says. And to find it a day for man’s welfare – both spiritually and physically, the whole man. As it is used as a day of rest and relief from sin and from misery and from toil. Also a day to benefit from focussing on the Lord, in order to honour and worship Him. To benefit spiritually from focussing on Him in a way that we can’t during the week because we are too busy running around and doing our weekly work and also involving ourselves in our weekly recreations. But not a day in which man was made simply to serve a set of legalistic rules and legalistic additions, as if the rules were ends in themselves, no, the day was made for our benefit. And there is not a single one of those purposes that God made for the Sabbath as a day **for** man. Not a single one of those purposes was hindered by plucking and eating grain in the fields, and not a single one of those purposes was hindered, in fact it was furthered, by the Lord Jesus going into the synagogue and healing on the Sabbath day.

In Matt. 12:7 the Lord reinforces this point by citing Hosea 6:6. That God desires compassion and mercy more than He desires sacrifice. And that is a recurring theme in the gospels in the Lord Jesus’ clashes between Himself and the Pharisees. What it means is that God desires his people to reflect His mercy and compassion, and He desires them to do so from the heart, and He wants that far more than He wants mere outward compliance in a legalistic way to ceremonies and rituals. That is what the passage in Hosea means. And so David in the Old Testament situation in 1 Sam. 21, David needed the mercy of food, and the Lord was happy for him to have that – to receive that compassion. The ceremony said otherwise, but the Lord was happy for compassion to be shown.

The disciples needed the mercy of food, and the Lord was happy for them to receive that mercy. The sick needed the mercy of healing and the Lord was happy for them to receive that mercy. The tax collectors and the sinners needed the mercy of hearing the gospel and the Lord was happy for them to receive that mercy. Not a burdensome legalism that prevented mercy from being extended. The Sabbath is FOR focussing on that mercy, amongst other things.

Well, once the Lord had laid down the theory, the doctrine of the Sabbath, that is was made for man’s benefit, it was made for man’s joy. It was a day that was made to be driven by a heart for the Lord, a love of His mercy, and of everything else that He is. When that was laid down, He then followed through with a practise that demonstrated the same doctrine.

Our second point – the Sabbath practise. And as Reformed people this is one of our catch phrases isn’t it. Doctrine and Life. You’ve probably heard that before. Well, the Pharisees focussed on the doctrine. In fact, most of the time on man-made interpretations and additions to it, the Lord Jesus called upon them to take a correct doctrine and to follow through with a correct practise in their lives. And this is an important reminder for us as well, not just with our Lord ’s Day practises but with our lives in general. That when we get the correct doctrine that we follow through with the correct living. Sometime after the clash over the disciples’ reaping of grain on the Sabbath, the Lord entered the synagogue again. Mark places his account of this after the Sabbath incident of Chapt. 2:23-28, in order to emphasise the things that Mark (by Holy Spirit inspired) wants to be emphasised here, namely that Jesus is Lord, Lord of the Sabbath in this case, and the increasing tension with the Pharisees. And so what is effectively a kind of sequel to the end of chapter 2, in this sequel we find the Lord deliberately going into the synagogue in a provocative way. Given the background of what happened in the grain fields, His actions in the synagogue are provocative.

He goes in and He deliberately calls the man with the withered hand to come forward. That man didn’t ask. The Lord Jesus calls him to stand up and come forward, and then He turns to the Pharisees, again very, very deliberate and very provocative in terms of this growing tension, He turns to the Pharisees who haven’t even asked a question, he knows what they are doing, He knows that they are watching Him. They are spying on Him the whole time. They must have been hanging around on the edges of the grain fields watching to see what He and His followers would do. Now in the synagogue, watching and looking for an opportunity to accuse and the Lord knows that, so He turns to the Pharisees and He asks them this provocative question – “Is it lawful to do good or do to harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill” - Chapter 3:4. And you will notice that this is a kind of parallel, there is a symmetry here with their accusation in Chapter 2:24. The Pharisees ask “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?” And the Lord Jesus “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath?” The parallels are provocative, and when they refuse to answer, the Lord Jesus, with them watching and knowing what was in their minds, He then goes straight ahead and heals that man’s hand.

Thus the Lord’s practise demonstrates the principles of using the Sabbath for man’s benefit and his joy. Both physically and spiritually together – the whole man. He shows that the day is a day for reflecting the mercy of God. It is reflected in the healing of the man’s hand. Rather than a day of empty legalistic ritualism. In a confrontational way that exposes the Pharisees as having exactly the opposite view and practise. They desire sacrifice; they desire the performing of ceremonies without a heart that is tuned to God’s grace. They desire man to be made for the Sabbath rules, not the rules of the Sabbath and the Sabbath for man. And their refusal to answer the Lord’s question shows up very well that they have this wrong view. The Lord, for His part, demonstrates the attitude of God to this wrong reversal of His truth. Verse 5 tells us that the Lord Jesus looked at them with anger and with grief over their hardness of heart. Loving regulation, loving ritual more than you love the mercy of God is actually an evidence of hardness of heart. And it is a serious thing that angers God. In His compassion for His creatures, the Lord Jesus also grieves over their sin, and especially since it involves His own covenant people. This by the way, is another reminder to us, if you have seen pictures of Jesus at any time, not that I recommend that, but if you have seen them you often see Jesus presented as gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Well, He was gentle and He was meek and mild, but that is certainly not all He was, and that is the danger with these images that you get stuck in one particular thing portrayed in a human way, but here we find Jesus not gentle Jesus meek and mild, but we find a Jesus who is angry and grieved. Where the hardness of heart of man comes out the anger and the grief of the Lord Jesus Christ is plain. And we see just how far that hardness of heart went. The Pharisees immediately went off and began conspiring with the Herodians. The Herodians were supporters of Herod, and behind that of course, the Romans, because the Romans put Herod in charge. He wasn’t generally very popular, but there were supporters. And the Pharisees conspire with this group, this party, on how to kill the Lord Jesus. And when you stop and think about that, that’s pretty strange bedfellows for the Pharisees to be aligning themselves with pro-gentile, a pro-Roman faction. To be aligning themselves with someone who supported a wicked ruler. Who broke many of the rules, even far more seriously than ceremonial details. But they aligned themselves, strange bedfellows, united by a common hatred of someone who was breaking their rules, who was exposing their sin and who was liable to cause social and political unrest. A danger to status quo conservatism and a danger to the stability of the region as far as they were concerned.

This is really a smaller, local Galilean portrait of what would soon happen in all Judea and the surrounding areas. Namely, that opposition would grow from verbal attacks on the disciples, it would move to verbal attacks directly on the Lord Jesus and it would go from there to physical attacks, both on the Lord Jesus and the disciples, culminating in the cross and the persecution of the early church.

What they did not sufficiently take into consideration, or perhaps even acknowledge was that that hostility was directed against none other than the Lord of the Sabbath, the Lord of all, but certainly the Lord of the Sabbath. And this is a point that Mark is at pains to show, that Jesus is Lord, He is the Son of God, God as well as man. And moreover, that He is the Messiah. Who else could say with authority the things that He said here, about the Sabbath day, who else could say that with such authority other than the one who is the Lord.

Our third and final point – the Sabbath Lord. Jesus, as I say, is Sabbath Lord, because He is both God and Messiah. As God He is the one who created the Sabbath. As God He is the one who knows every aspect of God’s purpose for the Sabbath Day and who is therefore in a perfect position to point out errors in those who are opposing the purpose of the Sabbath. As God He is the regulator of the Sabbath, who has the right to say how it ought to be honoured and in what ways mercy is more important than ceremonial formalism. As the great Anointed One, the Great Messiah, even more than David was an anointed one of God, the Lord Jesus was THE anointed, who has more right to have His needs met, His need of hunger in this case, considering the Messianic mission, the anointed mission that He was on, He has far more right to have His physical needs met, by way of exception, and in the face of man-made regulations than David had to make an exception to ceremonial law. As Messiah He knows what His coming in fulfilment does to the Sabbath. Especially to its ceremonial aspects, but also He knows how to leave its moral aspects completely in place and upheld. He knows that He is the bridegroom bringing in the day of Salvation. Fulfilling the Father’s mission which is so much more than ceremonial legalism and it is that which enables the joy and delight in this day that Isaiah spoke about. Lord of the Sabbath does certainly not mean what so many try and take it as – they take it as a little indication that the Lord Jesus was abolishing the Sabbath. But it is very far from meaning that and the text in no way says that. How then do we uphold His Lordship. The Lordship of the Christian Sabbath, the one with the ceremonial details fulfilled, but with the abiding principles remaining? The one that is carried out in light of the fact that Jesus Christ has come in fulfilment. How do we uphold His Lordship in that situation?

Well, as I intimated at the start we live between two dangers. One of those dangers is the danger of Pharisaic legalism – a desire to make so many additions, hedges, so many man-made rules often it comes out of a good motive that we want to protect the day. We want to keep it from being destroyed by our society and by liberalism within the church and so we make many many rules to try and hedge it, to protect it. But there is a danger then when we do that that we come to think of those rules as a kind of end in themselves. Worse still, if we would ever think that keeping those rules automatically earns favour with God, the way the Pharisees thought. And the problem also that comes with that is that we open the door to hypocrisy because if you make too many rules and add them on to what God requires, no one is going to be able to live like that, you soon find yourself acting inconsistently with your own rules, turn around and criticise others who break those rules – “they are so liberal – look what they do on the Sabbath” while allowing ourselves plenty of liberty. That is one danger.

The other danger is the liberal view of the Sabbath where the day is seen as abrogated, abolished, it’s been done away with. Well perhaps saying – the Lord’s Day is just a day of worship, we conveniently picked this day of the week as the day we worship and you should be worshipping God on this day, but as for the rest of it, you can do what you like, because there is no day of rest any more – that is often the way it is argued.

Or on other occasions we claim that we see it as a day of rest as well as a day of worship, but despite of the right words we simply allow the world to break in upon us and put its pressures upon us and take up those things that come in – we let them creep in and steal a very large portion of the day from us. So that in the end, our practise on the Lord’s Day is more a matter of watching TV or doing shopping, or hanging out with our friends or doing the other things that please us, with just one or two services intruding in the middle – preventing us doing the things that we really prefer to be doing but we know we have a duty. That’s the other danger.

Neither of these extremes properly recognises the Lord Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. Both at the end, in their own way, try to make man the Lord. Man the Lord who makes the rules or man the Lord who dismisses the rules. And they prevent the day from truly being for man.

To uphold the day properly, to treat the Lord Jesus as Lord of the Lord’s Day, that’s why it’s called that, we have to apply what we heard in this text, what it teaches us. We have to remember that God has indeed set aside one day of the week as a day of rest and worship. As a day to focus on honouring the Lord Jesus as the Lord of the Sabbath rather than reducing it to just another day of the week – a day of self-pleasing. Everything the Lord Jesus says here in this text would make no sense if what He was trying to say was “Oh, yes, the day is done, its past history”. It wouldn’t make sense. He’s upholding the abiding principles. But we also need to remember that He fulfilled the ceremonial details while upholding these abiding principles of rest and worship.

We need to remember also, that He came as the bridegroom, in order to make this a day of joy, a day of delight. We need to remember that HE came to make it a day for reflecting the mercy of God, and all of His other attributes in a way that benefits the whole man - body and soul. And we need to remember that He did not come to make the day a burden by inventing many man-made rules or applying legalistic interpretations of God’s abiding rules. This means that our questions about the Sabbath should not simply be “is it lawful”. I get this in catechism class – “Is it ok, is it lawful to go swimming on Sunday, is it lawful to kick a soccer ball around between services out in the church yard, etc, etc.” That’s the usual question “is it lawful” – and it is a good question. Because there are abiding laws of rest and worship and we need to keep this day separate. There is no doubt about that. That question needs to be asked, but it is not the only question. We also need to ask “Will it (whatever it is – whatever I’m proposing to do or not to do) will it be of spiritual benefit to the whole man – will it increase our joy in salvation – will it increase our delight in the day – will it increasingly help us to reflect the mercy of God and His other attributes?” And if it doesn’t increase those things then don’t do it.

Another way to sum it up - Will doing or not doing, will it honour the Lord of Sabbath or will it district us from these goals.

AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father we pray that we may uphold the fourth commandment in every respect, over against the pressures that come from the world so that we ensure that we really do rest from our weekly labours and our weekly recreations in order that we may honour You, that we may focus on honouring You. That we may concentrate on enjoying You and on resting from sin and on reflecting Your nature. Father, help us to develop good house rules that will keep us from falling into a worldly use of the Lord’s Day but not in such a way that we take away our delight in the day or make it a burden to ourselves or others. We pray this in Jesus name, AMEN.