

# Mark 2:23-3:12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Mark chapter 2 verse 23 to chapter 3 verse 12. And he said to them, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Again he 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.

And he 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, and said to the man, Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea. And a great crowd followed from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon.

[ 1 : 33 ] When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him. For he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him.

And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, You are the Son of God. And he strictly ordered them not to make him known. The conclusion of Mark 2 and the beginning of Mark 3 continue and conclude the sequence of events begun with the healing of the paralytic at the beginning of Mark 2.

While Jesus' power, the problems of his rising fame, and the secret of his messianic identity were forefront in chapter 1, chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 begin a series of controversies.

These controversies are about specific issues. The forgiveness of sins, eating with tax collectors and sinners, fasting and not fasting, picking the grain on the Sabbath day, and healing on the Sabbath.

Sin and forgiveness is a common theme of the first two controversies. Eating is a common theme of the second to the fourth. And Sabbath is the common theme of the fourth and the fifth.

[ 2 : 41 ] While there are unifying themes of controversy, there is a deeper issue beneath the surface throughout, which is the identity of Jesus. He is the Son of Man who forgives sins. He is the Bridegroom who has come to his people.

He is the New David. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. Within the controversies then, we are getting a clearer picture of who Jesus is. Jesus' actions on the Sabbath demonstrate that he is the one who gives rest.

This is the true intent of the Sabbath. And the Sabbath stories are easily misunderstood as Jesus presenting some casuistic understanding of what the Sabbath law required in a way that circumvents something of the purpose of the law.

That's not what's going on. Rather, Jesus is revealing the purpose of the law, what it was all about, and his fulfilment of it. He's not just trumping the law with his authority.

He's fulfilling it. The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field, as a form of gleaning. The issue was that they were doing so on the Sabbath, when what they were doing would count as work.

[ 3 : 41 ] And so Jesus is questioned concerning the behaviour of his disciples, for whom he is expected to bear some responsibility. And he gives the example of David in response to the objection of the Pharisees.

In 1 Samuel chapter 21 verses 1 to 7, David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the showbread, which was usually restricted for the priests. They would offer it one week, and then at

the end of the week, they would be able to eat it.

And in these circumstances, the hunger of David and his men took precedence.

But it seems that there's something more going on here. It's not just that they were hungry. It's the fact that they were under David's leadership. Jesus is exploring the relationship between him and his disciples, and David and his men.

Jesus is the greater David, who has the prerogative to determine in this instance. His men are like David's men. They are committed to a mission of God, and the demands of that mission take priority over the strict requirements of the Sabbath law.

[ 4 : 47 ] In the parallel passage of Matthew 12, Jesus also points out the work of the priests isn't counted a Sabbath-breaking work, because it's in service of the temple, and Jesus is one who is greater than the temple.

The Sabbath was made to give rest to man, not to subject man to bondage. And the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to. Mark records Jesus saying that this occurred in the time of Abiath the priest, who was actually a Himelech's son, and various explanations have been advanced to account for this seeming inaccuracy.

My inclination is to say that Abiath is mentioned because he was the more prominent than his father, and Jesus wanted to evoke the larger story of David and the role that Abiath played for David in the coup of Absalom, which would help to explain further his mission and the relationship between him and the people who were challenging him.

In Jesus' response to the challenge to the actions of his disciples in the grain fields, he makes an analogy depending upon David and his followers, aligning himself with David.

[ 5 : 52 ] The argument that Jesus is presenting then depends in large measure upon the authority of him as the leader of his men. He presents himself as the eschatological Son of Man again, and as the Lord of the Sabbath as such.

Jesus moves from the more general point about the Sabbath being for man, to the greater point of the Son of Man being the Lord of the Sabbath. It might be worth considering here the way that the Son of Man is also a corporate figure in Daniel chapter 7, not just an individual, but a representative of the people.

Jesus is the Son of Man as the Messiah, and his people also participate in this. David leads his men, and as his men share in the authority of his mission, they can enjoy a similar prerogative, a prerogative that means that their needs can take priority over the law of the tabernacle, and in this case, of the Sabbath.

Jesus is the eschatological Son of Man, the one who establishes the original purpose of the Sabbath, in its great fulfilment in the last days. Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.

Although the man isn't in urgent need, Jesus gives rest on the Sabbath, which fulfils again the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath. Sabbath keeping is about giving life and healing, not about laying burdens upon people.

[ 7 : 15 ] Perhaps we're supposed to hear the story of the withering and the restoring of Jeroboam's hand in 1 Kings chapter 13, behind the story here. Jeroboam's hand was withered because of false worship, and then it's restored to him in an act of grace.

Our passage ends with a section that exhibits many of the things that we've seen so far, and so serves as a fitting culminating expression of its themes. Jesus needs to withdraw from the huge crowds that are gathering around him.

They're falling upon him, pressing upon him. And the extreme response to his presence, people are just trying to touch him to be healed. And this response is found not just from the crowds, but also from the demons who are falling down before him.

Jesus displays great power in his healings and in his exorcisms. His ministry is characterised by an activity and an urgency and a speed and immediacy.

As we study Mark, we should get a sense of Jesus as the king, the one who's moving from place to place, the one who's engaged in a sort of military campaign against the forces of the evil one, the one who's bringing salvation and healing wherever he goes, the one who's drawing these great crowds and rising in his fame.

[ 8 : 27 ] Jesus is a new David. He's the eschatological son of man. He's the Lord of the Sabbath, and he's the one who can forgive sins. A question to consider.

Jesus' teaching and practice concerning the Sabbath maybe suggests the Sabbath being thought of less as a command that people are subject to and under than as a mission to complete. Jesus is the one who gives the rest of the Sabbath to people. Jesus is the one who is the Lord of the Sabbath, whose mission is a sabbatical mission. How might our practice as Christians be reformed as we think about the Sabbath in this particular way?