

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: April 26, 2009

Liberating the Sabbath

by Dan Trygg

“And He was saying to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.’²⁸ Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”
Mark 2:27,28

“And He said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to destroy?’ But they kept silent.⁵ And after looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.⁶ And the Pharisees went out and immediately *began* taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, *as to* how they might destroy Him.”

Mark 3:4-6

One of the most important questions in the first century had to do with how Jesus addressed the matters of the OT Law and Jewish religious practices. This was an ongoing concern in the expansion of the Christian movement in the book of Acts (e.g., Chapters 10,11,15), and also became an issue in many of the churches pioneered by Paul (e.g., Galatians; I Timothy 1:6,7). **The question of whether or not the new Gentile converts had to keep the Law and the Jewish traditions, or to what extent they were obligated to follow the Jewish way of life, was a hot topic** in those first decades of the early church. Jesus, through whom the new covenant was established (Heb. 7,8), had to deal with the same kinds of questions in His own ministry, even though He focused primarily on the Jews. Was the Kingdom of God primarily about performing religious duties, or was it about knowing God and doing His will? **Jesus made it clear that He did not come to abolish the Law or the prophets, but to fulfill them** (Matt. 5:17-20). As we examine the two incidents from Mark 2:23-3:6 (cf. Matt. 12:1-14; Lk. 6:1-11), we must keep these words in mind. Jesus was *not* advocating breaking the true commandments of God. **The Pharisees, however, had added so many explanations, interpretations, applications and traditions to the Law and the prophets that the actual intention of the commandments of God had been obscured** by the mass of rituals and duties invented by them. The observation of the Sabbath had fallen victim to this endless attempt to clarify and specify. **The Sabbath had started out as a day that was to be free from work, so that everyone could rest and reflect on God and His goodness to them.** Initially it was to be spent privately and/or with your family, in your *own* home (Ex. 16:23-30). Eventually, it became a day for leaving one's home to gather with other families for religious services in someone else's home, or in a building set aside for religious meetings. **The simple command to cease from work for the day took on such a multitude of specific interpretations and applications that people were more mindful of keeping the Sabbath properly than they were about God.** How far could one travel on the Sabbath? Was it work to help an animal that was stuck, or in danger? The teachings and pontifications of various rabbis covered nearly every possibility imaginable.

We shouldn't be surprised when Jesus' disciples were coming through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and they started picking the heads of grain (Reaping!) and rubbing them in their hands to loosen the outer chaff (Threshing!) and then blowing it away (Winnowing!), and popping the kernels into their mouth for a snack (Preparing food!), that *someone* would notice and accuse them of Sabbath breaking. “Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful on a Sabbath.”

It is interesting to note that **the word translated as “lawful” in this passage, and the parallel gospels, has nothing to do with “law” at all. The word simply is “it is permitted”.** It is a reference more to *custom* than the **authority of God's Law.** I am sure to the Pharisees it had the same weight, but it is significant that even their choice of words does not really appeal to God's word, but to man's accepted practice. **In response, Jesus used the exact same word when recounting the action of King David in the OT.** He and his men, when fleeing from king Saul, stopped at the tabernacle (I Sam. 21) to ask aid of the high priest, Ahimelech. Since he had no other bread to offer, except the bread of the Presence, ...bread which had been placed before the Lord in the holy place as a reminder of Israel's need and God's provision, ...bread which was to be eaten by the priests in the holy place..., Ahimelech gave this bread to David, and he and his men ate “what is not lawful”, or, “what is not done”. **The point is that neither the high priest nor David, both reputed and respected as godly men, had any problem going against convention for the sake of a higher good. It is important to see that they did not break any specific commandment of God, either.** The moment the bread left the tabernacle and was placed in David's hands, its “holiness” or “set-apart-ness” was lost, and it simply became regular bread. Furthermore, both men acted respectfully toward God and this special provision. They did not minimize the significance of the tabernacle, or of God's presence there. They simply realized that this was a special incident where custom was less important than the need for survival.

A second line of defense was employed by the Lord in Matthew's account. **Jesus reminded His critics that the priests regularly “broke the Sabbath” in order to carry out their priestly responsibilities.** Even though the

Sabbath was a day of rest, the priests had an obligation to do work on the Sabbath to fulfill their God-assigned duties. On some Sabbath days, they actually had *more* work to do than on other days of the week. They were not Sabbath-breakers. Their duty to serve God was a higher calling than to stay home and meditate. In fact, had they done *that*, they would have been disobedient to God. *God* set things up this way. **The restriction against work was not absolute**, as they thought.

A third line of defense (also in Matthew) is the Lord's citation of **Hosea 6:6**. Jesus said, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice', you would not have condemned the innocent. [The word for "innocent" literally is "ones-without-cause".] **God is not looking for religious duties from us. He wants loyalty from us toward Him, and compassion from us toward others** (cf. Mic. 6:8). He is more honored and pleased with our godly care for others than about any ritual we might perform. Jesus did not quote the entire verse, but the thrust of the passage is to incite us to pursue knowing God personally, intimately, and living with integrity and justice.

A fourth line of argument, found in Mark 2:27, "**The Sabbath came into being for man, and not man for the Sabbath.**" The purpose of the Sabbath was to be a day of blessing for humankind, ...a day of rest and being mindful of God. **It was to be a day to remind us that our blessings and purpose in life come from God, and are for His glory** (Ex. 20:8-11; 30:13-17; Deut. 5:12-15). **People weren't created to crank out religious duties or rituals to feed God's ego. God made us out of the fullness of His heart, to know, express and give His love and goodness, which He will abundantly supply to those who are His.** God did not make us to "get something" from us. Rather, we were made to know Him, to enjoy fellowship with Him, and to become like Him to express His character to the world around us. **We were not made to serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given to assist us in coming to know God.**

Finally, as a conclusion or result clause from the previous argument, **Jesus declared (Mk.2:28), "...so that the son of man is Lord (master) even of the Sabbath."** There are two possible implications here. **The title "son of man" has two OT precedents**, and was Jesus favorite title for Himself. In Ezekiel it was repeatedly used in reference to the prophet himself, to emphasize his humanity. To Ezekiel, the title "son of man" meant "human being". **From this perspective, Jesus is simply saying that if the Sabbath was made for people, then it is subservient to them**, not the other way around. **Secondly, however, the Son of Man was mentioned in Daniel 7 as a superhuman figure who will come on the clouds of heaven to receive everlasting dominion, glory and a kingdom from God**, "that all the peoples, nations and tongues might serve Him" (7:13,14). **Taken from this angle, Jesus is saying that this Person will certainly be Master even of the Sabbath.** This coincides with the teaching from Hebrews 7. This passage talks about how Jesus came as a new High Priest, One of a higher order than the Jewish priests descended from Aaron. The writer observes that "if the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also" (vs.12). If Jesus meant to refer to Himself as the Son of Man and High Priest in this fashion, He is saying that He is Lord even of the Sabbath. He will not *break* the Sabbath, but **with Him will come changes which the Pharisees and others may not grasp, changes which will fulfill the true purposes of what the Sabbath was really for** (cf. Heb. 3,4; Rom. 14:5-8; Col. 2:16,17).

If this incident were not enough, Jesus goes from this encounter into the synagogue, where there was a man with a withered hand. [The Greek word indicates that he had a hand "having become withered", indicating that the man was probably born with two normal hands, but his right hand (Lk. 6:6) had become injured or was affected by disease, and so had come to be in this withered condition.] **The Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might have some grounds to accuse Him.** They even tried to push Him into a trap, asking Him if it was lawful ("permitted") to heal on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus has the man step forward into the open, where everyone could see. (It's showdown time!) He then asks the entire crowd if it was "permitted" to do good on the Sabbath, or evil; to save a life or destroy it (Lk. 6:8,9; cf. Isa. 58:1-14)? Then, **Jesus reminds the crowd that if any of them has a sheep that would fall into a pit on the Sabbath, he would undoubtedly do what was necessary to rescue the animal.** This *was* indeed a commonly accepted scenario for which at least some rabbis had made an exception from strict Sabbath duty. Jesus' observation, then, was that **we humans are worth much more to God than a sheep, so it must be permitted** (same word for "lawful") **to do good on the Sabbath.** Upon saying that, He loudly commands the man to stretch out his hand. When he did so, it was healed completely! Totally restored!

The Pharisees went out, full of rage (literally, filled with incomprehensibility or mindlessness), and began taking counsel with their arch enemies, the Herodians (pro-Herod Jews, ones given to lavish living and seeking political influence), to find a way to destroy Him (Mk. 3:6). Interestingly, the word used for "destroy" is exactly the same word as Jesus used in His challenge (Mk. 3:4). **Ironically, these men, who had been so concerned about the disciples' lack of respect for the Sabbath, left the synagogue and immediately began to lay plans for a plot to kill Jesus, ...on the Sabbath day.**