

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 05/26/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, June 2nd	Mark 2:23-3:6
------------------	---------------

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Lord of the Sabbath

Following Pentecost and Trinity Sundays, the lectionary during this Time after Pentecost reverts to a semi-continuous study of Mark's Gospel. In this week's lectionary text, Jesus becomes embroiled in a conflict with the Pharisees that will define His ministry and ultimately cost Him His life. What is the root cause of the problem and does such a problem manifest in our time?

Mark 2:23-3:6

The text forms part of Jesus' early Galilean ministry (1:16-3:12), itself a part of a larger block of text demonstrating Jesus' authority (1:16-8:26). Within Jesus' early Galilean ministry the antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees, scribes, and the Herodians begins. This antagonism will eventually lead to Jesus' death.

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

Many suggest the disciples here were gleaning. A definition of such is found in Leviticus 19:9-10:

⁹ "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. ¹⁰ And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

Luke's account provides a little more context to this verse which helps us to understand what was happening here.

⁶ On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands.

The disciples were not simply harvesting heads of wheat but were removing the grains and eating them on the spot. This then does not constitute gleaning. The disciples were not collecting the heads of grain and taking such away with them. Deuteronomy 23:24-25 provides additional insight:

²⁴ *"If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. ²⁵ If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.*

This text allows people to feed themselves while traveling by eating one's fill from a field but not using any harvesting tools or taking any excess with them. The disciples were not gleaning but merely eating.

Some argue that the grains would be immature and not ready for harvest since the human gut cannot digest matured grains, but immature grains are softer and are a source of protein and sugars.

²⁴ *And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"*

The work of harvesting, which, by definition, gleaning would have constituted, is clearly not allowed under the Law:

"Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest" [Exodus 34:21].

What appears to be the problem is the scribal interpretation of the Law in which work was so narrowly defined. To the legalism of the Pharisees, the disciples were breaking their Law by working on the Sabbath.

Jesus responded as follows:

²⁵ *And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: ²⁶ 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?"*

During the old covenant, on a table in the Holy Place of the Jerusalem temple sat the "consecrated bread"—also known as "showbread" or "bread of the Presence." Ordinarily, this bread was reserved for the priests alone (Lev. 24:5–9). Yet Jesus points out a well-known incident of how the non-priest David and his soldiers were permitted to eat it. Jesus' reference here is to 1 Samuel 21:1–6, which records an account of when David, the anointed king, was running for his life from Saul and how he received the showbread and gave this temple bread to his followers. Jesus was the anointed Messianic King.

In Matthew's parallel account, Jesus argued:

⁵ *Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.* [Matthew 12:5-6]

Priests work on the sabbath and yet are guiltless. Jesus is greater than the temple.

²⁷ *And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."*

Jesus correctly interprets the role of the Sabbath and how He is Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was intended for humanity's nurture and well-being not for its enslavement. Jesus puts forth the principle that God gave the sabbath to help people—not to arbitrarily restrict their activities. By abstaining from work on the sabbath, people keep it holy (a service to God), but also gain a day of rest (a service to themselves and their families). The scribes

and Pharisees had completely missed the intended purpose of the Sabbath and had elevated their interpretation of the Law over the will of God.

The next passage includes a separate event occurring on the Sabbath where it appears the same scribes and Pharisees observe Jesus' behavior through the lens of their legalistic tradition.

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." 4 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. 5 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.

Here Jesus healing on the Sabbath was the issue. Again, the scribal interpretation of the Law defined precisely what kind of health care was allowed to be provided on the Sabbath. Healing this man was outside of the scope since it was not a life-threatening emergency. To Jesus' question, the scribes and Pharisees remain silent. They would advocate a third option: Wait until the sabbath is ended. Honor God on the Sabbath and heal this man on the next day. Where is the urgency? Surely a few more hours would not make a difference.

Jesus was angry and grieved. How could such men who exercised so much power over the community lack compassion? How could those responsible for interpreting God's Law misunderstand God's will?

We perhaps miss the faith and courage of the man here. While all he needed to do was stretch out his hand, by doing such he had sided with Jesus and thus gone against those in power who he would have to live with each day. If he had no faith here, would he have demonstrated such courage?

6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

The miracle of healing is of no consequence. Jesus challenged the authority and understanding of the Pharisees. This affront is enough for them to seek out their political enemies, those who support the Jewish puppet king Herod, to help them get rid of Jesus so they could continue to enjoy their privileged status. In the end they would remove Jesus, but it would be Jesus who emerged victorious from the grave.

Reflection and Application

If the purpose of the Sabbath is to honor God, and experience rest and not to follow a set of detailed human rules, how is it that many of the expressions of church continue to follow a set of narrowly defined expectations for what constitutes appropriate behavior on the Sabbath? Furthermore, if the purpose of the Sabbath is to benefit humankind, why do Christians so engage in a society that treats all seven days of the week as almost identical?

It is ironic how the first full day of Adam's life was a Sabbath but just look at how difficult it is today in a 24/7 culture to gain real Sabbath rest and honor God appropriately on the Sabbath.

What intentional practices can be instituted to ensure we keep the Sabbath holy? One thing is for sure, we do not need a list of rules.