

THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

Mark 2:23-3:6

October 22, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Chapter 21 of the Charleston Confession of Faith, which is the confession this church has adopted for its leadership, begins:

The light of nature shews that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. [21.1]

According to this statement, true religious worship is prescribed by God, *instituted by himself*. God has *lordship and sovereignty over all*. Therefore He *may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men*.

We have been looking at a group of men over the past weeks that did not have this clearly articulated statement on the sovereignty of God as it relates to religious worship. However, the Pharisees did have the Old Testament on which most of this statement is based. The difference is that they had taken the Scriptures and twisted them to fit their own theological framework rather than letting Scripture shape their theology. Further, where they had interpreted Scripture rightly, they often bathed it in their strict legalisms. They “strained the gnat and swallowed the camel” (Matt. 23:24). They lived their lives in bondage to the law rather than in the liberty that comes from God’s grace alone. It is not that the Law is not important. God gave His Law so that man might know that He is a sinner and be driven to repentance in Christ alone. His righteous Law then serves as the rule of obedience for the believer, but not in a legalistic way. What we see in our text once again this morning is that *a person will live their life according to their understanding of Scripture*.

I. The Ignorance of the Pharisees Exposed (2:23-28)

As we have seen over the past few weeks in these “conflict” narratives, the Pharisees were lying in wait everywhere that Jesus went. They were seeking to expose Him. They were at the very least concerned about orthodoxy (right teaching) and orthopraxy (right practice), and for this they are to be commended. Orthodoxy, or doctrine, leads to orthopraxy, or practice. You will live according to what you determine to be right and wrong. But it was their jealousy of Jesus, fostered by their self-righteousness, that was the condemnation of these Pharisees. And this self-righteousness blinded the Pharisees of their ignorance in three particular areas that Jesus exposes in this story.

1. Their ignorance of the Scriptures (vv. 23-26)

As was their custom, the Pharisees question Jesus and the actions of His disciples on this occasion. Jesus and His disciples were passing through the grain fields on the Sabbath and they were hungry. They did what anyone with common sense would do when they are hungry and food is available. They pluck the grain and they eat. It was not their plucking and eating that was the problem. It was the day on which they did it – the Sabbath. So the Pharisee police once

again think they have Jesus by the collar. In their self-righteous, legalistic framework Jesus had broken the Law by picking heads of grain on the Sabbath. For them, this was equal to working on the Sabbath.

Jesus responds to them with Scripture and recalls an event that would call their criticism into question. You see, there were two or three men in the Jewish tradition that were honored and revered above all others, and rightly so. Abraham, Moses, and David were all covenantal figures in the life of Israel. While these men were not perfect by any stretch, their actions, when not repudiated by God, were sacrosanct. So Jesus reminds them of the occasion when David himself ate the showbread in the sanctuary (1 Samuel 21:1-6). This bread was consecrated for the priests alone, and no one but a priest, according to the Law, was to eat of the showbread. David, however, was not a priest, nor were any of his companions.

The Pharisees were now in a dilemma. If they were consistent in their interpretation, they had to admit one of two things. Either David had broken the Law in taking the showbread from the priest, which would not be at all popular with the crowd, or they must admit that on this occasion, David was in the right and Jesus was as well. You see, Jesus was forcing them to the Scriptures to interpret this occasion, not their self-righteous, legalistic traditions that were built on presumption.

Next week we will celebrate an important day in church history. In our culture October 31 has been turned into a holiday celebrated with ghosts and goblins. However, this holiday originated as “All Saints Day” and is actually celebrated on November 1 to recognize the saints of old in certain church traditions. Thus the title “Hallowmas” or “Halloween,” “hallow” meaning “holy” or “saintly.” However, October 31 means much more in the Reformed tradition as we look back to that day, October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, which traditionally marks the beginning of the Reformation. Four and a half years later, in April 1521, Luther was on trial by the Roman Catholic Church. He had been critical of the Pope, questioned the validity of some of the sacraments, and denounced the corruption of the church, particularly as it related to the use of indulgences, the practice of paying for penance or purchasing forgiveness. The Archbishop asked Luther again state his position clearly on the Pope and the Church and to recant of his errors. It is Luther’s response on this occasion that helps us to understand the importance of knowing Scripture and to live accordingly. “Since then your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. *Unless Scripture* and plain reason convict me, I do not accept the authority of Pope’s and counsels for they have contradicted each other. *My conscience is captive to the word of God.* I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other, so help me God.”

That’s what Jesus is doing here with these Pharisees. He takes them to the Scriptures, of which they were ignorant, and asks them, “Do you know what they say? Do you know what they teach?”¹ Of course, the answer was no. They were driven by presumptuous traditions, as were the Roman Catholics in Luther’s day, not by Scripture alone.

2. Their ignorance of the Sabbath (vv. 27-28)

Here we see that their ignorance of Scripture led to a faulty practice of the Sabbath and a misconstrued fault on the part of Jesus and His disciples. Because of their petty legalisms, the Pharisees missed the forest for the trees. They did not get the big picture concerning the Sabbath.

¹ Derek Thomas, <http://www.fpejackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek's%20SERMONS/Mark/04amark.htm>

Geoff Thomas gives two important aspects of the Sabbath day as instituted by God.² First, Jesus here is referring to the Creation Sabbath. In the debate over the Sabbath today, this important point is often missed. Many go to the fourth commandment in Exodus that we will look at in a moment as their starting point in formulating their beliefs regarding the Sabbath. That is what the Pharisees had done. However, the Sabbath was instituted by God at Creation. It was a Creation ordinance, before sin had entered into the world. In Genesis 2:1-3 we read, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. ² By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”

This is the basis for Jesus’ statement in v. 27, “**Jesus said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.’**” The Sabbath was not given by God at Creation as something to be kept for righteousness sake. God instituted the Sabbath because man needed it! Under the old economy, the Sabbath was the last day of the week. But since the resurrection of our Lord, “he hath set apart the first day of the week, which is called the Lord's day, the observation of the last day of the week being abolished” [Charleston Confession, 21.7]. The Confession then clearly states,

The Lord’s day is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering their common affairs aforehand, *observe an holy rest*, from their own works, words, and thoughts, about their worldly employment and recreations, and are taken up in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy. [21.8, emphasis mine]

We see here that the Sabbath as originally instituted by God at Creation was a day of rest, a day set apart to God from the rigors of the world for an intense time of devoted worship to Him. That is what we celebrate when we come together on Sunday, the Lord’s Day. It is a time set apart for us because we need it! It is a *positive* commandment given by God. The Pharisees totally missed this truth. They had taken God’s positive commandment and turned it into something negative. As Derek Thomas points out, “This principle of which Jesus is now speaking and which the Pharisees couldn’t see to save their lives: there’s something in the Sabbath that was made for us and for our benefit. It isn’t something essentially negative and restricting and foreboding that needs to be hedged in with 10,000 rules and regulations.”³

But Jesus refers secondly to the Sabbath as set forth in the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8 and again in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 where we read, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” In the passage in Deuteronomy, Moses expanded on the purpose of the Sabbath, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day (5:15). Moses point was that they could not remember the Sabbath as they were commanded without remembering that they were once an enslaved people, delivered by God from their bondage. They could not deliver themselves, so God in His mercy delivered them and destroyed their enemies. And how did He accomplish this feat? Through the Passover Lamb. So Moses ties the Sabbath to the deliverance of His people through the slain Lamb of God.

² <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark13.htm>

³ <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek's%20SERMONS/Mark/04amark.htm>

It was the Exodus Sabbath that is the basis for Jesus' proclamation in v. 28, **“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”** In essence He is telling the Pharisees to remember Him. He alone could provide deliverance from their bondage, not from earthly powers, but from the power and penalty of sin. In other words, He is the Passover Lamb. The Sabbath was to be set apart to remember their rescue from the wrath of God through Jesus Christ alone. It was not simply a time of merit or demerit, a time of keeping every jot and tittle of the Law. The Sabbath is a time to worship Him, to remember Him, to relish in His grace and mercy that set us free from the bondage of sin and the wrath of the Almighty God! Hear Geoff Thomas,

Those lambs were types, that is, they were symbols and teaching devices all pointing forward to the one great Lamb who at the Passover Feast in Jerusalem around 33 AD would become the Lamb of God who, all by himself, would take away the sin of the world in his royal death on Golgotha. Only his blood can make the foulest clean. That Lamb of God is Lord even of the Sabbath. So the Sabbath day was a time for Old Testament Christians to rejoice in experience and hope of redeeming mercy. The promise was that one day someone would come who would be bruised for their iniquities. The Lord would lay on him the sins of us all. *We know who this is.*⁴

“Ask ye, Who is this same?
Christ Jesus is His name,
The Lord Sabaoth's Son;
He, and no other one,
Shall conquer in the battle.” (Martin Luther, 1483-1546).

II. The Authority of Christ Demonstrated (3:1-6)

Jesus' statements in the preceding paragraph were statements of authority. Salvation was in Him and Him alone. He was King of His kingdom, and no one could come into His kingdom but by Him. It was not in religious self-righteousness in keeping the Law but by grace alone through faith *in Him* alone that one could be delivered. Needless to say, the Pharisees would not take this lightly. Jesus enters the synagogue and, as in the past, the Pharisees were waiting.

1. The healing of the withered hand (vv. 1-5)

Upon entering the synagogue, Jesus encounters a man with a need. Remember, it is still the Sabbath, though a Sabbath later than the preceding narrative according to Luke (6:6). There is a man whose **“hand was withered.”** This is probably a reference to some form of muscular atrophy. The Pharisees knew that the rabbis were not opposed to healing on the Sabbath if there was a danger to life. The Torah read, “Whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath (*Yoma* 8:6). But they were adamantly opposed to healing on the Sabbath if life was not at stake. This man's condition was not life threatening. But the condition of the Pharisees hearts was. So Jesus uses this as an opportunity to once again show His compassion while at the same time exercising His authority over these obstinate Pharisees. You see, they had one thing in mind. Mark tells us, **“They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.”**

⁴ <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark13.htm>, emphasis mine

Jesus, knowing their hearts, says to the man, **“Get up, and come forward.”** I can just imagine the thoughts of the Pharisees at this point. They once again thought that they had Jesus dead to rights. Surely this time Jesus had slipped up and the people would recognize that Jesus was not who He claimed to be. Surely this would provide the occasion for Jesus’ downfall and the people would once again pledge their loyalty to them.

But notice that Jesus does not immediately heal the man. He puts the ball back into the Pharisees court with a question, **“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?”** Here is what Jesus was asking them, “Is it better to do good to a man in need or to observe the Sabbath?” Matthew shares that Jesus added a bit of a twist to the question, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (12:11-12). Jesus once again has painted them into a moral predicament. Of course, the answer was simple. If it would be considered wrong not to do good on the other six days of the week, it would be even more improper not to do good on the Sabbath. The Pharisees obviously knew Jesus was right because Mark tells us, **“They kept silent.”**

Having once again put the Pharisees in their place, Jesus then tells the man, **“Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”** Keep in mind that Jesus’ actions on this occasion were both to discount the misguided teachings of the Pharisees as well as to demonstrate to others His authority. As John MacArthur notes, “Jesus not only *approved* doing good on the Sabbath but *did* good on the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath He demonstrated that, if anything, the Sabbath was the supreme day for doing good.”⁵ So Jesus once again backs up His words with His actions in healing this man.

2. The emotions of our Lord (v. 5)

Mark tells us that Jesus was **“angry”** and **“grieved”** with the Pharisees. Attempts are often made to somehow spiritualize Jesus emotions on these occasions. These would say that Jesus was not really **“angry”** but simply loved these Pharisees less than others in the synagogue on this occasion. After all, Jesus loves everyone, though He loves some less than others.

But may I suggest to you that when Mark said that Jesus was **“angry”** and **“grieved”** with the Pharisees, he meant just that. We do not need to make Jesus somehow look better on this occasion. **“Angry”** means angry. When we read the account of Jesus’ anger with the moneychangers in the temple, are we to assume that Jesus gently turned over the tables and merely suggested that the moneychangers leave? No, He was angry. Was it a righteous anger? Yes, but make no mistake about it, He was angry and His anger was justified. Jesus is more than a little disconcerted with the Pharisees. He is disturbed, Mark says, **“at their hardness of heart.”** That is the issue, and Jesus is furious. As Geoff Thomas put it, “This is not the darling little lamb of the women’s quilting circle. This is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. This is the incarnation of Sinai. This is the Lord of Sodom and Gomorra’s destruction; this is Noah’s God; this is the Lord who passed over Egypt and took their first born.”⁶

When we look at these “negative” emotions of our Lord, we must understand that His anger and grief are tied to His wrath. Jesus hates sin. And may I be so bold to state that Jesus hates the sinner? It is a mistaken notion to believe, as many do, that Jesus “hates the sin but loves the sinner.” How can we reconcile this idea with the righteous judgment that awaits the sinner?

⁵ John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, 289

⁶ <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark14.htm>

How can we justify this thought when the unrepentant sinner stands before the Almighty in all of His wrath and fury? A belief such as this affects one's doctrine of hell as well. Is hell going to be a place of God's wrath and fury, poured out for all eternity as Scriptures teach upon the unrepentant who deny Christ just as these Pharisees? Or must we somehow spiritualize hell to make it more compatible with a God and Christ who simply loves the unrepentant less? Do you see what is at stake here?

Jesus was **"angry"** and **"grieved"** at the hardness of their hearts. They were obstinate towards His teachings and actions and were seeking to persuade others to choose the path of the self-righteous and their hell. These of all people who had the righteous teachings of God, to whom God had covenanted with of old, now hold Jesus up as some kind of traitor. Make no mistake about it – Jesus was bitterly angry and grieved with these men.

3. The reaction of the Pharisees (v. 6)

Here we see the first mention of insurrection in the gospel according to Mark. The intentions of the Pharisees are plainly shown in their response to Jesus' actions on this occasion. The road to Calvary was now being paved and the events that follow from this point forward, according to the preordained will of God, drive Jesus to the Cross at the hands of these obstinate men.

The depth of their depravity is shown in their **"conspiring with the Herodians against Him."** The Herodians were typically loathed by the Jews. They pledged their allegiance to Herod, the half-Jew Idumean king who had bought his title from Rome. They served Rome and Rome first, often at the expense of the Jews. They were the antithesis of the Pharisees in almost every way, and yet, the Pharisees now join forces with the Herodians **"as to how they might destroy"** Jesus. The Pharisees were desperate, and their jealousy of Jesus now reached its height. They would have taken Jesus' life on the spot if it were not from Roman law that restricted them from capital punishment and were they not afraid of the people that followed Jesus. The Pharisees were cowards in every sense of the word.

But they were all part of God's plan. How did Peter put it, "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—²³ this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death" (Acts 2:22-23). And then later in Acts 4:11-12, "He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, *but* **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone**.¹² And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Conclusion

1. Do you know Christ?

2. Why do you come to church? The Pharisees show their ignorance of the Sabbath. Rather than gather together for worship, they were in the synagogue for all the wrong reasons. **Have to / need to? Can you take church or leave it?**