

*Where we start . . .*

What do you think are some of the “marks” of a Christian? What would others notice that you think helps them conclude who is “in” and who is “out”?

*What we read . . .*

For the Jews, “keeping the Sabbath” was one of the notable ways that they were identified as God’s people. Over the years, different rabbis and teachers had built on what God had said in the Old Testament in an effort to clarify what they believed God wanted in the keeping of the Sabbath. But those views and Jesus’ approach to the Sabbath resulted in some conflict. Read Mark 2:23-3:6.


Both the Pharisees (in 2:24) and Jesus (in 3:4) are addressing the issue of what is “lawful” on the Sabbath. Why do you think they are at odds about what is lawful?

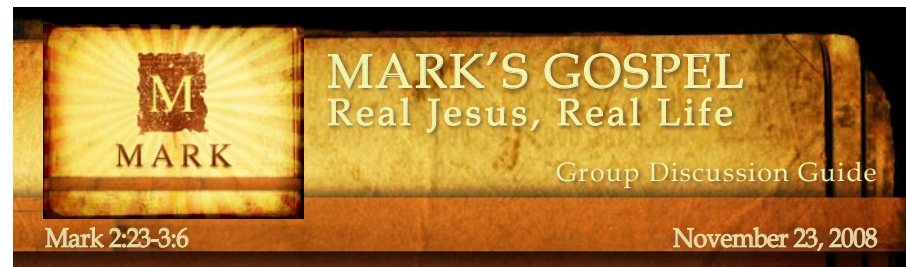
How do Jesus’ remarks in 2:27 clarify what He understands to be the appropriate attitude toward the Sabbath?

How do Jesus’ actions in the opening portion of chapter 3 underscore His thinking?

Ultimately, however this controversy with the Pharisees is not merely one of “interpretation.” Right in the middle of this section, Jesus makes what is probably the key assertion for understanding what He is doing and saying. What is His point in 2:28?

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Jesus is not inviting those around Him to discard what the Scriptures teach. But He is reserving for Himself the prerogative to authoritatively explain and apply Scripture. How will you better appropriate this role, of His, in your 



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*Diving in . . .*

Whether reading about the picking of grain on the Sabbath or the healing of the man with the withered hand, it might be possible to conclude that Jesus is simply appealing to a “greater good” principle; that is, what is “lawful” on the Sabbath is to do what is the greatest good. Although that may be true, He seems to be about something more startling than that. Jesus asserts that He is “Lord of the Sabbath.” That is an amazing assertion—proven by the amazing actions He takes—that drives us to re-evaluate whether we invite Him to have that same kind of prerogative in our lives.

*Discussing . . .*

The discussion section opens with a question about what “marks” Christians out as Christians. People may have all kinds of opinions; that’s fine. What we want to realize is that Christians (and Jews in Jesus’ day) did recognize certain things as “defining characteristics.” High on the list for the Jews in Jesus’ day was the “keeping of the Sabbath.”

Rooted in passages like Exodus 31:15 and 35:2, the Jews sought to live their lives under the “mark” of being Sabbath keepers. Unfortunately, there is a bit of fuzzy thinking (even in the church) about the Sabbath. The Sabbath is Saturday; from sun down on Friday until sun down on Saturday for the Jews. And, according to passages like the ones cited above, it was a day of rest, where attention was to be turned to God.

Jewish rabbis had assimilated a great deal of oral tradition to explain how the Sabbath restrictions on work should be understood. There were over three dozen categories of work that could not be done on the Sabbath; each category had multiple layers of explanation clarifying just what that particular kind of work consisted of. (For example: You couldn’t kindle a fire on the Sabbath, but you could use a fire that had been started before the Sabbath began; if a building collapsed, you could dig through the rubble to see if there were any survivors and, if there were, you could dig them out. But if everyone was dead you would have to leave their bodies buried until after the Sabbath was over.) We might laugh at how particular and picky the restrictions became, but the intention was to take seriously God’s instructions to do no work. The problem was, that the reason for the Sabbath rest was lost sight of in the process.

In Exodus 31:13-17, God makes it clear that the Sabbath was established

primarily to be a reminder to the people of Israel that God was the one who sanctified them, who was in the process of making them His. It really was about what God wanted them to remember about what He was doing. But, with all the rules that came to be attached to the Sabbath idea, the focus moved from God to what the people, themselves, were doing.

When Jesus and His followers were challenged by the Pharisees with doing something “unlawful” on the Sabbath (by picking grain, something that would have been considered “harvesting” and, thus, work that was not permitted on the Sabbath), Jesus replies by referring to what David had done. It is important to notice that Jesus doesn’t seem to be driving home the point that “human need surpasses the specifics of the Law;” some approach the example of David that way, but Jesus seems to be driving to a different point. It would seem that Jesus is highlighting how David, as king of Israel, had the freedom to leverage his God-given authority to side-step how the Law was understood. And this is what Jesus appears to be stressing; He is “Lord of the Sabbath” and He is the right interpreter of what the Sabbath means. And seeing that it was Yahweh, the God of Israel, who established the basics of Sabbath keeping, Jesus’ assertion is huge!

When we then encounter Jesus in the synagogue (in Mark 3) and find Him again engaged in some debate with the Pharisees, we see Him, again, seeking to define what real Sabbath keeping is. In the grain picking episode, He underscores His right as “Lord of the Sabbath” to guide His disciples’ thinking on the subject. In the healing of the man with the withered hand episode, He demonstrates His right to do what He deems best on the Sabbath.

Does this mean that Jesus has a blatant disregard for the Old Testament Law? Is He merely blowing off what was revealed in the Scriptures about the keeping of the Sabbath? Certainly not! If you think back to Jesus’ comments about the “new wine” and the “old wineskins” we can perhaps gain some perspective. The rules that the rabbis attached to and added to the basic instructions about Sabbath keeping had become the old wineskins; in an effort to live right under God’s direction, they had come to privilege their own interpretation of God’s instructions . . . over what God was really after in the first place! Jesus is merely exercising His rightful prerogative to re-acquaint His followers (and His opponents) to what God rightly thinks about the Sabbath and what Sabbath keeping should really be all about.

Since we don’t “keep the Sabbath” the way the Jews did in Jesus’ day, what are the implications for us in these two short episodes? We need to see them as concrete examples of the “new wine, old wineskins” problem. We need to realize that Jesus, as the one in charge of the kingdom of God breaking into our world, has both the right and the authority to speak to us about how we are putting into practice what we think we know of life with God. He may not end up doing things our way, but He always does things God’s way! So, we only need to wrestle with: Where is Jesus raising questions, in our hearts and minds, about the traditions and habits that we have allowed to become encrusted on what God really wants?