

Title: The Trump Card of Love

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you give us laws and rules to give us fullness of life; let us be always reminded that the rule of love trumps any law written or implied, we pray through Christ Jesus, the king of love. Amen.

To understand the sabbath issues in the gospel, we first need to understand what the Law of Moses says about the sabbath. The core is in the Ten Commandments. “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” (Exodus 20:8-10a) The genesis of this commandment is God resting after the six days of creation. The penalty for working on the sabbath is death.

Numbers 28:9-10 provides an exception that allows priests to make sacrifices on the sabbath. Deuteronomy 22:4 also specifies a loophole: “You shall not see your neighbor’s donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up.” This is not for the donkey’s sake. It is saving livestock for your neighbor.

And so it was on a sabbath where Jesus and his disciples were walking to the local synagogue, through a grain field. Probably not something they would typically do, but it was likely a shortcut so as not to walk too far in violating the sabbath rules.

Apparently, they were dogged by some Pharisees. The Pharisees could have waited in the synagogue for Jesus but they had to follow to discover anything that they could use to discredit Jesus. See, politics is the same no matter the culture or the time period. This scene looks like a teenager with a younger sibling following behind in spite of all attempts to get rid of the smaller child.

The Pharisees who are really required to follow all of the sabbath laws had to be careful tagging alongside Jesus. Jesus could get rid of them by walking too far. However, the synagogue is not *that* far away and they were taking the shortcut through a grain field.

It seems they did not have breakfast before they left for synagogue. Maybe they slept in. It would not have been the only time Jesus had to rouse them from sleep. Maybe the Pharisees came barging in to remind them of their religious duty. But the Pharisees probably would have kept silent so that Jesus' synagogue absence could be used against him.

The disciples plucked grain along their way. Did they have permission to do so? Unlikely. And anyway, eating some wheat grain isn't going to satisfy my hunger. I don't think it would have been significant to them either. It works a lot better after it has been transformed into bread.

The Pharisees had to have been delighted. They had a charge to make against Jesus. Except, the story never says Jesus ate the grain, just the disciples. This is not a fasting issue. This is a work issue. This is a life and death issue. Plucking the heads of grain is work and not allowed on the Sabbath. They ask Jesus why they are violating sabbath law. Jesus is apparently responsible for the actions of his disciples.

Jesus reminds them of the story of when David violated the Mosaic Law. Mark mentions the priest Abiathar, but it was actually Ahimelech. The showbread, or bread of the presence, is to always be in the temple with God and after going stale can only be eaten by priests. Ahimelech gives this bread to David and his soldiers when they were fleeing Saul.

Jesus' conclusion of David's lack of respect for the priests and the law was to reinterpret the Ten Commandments. Jesus is answering by looking at the issue of who is the master and who is the slave, the sabbath versus humankind. Jesus said that we are the masters over the sabbath and not the other way around. Then Jesus adds that "the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." (Matthew 2:27b)

Of course, when they get to the synagogue there is a sick or infirm person. This man had a withered hand. The tension mounted during the synagogue service. Would Jesus heal the man or not? I feel sorry for the synagogue leader as most eyes were on Jesus and not on him (and it would have been a him in those days). Maybe bets were placed before Jesus arrived on whether Jesus would heal the man or not. I can just see the odds posted on a synagogue wall.

The tension built to a climax when Jesus asks the man over to him. Before Jesus does anything, he asks for a legal interpretation about doing good on the sabbath or not. Jesus' question is met with crickets, but very quiet crickets. The Pharisees knew that they would not fall into Jesus' trap. If they said yes, it was okay to do good, then they would give Jesus license to heal. If they said no, it was illegal to heal on the sabbath, then Jesus would quote to them the laws and rules granting exceptions.

Jesus was angry. They seemed to care little about human suffering. Why would a strict interpretation of the law be more important than relieving human suffering? Is that really what God would want? Then Jesus' anger was transformed into grief. Jesus grieved that they were so set upon what they think is right that they could not conceive of a God who condones the breaking of rules. They could not conceive of a God of love or even an ethic of love.

Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand. Without lifting a hand, Jesus cured the man with an outstretched, cured hand. Is it work to say a few words? The only thing physical was what the man did, lifting his hand. Would the man be condemned?

The issue was not whether Jesus or his disciples break the sabbath laws. The issue was about the possibility that Jesus would lead a reform movement of Judaism. This would mean that, if successful, Jewish authority would rest with Jesus and not the Pharisees. The Pharisees' place of privilege and power would dissolve. Jesus must go.

In order to help them succeed, they enlisted the help of Herod's minions. Galilee was in Herod's territory. Herod could bring physical force against Jesus. However, Herod's power was only as much as Rome would let him have. Any major moves or military options would require the permission of the Roman governor in Caesarea.

In chapter three of Mark, the conspiracy to get rid of Jesus is forming. And it all started with a simple healing in a synagogue on the sabbath. By breaking the sabbath law, Jesus is inviting the death penalty.

Jesus isn't necessarily saying that rules are meant to be broken. Jesus is saying that laws and rules are good when they help people and societies.

When they hurt people and societies, then their enforcement should be discretionary. In other words, if a donkey is stuck in a ditch on the sabbath, then by all means free it.

Law enforcement has taken a beating, lately, by a few bad cops using excessive force in doing the job they were sworn to do. What we don't often see is videos of cops going out of their way to help people. Sometimes it is heart warming and sometimes just makes human sense.

This story of a law enforcement encounter took place in South Africa. I'll call the main person in the story, Joe.

When Joe was in high school, the rugby team found out Joe had learned how to drive, but he did not yet get his license. They all knew Joe did not drink, so one of them had the genius idea of inviting Joe to parties as the designated driver. They'd lost a popular kid to a drunken accident a few months earlier, so it was actually a good idea.

It was a great arrangement, lots of parties, lots of girls and all Joe had to do was get them home in one piece afterwards. It went great for a few weeks, until one night.

The police had heard there was a big party on a farm outside of town and decided to set up a roadblock. So, Joe came driving up to the flashing lights, car filled with five big drunk guys, including one passed out with his head out the window, and little scrawny Joe, barely able to look over the steering wheel. And the inside of the car smells like a brewery.

The officer takes one look at the car, asks Joe to step out. "Have you been drinking?" "Uh. No officer. I don't drink." Joe takes a breathalyzer. Zero. The officer looks at Joe. "Can I see your driver's license?" "Uh. Sorry officer. I don't have one yet. I'm getting it next week." And Joe points back towards the car, "But they have theirs."

The cop looked at Joe. He flipped his little book closed and said, "Just take them home. Next time I see you, you'd better have your license."

"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." Laws and rules are made for humankind, and not humankind for laws and rules.

Text: **Mark 2:23–3:6** (NRSV)

²³ One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵ And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷ Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴ Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. ¹

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mk 2:23–3:6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.#