

THE SON OF MAN IS LORD OF THE SABBATH

Mark 2:18-28

Key Verse: 2:28

“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

From the beginning of his gospel, Mark declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (1:1). In chapter 2, Jesus reveals how he is the Messiah in several respects: Jesus has authority to forgive sins; he is the spiritual doctor who came to heal sinners, the bridegroom at the wedding, the new wine which is explosive and gives joy, and even the Lord of the Sabbath. In both events in today's passage, Jesus defends his disciples from the criticism of those who followed Jewish traditions and regulations. It is a kind of collision between the gospel and legalism. Jesus had invited his disciples to follow him (1:17; 2:14). This means to have a clear life direction to know Jesus, learn of Jesus, and grow to be like him. So to them, having a relationship with Jesus is most essential. More than anything else, they need to know who Jesus is and follow him. In order to help them keep their eyes on him, Jesus defended them from criticism so they would not be distracted or hindered. In our time as well, distractions and hindrances arise for those who want to follow Jesus. It may be through temptation or doubt from within, or criticism and legalistic teachings from outside. Though the issues may seem small, the results can be serious; they can divert us from following Jesus. Jesus wants us to give our hearts to follow him and learn of him, not turning to the right or to the left. Let's learn who Jesus is and what Jesus wants our lives to be like, and focus on following Jesus.

First, Jesus is the bridegroom and we are his guests (18-20). In Jewish society, fasting was the expression of self-denial in order to pray and seek God. One day per year, the Day of Atonement, was set aside for this (Lev 16:29,34). It was a day of national humiliation before God to seek atonement for their sins. After the Babylonian exile, four other fast days were added by the Jews. In Jesus' time the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Lk 18:12). Fasting was an expression of holy desire. Jesus did not deny the value of fasting. Yet, Jesus did point out hypocrisy regarding fasting in Matthew's gospel. Some people while fasting, disfigured their faces and left them unwashed and sprinkled with ashes, to publicize their physical hardship (Mt 6:16). Jesus' concern in this passage is to defend his disciples, who were not fasting, by explaining why it was not time to do so. Since Jesus' disciples followed him,

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they had no chance to fast. Tax collectors and sinners invited them continually, and every day was like a feast. On the other hand, the disciples of the Pharisees were never invited to tax collector's houses. Instead, they were fasting. John's disciples were fasting too, maybe because their master had been put in prison. When people saw this, they wondered about Jesus' disciples, and asked, **"How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"** (18) They implied that Jesus was to blame, since he was responsible for the behavior of his disciples.

How did Jesus respond? **"Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them'"** (19). Here, Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to his guests. Jewish weddings were very joyful events, and the celebration of them often lasted a week. It was unthinkable to fast during such festivities, for fasting was a sign of sorrow. Now, Jesus was with his disciples and their fellowship was joyful, like a wedding feast. Christian life is characterized by joy. As long as we follow Jesus, we can be joyful always, regardless of our circumstances. Some people think that Christian life is extremely ascetic, like life in a monastery. They try to refrain from doing anything except Bible study, and prayer. Humor and laughter are illegal, and they speak only the minimal amount of words. Wearing casual clothing is borderline criminal activity. But Jesus compared Christian life to a joyful wedding celebration. Frequent eating fellowship with laughter and joyful conversation is normal for Christians. So we enjoy it. Jesus wants us to be joyful always (1 Th 5:16). The joy of the Lord is our strength and the best preventive medicine for living a holy life (Ne 8:10; Pr 17:22).

However, the time would come when Jesus would be taken from his disciples through his death on the cross. Jesus knew that on that day they would fast (20). To Jesus' disciples, having a relationship with him is most important, more than anything else. When we feel distant from Jesus, we should fast. Sometimes, when we commit sin either intentionally or unintentionally, we lose joy and feel miserable, no matter what we do. When King David committed the sin of adultery and murder, he lost the joy of salvation. **He confessed, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long...my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer."** Then he said, **"I will confess my transgressions to the Lord."** **And the Lord forgave all his sins, and his joy was restored** (Ps

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32:3-5,11). If our relationship with Jesus becomes distant, whatever the reason—committing sin, loving the world, being overwhelmed with problems, becoming weary, or something else, we need to restore our relationship with Jesus as a first priority. At that time, we need to fast. It may concern more than food, like fasting from watching television, or from Internet use. Through this kind of fasting we can restore our relationship with Jesus and be joyful. Let's accept Jesus as our bridegroom and be joyful always.

Second, Jesus is the new wine which is poured out into new wineskins (21-22). In proclaiming the gospel, Jesus was beginning a new work. It was not a continuation of Judaism; it was a new beginning. Gospel work and Judaism are essentially different, and cannot be mixed together. In order to explain this, Jesus used two analogies. First, in verse 21, he said, **“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.”** These days, many people deliberately wear ripped and torn garments; it is stylish. But in Jesus' day, only very poor people wore torn garments. So when they had to repair their clothes, they were careful not to use unshrunk cloth. If they did, the first time they washed the garment it would shrink, tear away from the old, and ruin the garment. Unshrunk cloth has a kind of power. Jesus used another analogy in verse 22, **“And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”** These days, wine is packaged in bottles. But in Jesus' day it was kept in the treated skins of animals which were woven together into a container. New wineskins are very flexible to accommodate new wine, which has great expanding power. But old wineskins, after being used many times, have lost their flexibility and become rigid. They cannot bear new wine. In these analogies, unshrunk cloth and new wine represent Jesus and the gospel. The old garment and old wineskins represent Judaism. Jesus' point is that Judaism could not contain the gospel because the gospel is dynamic, and vibrant, and has life-giving power. In what respects is the gospel so powerful?

In the first place, the gospel has power to transform people from the inside out. Manmade philosophies and ideas can affect people's thought world. But they cannot transform the sinful nature of man. It is because they are ineffective against the power of sin and death. But the gospel has power to

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cleanse our sins and to make us a new creation. That is why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, but called it the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). The gospel can transform powerless paralytics into powerful servants of God. The gospel can change selfish tax collectors into the most sacrificial kingdom workers. The gospel can convert pleasure-seeking Samaritan women and men, who worship many idols, into true worshipers of God. The gospel has power to transform anyone into a new person from the inside out. “If anyone is in Christ the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17)

In the second place, the gospel has power to break into the old systems and to create a new history. Wherever the gospel is preached, it breaks evil systems and liberates people. For example, the slavery system oppressed so many people in the English empire and America. It seemed impossible to change it. But those who were transformed by the gospel, such as William Wilberforce, and Abraham Lincoln, exposed its evil and fought against it tirelessly until it was abolished. In India, for centuries it was expected for widows to immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. This practice continued until the late 19th century, when it was outlawed through the efforts of Christian missionaries, including William Carey. The forced prostitution of young Indian girls was stopped through the efforts of many Christian missionaries, including Amy Carmichael. In one area of Indonesia, tribal people had a practice of luring their neighbors into confidence, then betraying and eating them. But through the gospel preaching of Missionary Don Richardson and others this practice was abolished and tribes began to worship Jesus together and love each other. There are numerous examples. The point is that the gospel has power, through those who are transformed by it, to break old evil systems and to liberate people to create a new history.

Wherever the gospel is preached, a spiritual revolution takes place—quietly, but very powerfully. Jesus is the new wine which gives us the joy of forgiveness, the joy of new life, and the joy of walking with the Holy Spirit. In order to contain this new wine, we should be like new wineskins. It means that we should be flexible, ready to follow, learn and grow in response to the new wine working within us. Pride, laziness, and stubbornness are traits of an old wineskin which make one unfit for receiving the new wine. We must put off our old self and put on the new self in order to become new wineskins (Eph 4:22-24). We assume that new Christians are like new wineskins, and

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they usually are. We also assume that older Christians are like old wineskins, and sometimes we are. Yet it is not a matter of years, but of attitude toward Jesus. When we really follow Jesus day by day and learn humbly from him, we can always be like new wineskins.

Third, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (23-28). As Jesus had defended his disciples against criticism about fasting, he now defends them from legalism regarding the Sabbath law. One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The disciples were always hungry. Subconsciously their hands reached out and began to pick some heads of grain, rub them together to remove the husks, and eat them, munching and crunching, saying, “Ah! Tasty!” Suddenly, the Pharisees, who were hiding in the fields, popped up and said, **“Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”** (23-24). Why was this such a big deal to the Pharisees? They thought Jesus’ disciples broke the Sabbath law. They had three pillars of faith and culture in Israel: temple worship, the Torah and the Sabbath. These were all related to their identity as a chosen people. In the Old Testament, keeping the Sabbath law was so important it was included in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:8-11). It was a sign of the covenant between God and the Israelites which was to last for generations. Anyone who desecrated the Sabbath was to be put to death (Ex 31:13-14). In order to keep this Sabbath law, they wrote detailed instructions, including 1,261 specific rules. Their intention was to help people keep the Sabbath holy. However, their diligent effort in making regulations resulted in legalism, which bound people to slavery. For example, there are 39 specific activities that are forbidden, such as planting, plowing, reaping, threshing, grinding, cooking, baking, gardening, laundry, business transactions, lighting a fire, writing, erasing, and more. And each of these categories has been developed in detail. Writing one letter of the alphabet on the Sabbath is okay, but not two. Erasing one letter is okay, but not two. They also regulated how long a radish could be dipped in salt before being eaten—if it was left too long in the salt, it would begin to pickle, and pickling was forbidden on the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews of today still practice these Sabbath rules. In order to not light a fire, they do not use electricity on the Sabbath. So they do not turn lights on or off, or even push the button of an elevator on the Sabbath. Instead, they wait until a Gentile comes along and ask him or her to push the button for them.

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In Jesus' times, Jewish people were tightly bound by these Sabbath rules. The accusation against Jesus' disciples was breaking the Sabbath, by working. Picking heads of grain was considered harvesting, and separating and removing the husks was considered threshing and winnowing. In this way, the religious leaders accused Jesus' disciples as law-breaking sinners. They lost the spirit of the law, which is love. They became legalistic, critical, and judgmental. They did not know God's heart of mercy, justice and compassion. They were not understanding of others. In their hands, the law was no more than a tool to judge and condemn others.

How did Jesus defend his disciples? **He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"** (25) By saying, **"Have you never read,"** Jesus exposed the Pharisees' lack of real Bible understanding. Then Jesus defended his disciples by explaining a Bible story from God's point of view. He said, **"In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he [David] 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"** (26). Here we learn from Jesus two things.

In the first place, Jesus considered his disciples as precious as David. In a time of crisis, David once ate consecrated bread, which was lawful only for the priests to eat. The high priest understood David and allowed this. It was because he knew God's heart of mercy on the needy. God did not rebuke David regarding this matter. It was because David loved God with all his heart. So he was known as a man after God's own heart (Ac 13:22). God sees the heart (1 Sa 16:7b). Like David, though Jesus' disciples made mistakes they basically loved God and had committed their lives to follow Jesus. So Jesus bore with them and defended them. Jesus never criticized his disciples over trivial things. He embraced them with love which enabled them to grow as shepherds like David. Love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Pe 4:8b).

In the second place, Jesus valued man's life more than the law. In verse 27 he said to them, **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."** After finishing the creation of heaven and earth, God rested on the seventh day. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Gen 2:2-3). God did not rest because he was tired after hard work. He rested in order to commemorate what he had done. He also blessed the Sabbath for the benefit of people—for our spiritual, mental and physical restoration. God gave the

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Sabbath so that we may stop ordinary work and come to God. God wants us to worship him, have fellowship with him, serve one another in love, and find real rest. God did not make the Sabbath to control us with rules. God's purpose of the Sabbath was for our well-being. It is because God loves us, who are made in his own image. Jesus understood God's purpose and valued man's life more than the law.

Then Jesus declared, **“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath”** (28). This means that Jesus is God who created the heavens and the earth, including the Sabbath. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus is the head of the church (Col 1:18). Jesus is the Lord of our lives. So in order to keep the Sabbath we should first of all accept Jesus as Lord in our hearts. We should love him, worship him, listen to his word, and serve as Jesus wants us to serve. Christian life is not a matter of engaging in many kinds of activities. It is to follow Jesus, love him, listen to him, and to have an intimate relationship with him. Then, whatever we do, we do out of love for Jesus, and we can learn of him and grow to be like him. Then true joy and peace come into our hearts. Jesus invites, **“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”** (Mt 11:28). Let's accept Jesus as the Lord of our lives and love him and serve him with all our hearts, even though we make many mistakes. Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please.” Let's love Jesus from our hearts.