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Andrew M. Davis Sermon

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Lord of the Sabbath

Mark 2:23-3:6

Six centuries before Jesus was born, Isaiah the prophet predicted his ministry:

Isaiah 61:1-2 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor

Jesus came to proclaim FREEDOM FOR THE CAPTIVES... Freedom from slavery.

All sinners are slaves to sin, and therefore slaves to Satan, the invisible slave master. Satan has many different patterns of slavery, however, with many different foremen on his plantation of sin... many different taskmasters lash the slaves.

One of the most powerful in Jesus' day was religious legalism... a harsh bondage of relentless religious obligations and duties to fulfill a pattern of works righteousness gained by the Law. And the religious leaders of his day, especially **the scribes and Pharisees**, loaded up and lashed their own people relentlessly with their unbending laws.

Jesus came to set his people free from all slavery

Some years ago, I and my family went to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC.... The Holocaust was the persecution of the

Jewish people by the Nazis of Germany under Adolf Hitler... resulting in the deaths of six million Jews.

Some of the most striking photographs I saw was of the Forced Labor camps run by the Nazis... in which the Jews were literally worked to death by grinding hard labor. One photograph stuck in my mind and I looked it up online recently. It was of the notorious Stairs of Death at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria. This camp held almost a 1/3 of a million prisoners, of which only 80,000 survived to be liberated. The Stairs of Death was in a quarry from which granite was carved to build the grand cities of the glorious Third Reich. The stairway itself led up out of the quarry to a rim above it... the guards forced the prisoners to pick up blocks of granite weighing over 100 pounds, to put them in wooden backpacks, and carry them up 186 steps to the top... the prisoners were lined up five abreast, in row upon row of stairs. If any of them toppled backward, which happened often, there was a deadly domino effect on all the prisoners behind them.

In Jesus' day, there were different slave drivers over the Jewish people... they were spiritual task masters... the Scribes and Pharisees, who made relentless spiritual laws by which they bound the consciences of the people. Jesus said of them:

Matthew 23:4 "The scribes and Pharisees tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."

Central to this spiritual slavery was the sense of God as a harsh taskmaster, and of salvation being something earned by the external obedience of the people to these man-made laws. Salvation by works... no mercy, only the strongest survived. Like a SLAVE LABOR CAMP... with God holding the lash.

One of the greatest of these forms of bondage were the Sabbath regulations. The scribes and Pharisees owned that day, so they thought, and they multiplied the traditions of the rabbis to plant the entire day thick with laws and regulations and

prohibitions that were never written in the Law of Moses. With these relentless Sabbath laws, they made the day a form of slavery for all the people.

Jesus was sent to proclaim LIBERTY FOR THE CAPTIVES; and he did it by claiming full authority as LORD OF THE SABBATH.

I. Sabbath Legalism

A. The Origin of the Sabbath: Genesis 2

Genesis 2:2-3 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

B. The Sabbath Law: Exodus 20

Exodus 20:8-11 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work... ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

C. The Further Clarification: Exodus 31

Exodus 31:17 [The Sabbath] is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

The basic command was DO NOT WORK... nothing more. Focus on the Lord, REFRESH yourself in him. Isaiah said "**Call the Sabbath a delight**" (Isaiah 58:13)... meaning, through focusing on the Lord together with the people of God, drinking in the ministry of the word and worship, we are renewed.

But the Jewish leaders couldn't leave it at that...

D. The Long History of Legalism... Layer Upon Layer

1. The Jewish rabbis over the centuries began adding additional commands to protect the Law; these additional commands are found NOWHERE in scripture, and they became as binding on the consciences of the people as any clear command in scripture
2. These extra rabbinic traditional laws were codified in a big book called *The Talmud*, and it had TWENTY-FOUR CHAPTERS of Sabbath regulations!
3. One rabbi actually spent 2½ years of study on just one of these 24 chapters!! At that rate, it would take 60 years to study it all!
4. They added dimensions and definitions and a long heritage of rabbinic interpretation on what it means to keep the Sabbath day holy... what it means not to work
5. They had limits to how far you could walk on a Sabbath day—1999 steps at the most; 2000 would be to break the Sabbath; of course, this was before the electronic devices you all have which COUNT STEPS... so who was counting steps back then, I don't know
6. Anything that might be contrived as work was forbidden... on a Sabbath, scribes could not carry their pens; carpenters could not touch a hammer or saw; tailors could not have on their person a needle; all of that might tempt them to work
7. No one was permitted to pick up anything heavier than a dried fig
8. If you tossed an object in the air with one hand, you had to catch it with the same hand; to catch it with the other hand constituted work
9. No insects could be killed; no candle could be lit or extinguished
10. No bathing was allowed, because some water might spill on the floor and accidentally wash it
11. All farm work was illegal, especially plowing, sowing, and harvesting
12. A woman could not look in a mirror, because she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it out, and that would be work

13. Especially relevant for Jesus' healings: sick people were only allowed enough treatment to keep them alive until the Sabbath ended; so if a condition were literally life-threatening, like someone bleeding out, they could be saved, but anything not life-threatening (like a shriveled hand) had to wait until after the Sabbath was over
14. If someone put cotton in their ear before the Sabbath began, they could leave it in there... but if it fell out, they couldn't put it back in
15. Jews found clever ways of circumventing some of these Sabbath laws... for example, as we've said you can travel no more than 1999 paces from your home... but what constitutes your "home"? If the day before the Sabbath you stored food 1998 paces from your front door, that would actually extend the legal boundaries of your home and you could travel another 1999 paces from that point on
16. If you connected two buildings with a piece of wood or even a rope, it was considered to be one building... so communities of Jews in cities learned to connect their whole block or ghetto with ropes or pieces of wood so the Jews could freely travel in the whole area without worrying about the 1999 paces... AND they COULD carry certain household items like keys, medicines, wheelchairs, canes, etc. even if they weighed more than a dried fig!

You can see how ridiculous all of this could become.

E. The Scribes and Pharisees Sense of Ownership

1. The Scribes and Pharisees set themselves up in Moses' seat to judge all their fellow Jews on Sabbath regulations
2. That was their authority... so anyone who questioned them or challenged them were considered outlaws and blasphemers
3. That was why Jesus so enraged them... because he didn't follow any of their additions... especially when it came to the healings

F. The Real Issue: Salvation by Works of the Law

1. The Scribes and Pharisees preached and sought to live out a salvation by works of the Law...
2. They believed that if they kept all the minutiae of the Law, if they were careful to observe the traditions, that would be their righteousness

G. The Real Problem: Religious Hypocrisy

1. The Scribes and Pharisees meticulously kept the externals of the Law... but their hearts were every bit as corrupt as any pagan's.... their pride, rage, lust, greed, slander was a raging fire within their souls that no legalism could cure

Matthew 23:27-28 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Jesus LEVELLED this whole corrupt system!

II. Jesus' First Challenge to Sabbath Legalism

- A. Jesus Did Not Accidentally Heal on the Sabbath... he did it on purpose!
- B. Jesus Was Sent to Liberate the Captives
- C. John 5: Jesus healed a man paralyzed for 39 years!!... then told him to pick up his mat and go home
- D. The Religious Leaders stopped him and accused him of being a Sabbath-breaker for carrying his mat!
- E. Open Claim to Deity

John 5:16-18 So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." ¹⁸ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he

breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

F. What They Didn't Understand... Jesus actually personally instituted the Sabbath to begin with!!

John 1:3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

III. The First Case Study: Picking Heads of Grain

A. What Happened

Mark 2:23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

1. This shows how poor they were...
2. Jesus had said how hard it would be to follow him:

Luke 9:58 Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

3. Luke tells us some wealthy women were supporting Jesus out of their means
4. The disciples picking heads of grain and rubbing them in their hands and eating them directly was a form of welfare for the needy; Jewish farmers were told not to harvest to the edge of their property or go over their harvest a second time, but to leave the extras for the poor
5. Any poor person could walk into any field and pick enough grain to fill his empty stomach... but he couldn't bring a bushel basket
6. That this was care for the poor shows how heartless the Pharisees were

B. The Challenge from the Pharisees

Mark 2:24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

The issue was not one of stealing... but one of working; the Pharisees were accusing them of harvesting

C. Jesus' First Defense: David and the Consecrated Bread

Mark 2:25-26 He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

1. Jesus cites a scriptural precedent
2. David, the true anointed king of Israel, was made to flee for his life by the insane King Saul
3. David and his men were in physical distress with nothing to eat
4. David goes to the tabernacle and the priest, Ahimelech, greeted him in fear; David asked if he had anything to eat, because he and his men were hungry; Ahimelech said there was nothing there but the Bread of the Presence, the consecrated or holy bread put out each Sabbath by the priests, as specified in Leviticus 24:5-9
5. Jesus clearly said it was lawful only for the priests to eat
6. BUT the priest realized that David wasn't just any person but was the king's son-in-law; but the priest also and more importantly realized that no ceremony or ritual or religious symbol was more important than feeding a hungry person
7. All of this constitutes a "how much more" argument... if David, the king's son-in-law, merited special consideration and a bending of the ceremonial law for the higher purpose of feeding the hungry, HOW MUCH MORE Jesus, the Son of God, and his disciples should be free to break a MAN-MADE regulation never found in the Law

D. Jesus' First Assertion: The Sabbath Was Made for Man

Mark 2:27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

1. At the heart of this was the Pharisees failure to understand the whole point of the Sabbath
2. It was to BLESS man, to refresh him, to strengthen him... to free him for one day from the burdens of work and to allow him to refocus his mind on God and his throne... God ceased work and sat down on his throne to rule the universe... the best way to see the Sabbath is a time for man to cease his work and be refreshed by worshipping God

Exodus 31:17 It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

Amazing! The Hebrew literally says that God “caught his breath” ... “was refreshed”

Since God is omnipotent, he never gets tired or weary... EVER!

Isaiah 40:28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary

The work God did in making heaven and earth did not TIRE HIM OUT. This is therefore an anthropomorphism... words that make God like a man so we can understand something. In this case, it is the SABBATH that God wants us to understand... though he doesn't get weary from work, WE DO. So the Sabbath was made for man, so that we could be refreshed IN THE LORD!

Psalm 23:2-3 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul.

3. God never intended the Sabbath to be the most oppressive, burdensome, shackled, crushing, soul-depleting day of the week... but that's what the Pharisees had made it
4. Man's welfare is above the Sabbath regulation, not a slave to it

IV. Jesus' Stunning Claim: I Am Lord of the Sabbath

Mark 2:28 Therefore, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

A. First: "Son of Man"

1. This is Jesus' favorite title for himself
2. He frequently employed it, especially at key moments like this one
3. It comes directly from the vision of the prophet Daniel in Daniel 7
4. There, Almighty God is called "the Ancient of Days," and he is depicted as sitting on a throne of glory, with a river of fire flowing from the throne
5. And into his presence, riding on clouds of glory comes another figure, one like a Son of Man... a HUMAN BEING!!

Daniel 7:13-14 In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

6. This is JESUS... and as Jesus himself said, "**All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.**"
7. If they really knew who he was, he would have been sitting on a throne of glory ruling not just Israel but all the earth
8. He would have merited the fullest consideration... not merely for his followers to pick a few heads of grain and eat them like the poorest of the land

B. The Logical Link: "Therefore..."

1. Because he is the Son of Man, he has authority over everything pertaining to man and to man's WELFARE

2. Jesus just said, “The Sabbath was made FOR MAN, not man for the Sabbath”... so because Jesus is the Son of Man, the Sabbath falls under his jurisdiction
3. Son of Man carries with it certain rights and privileges of power

John 5:27 And [God] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

4. Hence... these words follow:

C. The Stunning Claim: Lord of the Sabbath

Mark 2:28 THEREFORE... the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

1. This is a stunning bombshell!
2. It is nothing less than a claim to full deity
3. To be Lord of the Sabbath... EVEN of the Sabbath... something as HIGH and HOLY as the Sabbath, no human being in history could have made that claim!
4. Can you imagine Moses or King David or King Solomon or Elijah the prophet claiming, “I am LORD OF THE SABBATH”???
5. Jesus instituted the Sabbath himself when he and the Father were done creating and sat down to rule over the universe they had made
6. So, as Lord of the Sabbath, he has the right to say what is permissible on the Sabbath—it is a matter of authority, kingly authority, the right to command and forbid; and he was saying what his disciples were doing was completely permissible
7. Jesus is God.

D. The Sabbath a Shadow Made Obsolete and Fulfilled

1. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus levelled the Sabbath regulations and reinvented them
2. More importantly, Jesus FULFILLED the Sabbath...

3. By his death and resurrection, Jesus invited all who believe in him to enter his rest, to finish from all works of righteousness and rest in his finished work on the cross

Hebrews 4:3 Now we who have believed enter that rest

Hebrews 4:9-10 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

4. The Mosaic regulation of Sabbath was SHADOW... Jesus is the REALITY

Colossians 2:16-17 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

5. The Sabbath as the Jews observed it was obsolete. Jesus has made a new Sabbath
6. So from his resurrection on, Christians have worshiped on the Lord's Day... the first day of the week, not the seventh; we look AHEAD to the new creation, not back to the old creation

V. The Second Case Study: A Man With a Shriveled Hand

Mark 3:1-6 Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." ⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

A. Back to Back Accounts in All the Gospels...

1. Meant to be taken together

2. Probably consecutive Sabbaths... Jesus was going through all the towns and villages in Galilee, visiting synagogues, preaching

B. Jesus' Enemies Wanted Him to Break Their Law

1. The text says they were watching him, quietly waiting to see if he would break the Sabbath law and heal as he did in Jerusalem
2. They wanted him to hang himself by his own words and actions
3. For them, it was absolutely clear proof that Jesus was not from God

John 9:16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

4. But yet the evidence kept staring them in the face:

John 9:16 But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided.

5. They were like prowling predators, lying in wait for Jesus in the tall grass, ready to pounce

C. Jesus Attacks Them Head-On

Mark 3:3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

1. Jesus was the most courageous man who ever lived
2. He did not conciliate them, try to compromise with them, reason with them... **Not at all!**
3. He calls this man with the shriveled hand forward, has him stand in front of everyone
4. The Greek words translated "shriveled" or "withered" refers to atrophy—it was used of dead plants that have dried up and wasted away; picture a hand like a claw, dried and shrunk; Luke tells us it was his right hand... so it would have been very difficult for him to work

5. This is a clear test case, for the man's medical condition is in no way critical... he's had this paralyzed hand for a long time; he could easily survive another 12 hours with it
6. But Jesus wants to set him free RIGHT NOW from the physical bondage and set the whole nation free from the spiritual bondage

D. Jesus' Puts Them in a Logical Trap

Mark 3:4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

1. He seeks to expose their corrupt hearts
2. In Matthew's Gospel, he speaks of any of them, if they have a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath, would they not lift it out? And a man is worth far more than a sheep!
3. The Pharisees actually selfishly cared more for their own livestock more than they did the suffering among their people
4. But the question here in Mark's Gospel is one which exposes their own evil intentions... they had specifically come there that day not to worship God and hear God's word taught but to plot against Jesus; and by the end of the day, they will work very hard! They will work a lot, laying plots and plans to kill Jesus
5. Jesus is trapping them: I am healing people, doing good on the Sabbath; you are hurting people, even plotting on the Sabbath to kill me.
6. Jesus puts this question to them, but it TRAPS them... there is nothing they can say. So they remain silent
7. What they should have done was to repent of their hard-hearted lack of compassion toward the hurting man, and even more of their wicked desire to kill the only perfect Sabbath-keeper there has ever been, Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God!

E. Jesus' Passionate Response

Mark 3:5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts

1. Their silence evoked two very passionate responses from Jesus
2. Jesus was an emotional man... but unlike us, his emotions were always perfect
3. First, Jesus looked them right in the eyes, exposing their evil corruption; he was truly angry at them, with a clean, pure, fire of holy wrath... their hypocrisy toward God and their lack of love for other people was pure evil, and it made Jesus perfectly angry; surprisingly, this is the only verse in the New Testament that asserts clearly that Jesus was angry... he almost certainly was angry when he cleansed the Temple TWICE... but it doesn't say it; here, it does... sin makes God angry
4. Second, Jesus was GRIEVED at their stubbornness or hardness of heart; a hard heart means it doesn't yield, it doesn't melt, it doesn't feel the sting of conviction... it is a dead heart; Jesus WEPT over the unbelieving city of Jerusalem, and their hard hearts; the hardness of hearts will, if not transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit, result in their hearing these dreadful words from his lips on Judgment Day:

Matthew 25:41 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Then, having felt these feelings, he did what he had come to do:

Mark 3:5 [Jesus] said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Instant and complete healing! The tendons were regenerated, the flesh made supple again... the stunning amazing thing that a hand is was restored by Jesus' secret healing power

F. Jesus' Enemies Passionate Response and Wicked Plot

Luke 6:11 they were furious

Mark 3:6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Jesus threatened their power... he was basically going to destroy all the authority they had claimed for themselves; they hated him and wanted to kill him immediately; but they knew because of the crowds they had to be careful

One note... the Herodians were basically Greek-speaking Hellenists, secularists; an irreligious, worldly, political group that sought earthly power by supporting the dynasty of Herod the Great who had given his kingdom to his four ungodly descendants; the Herodians were viewed by their patriotic countrymen as traitors; the Pharisees ordinarily were mortal enemies to the Herodians; they were pure Jews who hated Hellenists and worldly power people; but now, they had a common cause... "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." They would work together for the rest of Jesus days in finding a way to kill him.

VI. Lessons

A. The Majestic Person of Christ: Lord of the Sabbath

Stand in awe of Jesus' awesome power, and of his self-declaration as LORD OF THE SABBATH. This is an open claim to deity!

B. The True Sabbath Rest: Salvation Through Faith in Christ

Colossians 2:17 *These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*

The fulfillment of the "Sabbath rest" is entering into Christ's finished work on the cross... when he said "It is finished," so also were all the works of the law finished on our behalf. Jesus completed a perfect set of works in obedience to God's law, a perfect righteousness he now offers to us BY FAITH. Have you entered that rest for all time through faith in Christ?

As Jesus said to the dying thief on the cross after he declared his faith:

Luke 23:43 *Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

C. A Persistent Danger: Religious Legalism and Hypocrisy

Let us stand diligently against all forms of religious legalism and hypocrisy. It is a persistent threat to think that we are righteous by our works. That also leads to hypocrisy, of covering over our failures with lies and trickery like the Jewish leaders did with their clever Sabbath dodges, but also with their bitter judgmentalism. Let us throw that whole system out the door!

D. A Lasting Question: The Best Way to Spend the Lord's Day

1. Go back to Exodus 31:17

Exodus 31:17 It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

2. And again, this passage:

Psalm 23:2-3 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul.

3. Sabbath legalism is not helpful and should be no part of a New Covenant church... we must not judge what other people do on a Sabbath day.
4. But we should judge ourselves! Do our Sunday habits fulfill the Lord's original purpose in giving us one day in seven to be spiritually and physically refreshed?
5. Certainly it is not legalism to say that our Sunday habits should include faithful attendance at public worship
6. But what about the rest of the afternoon? Do your habits refresh your soul IN THE LORD?? Perhaps you love to watch sports... fine, it would be legalistic for a church to mandate that no one do this; but you should judge for yourself—does it restore your soul IN THE LORD or not?
7. So also whatever you choose to do... are you specially drawing close to Christ through Bible reading and prayer and the reading of good Christian literature or rich Christian fellowship

8. Obviously our Home Fellowships should be a part of that pattern of richness and spiritual refreshment
9. But the rest is up to you! Do your Sunday habits fit the pattern of a deep, rich, spiritual refreshment in the Lord or not?