Lord of the Sabbath
Mark 2:23-3:6

One of the things I find myself saying to people about us as a church is that we're resource rich, but time poor. Now, Jonathan, our treasurer, might debate us being resource rich, but I doubt anyone would debate us being time poor. Work, studies, family, life are all busy. And one of our most precious commodities is time.

Which makes today's passage so relevant. Because, while other religions venerate places, and Islam has Mecca, and Hinduism has the Ganges, sure Judaism had Jerusalem, but it had something else as well, it venerated time. It had the Sabbath.[1] And the Bible understands time - including your time - in a way that the Inshallah of Islam or the cycle of life of Buddhism never can - that time is precious, and what you do with it matters.

And we're in a part of Mark's gospel where Mark's highlighting some of the controversy around Jesus. And the religious leaders are upset because Jesus has claimed the power to forgive sins. But he doesn't just forgive sins, he mixes with sinners, and crosses that clear social boundary.

But in this passage, Jesus crosses another boundary - the Sabbath. And in doing so, he doesn't just help answer the central question of the book, 'who is this man?' He does something else as well: he helps us understand why you and I use time the way we do. Why we can be so restless, or driven, and how instead we can find rest.

The Day of Rest
Look at v23, 'One Sabbath he [Jesus] was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.'

Now, the nations we're from can have certain characteristics, can't they? If you're Dutch you're tall and direct. If you're British, you're short and like tea. But to be Jewish was different. Because you can be Dutch and short, you can be British and hate tea. But you couldn't be Jewish and not keep the Sabbath. To be Jewish was to keep the Sabbath. Alongside circumcision it was one of *the* two markers of what it meant to be Jewish.

And you kept it because, at creation, God had: Genesis 2:2-3, 'And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.'

And when God delivered the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, he gave them the 10 Commandments - the ten rules that were to shape their life as his people in his land - and the 4th was the Sabbath: Exodus 20:8-10, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates."

Now, if you've experienced a conservative religious upbringing, the Sabbath can seem oppressive can't it, because it's about all the fun you weren't allowed to have. But notice who God says has to put their work down: it's everyone - including your servants, and any foreigners, even your animals. Everyone must be allowed to rest.

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[1] Edwards, 93.

And when the people of Israel were stood on the doorstep of entering the Promised Land, Moses told them why, why the Sabbath was to be the identity marker of God's people: Deut 5:12-15, "'Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy… On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

So why should Israel keep the Sabbath? - because of who they were. Or rather, because of who they weren't. They weren't slaves anymore. In Egypt, they'd been made to work with zero rest. No days off or holidays by the Red Sea for them. But that was then and now's now, and God is saying, I've set you free. So keep the Sabbath.

You see, only a slave can't stop working. Only a slave with a slave-master standing over him can't put his work down. And so their ability, every seventh day, to stop and rest was a sign of who their new master was. It wasn't Egypt. But neither was it wealth and the endless pursuit of more. It was God, which meant that they and all those who worked for them, could stop and rest.

But interestingly, the Sabbath commandment is the only one of the Ten Commandments that's rooted in creation: Exodus 20:8,11 again: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy…. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth… and rested on the seventh."

So to keep the Sabbath was not just to live as a member of God's free people, knowing you weren't enslaved anymore, it was to live as we're all created to live - in time with God's rhythm for the Cosmos. I mean imagine an orchestra playing a great piece of music - with these sections where everything goes really quiet and all the instruments drop out. But imagine if the percussionist, on his giant kettle drums at the back, thought 'No, I can't stop, I've got to keep playing' and he keeps hitting those drums. What would you think? Er… that's not how the composer wrote it! But what the Sabbath tells us is that the person who can't put his or her work down is the same. It's not just that they're a slave to something, it's that they're also out of sync with their Creator. And the Sabbath is to help keep you in sync.

It's why, when Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees he says, v27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." As JC Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool, wrote, the Sabbath was given to us 'as a benefit and a blessing, not as a burden.'

You see, think what the Sabbath, and being able to put your work down says: you're free, you're not a slave. And your master is kind and you have nothing to prove to him, you can rest.

Which raises a question, doesn't it: why can we find it so hard to stop? And why do we feel this need to prove ourselves? And not just by our work. Why can we struggle with an inner restlessness?

Always Working

Now, if Jesus was on one side of this controversy, the Pharisees were on the other. And they see the disciples picking ears of grain and go, v24, "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

Now, nowhere does the Old Testament say that you shall not go for a walk with your friends and pick some ears of grain on the Sabbath. It says you shall not do any work, which being a farming community, included ploughing and reaping (Exodus 34:21). Because not even farmers were to be slaves.

And yet, the Pharisees were so keen to make sure no-one broke God's law that they fenced it. They created a whole list of rules further out to stop you getting anywhere near breaking the real one. So maybe you liked making clothes, well to stop you making a whole shirt on the Sabbath you couldn't sew more than one stitch. To stop you writing a book, you couldn't write more than one letter. And if harvesting was work, well, picking ears of grain is a type of harvesting, so picking ears of grain is work, so 'Jesus, why are you letting them do that?'

You see, if you were a Pharisee, how people behaved on the Sabbath was a litmus test.[2] A litmus test of whether you were one of us or not, whether you were acceptable or not. And when you think like that, you're always going to be on the look out, aren't you. Chapter 3:1-2, 'Again he [Jesus] 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.'

They want to find proof that Jesus really is what they suspect him to be: a Sabbath breaker. And so, in a synagogue, on the Sabbath, when they were supposed to gather to worship God and hear again from his word that they weren't slaves any more, something else is eating away at them. They're not working and yet… they're restless. They're on the alert.

When you're a doctor you take it in turns in the hospital to carry the cardiac arrest bleep. And you can be sat in the hospital canteen, having your lunch, or be sitting in the staff room reading a book, and to any outside observer you're not working, but inside, you're on edge, and you can't relax. Because you know that at any moment that bleep could go off: Cardiac arrest ward 19, and you're off and running.

And that was these Pharisees. Always on the alert. You see, it's not just workaholics or those who think they've got to prove themselves at work who struggle to rest. If you crave the acceptance or the affirmation of others, and you want to be 'in' and approved of, you're also going to struggle, you're going to be on edge. You'll always be evaluating how you're doing, and how others think you're doing, or what that person's comment really meant. Or, if you think your standing before God is based on what you do and don't do, you also won't be able to rest. Your moral performance - how good you are, how well you keep the rules - becomes your slave master.

And, you won't be able to let others rest. You'll be on the look out for law breakers - for those who don't match up to how you think they should behave. And you become both the judge and prosecuting attorney of others. And the problem is that over time, that does something to your heart. Verses 3-5, 'And he [Jesus] 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.'

Athanasius, the Church Father, wrote: 'If the man was withered in his hand, the ones who stood by were withered in their minds.' It's not just the man's hand that's withered, it's their hearts. And on

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[2] Witherington

the very day you'd hope to find compassion and the desire to set a man free from disability, and restore the order of the cosmos, you find hardness.

They've lost sight of what really matters. They're hyper alert, but they can't see a disabled man right in front of them. Because when you think you've got to prove yourself to God or to others, by what you do or don't do, by how moral you are, or how hard you work, or by what you own, or how attractive you are, or the political views you hold, your heart's going to wither. You're going to begin to lose sight of what really matters. You won't see a man with a withered hand, you'll just see an argument to be won. You won't have compassion on those less well off than you, you'll just see people who should work harder. You won't see people as friends, instead you'll begin to see them as competitors.

And the terrible irony of the ever watchful self-righteousness of the Pharisees, is that it actually makes you less righteous. Self-righteousness is always self-destructive. Look at Jesus' question again: v4, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" You see, who's really breaking the Sabbath? They're so intent on not letting anyone else break the Sabbath they end up breaking it themselves by plotting murder. They're so intent on making themselves righteous that they end up less righteous than before. Trying to make yourself right with God, and justify yourself and prove yourself to him, by what you do or don't do, always leaves you further away from him. Because it makes you proud and critical of others, and hardhearted.

And Jesus sees their hardness of heart, and Mark says he was angry and grieved. Angry because of what they've done to God's law. Angry at how sin has turned God's good world into one where withered hands are a reality. And angry at hard hearts that don't get angry at that. But not just angry. He's also grieved. Why? Because Jesus knows things could be so different.

The Lord of Rest

Go back to Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees in the field, and their challenge to him: 'Why are your disciples doing what they're not allowed to do on the Sabbath?' How would you have responded to that?

When you're facing some controversial issue, or you need to decide 'how should I respond here?' Where do you go to help you resolve that? What's that guiding authority in your life? Because it could be your feelings: "listen, they're hungry, and if it's not hurting anyone else, and they feel like that, it's fine." It could be your favourite political commentator, or the latest thing that's gone viral, 'Well, so and so says it doesn't matter what you do on the Sabbath. And they must be right' Or, you could be your own authority: "hey, this is my life, and no one else has the right to tell me - or them - what we can and cannot do.'

But look what Jesus does. He takes them to the Bible, because he knows that's an authority more stable than our feelings, with a wisdom that's tried and tested beyond any current cultural zeitgeist. Verses 25-26: "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 every Sabbath the priests would put out 12 loaves of bread in the Tabernacle and then the Temple. And at the end of the week, those loaves would be removed and fresh bread put in their

place, and the priests got to eat what was taken away. So, when David and his men were fleeing Saul, and in their hunger took and ate that bread, they were doing something only priests could do - and they weren't priests. But that basic human need - hunger - over-rode the law.

And yet, here, there's no indication Jesus's disciples are hungry, they're just casually picking grain as they go for a walk. So what point is Jesus making? It's that one like David is here. He's saying that just as David being present changed the way the priests applied the law, so the fact that he, Jesus, was present should fundamentally change the way these Pharisees see the law.

Now, for a carpenter turned travelling rabbi to claim to be equal to Israel's greatest king, David, is one thing. But the next thing he says makes that look like nothing. Verse 28, "The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." Now think about that. Who instituted the Sabbath by taking the first Sabbath? God did. And the Sabbath was one of *the* markers of what it meant to be a member of God's people, and Jesus is saying, 'I'm the Lord of the Sabbath. I'm the one who instituted it. I'm the one who defines what it means to be a member of God's people, because I'm the one who sets you free from slavery and brings you rest.'

And in the synagogue, on the Sabbath, Jesus asks the man with the withered hand to stand. And again, Jesus asks them, v4, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" And yet, this man's life is not in danger is it? He's not going to die overnight of a withered hand. There's no life to be saved here. So why say, "To save life or to kill?" Because that's what these religious leaders are plotting, to kill Jesus.

And Jesus tells the man, v5, "Stretch out your hand." And the very thing he couldn't do, as he responds to Jesus' command, he can do. As Mark says, v5, "He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." Because Jesus has come to restore what's withered. He's come to make whole what's broken. And sometimes, to be a part of that, we simply have to obey him, even if like this man it seems impossible.

But, v6, 'The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.' And in Jesus' trial and crucifixion, it seemed like they'd achieved their goal, job done. But what the writer of Hebrews tells us is that through Jesus' work on the cross it's our job that's done. That it's in his destruction that we find healing. It's in his death that we can find life. It's through his work that we find rest. Hebrews 4:9, 'There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.'

You see, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath because it's in him that you can rest from your works. You can put down your striving to earn God's approval, because Jesus has already won it for you. And you can find rest from that anxiety of never knowing if you're good enough, because at the cross Jesus absorbed the anger of God for our not being good enough, for our sin and hardness of heart and missing what's most important. And we can put down our restless trying to prove ourselves to ourselves or others, because we know that in Jesus we are already loved and approved of. And we can put down our ever watchful judgementalism of others - because we know he has shown us grace, so we can show others grace.

He’s the Lord of the Sabbath, and in him we can find rest and freedom. Freedom from the slavery of needing to prove ourselves. Freedom from the slavery of always having to have more. Freedom from the self destructiveness of self righteousness.

And as you know that inner rest, you’ll also be able to rest physically, to stop and take a Sabbath - a Sabbath that’s a blessing, not a burden. A Sabbath of restoration, not rules. Psalm 46 says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Be still, stop, put your work down, rest - and know, experience the fact that Christ’s work for you is complete, there’s nothing more for you to do. You’re free, you’re healed and whole in him and your future is safe in his hands.