

### The Lord of the Sabbath

#### Mark 2:23-28

Mark 2:23-28 – *“Now it happened that He went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. <sup>24</sup> And the Pharisees said to Him, “Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” <sup>25</sup> But He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: <sup>26</sup> how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?” <sup>27</sup> And He said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.”*

#### Background Notes

In verse 23, some translations read that they began to pluck the *ears of corn*. This was not the kind of corn we have in Iowa, and the disciples are not picking ears of corn and eating them like corn on the cob! No, *ears of corn* should more properly be translated (as it is in many translations) as *heads of grain* of wheat or barley.

The Pharisees found fault with the disciples, and asked, *“why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”* They weren't accusing the disciples of stealing – they were accusing them of *working on the Sabbath!* The Jewish Law permitted people to walk through a field and pick and eat some grain. Deuteronomy 23:25: *“When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain.”* So, you could walk through a field and pluck and eat some heads of grain, but you couldn't bring in your tractor and harvesting equipment! That would be stealing.

The Law also required that some grain be left unharvested at the edges of the fields for the poor and for the stranger to gather. Leviticus 19:9-10 - *“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.”*

So the Pharisees were not finding fault with the disciples for picking some of the grain and eating it; their problem was that it was being done on the Sabbath, and in their opinion that was against the Jewish Law. Exodus 20:9-10 says, *“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man servant, nor your maid servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.”*

According to the way Judaism at this time interpreted the Law (wrongly, of course), plucking a few heads of grain was *reaping* and therefore it was “work.” Rubbing the few grains in your hand was *threshing* and therefore “work.” Blowing the chaff away from your hand was *winnowing*, and therefore it was “work.” So that was the problem the Pharisees had when they saw the disciples taking a few heads of grain. They weren’t stealing—no problem there. The problem was that they were “working” on the Sabbath - at least as far as the Pharisees were concerned.

How did the Lord answer the question that they raised? We’ll discuss that in our doctrinal points.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

That was part of our Lord’s answer (v27), and also that “*The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath*” (v28). Verse 28 means that the Lord Jesus Christ has authority over the Sabbath, and He made the point that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

What did the Lord mean by this? Essentially the Lord was teaching that we must distinguish between *moral law* and *ceremonial law* (or civil law). The Law of the Sabbath was a regulatory civil law; it was not a moral law. The Law of the Sabbath was not a moral law like “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” or “Thou shalt not murder,” or “Thou shalt not steal,” or “Thou shalt not lie.” The Law of the Sabbath was a law that actually protected mankind from overworking by providing a day of rest. The Sabbath forced man to rest and think about God, and it certainly protected poor servants with a day of much-needed rest. All the other Ten Commandments were moral, and therefore they’re repeated in the New Testament because God’s moral laws never change. But the Sabbath is not repeated as a moral law in the New Testament because the Sabbath is not a moral law.

The Lord backed up His point that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath by using the example of David in the Old Testament.

### 2. Bible stories should be used as precedents.

When I first wrote out this point I said, “Bible stories **can** be used as precedents.” But I decided it really should be “Bible stories **should** be used as precedents.” That’s why God gave them! That’s why they’re included in the Bible. Romans 15:4: “*For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*” And certainly that includes the Bible stories. All of the Scriptures are written for our learning, and it certainly includes the stories in the Bible.

And that's exactly what our Lord did here. The Lord went back to the Old Testament, to 1 Samuel 21 and the time when David and his men were running away from King Saul, who was out to kill them. Our Lord referred to that story and then drew an application from it.

In the account, David and his men came to a place called Nob, where the Tabernacle was located in those days. The men were famished and there was no food except the Tabernacle "showbread." This was, according to ceremonial law, only to be eaten by the priests. But the saving of life is more important than ceremonial Law - so the priest gave them the bread, and David and his men ate it. The Lord affirmed what David did, and then He went on to apply this story to the Sabbath. The Pharisees really had no comeback argument because they certainly would have agreed that David did the right thing. The doctrinal point that we're making here is that the Lord used an Old Testament "Bible story" as His precedent to make His point, and we should do the same. That's why the historical stories are included in the Bible!

One note of caution is in order here, though. In some Bible stories the character is doing the wrong thing - so let's be careful not take the *wrong thing* and make it a precedent for doing *wrong*. In Genesis 12, for example, Abraham - a great hero of the faith - went down to Egypt and lied about His wife to protect his own life. That's a Bible story, but you don't want to take that Bible story and make it a precedent for lying about your wife! That would be wrong! The Scripture gives us safeguards, so keeping these safeguards in mind, Bible stories can be and should be used as precedent.

Before we go to our practical application, one little technical note should be mentioned here. The priest who was in office when David received the showbread was actually Ahimelech, Abiathar's father - but the Lord mentioned Abiathar. Notice closely however - the Lord didn't say Abiathar was the high priest in office; He said, "in the days of Abiathar," and certainly that would be true. Remember we're looking back now about a thousand years, and the Lord says, "in the days of Abiathar." It would be similar to saying, in reference to some event in our own country's history, "in the days of George Washington." When we use that phrase, we don't necessarily mean that the event happened during the years that George Washington was in office as President. It just means it happened during the life and times of George Washington. In the same way, because Abiathar became the more prominent priest in the days of David, the Lord looked back at that time and said "In the days of Abiathar the priest."

## Practical Applications

### 1. Let's not miss the *spirit* of the law by keeping the *letter* of the law.

That's what the Pharisees did with the Sabbath, and what they did with so many of the ceremonial laws. They kept the laws for the laws' sake - and missed the whole purpose and spirit of the laws. And we do the same.

For example, in I Timothy 4:4-5 we read that it is right to give thanks for our food. Most Christians keep the letter of that law. We bow our heads before a meal and give thanks, even in restaurants. But in a restaurant it's often a "quickie prayer" - even a "rub of the eyebrows prayer!" (Right?) Have we kept the letter of the law but missed the spirit of the law?

The spirit of this teaching is that we should take time out and reflect on how good God is, and how He continually provides for us, and how thankful we should be. But many of us just go through the motions. Let's not miss the *spirit* of the law by keeping the *letter* of the law.

## 2. Let's not confuse moral laws and regulatory laws.

Again, that's what the Pharisees were always doing, and the Lord had to correct them. We often do the same thing the Pharisees did - but we should be careful not to confuse moral laws and regulatory laws. If we don't distinguish between these two kinds of laws, we can get confused.

Let's take the speed limit, for example. Is that a moral law or a regulatory law? Obviously it's a *regulatory or civil law*. Should we ever break the speed limit? Normally not (just as only the priests normally ate the showbread). But suppose your child is bleeding to death? Or your neighbor has had a heart attack? Of course you'd drive to the hospital as quickly as you can! You'd try to keep safety in mind, but you wouldn't let your child die because of a road sign that says 15 mph! On the other hand, you don't break the speed limit just because you don't like it, and you feel like driving faster, or you're late to work or church. No. But with a regulatory law, there may be a time (just as when David and his men ate the showbread), when saving life is more important than the law.

What about the moral law? People can get confused here, too, because they don't distinguish between moral law and regulatory law. "Don't commit adultery" is a *moral law of God*. Is there ever a time when it would be right to commit adultery? *No, absolutely not* - regardless of what a state law might allow between consenting adults, or regardless of what the situation may be. The Bible does not teach situational ethics. You **never** commit adultery. It is a moral law of God.

Let's not confuse moral laws and regulatory laws.