

## **“A Holy Sabbath”**

Mark 2:23-3:6

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### **Some of Our Laws**

Some time back, Readers' Digest compiled the strangest laws from around the country.<sup>1</sup> Here are a few of my favorites:

In Connecticut, “a pickle cannot be sold unless it bounces... when dropped from the height of one foot.”

In Iowa, “any person who attempts to pass off margarine... as real butter is guilty of a simple misdemeanor... punishable by up to 30 days in jail and a \$625 fine.”

In Topeka, Kansas, “it is unlawful to ‘throw any stones, snowballs, or any other missiles.’”

In University City, Missouri, “it is illegal to ‘swing upon’ another person’s motor vehicle and honk their horn for them.”

“In Oklahoma it is illegal to promote, engage in, or be employed by a “horse tripping” event. Also, it is unlawful to wrestle a bear.”

“Vermont passed a law just to say there would never be a law prohibiting the use of clotheslines.”

I am the sort of person who loves rules and guidelines and orderliness -- you might say I'm a Stickler for such things. We have a lot of laws in this country that I can wholeheartedly support. Drinking and driving should be illegal. Stealing or damaging someone else's property should have consequences. Hurting another person or putting their safety in jeopardy is definitely wrong.

But these laws seem pretty ridiculous to me. In my estimation, they seem unnecessary. Do our pickles really require legislation? How is throwing a snowball in the same category as throwing a missile? Is there really a big problem of people trying to pass off margarine for butter? And do we really need a law against bear wrestling? That seems like the sort of thing that would work itself out pretty quickly.

Sometimes in life, we live under laws we understand and support. Other times, the rules might be harder to understand or agree to. That's sort of the situation we have in today's passage. Two different groups are at odds - not about what the law *is*, but about what the law *means* and to whom the law applies.

### **The Sabbath**

We're looking at two separate, but related stories today. In every Bible, there is a chapter break between them. Depending on what kind of Bible you have, these might

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rd.com/funny-stuff/dumbest-laws-america/>

look like two separate sections with separate section headings, or they may be put together as one unit. There are some mildly interesting arguments for both options of formatting, but they're largely unimportant for our purposes today. Our main focus is that we have two stories of Jesus doing things on the Sabbath that the religious leaders think ought not to be done on the Sabbath.

So let's start with the Sabbath. If you've spent much time in church, you've probably heard a sermon or been to a Bible study about Sabbath. If you're of a certain age, you will remember the blue laws which restricted what kinds of stores would be open on a Sunday. Depending on your upbringing, you have grown up in a home where you didn't mow the lawn or go to the movies on a Sunday. From talking with a number of you throughout the past week, my suspicion is that however many people we have in this room (or listening online), we have the exact same number of ideas about exactly what Sabbath is and how it should be observed. Today, there is not one definite answer about what Sabbath looks like, and it seems like there never has been.

The earliest instructions about the Sabbath come from Moses, who on behalf of God, told the people to "remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." (Exodus 20:8) At that point, the people don't get a whole lot of instructions. The only thing that is particularly clear in Exodus is that Sabbath matters a lot to God, and every seventh day he wants his people to rest from their work in order to remember who God is and that God is the source of their holiness. This is a beautiful concept designed by God. But as is so often the case, when I read these parts of the Bible, I end up with more questions than answers. I wish God had spelled out exactly what a Sabbath should look like for all people at all times. But that's not what we get; we just have the instruction to observe the Sabbath and maintain holiness. Holy just means "set apart." There are a whole lot of ways that one might keep a day holy. And so quite naturally, as time goes on the people and their leaders develop an increasing number of rules and regulations and routines around the concept of Sabbath.

Sometimes Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders get a really bad reputation in Christian interpretation. I'd like to give them the benefit of the doubt for now. I don't think that any of them were trying to make the Sabbath a chore or had the desire to over-complicate things. I believe they were well intentioned people who got a little carried away with their rules. This makes sense to me, because I did the exact same thing a few weeks ago. At our new house, Josh and I have a massive fire pit in the backyard. It's probably 8 feet across. A few days before Christmas, we built our first fire so that we and our 7 year olds could roast hot dogs and make smores. The kids played in the yard while we got the fire going. When they joined us, my "rules" started out as a short and sweet list -- don't touch the fire.

Then, as the kids got excited, the potential dangers became more and more obvious. Suddenly I was telling them, "don't walk *through* the fire pit, walk *around* it" and "I don't want you running or jumping on the rocks around the fire pit" and "don't push those logs over with your stick" and "okay, you can set the stick on fire, but then leave it in the fire, don't shove it at your sister" and on and on and on. The rules got more complex every time I opened my mouth. My main concept stayed the same -- I didn't want our kids to get burnt. But the longer they were around the fire, the more ways I saw that they could trip or fall or have an accident. It wasn't just about not touching the

fire; it quickly became about not being anywhere close enough to potentially get hurt. Although I didn't do it, there was a part of me that was tempted to say, "just stay away from the fire, in fact, go sit inside. I'll cook the food and bring it to you."

That's exactly what the religious leaders were doing with their Sabbath regulations. They were so concerned about keeping the people and the Sabbath holy that the list grew and grew so that there would be no chance of someone even accidentally breaking the Sabbath and making it unholy. The Sabbath, which was designed by God as a gift for the people, got buried in rules and regulations. Much like that fire which I built for the kids to enjoy, it almost got smothered out in rules.

## Reaping and Healing

By the time Jesus came along, the Sabbath practices had been evolving and growing for a couple thousand years. Moses started by saying that no work should be done on the Sabbath. Not by the Israelites, nor by their children, their servants, their animals, or foreigners residing among them. (Exodus 20:10) In Jesus' time, the rule to not work had evolved into 39 categories of work that was forbidden. Several of those categories related to harvesting and preparing food.

When the Pharisees see Jesus' disciples picking grain in a field, their question "why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" is a question primarily about timing. On any normal day, it was perfectly legal to pick grain from a stranger's field, provided you did it by hand and not with a tool. The idea was that you could glean whatever you wanted by hand, but you couldn't go harvest another person's field. It was a well-established tradition to leave the edges of the fields unharvested specifically so that the poor or those traveling would be able to pick grain and feed themselves. It was a type of built-in charity in their culture. The problem, as the Pharisees see it, is not that they're picking grain. It's that they're picking this grain on the *Sabbath*. This act of plucking some grain to eat was for the Pharisees an example of work, and thus a violation of the Sabbath rules. But remember, these rules aren't there just for the sake of having rules; I think the Pharisees truly believed that they were obeying God in the best way that they could by making and keeping these rules. Their goal was to honor God's commandment to keep the Sabbath and themselves holy. To them, plucking equals working, and working equals not being holy.

Jesus sees things differently. Jesus appeals to a story from the Hebrew Bible, when David went into the Temple and got the "showbread" for him and his companions to eat. The story that Jesus alludes to is found in 1 Samuel 21. What's important for now is that the bread was considered holy. Once consecrated, the bread would be left on the altar for a week. After that time, it would be replaced with new bread, and the bread that was removed would be given to the priests. This wasn't ordinary bread; it was holy bread that was only supposed to be eaten by the priests. David and his companions, none of them priests, took the bread to eat. What Jesus seems to be doing here is drawing a simple lesson: human need takes precedence over the law. Jesus drives that concept home when he says "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) In both cases, hungry people matter more than the rules around the food they're eating.

Mark pairs this story with another story of Sabbath conflict. As is often the case in Mark's gospel, it's not altogether clear exactly when this happened, or how much time elapsed between the grain field incident and the synagogue incident. He tells us in his distinctly abbreviated fashion, "Another time. . . ." (Mark 3:1) This time, instead of grain in a field, we're dealing with a man's "shriveled hand" in the synagogue. Much like the rules against harvesting and preparing food, it was unlawful to heal somebody on the Sabbath, because healing was considered a type of work.

The Jewish law was very clear and specific about healing. It was permitted to give medical attention only if someone's life was in danger. A woman in labor could be helped; childbirth was very dangerous in the ancient world. If a wall fell on someone, bystanders could move the wall enough to see if the person was dead. If alive, he could be helped; if dead, they would leave the corpse until another day. Fractures couldn't be set. Sprains couldn't be treated with cold water. A cut could be bandaged - but only with a plain bandage; no ointment. In other words, it was okay to keep an injury from getting worse, but it was forbidden to do anything to make it better.

Once again, to the religious leaders in the synagogue, the principle is clear enough. We have no reason to believe the man's "shriveled hand" is a life-threatening injury. Surely it impacted his life and made many normal everyday tasks harder. But we have no reason whatsoever to assume that his life was in jeopardy. By the Sabbath rules, he should not be healed on this day. Waiting until the Sabbath was over would not cause his condition to worsen. To the religious leaders, this is a no-brainer. And by this point, Jesus clearly knows what's going on with those leaders.

He asks the man to stand up in the middle of everyone and to stretch out his hand. If Jesus wanted to heal simply for the sake of healing, he could have caught up to this man outside the synagogue after the service was over and healed him then. Instead, he made a point of being very conspicuous and doing this in plain view of everyone. Jesus asks a question that does not get answered, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4) The religious leaders don't really need to answer. Everyone in the room knows the same laws and knows the same answer. It was permitted to "break" the regular Sabbath laws in order to do good and to save a life.

Jesus' unspoken but very clear message in this scene is that improving a life is just as important as saving someone from death. If that seems a little bit familiar to you, you're onto something. Jesus does the same type of redefining of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount when he says:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." (Matthew 5:21-22)

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28)

Jesus' redefinition of the Sabbath is very true to who he is. He does not get rid of the commandments of the Jewish law. Quite the contrary; Jesus consistently affirms and follows the Jewish law. What he does is shine a new light on them. He reveals the true meaning of the law.

## You're Not Jesus

These stories, when taken together, are both incredibly beautiful and incredibly frightening to me. They are beautiful because they reveal that Jesus cares a lot more about the actual needs of real humans than he does religious systems and rules. Faced with the option to uphold a system or meet a human need, he consistently meets the human need. As much as I love lists of rules and orderliness and predictability, I'm immensely grateful that Jesus cares more about who I am and what I need than any list of rules. That Jesus errs on the side of compassionate relationship rather than rigid obedience gives me hope and comfort and peace.

But these texts still frighten me. They frighten me because we have gotten our sinful 21st century American hands on them and have twisted these stories and the concepts behind them into really strange interpretations. The first "bad application" of this passage that I've heard goes something like this... "Jesus didn't follow the rules, so I don't have to either." Two things are wrong with this: First, you're not Jesus! And second, he most certainly did follow the rules!

Our modern American culture is one of pluralism and individualism and countless other -isms. The overall gist of all of them is this: you do whatever seems right to you. We're encouraged to speak *our* truth, as though truth were relative to each one of us. We're told that whatever our feelings, our experiences, our perceptions, they're all perfectly valid and should all be equally valued. As long as it's true to you, and it doesn't infringe on what's true for me, it's perfect. If you want a biblical example of why that doesn't work and just how badly that approach to life turns out, try reading through the book of Judges. If we see Jesus "throwing out the law" when we read this passage, it's a slippery slope to say, "Jesus didn't keep the Sabbath law, so this other Old Testament thing that I don't like can be thrown out the window too."

Jesus doesn't abolish the law. He fulfills it. Nowhere does Jesus say that the Sabbath is unimportant, and nowhere does he say we should do away with the Sabbath. What he does is remove years of "extras" that were built up around the basic commandment to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. This is not license to throw out the Old Testament. This is not a declaration that the Law is bad. This is a return to the very heart of the Law. In no way is Jesus giving us permission to pick and choose what parts of Scripture we like and only pay attention to those. In no way is he advocating for a moral and ethical free-for-all in which we each get to embrace the parts of the Bible that are comfortable and easy for us and ignore those that aren't.

The way of Jesus is rarely - if ever - the easiest way or the path of least resistance. I'd argue that it's far easier to keep a list of rules, even a very long list of rules, than to have just the guiding principle. After all, that's why those long lists of rules got invented. They came into existence to make it easier to know exactly what you could and couldn't do. But as the list got longer, the central point got more and more obscured. Jesus points directly back to the heart of the Law - "remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Is it holy to abstain from work and take time to rest? Yes it is. Is it holy to do the work involved in helping another person? Yes it is. So which one is truly keeping the Sabbath? Both.

## **Love God, Love People**

“Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” Jesus says. There are times when the right thing to do is to rest from our work. The cycle of work and rest is built into God’s plan from the very creation of the world. On the seventh day, God rested. It is in this act of rest that we reflect on who God is. When we stop working, we remember and reenact the truth that our lives do not depend on our work, but on God’s grace. The ancient Israelites believed so strongly in this that there are numerous accounts of them being slaughtered in war time because their enemies knew that they would refuse to fight (even to defend themselves) on the Sabbath. Whether or not you think that’s wise military strategy, it’s a powerful statement of trust in God. When we stop working, we create space to watch God work, to hear God speak, and to feel God move. That is a holy experience, and practicing that kind of Sabbath makes us a little more like God, a little more holy.

“Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” Jesus says. There are times when the right thing to do is to work for the good of others. From cover to cover of the Bible, God is relentlessly working for the redemption of his entire creation. I believe that the world God imagines doesn’t have disease and wars and homelessness and hunger and heartache and loneliness and loss. There is something profoundly important about doing the work that God does -- clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving hope to the destitute, proclaiming release to the captive. When we join God in that work, when we do something to serve other people, to bring them comfort and peace and grace and hope, we are becoming a little more like God, a little more holy.

So what’s the answer? What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? Do we rest? Do we work? If we look at what Jesus does, he starts with the principle of resting from work. But he doesn’t let his rest prevent him from dealing with an obvious, immediate human need that is right in front of him. I’m not sure what needs God will put in front of you or me as we try to practice our times of Sabbath. But I know this much: if we are trying to be disciples of Jesus, we must rest. We must trust that God keeps working when we cease from our labors. We must abide in God’s presence and goodness without an agenda. But when God presents us with a person in need and gives us an opportunity to be his hands and feet in the world, no matter what day that is, we also must act.

If you walk away from this message with a list of rules, even a shorter list than you had when you started, you’ve missed the point. This isn’t a how-to guide to figuring out the perfect formula for a perfectly holy Sabbath. The model that Jesus gives us is not religion defined by a set of rules; it’s relationships defined by compassion and mercy. If we find ourselves so focused on protecting our religion that we can make compelling excuses not to meet the needs of others, we have missed the point of both the Law and Jesus. Our faith, our core convictions are far more convincingly exhibited in what we do than what we don’t do. May we never get so wrapped up in the rules that we miss the opportunity to serve God and to love others. Amen.