

# What is Lawful on the Sabbath?

## Mark 2:23-3:6

### Introduction

Yosemite Sam was one of my childhood heroes. He was an animated character in the Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies short films produced by Warner Brothers and was, along with Donald Duck, an adversary of Bugs Bunny. Sam would go on to star in such feature films as Space Jam and Who Framed Roger Rabbit.

One of Sam's frequent lines was:

Thems fightin' words, Rabbit.

In our text today we read some "fightin' words," although they probably didn't sound all that threatening as I read them to you just now. You might have even missed them. Here they are again:

One Sabbath ... (Mark 2:23)

In Mark's Gospel, "thems fightin' words." Almost every skirmish Jesus has with religious leaders, happens on the Sabbath. For example:

- In chapter 1, Jesus drives out demons on the Sabbath.
- In chapter 6, Jesus preaches a Sabbath day sermon in His hometown that those same religious leaders found to be offensive.
- Here in today's reading, we hear about two different Sabbath days and two different combative interactions.
  - So, it is on the Sabbath that Jesus is challenging those religious leaders ABOUT THE SABBATH!

In the minds of the Jewish leaders, Jesus was using this holy day for no other reason than to pick a fight with them. He was intentionally trying to make them look bad.

- And you can sort of see their point. Look again at what happens in the text. Jesus goes to church. He meets a man with a shriveled hand and says to that man:

"Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked (the religious leaders), "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. (Mark 3:3-4)

Their silence was deadly – quite literally – for the text concludes:

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mark 3:6)

You see, "thems fightin' words."



Today I conclude a four-week sermon series that has looked at some of the “Great Questions” of the Bible. Over these weeks we have seen ...

- The challenge of the angels on Ascension Sunday: “Why are you still looking into the sky?” (And not doing what He told you to do.)
- The confusion of the crowds on Pentecost when they heard the once-frightened disciples boldly proclaiming the Gospel in languages they did not know. “What does this mean?”
- The calling of God to a young man named Isaiah “Who will we send?”

Today is a practical application question. As good Lutherans we know the third commandment teaches us to:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Over time, the Pharisees created a host of guidelines to help the Israelites know what qualified as work and what was necessary to “remember” the Sabbath.

- Those guidelines, as such things often do, eventually became laws.
- And those laws, as such things often so, became more important than the commandment they were trying to describe.
- By the time of Jesus, if you accidentally broke one of those additional laws, you could get off by paying a fine.
- If you intentionally broke it, it was a capital crime punishable by death.
  - NOT THE COMMANDMENT, BUT THE GUIDELINE!!

And so, it worked out like this:

- If God healed you on the Sabbath, it was OK.
- If the doctor did it – and if it was not a life-or-death issue, that was not OK. He should have waited until the Sabbath was over. Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.
- Now get this: For most Pharisees you weren't even permitted to pray for someone's healing on the Sabbath – lest it might actually happen. Because who was responsible for the healing? God? Or you because you prayed?
- You are better off to pray the other six days, but not on the Sabbath. (That's what they said.)

It was into this mess of theology that Jesus raises today's question: “What can I do on the Sabbath?” In our text Jesus offers **two insights**.

### **INSIGHT #1: THE SABBATH IS A GIFT FROM GOD**

In our text Jesus reminds those Pharisees about the order in which things were created. People were created first. The Sabbath wasn't created for several hundreds afterward.

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

By all of their guidelines that became rules, the Sabbath became just another burden for the people to carry.

- To the Pharisees way of thinking, God had this special day, and He needed people to make it special.

But Jesus says "No, no, no." The correct way to think about it is that God had a people, and in His great wisdom He knew we needed a day.

As a part of my Master of Divinity degree, I took a course in Clinical Pastoral Education offered through the Kettering Medical Center. In essence I was a student chaplain for a semester. If you weren't aware, Kettering is a Seventh Day Adventist hospital. Seventh Day Adventist worship on the traditional Jewish Sabbath – Saturday, for us.

Our Seventh Day Adventist friends have a lot to teach us about the importance of a day. Whether you honor that day on Saturday or Sunday, it is important for a number of reasons – many of them health related – to honor a Sabbath. These reasons are valuable to us in the Lutheran tradition, too.

What does this gift of God teach us?

1. You are more important than what you do or what you produce.
2. You are reminded that you do not need to be enslaved by the expectations of others.
3. You have time to assess, refocus and be present in the world God created.
4. Your relationships and communities will be strengthened.
5. Your mind refreshed so that you can have a greater connection to God.
6. Your prayer life will improve.
7. Your study of the Scriptures will be more fruitful.
8. You will have less stress.

Keeping the Sabbath means treating it like a gift from someone who loves you. Anything that turns it into a burden is contrary to God's intent. All the rules and worries about what you can and cannot do on the Sabbath, miss the point of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is not a burden; it is a gift.

## **INSIGHT #2: THE SABBATH PRIORITIZES THE AGENDA OF GOD**

When Jesus calls the man with the shriveled hand forward, He makes this point very clear:

"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. (Mark 3:4)

In other words, Jesus says to the people in church that day:

What do you think God would like to see done?

A generation ago, we wore these little bracelets with the letters WWJD on them. What would Jesus do?

- Jesus, in essence, asks the congregation WWGD. What would God do in this moment? How can the kingdom of God be advanced right now on this day?

Eugene Peterson writes:

Sabbath is that uncluttered time and space in which we can distance ourselves from our own activities enough to see what God is doing. (Eugene Peterson)

And then, once we see it, we are invited to join in and do it too.

It's probably the same at your house, but at our house a frequent question is this:

What would you like to do today?

What if the first question in our minds when the alarm goes off on Sunday morning – assuming you set one – would be this same question. God, what would you like to do today?

- Not “what do I have to do today?”
- But “what would God like to do today?”
  - That's a Sabbath focused question.

On the Sabbath in our text, Jesus wanted everyone to take note of what God wanted to do in regard to that man with the shriveled hand. Jesus could have healed him quietly, but He called the man front and center and made sure everyone saw it.

- Our text tells us the reaction of the Pharisees. They plotted to kill him.
- But if we would have read one verse further, we would have seen that the reaction of the rest of the people was drastically different. A large crowd followed him ... and brought to Jesus all their friends and family members who were sick and demon-possessed.
  - They saw God at work in that moment!

Keeping the Sabbath opens the possibilities for God to be work in your life and through your life.

### **INSIGHT #3: JESUS KEPT THE SABBATH**

Jesus doesn't teach this third insight with words. He does it with actions. And if the Son of God needed the Sabbath, maybe we should recognize that we need it too.

## APPLICATION

Writer Rob Bell says:

“Sabbath is taking a day a week to remind myself that I did not make the world and that it will continue to exist without my efforts. Sabbath is a day when my work is done, even if it isn't. Sabbath is a day when my job is to enjoy. Period. Sabbath is a day when I am fully available to myself and those I love most. Sabbath is a day when I remember that when God made the world, he saw that it was good. Sabbath is a day when I produce nothing. Sabbath is a day when I remind myself that I am not a machine. Sabbath is a day when at the end I say, 'I didn't do anything today,' and I don't add, 'And I feel guilty.' (Rob Bell)

Have a great day. A Sabbath day.

Amen.