

## **Who's in the Family: Lord of the Sabbath**

Mark 2:23-3:6

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If you are just joining us today we are looking at the life of Jesus through the eyes of Mark. And we are in a section I've titled "Who's in the Family."

So in chapters 2 and 3 of Mark Jesus unpacks what it looks like to be part of His family – and it's never what we expect. So first we looked at this lame guy who comes to Jesus on a mat, dropping through the roof, looking for new legs. He thinks new legs is going to make him happy. But Jesus sees something else inside him. He sees faith and a soft heart. And so Jesus gives him what he's actually looking for – forgiveness – and this causes quite a stir with the Pharisees.

And of course this is Jesus' point. When we look for happiness in anything else we come up short. But if we want the abundant life God designed us for then we have to be forgiven. That's how we get into the family.

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After this we looked at a feast where Jesus eats with Levi and a bunch of sinners, and then a fast that the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples were observing. And we saw that God's family is about people keeping, not rule keeping. And today's text continues this trajectory to an ultimate place as Jesus shows us His family isn't a religion, it's a relationship with Himself.

So would you grab your Bible and open it to Mark 2. We are picking it up in verse 23 and continuing through to 3 verse 6. And as you are finding that would you stand with me in honour of God's word. Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Mark 2:23-3:6]

This is the word of the Lord. You can be seated.

So we have two stories here that are linked by the Sabbath. In one story Jesus exposes how useless religion is, and in the other He offers Himself as the alternative. And in these two stories we get some incredibly relevant insight into what it means to follow Jesus in Canada in 2021.

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So let's start in chapter 3 with Shriveled Hand man. It's Sabbath and there are some people who are looking to attack Jesus for any reason at all. It's possible they were even setting this scenario up.

So they know Jesus cares about pleasing God. And they know He loves healing broken people. So they say to each other "Let's set something up where He has to choose one or the other. There's no right answer. It's a trap."

And in verse 5 Jesus sees their hearts – how they’ve decided to oppose everything He does – even if it’s healing someone. And He gets angry. Jesus gets angry. And instead of doing one or the other He does both. He honours God by healing the man. But in order for us to understand what He’s doing we need to understand Sabbath.<sup>1</sup>

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So in Judaism everything revolves around Sabbath. It’s the culmination of the week, and it’s the primary way that a Jew shows themselves to be a Jew. In Sabbath a Jew says “I trust God with my life. I acknowledge that my livelihood isn’t dependent on me, it’s dependant on God. And I make this declaration to myself so I don’t forget it, and I make this declaration to the world so everyone knows I belong to God.” That’s what Sabbath is about. And this wasn’t an academic thing for the Jews, it was real.

So 200 years before Jesus, in the Maccabean period, Jews were actually refusing to fight on the Sabbath. And the Romans figured this out and decided they would wait till sun down Friday night to attack all the time. And the Jews would literally allow themselves to be slaughtered rather than pick up their swords which would be work.

Now you say “that’s not very smart!” But for the Jews following God wasn’t about being smart, Sabbath was about trusting God with their lives. And they showed this by going to their deaths. That’s legit!

And so, because Sabbath was so important, the Pharisees built all sorts of rules around it in order to protect it. In fact there were 39 different types of work that they weren’t allowed to do on Sabbath. And of course one of these included picking grain.

But here’s the problem Jesus has with religion. People can get so fanatical about it that they end up opposing the very things God is about in order to keep God’s rules. So keeping the Sabbath had become more important than helping the hurting. For them Shriveled Hand man could wait till tomorrow. And they are right – he’s not going to die. He’s been shriveled for a long time so Jesus can wait one more day. But Jesus says this isn’t God’s heart. God cares about people not rules.

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Now just to make this practical, right now in Western Canada churches are struggling to know what the right thing to do is in regard to the lock down. You’ve probably heard that there is a pastor in jail in Edmonton, and a lawsuit in the Lower Mainland.

And the question the church is facing is does God want us to open or should we stay closed? And the churches of Prince George are thinking about this right now, and your church is thinking about this. And we don’t have it figured out yet.

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Now the pressure is building and maybe you feel it. The media loves to find Christians who will say stuff like: “I just want to follow God. And God says ‘Don’t forsake meeting together’ so the church should open and if there happens to be an outbreak and we infect the city, so be it. Following God says is more important.”

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-lord-of-the-sabbath-5446/> (Accessed March 3, 2021)

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Hold on to the trickiness of that for a second.

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So in our text Jesus isn't very sympathetic with the Pharisees desire to uphold the law. For Jesus Sabbath specifically, and God's rules in general, have a greater purpose than just telling us what to do. For Jesus there is a relational tension between the rules and the heart of God.

So yes, Sabbath was about acknowledging God – it was about the glory of God. But God's glory always goes hand in hand with our good. And so Sabbath is about God's glory through our rejuvenation – we rest on Sabbath. It's about repairing brokenness.

And this is actually the point with Jesus' illustration about David in the previous verses. So in verse 25 we read:

Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He went into the house of God (during the days when Abiathar was high priest) and broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. He also gave some to his companions." (Mark 2:25-26)

David blatantly disobeys the law. And not the Pharisees rules around the law, but God's law. God said nobody eats this bread except the priests.<sup>2</sup> And people died for breaking God's law. But Jesus' point is David understood something about God's law that the Pharisees didn't. And that is that there is a relational tension between the rules only count when they are interpreted by God's heart.

So God's heart with the temple bread was that He wanted to take care of the people who were serving in His temple. So no one else could eat the bread. But the heart was taking care of people. And so when David and his men show up in need, it's in line with God's heart that they break God's rule. Does that make you feel uneasy?

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Actually, if you read the story of David, the man after God's own heart, you see this over and over again. He is constantly doing things that make no sense to everyone around him, but he does them out of a love for God.

Remember that time David sneaks into King Saul's camp and everyone is sleeping. And he stands over Saul with his sword drawn and then decides "I'm not going to kill the guy who is trying to kill me." And David's men are like "What!?" And David says "How could I lift my hand against the Lord's anointed?" David cares about God's heart. And Jesus is the same.

Actually the only difference between David and Jesus is that Jesus does it perfectly while David bumbles along messing up half the time. But it's in this vein that Jesus says:

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 24:9

“Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?” But they wouldn’t answer Him. (Mark 3:4) And here we come across one of the truths that sits at the very center of what Jesus was and is all about – don’t miss this. This is the difference between religion and Jesus.

So in religion the rules are a heavy burden. In religion God lays out a high standard that He requires His people to live up to. And these rules are largely arbitrary, they are things that He wants and we simply have to obey.

But Jesus’ good news says this isn’t actually what God is about. God’s laws aren’t arbitrary. God’s laws are there for our good. God’s glory and our good go hand in hand. This means that when we live our lives in line with God it goes good for us because God made the world to work this way.

Another way to look at this would be to say that in religion the rules are there for God’s benefit and result in our working to earn God’s acceptance. But with Jesus God already accepts us by grace, and the rules are there to show us how we can thankfully respond to His undeserved gift of salvation.

In religion it is “I obey therefore I’m accepted”, but with Jesus it is “I’m accepted and therefore I want to obey.” In religion you get saved because you are good. With Jesus you get saved because you realized you aren’t good and so you love God in return.

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Now we like the grace not works part. But there is another side to this coin that is much less comfortable. In religion the rules are black and white. So even though God’s standard is high and hard to obey, it’s simple in the sense that you can always know the right thing to do. So don’t pick grain on the Sabbath, and don’t heal shriveled hands and don’t take up your sword. It could also mean open or don’t open the church because there is a verse I can quote. Religion is black and white.

The problem is Jesus isn’t about the rules, He’s about relationship with God. And relationship isn’t black and white, it’s dynamic. So God’s law points us to God’s heart. And God’s heart isn’t for the rules, it is for His glory and our good. And these go together because He is Abba Father who loves us with a crazy love that transcends all our understanding.

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As an aside perhaps you’ve been hit by that song we sometimes sing with the dangerous line in it. It goes: Oh the overwhelming, never ending reckless love of God.” Do you know that song?

You’ve probably heard that line and not been comfortable with it. I know I have. After all God isn’t reckless in the sense that He isn’t careless or thoughtless. In fact He thinks everything through to the infinite end. He plans the beginning from the end. But the song isn’t actually denying that.

Rather the point of the song is to draw us into God's grace which transcends our ability to understand. A love so extreme at His expense, and unfair in our favor, that it appears reckless.

Why would God would leave the 99 to look for me? I was His foe. I wasn't worth anything. Why would God chase me down and fight till I'm found? Why would He die in my place? That makes no sense. It's crazy. God's grace seems reckless.

But the song means for us to fall in love with the God who loves us so much that it's messy. And that's the Abba Father that Jesus wants us to see.

In contrast Jesus hates the distorted god that the Pharisees had conjured up in their own image. Their god preferred that a man would live out a shriveled life rather than be healed just to keep the rules. Their god looked like them. Ironically they were as shriveled on the inside as this man was on the outside. And we see it in verse 6:

At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus. (Mark 3:6)

So these religious Pharisees were so calloused and shriveled that they would conspire to kill someone on the Sabbath, even partnering with their enemies, the Herodians.

Friends, this is wicked. This is evil. And evil wickedness is demonically inspired. Religion is demonic. Jesus hates it. Jesus hates it because religion – all religion – distorts God and leads people to try to be good enough by upholding their traditional values. And religion holds on to these values even when they fly in the face of God.

So Herod worked for Rome, and his job was to calm Israel down for Rome's agenda. And Rome's agenda was to create peace by letting everyone to believe whatever they wanted as long as they kept their allegiance to Rome at the top. So the Herodians encouraged people that being progressive and open minded was the way forward. They were liberal. And the Pharisees hated them. But in Jesus they found a common enemy. Jesus was about something totally different than either of them wanted.

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Here's the crazy thing. In the world there are basically two perspectives. The right says try to follow the traditional values because being good is what matters. The good people are in and the rule breakers are out, and of course we are the good people.

The left is all about self discovery and being open minded and says the judgmental are out and the open are in and of course we are the open minded. But Jesus says both the left and the right are equally broken because both sides are all about being our own saviours. And Jesus is the one who wants to be our Saviour.

Now the Herodians are an ironic side note in the text. Jesus' main point is to expose the futility of religion – following the rules doesn't get you anywhere with God. But Jesus doesn't just tear things down, He builds something new. He points to Himself as the solution.

So in the first text we see Jesus walking through the grainfields and His disciples are working. And Jesus knows what's going on and He's cool with it.

And the Pharisees think they've caught Him. But Jesus responds with a much of a bigger fish than they were looking to catch and He breaks all their lines. Jesus says:  
 "The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!" (Mark 2:27-28)

Now notice here that Jesus doesn't get rid of Sabbath. He could have done that. He could have said "God's heart is about people keeping not rule keeping and so Sabbath isn't important. But He doesn't say that. Instead He says The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus says "The Sabbath is mine."

What's going on here? Well, Sabbath means deep rest. And Jesus says I am the Lord of rest. The one day a week of rest that you get is just a reflection of the deep rest that I can give you. It's like He says in Matthew 11:

"Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

I'm Lord of the Sabbath. Do you see what Jesus is saying with these claims? He is not claiming to know the best ways to follow God's rules. Nor is He saying He's got insight into the most open-minded ways to live. What Jesus is saying is that "There is one infinite, omniscient Creator in the universe who spoke everything into existence and who sustains and controls everything in creation, and I AM that God. I AM YHWH with skin on." That's what Jesus is saying here.

And Jesus was constantly making claims like these. So a few weeks ago when we looked at the cripple who got lowered through the roof we saw Jesus forgive his sins. And in that moment He was saying "I can forgive your sins because all your sins have ultimately been against Me. And just so you know this is true, I've also got the authority to create new legs because I'm the Creator. So Bam!"

Or in another place Jesus says

"I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning!" (Luke 10:18)

It's a crazy statement! He's saying "Yeah, I remember back before creation when Lucifer started causing trouble. My Father and I kicked him out of heaven." What?!

Or what about his casual statement in Matthew 23 where He says:

I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers of religious law. But you will kill some... [and] flog others... chasing them from city to city. (Matthew 23:34)

He doesn't say I am one of the prophets. He says I'm the God who sends the prophets!

The prophets are constantly saying “Thus says the Lord.” But Jesus says “Truly, truly I say to you.” Everything Jesus says assumes He is the infinite creator and sustainer and judge of the universe. He is Lord of the Sabbath.

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Now most people agree Jesus existed, but they think He was a great teacher just not God. But anyone who thinks that hasn't actually wrestled with what Jesus said. Because Jesus doesn't teach best practices for following God's law nor how to be open minded and progressive. What Jesus teaches is that we need to come to Him.

So what are you going to do with Jesus? There aren't a lot of options. With Jesus it is either hate Him because He makes claims over your life that you don't want to submit to, or fall at His feet and worship Him. There isn't any room in the middle. Jesus didn't leave us the option to be casually interested. And He didn't leave us the option to pray a bit each day but then get on with our lives. Or believe in Him but not allow this belief to impact every aspect of our day. What are you actually doing with Jesus? Jesus will be God in our lives or He won't have anything to do with us at all.

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Now, it would be easy to leave the things Jesus says in the academic, but if we are going to take Jesus seriously and fall at His feet - if we are going to worship the God who loves us with such an extreme love that it looks reckless, then we have to let go of the neatness of religion and its simple rules and embrace the messiness of relationship with the God who loves us.

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So with this in mind let me take us back to the issue facing our church, and the church of Canada right now.

At the outset the Bible tells us we need to respect the government. And Paul wrote that when Nero was running around. But Jesus followers know that ultimately we follow God first and government second. And usually in Canada these two things line up well. But we know – at least academically – that if there is a contradiction between the two then our allegiance is to the kingdom of heaven, not the dominion of Canada. Right?

But do you see the gray? Where is the line? Religion can draw a neat line in the sand. Hebrews says:

Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do... especially now that the day of His return is drawing near. (Hebrews 10:25)

But following Jesus is about God's heart, not the rules; not even the rules of the Bible.

So what's at the heart of the God? Well Jesus taught us to lay down our desires to put the people around us first. So whatever this becomes it can't be “I want to worship in church because that would make me happy, so let's open up.

Nor can it be “I'm enjoying worshipping in the safety and comfort of my home so let's keep the church closed.” Both those positions are about me.

In contrast Jesus taught us to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. And some have helpfully said “Practically this means we love God by wanting for our neighbours what we want for ourselves.” So what do we want?

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Well, I think Jesus followers want two things right now. We do want safety and comfort for ourselves. So we must want safety and comfort for our neighbours. And this could mean staying closed so as to avoid inadvertently infecting them with the virus. That’s love.

But we also recognize that a thousand years from now COVID will be irrelevant but the state of our souls and the souls of our neighbours will still be very relevant, and so that could mean opening up. That’s love.

And this is further complicated by the perspective of society. So if the churches open and the world feels that the church is selfishly and unlovingly putting them at risk then will we have burnt the bridges that might otherwise have been used to draw them to Christ?

Oh, this is not simple! And that’s the point. It’s not about getting it right. In fact some in the world are going to think we get it wrong no matter what we do, and some in the church are going to think we get it wrong no matter what we do. We can’t get this right. But we can get our relationship with God right. And this is what being in God’s family is all about.

So the church: your pastors, your leaders and all of us together, must press into the heart of Christ. Friends, whatever your relationship with Jesus looks like today, dig deeper.

Today and this week take time to pray, not just that we and the church of Canada makes the right decision – that’s secondary – what really matters today and a thousand years from now is that we know Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath. We need to rest confident in Him.