

1. An Unholy Alliance

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[0 : 00] Well, before we turn to God's words, let's pray together. Our dear Heavenly Father, we thank you that you've brought us safely here today to join with your people and praise your name and draw near to you through your words.

We thank you that you have set your Son upon the throne, a gracious King who rules over and cares for his people. We thank you that for many of us here, he is a Lord we know and love and rejoice to serve.

We thank you, Father, for all that we've come from, from our workplaces or our homes, for the way you provide for us and are with us even through the difficulties and disappointments of life.

And Father, whatever the situation we've come here from, the business and chaos, the joy or the loneliness of our lives, we pray that you would quieten our hearts now and speak to us afresh as we come to your word.

And finally, Father, for the hundreds rushing past this building as we meet, absorbed with all the things they can see around them and yet blind to eternity, we pray for your mercy.

[1 : 25] We pray, dear Lord, that you would bless this city of ours, that the gospel would sound out, bringing life and health. We pray that for any who have wandered into this building today for the first time, that through the words of scripture and by your spirit, they too would meet your Son.

And we ask this all for his namesake. Amen. Well, turn with me, if you would, to Mark chapter 3, page 838 of the Visitor's Bibles.

And Lord willing, we'll spend three weeks in this third chapter of Mark, beginning today with the two incidents that kick it off. In fact, chapter 2, verse 23 is where we'll begin today.

838. Let me read the word of the Lord. One Sabbath, he was going through the cornfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pick ears of corn.

And the Pharisees were saying to him, Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And he said to them, Have you never read what David did?

[2 : 46] When he was in need and hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar, the high priest, and ate the bread of the presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him.

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.

[4 : 00] He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out immediately, and held counsel with the Herodians against him. How to destroy him.

Well, here are two stories before us, and neither of them are really about the Sabbath. These are two stories, all about hard-hearted rejection of Jesus, the Son of Man.

We're at the beginning of this third chapter of Mark's Gospel, and yet already, by the end of today's passage, two natural enemies will join forces to plot Jesus' death.

His ministry has only just begun, and yet opposition is everywhere. It began back in the very first incident of chapter two, the healing of the paralyzed man.

And from then on, everything Jesus has done, that Mark's recorded, has been opposed by the religious leaders. That's the build-up to these two Sabbath stories.

[5 : 13] Just before our passage, look at chapter two, verse 21. Jesus uttered his most incendiary words yet to the Pharisees.

His implication was that they are the old garments, the old wineskins, of a broken religious system based on rule-keeping and hypocrisy.

And so as we come to our passage from verse 23, they are out to get him. As you look at the first of these two incidents, you might ask what if they were such sticklers for Sabbath-keeping the Pharisees were doing in the grain fields themselves.

You see, their own extra Sabbath rules forbade them from even walking too far, yet alone harvesting corn. So it seems that if you're a good religious man, then the rules could be a little bit more flexible.

If you're there to stick your superior religious beak into the business of others, then the rules didn't apply quite so strictly to you. So you see, this isn't really about the Sabbath.

[6 : 29] It's about keeping an eye on this upstart preacher. It's about opposing Jesus. In fact, when we read on to verse 22 of chapter 3, we discover that a special theological commission has been set up to investigate him.

A group of experts from the capital have come down to Capernaum to deal with this man and his gospel. And if you can't get him, then you can nitpick at his disciples.

That's what's behind the question in verse 24. What sort of rabbi would let his disciples behave like this? So as we kick off chapter 3 of Mark's gospel, opposition to Jesus and his message is everywhere.

And as the chapter develops, that opposition will intensify and its source will spread well beyond the Pharisees, well beyond the religious establishment, to even his own family.

This whole chapter crackles with hostility and rejection and tension. Well, let's just notice two things about these Sabbath incidents.

[7 : 48] Firstly, Jesus is not naive. It's not that he can't help himself from doing a good deed in the synagogue or that he doesn't realize that allowing his disciples to pick corn will cause a fuss.

He is well aware that they're watching him. Notice that it's Jesus, not the spying Pharisees, who brings the confrontation to a head.

That's clearest, I think, in the second incident. Look with me at chapter 3, verse 3. It's Jesus, isn't it, who calls the man with the withered arm to stand up in front of the whole synagogue while he challenges the Pharisees.

Can you picture the scene there? Jesus has not gone to the synagogue to heal. He's gone there to teach. He tells us very clearly in chapter 1 that that was his priority.

In fact, this man with the withered hand hasn't even asked for his help. And yet, aware that the Pharisees are hoping to catch him out, Jesus calls the man to him.

[9 : 03] So now he has the disabled man on one side of him and the Pharisees on the other and the whole assembly watching and waiting. and while the man stands before him trembling a little, I'd imagine, he challenges these so-called experts in the law to defend their teaching.

Do you see? These are not stories about Jesus doing a good deed on the Sabbath and then desperately trying to defend himself. Instead, he is going on the offensive.

He is using their hostility and abuse of God's law, the Sabbath law, to teach the truth and to make a radical claim about himself.

So what is it then that he claims in the first of these incidents? Well, fundamentally, it's that he and not the legalists has the right to decide what is and isn't proper behaviour on the Sabbath.

He begins to make that point in chapter 2, verse 25, with a rather cheeky story. Jesus' favourite tactic seems to be to demolish the religious leaders by exposing their own misunderstanding of the Hebrew Bible.

[10 : 28] Haven't you ever read your Bibles, you experts in the law? You seem to have forgotten. Let me remind you about David, about the man God chose to be the lawful king of his people.

Well, the story he tells is a provocative one. It came from the time when David had been anointed already by God to be king over Israel, yet before he was publicly recognised as king.

And so, rather than feasting in a palace, David and his men are on the run from the enemy, from Saul. Which is why, as God's king, David was perfectly within his rights to take the bread set apart for God and use it to feed himself and his men.

Do you see how Jesus' argument is going to work? He's making a direct comparison between himself and King David. David. He, like David, is the lawful but unrecognised king. The son of man is a title which speaks of Jesus' kingship. It was a title in Daniel of the man given dominion and authority over all men.

[11:51] So here is Jesus' argument. The Sabbath was given as a gift to man, not as a burden. The Sabbath is for man.

And so, as king of men, the David-like king over all God's people, it is I who have the right to rule over its meaning and its use.

I am the lord of men and so I am the lord of their Sabbath. You see, the Pharisees have not only misunderstood God's law but more serious still, they've mistaken the identity of his king.

Let me pause briefly to point out how often those two things go together. You will never have a proper understanding of God's law unless you understand his character, who he is.

If the way you think of God is as a harsh, impersonal taskmaster who desperately needs you to impress him, then you'll always find his law a harsh and oppressive thing.

[13:05] But if you think of him as a loving and gracious king, then his law will look more like a loving and gracious gift. So, for example, the law in Scotland says that I mustn't get on a train without first buying a ticket.

And the reason for that is simply that the train company wants to make money out of me. Now, I don't know about you, but my heart doesn't exactly overflow with love for Scot Rail.

The truth is I resent how much the ticket costs me, but I buy it dutifully because I know I'll get in trouble if I don't. That's the only reason. But how different is it when I get a message on my phone from my wife telling me in no uncertain terms to come home on time tonight?

I might be very busy that day, but I'll do everything I can to get home early. And the reason is that I know my wife. I know the one who the command came from.

I know that she wants me home early because she's been working hard all day to get our daughter to bed on time and she's prepared a lovely meal. Do you see what a difference it makes?

[14:19] If you understand God's character, then you'll understand his law. Miss the identity of the king and you'll miss the purpose of the law. Well, we don't need to be ignorant about the son of man.

We see it just in these two incidents don't we? God's king is firm but he's gracious and loving. He's the lord of his own law just like he himself.

His law is a gracious thing meant for our good. But he won't allow the opposition to go unchallenged. Jesus is not naive. He knows exactly what he's doing and exactly what he's claiming about himself.

By claiming authority over the law, Jesus is claiming kinship over God's people. He's claiming that he and not the Pharisees has the right to rule over what pleases God.

And for anyone prepared to listen to him, his ability to restore the use of a man's arm in the very next incident validates his claim to authority beyond reasonable doubt.

[15:32] God. So the second point to notice is this. Rejecting Jesus always involves both stubbornness and hatefulness.

There is no neutrality when it comes to our response to Jesus. Notice the little eyewitness detail in verse 5 of chapter 3, the synagogue incident.

He has the man standing up and the Pharisees have nothing to say in answer to Jesus' question. So Mark says he looks around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.

Rejecting Jesus is stubborn and hateful. Stubbornness is really what's implied there by hard-hearted. That isn't simply a failure to respond emotionally to Jesus.

Hard-heartedness is a stubborn refusal to do so. The heart in the ancient world was the control center of our wills.

[16:38] And so a hard heart is one which obstinately refuses to submit to God's king, the son of man. In context here, it's the refusal to acknowledge his authority over the Sabbath.

So Jesus' answer, once again, is to take them back to the Bible. There's the man standing in front of him in plain sight of all. And Jesus asks the Pharisees a simple question.

Which is lawful to do on the Sabbath? Good or evil? To save life or to kill? That's a simple question, isn't it? To these self-proclaimed experts in the law, which is lawful.

lawful. But instead of an answer, nothing but silence. No wonder Jesus looks around in anger.

These Pharisees are happy to heap on the rules and regulations trying to keep on the right side of God. But these teachers can't even explain what the purpose of God's command was in the first place.

[17 : 49] They've missed the point, haven't they? Now the issue is that you don't need a degree in theology to understand God's law. You just simply needed to have read your Ten Commandments.

You see, the Sabbath was instituted to celebrate just two things. Any teacher should have told you this. Two things which sum up a whole Old Testament understanding of God.

It celebrates God's grace in creating man and his grace in saving Israel. That is what God does. He creates and he saves.

In other words, the Sabbath celebrates the story of Genesis and Exodus. The two stories which give us our fundamental understanding of who God is.

So to answer Jesus' question, you simply need to read your Ten Commandments, don't you? Read them in Exodus 20 and Moses says, rest on the seventh day because when God made the world, he rested on the seventh day.

[19 : 01] It's a day to celebrate the God who made you. Read them again in Deuteronomy chapter 5 and it says that even your slaves are to be given a day to rest to remind them that you yourselves were slaves in Egypt and God rescued you.

It's a day to remember the grace of God in salvation and delivering you to the rest of the promised land. It's simple, isn't it? You don't need a degree in theology.

Any teacher of the law should be able to explain the Sabbath. So let's come back to Mark chapter 3 and Jesus' question. Which is lawful, do you think, to do on the Sabbath, a day set apart to celebrate the God of creation and salvation, good or evil, to save or to kill?

Well, we won't get an answer, will we, from the religious leaders. So what answer do we get from Jesus? Stretch out your hand and with just a word it was restored.

A fallen, broken body is recreated and just as in Genesis, it's done simply by the power of his voice.

[20 : 27] With just a word, a man crippled by his condition, unable to earn a living, is delivered. Creation and salvation.

It might just be that Jesus allowed that man to enjoy the first true Sabbath of his life. Rest and deliverance from his suffering.

You see, Jesus loves the Sabbath. And this isn't the first time. In fact, the very first miracle Mark records is the rescue of a demon-possessed man in the synagogue, on the Sabbath.

So who is it here that understands the Sabbath? The teachers motivated by rules or Jesus, the one moved by grace? Do you see the sheer stupidity in rejecting this king?

The Sabbath is his Sabbath. He is its Lord. He is the one who creates and redeems and who sets the agenda. So rejecting him will always mean sheer stubbornness, hard-heartedness, and it will always mean hatefulness.

[21 : 44] Notice that lastly. The hatefulness with which they respond to his enormous display of grace. Their reaction in verse 6 is immediate and extreme and violent.

sworn enemies, the religious and the political elite, the Pharisees and the Herodians, club together to plot to destroy Jesus.

grace. We're only in chapter 3, just at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and already the cross is looming darkly.

You see, the response we make to grace is never neutral. Here it's the birth of an unholy alliance of hatred. Just look again at the pointedness of Jesus' question as he saw through their hearts.

Which is lawful to do on the Sabbath, to save life, or to kill? Do you see the great shock there? Do you see the link between Jesus' question in verse 4 and the result he knows will come in verse 6?

[22 : 58] Who is it that's breaking the Sabbath here? Is it Jesus, the one working to give a Sabbath rest to the oppressed? Or is it the so-called experts in the law who are working to destroy?

One recreates and delivers, the others plot to kill and oppose the gospel. So two stories about hard-hearted rejection of the king of men.

And yet two stories which should convince us beyond doubt that Jesus truly is king, the son of man. He is lord of the Sabbath because he is lord over us.

And it was us whom he created the Sabbath to bless. And it is he who is qualified to rule us and guide us both in life and in eternity.

Jesus offers us a true rest, a true Sabbath, sealed by the very thing which the Pharisees and Herodians thought would destroy him, his cross.

[24 : 18] Like them, we can kick out and refuse his authority and try to make it our own way by following our own rules. We can be stubborn and hateful and we can stand against him.

Or we can look at him and see a king who knows our needs and loves to provide a lord who with just a word can offer us new life and true rest.

Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do harm or good, to save life or to kill? But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of hearts and said to the man, stretch out your hand.

Let's pray. Father God, we rejoice to know that at the heart of your creation is a gracious and loving king, the son of man whom you have given dominion and glory over all peoples.

We thank you father for his work for our sakes, bringing us hope and life and in time a true Sabbath rest. And we confess, father, that like the religious and political leaders of his day, we too have not always honored your king.

[25 : 52] Like them, we kick out against his gracious rule over our lives. We've even denied his right to rule. So our prayer, father, is that by your spirit, you would help us to bow the knee in loving and joyful submission to the son of man, by whose mercy alone we are made new.

For we ask it all in his name's sake. Amen.