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

We're looking at some of the saying and actions of Jesus that were controversial in his day.

And there's a reason for doing this. When you sit down with a young couple and help prepare them for marriage, one of the things you want to make sure is that they're not marrying an idealised version of the real person, or in the hope that they're going to become someone different. Now, sure, you always marry a stranger, because marriage always changes you, but if you're going to commit yourself to someone, you need to know who it is you're committing yourself to.

And the Christian faith is a commitment to Christ. And that means that if you're going to pledge your life to follow him, you've got to understand who he says he is.

And today, we're looking at two episodes in Mark's Gospel that Ben read to us. And Mark brought them together because they're both to do with the Sabbath. But what Jesus does and says results in rational, presumably intelligent people, wanting to see him destroyed. Why such a strong reaction?

Well, we're going to look at three things: firstly, two ways that will never bring you rest; secondly, what Jesus says about rest; and thirdly, how Jesus brings you rest.

Two ways that will never bring you rest
Now, religions tend to venerate various places as special don't they. Various primitive religions view a mountain or source of a river as holy; Islam has mecca, Hinduism has the Ganges, and Judaism has Jerusalem. But at least as much as a place, the Jewish people venerated a day, the Sabbath. And along with circumcision, it was keeping the Sabbath that set them apart from the nations. It was no.4 in the ten commandments, rooted in creation and the divine order of the universe, and you broke it at your peril.

And the Pharisees, the religious conservatives, were determined to uphold it. And so they fenced the law about the Sabbath with no less than 39 types of work that you couldn't do on the Sabbath to make sure you didn't break it. Like hunting, or plowing, or tying and untying knots. And you couldn't sew more than one stitch or write more than one letter. And you couldn't reap grain.

So when the Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples picking heads of grain as they walk with Jesus, their response is, 'you're harvesting, you're reaping, you're breaking the Sabbath.'

But it's also clear that it was the Pharisees who were watching Jesus in the synagogue to see if he would heal on the Sabbath, and who responded so negatively when he did. And when Jesus observes their attitude Mark tells us, v5, he 'looked around at them with anger.'

Now, why does Jesus get angry with people who were clearly highly moral, religiously committed and zealous, with a high view of the Bible? Because v5, he was 'grieved at their hardness of heart.'

In other words, their desire to obey the rules, and make sure others did too, led to their hearts being as clamped shut, as withered, as atrophied as the man's hand.

And that's the danger of religion, isn't it? You think that to be acceptable to God you have to obey the rules and follow the moral code. And it's about an outward conformity, not an inner transformation. And the problem is that results in self-righteousness, because you're sure that you're right and others are wrong; and you look down on those who don't conform. You view them as outsiders, as unacceptable. And so it makes you tribal and sectarian.

But rule keeping religion also makes you restless. Restless about your own life, because you can't rest: you've got to 'do', or make sure you're 'not doing', to be acceptable. And how can you ever know you've done enough, or been zealous, or committed, or passionate enough? And so even the day of rest becomes a day of performing: things you've got to do or not do. But it also makes you restless about others' lives: you become watchful, alert, judgmental of others who you think are breaking the rules, or are not being zealous or passionate enough.

And yet, it's not just the religious people that oppose Jesus. He proved just as controversial to the irreligious. Look at v6, 'The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.'

And the Herodians were supporters of King Herod and his desire to Hellenize the Jewish people, to make them more Greek. And they collaborated with the Romans. So, if the Pharisees were the traditionalists, the Herodians were the progressives. If the Pharisees were the religious, the Herodians were the secular; relativists prepared to compromise religious convictions or long held cultural moral principles to succeed.

For the Pharisees life was about obeying the rules, for the Herodians life was about playing the rules, catching the wave, deciding for yourself what's right and wrong, so that you can get out of life what you want. The Pharisees were tied to tradition, the Herodians wanted what was new.

But that can't give you rest either, because it's just as much about performance as the way of the Pharisees. You see the secular way of life is still about how you measure up, how you succeed, how good you are, how you conform - it's just it's the morality of the world you've got to conform to.

And both the Pharisees and the Herodians saw Jesus as a threat. Mark tells us they both wanted him destroyed. And what provokes that is what Jesus has to say about the Sabbath.

What Jesus Says About Rest

Now, before we look at what Jesus says about himself, look what he says about the Sabbath: v27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." And then, v4, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

So Jesus is saying that all along, the Sabbath was intended for man's restoration, for his renewal, for his healing, for his being put back together again. Not for him to be burdened by a list of rules.

And in Genesis chapter 2 we're told that after his work of creation, God rested on the seventh day, and blessed the seventh day, and made it holy. He set it apart, as a day of rest for humanity. That because God rested Adam could rest, one day a week. That he was to rest like his Heavenly Father rested. As Sinclair Ferguson says, instead of endlessly working the garden, Adam could spend a day a week walking with his Father in the garden. That every Sabbath was Father's Day.

But Adam wanted to choose for himself what was right and wrong. He wanted to establish his own identity, his own significance apart from God. And the problem is that always results in restlessness, in a never-ending treadmill of trying. And so the Sabbath became a rule, rather than a delight; a command, 'put down your work'; a day to rest from outward working, but also a day to rest from internal working. A day to recognise and remind yourself, I'm not self-sufficient. A day to rest from thinking 'I've got to work to achieve significance.'

I read a letter in a national newspaper last week commenting on the kind of thing you've probably heard of trying to keep hold of some of the good things we've learnt in lockdown. And the writer said, 'I agree. In fact, we used to have lockdown once a week, it was called Sunday.'

And Jesus says, the Sabbath, the day of rest, was made for man, not man for the sabbath. A day not of rules but of reminding and rejoicing and resting in finding our wholeness, our worth, our significance in God, and not in our doing.

Now if saying that about the Sabbath may have antagonised the Pharisees, what he says about himself is in another league.

Now, mentioning no names, but various politicians get into trouble when they compare themselves favourably to great historical figures. Well, here Jesus starts by comparing himself to King David, Israel's greatest king. And when the Pharisees criticise him for allowing his disciples to pick heads of grain, he reminds them that David once took the 12 loaves, put out in the temple every Sabbath, to feed his men. And at one level you might say, 'well, Jesus is simply saying, if David could break the law, so can I.' Except think who David was and think who Jesus is. Jesus was a carpenter, a travelling rabbi who'd never been to seminary. David was Israel's greatest king, hailed by psalms and prophets as the prototype of the Messiah, *the* great king who would come and deliver his people. And Jesus, is saying "I am like David; more than that David was simply setting a precedent, he was just the forerunner, the foretaste of who I am and what I have come to do."

And think, what argument, what authority does Jesus give for doing what David did, or for overturning centuries of rabbinic understanding of how you behaved on the Sabbath? Answer: Himself.

Look at v 28, "The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." And the Son of Man is Jesus' favourite title for himself. So think what he's saying. The Sabbath had been instituted and ordained by God. And here is Jesus claiming to be the supreme authority over the Sabbath. It was the Sabbath that that identified the Jewish people as God's people, distinct from everyone else. And Jesus is saying, 'I'm Lord over that.' Honouring the Sabbath was Ten Commandment no.4. and Jesus is saying, 'I'm Lord over the Law.' The Sabbath remembered how God rested from his work, and Jesus is saying I'm Lord over God's resting. That's him saying, 'when God rested it was me who was resting.' So Jesus isn't simply claiming to be equal to David, incredible as that would be. He's claiming to be the One who ordains and defines the Sabbath; the One who created the heavens and the earth and rested that first Sabbath; that He's not just another king, but that he is the long promised King: King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

No wonder both the Pharisees and the Herodians wanted to destroy him: he threatens the world view of both the religious and the irreligious, both those who think you've got to obey the rules and those who want to make their own rules.

And yet, he's saying something else as well.

Christ the Giver of Rest

You see, what Jesus doesn't say is simply "I am Lord *over* the Sabbath." He says, 'I'm Lord *of* the Sabbath .' I'm the Lord, I'm the source of the rest you need, that deep inner rest that means you can put down your work because you know you have nothing to prove. The source of that rest from constantly striving for significance or trying to find your worth. I'm the source of the joy and the deep emotional security of Father's Day, of walking with God in the garden, of knowing you are loved and accepted by your heavenly Father, regardless of your performance. He's saying, 'It's in me that you'll find the restoration, the renewal, the healing, the being-put-back-together that your heart and soul needs. It's in me that you'll find rest from those seemingly endless comparisons you make of yourself with others. And it's in me that you'll find rest from your critical watchfulness of others.'

It's why in Matthew 11:28 Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." It's why the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 4 that Jesus brings a rest that neither Moses nor Joshua could give, that nothing in this world's Promised lands can offer, because they're only a foretaste of the greater rest Jesus offers us now and we'll know in all it's fullness in eternity.

You see, we can work ourselves to the bone, trying to prove something to ourselves or to others. And some of us are experts at that! And we can work religiously, praying, reading the Bible, going to church, being passionate, to try and win favour with God. But when it comes to rest, you rest either because you're tired and you recognise you need to rest, or because you can sit back and say, job done, it's finished, can't improve on that.

And at creation God rested, not because he was tired but because he could say, it's very good, it's finished. And at the cross, once again, God cried out "It is finished!" as Jesus did all that was necessary and perfectly finished the work that means we can put down all our striving, all our working, all our restlessness. Because he's done everything to make us acceptable to God, to win us God's endless favour, to secure our worth and our significance and it cannot be improved on. You have nothing left to prove. And it's knowing the "It it finished!" of Jesus that means you can rest.

So… if you are not yet a Christian, you have a decision to make. Look at this man Jesus, and ask yourself, is he who he says he is? Is he Lord of the Sabbath? You see, you can find plenty of great religious leaders who will give you a list of things to do to make yourself acceptable to God. Only Jesus says, I have done it all, come to me and I will give you rest.

And look at the man with the withered hand that Sabbath morning. He also had a choice didn't he? Just like you, Jesus called him to come to him; to be restored and made whole. It's what the Sabbath is all about. But if that man had been more concerned about what people around him thought, he would have stayed in his place, and he'd never have experienced wholeness. His choice was to stay broken or risk the public scorn that might come with following Christ. But he chose right. He trusted Christ, he stood up, went to him and left that synagogue whole. And the same can be true of you.

But Christian or non-Christian, survey your life at the moment. Where are you working away? Where are you restless, trying to prove yourself?

Is it your work? That drive to prove yourself to yourself, or to others, by your work, or your reputation at work. The drive to earn or have more. The problem is, there's always something more to do or have, isn't there? And there's always a competitor, someone you fear might be doing it better. So you can't rest, you can't put it down, because to feel ok you need to know you're coming out on top.

Is it in your family? - and you'll feel like you're doing ok if the kids are succeeding, or everything is in order, and so you're restless and you make others restless, you won't let your wife, or your husband, or your kids rest because deep down you think you need your kids to succeed academically, or your family to be perfect, to say to yourself and others, 'I'm ok'.

Is it religion? And you are passionate for God, you're zealous for him. But deep down you're insecure, you're not sure God loves you, because you're only as accepted and loved as your last fervent prayer, or attempt to witness, or meaningful quiet time.

Is it your physical image? And it keeps gnawing away at you. There are the diets and the exercise and the supplements and the frequent looks in the mirror. There's a restlessness about how you see yourself. And you can't rest because you can't feel ok about yourself because in comparison to others, you're just not there yet.

You know, the hard truth is, these things will never give you the inner security, that inner sense that you are ok, that deep inner rest. But the great truth is that Christ can. Because he has finished the work for you and he tells you, you are loved and accepted by God your father and it has nothing to do with your performance. Because he's the Lord of the Sabbath.

But one last thing. The Sabbath rest that Jesus offers is not a charter for slackers and sloths, is it? One of the reasons we can be lazy is not that we *don't* care, but that we care far too much about ourselves and our comfort, so we won't let ourselves be stretched or pulled out of ourselves by the glory of God and the needs of others.

But when you know that Christ is Lord of the Sabbath and that he gave everything for you, and because of him you have a deep rest, it frees you to takes your eyes off yourself and your comfort and instead you can go work your socks off for his glory and others good, and then rest contentedly knowing that God doesn't love you any more or any less because you did.