

# **First Serve**

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Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 2:23-3:6

Topic

The Pharisees are furious that Jesus and His disciples push beyond the traditional boundaries of the Sabbath day observance

Title

*"Seventh Day Adventurers"*

## Introduction

If you want to observe the Sabbath, but live in a high rise building, you've got problems. Sabbath laws prohibit you from pushing the buttons in an elevator, because doing so completes an electrical circuit. Completing an electrical circuit is considered kindling a fire - a prohibited activity from sundown Friday til sundown Saturday.

There **is** a workaround. Special Sabbath elevators can be programmed to stop at every floor of the building, automatically, so that there is no need to push the button.

There are special Sabbath ovens that are built with Sabbath day settings.

Don't forget the refrigerator. If you open the door, and the light comes on, you've kindled a fire.

We chuckle, because this is ridiculous, but there are folks, and not just Jews, either, who take such Sabbath observances very seriously.

If it hasn't happened to you already, sooner or later you'll be confronted by someone who insists that you *must* 'keep' the Sabbath. Depending on who they are, that could mean simply that you attend church on Saturday instead of Sunday, or it could mean that kindling a fire, and a myriad of other restrictions, are going to make it all but impossible for you to get any rest on Saturdays.

Thankfully Jesus addressed the Sabbath day, and how it should be approached, and we get the foundation of what He taught in our text today.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Don't Let Anyone Burden You About Observing The Sabbath, and #2 Don't Let Anyone Block You From Serving On The Sabbath.

#1 Don't Let Anyone Burden You  
About Observing The Sabbath

(2:23-28)

The fourth of the Ten Commandments says,

Remember the sabbath day, to 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; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (NAS, Exodus 20:8-11).

That's it. Nothing about kindling a fire, or elevators, or ovens, or refrigerators.

The Sabbath day, in the Bible, is always Saturday, the seventh day of the week (Genesis 2:2-3, Leviticus 23:2-3). More specifically, the Jews consider a day to be the interval from sunset to sunset, and they have always observed the Sabbath from Friday evening until Saturday evening.

I might as well say this now. Some groups say that Sunday replaced Saturday as the 'new' Christian Sabbath day. **There's absolutely nothing in the Bible to back that up.**

Modern Jews continue the tradition of observing the Sabbath. There are other, Gentile, Sabbath day observers. We might be most familiar with the Seventh Day Adventists, but there are several seventh-day denominations, and hundreds of churches, that insist Christians worship on Saturday, and that they "do no work."

Here we sit, on a Sunday. Are we wrong? Let's see.

Mar 2:23 Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain.

Mar 2:24 And the Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

Walking along a path that skirted a grain field, probably wheat, the disciples picked some, rubbed it in their hands, and ate it. It was their version of a natural energy bar.

Why was it not lawful to do that on the Sabbath? That's an excellent question, because nowhere in Scripture will you find what they did prohibited on the Sabbath.

In extra-biblical writings, the Jews identified thirty-nine categories that constitute "work." I don't want to list them all; the ones pertinent to our discussion are reaping, threshing, and winnowing.

Sure, if you are a farmer, reaping, threshing, and winnowing your grain is obviously work, and you ought to abstain from doing it on the Sabbath. That makes sense.

Ah, but to a Pharisee, picking a few heads of grain on your walk is considered reaping. Rubbing it in your hands is considered threshing. Blowing away the chaff before you eat the handful of grain is considered winnowing.

If you're thinking, "That's insane, and certainly cannot be God's intention," then you're on the right track. But we need to hear it from Jesus.

The Pharisees kept pressing their question, so Jesus answered them.

Mar 2:25 But He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him:

Mar 2:26 how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?"

These guys prided themselves on knowing the Jewish Scriptures. They *did* know them; they *were* experts.

When Jesus said, "have you never read," commentators jump on it, suggesting He was putting them down, putting them in their place.

Maybe. I don't like to ascribe that kind of motive to Jesus. After all, He came to die for proud Pharisees, too. We're told Jesus "made Himself of no reputation," so it wasn't important for Him to put down anyone.

When you read His whole answer to them, I think you see that Jesus was suggesting that they were starting at the wrong place in their thinking when it came to the fourth commandment.

They were starting with the definitions of "work," then applying their definitions to people as rigid rules that they must rigorously observe. In this case, since farming was clearly work, then so was the micro-farming of the disciples.

If you start by trying to define "work," you'll never think of the episode Jesus mentioned as establishing a principle for understanding the Sabbath.

David, on the run from King Saul, was hungry. At that time, the Tabernacle was located at Nob, the old priestly town near Jerusalem.

David entered the Tabernacle, where twelve loaves of bread were always kept situated on a special table. They were replaced every Sabbath, and only then could they be eaten, and only by the priests.

The eating of the Tabernacle bread by David and his men was a direct violation of the Mosaic law, not just a violation of some interpretation or tradition of the Pharisees. It was a serious offense... Or so you'd think.

Nevertheless, David was nowhere condemned by God in Scripture, and he was held in high esteem by the Pharisees.

In David's case, human need overruled the Law of Moses. David's eating the forbidden-to-eat bread was a Scriptural proof to the Pharisees that their rigid demands concerning their traditional observance of the Sabbath were inconsistent with the Scriptures.

More importantly, they were inconsistent with the heart of God towards people. God didn't establish the rituals of the Tabernacle, like the twelve loaves, in order to have men starve rather than eat.

In March of this year, in New York, seven children from an Orthodox Jewish family died after their family's home burned. The fire is believed to have been caused by a faulty hot plate the family was using in observance of Sabbath rules. Since you can't cook on the Sabbath, and you can't switch anything on and off, if you want hot food, you keep it on a hot plate that you turn on before sundown Friday, and leave on until after sundown Saturday.

I don't think that is what God had in mind for the Sabbath.

Mar 2:27 And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

You can't start with the work. You have to start with the men who do the work, whom God loves. The Sabbath was *never* intended to be, or to become, a burden to mankind. It was *always* intended to be a blessing.

The Sabbath was a gift from God that afforded mankind not only physical rest but also refreshment in spirit in raising his thoughts above his daily labors.

Jesus wasn't done with His analysis.

Mar 2:28 Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."

There are two ways of reading this, both considered to be correct by scholars.

The first is the most common, that Jesus, being the unique "Son of Man" prophesied by Daniel could speak with authority about the Sabbath.

After all, **Jesus was there on the very first Sabbath** - on the seventh day of creation.

The second way you can read this is that "Son of Man" here means all mankind. Hebrew scholars, and messianic Jews, read it that way.

If that's the case, Jesus was reinforcing what He had just said, that people take priority over the Sabbath, not the other way around.

We now have a much better, much more biblical, understanding of the Sabbath, Jesus style. Since He observed it, **why don't we?**

Well, let's survey what happened after Jesus died and rose from the dead.

The first Christian converts, on the Day of Pentecost and beyond for a time, were all Jews. They continued to worship as Jews, and that meant they continued to observe the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 17:1-2, 18:1-4).

Because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, on Sunday, those early Christians called it the "Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10), and regularly met for their Christian worship on Sunday (Acts 20:7, First Corinthians 16:2).

When Gentiles began to convert to Christianity, a dispute arose about whether the Gentile Christians had to observe the Jewish laws about circumcision, dietary restrictions, and the Sabbath. In about 49AD, Paul, Peter, James and other church leaders met at what we call the Council of Jerusalem and decided, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that it was **not** necessary for Christians to observe the Sabbath rules and other aspects of Jewish law (Acts 15:28-29).

Period. End of discussion. Or, at least, it should have ended the discussion; but it didn't.

There were those who persisted in demanding Gentiles observe the Sabbath and other rituals of Judaism. They persist to this very day.



To all of them, then and now, the apostle Paul said,

Col 2:16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,

Paul could not make it any plainer that you are *not* under **any** obligation to keep dietary laws, or any special Jewish feast days, or *any* "sabbaths," which would include the weekly Sabbath as well as the every seventh-year Sabbath, and the fiftieth year Sabbath, called the Year of Jubilee.

If someone wants to worship on Saturday, I say, "Knock yourself out."

If someone says we all *must* worship on Saturday, and keep other rules and regulations, I say, "Not."

Let's dig a little deeper still. The word for *seven*, and for *rest*, is the same; it is Sabbath. The primary meaning of the Sabbath is rest. You see that even without the definition of the word, because the very first Sabbath was a day when God rested from His work of creation.

But get this: **When God rested on the seventh day, it wasn't because He was tired, and needed to kick-back and recuperate.**

No, God rested because His work was completed. He had completed all that He intended to do, and He rested from a perfect creation.

Pastor Ray Stedman said of this that "the Sabbath is not the keeping of a special day but the ending of a specific effort."

The weekly Sabbath, Saturday, **is not the real Sabbath**. It never was, and it is not now. It is a picture or a type of the real Sabbath.

These pictures and types, in Scripture, are often referred to as temporary *shadows* that point you to the permanent *substance* that they represent.

In the same passage where the apostle Paul told us we don't need to observe it, he says the weekly Sabbath was "only a **shadow** of what is to come; but the **substance** belongs to Christ."

When Jesus, on the Cross, said, "*It is finished!*," He fulfilled all the shadows that were pointing to the substance, to the real thing, which was Him.

Those who want to observe a certain day as the Sabbath are missing the real thing. They are preferring the shadow to the substance.

One author said it this way: "Remember that you are not practicing a sterile system of principles, but following a dynamic person who makes Himself real to you through His indwelling Holy Spirit."

Any modern effort to observe the Sabbath is a burden. Don't let anyone burden you by insisting you observe the Sabbath.

## #2 Don't Let Anyone Block You From Serving On The Sabbath

(3:1-6)

I thought we just established that we need not observe the Sabbath. Why, then, am I talking about serving *on the Sabbath*?

It's because there's something more to say about **rest**. We saw that God's rest meant His work of creation was complete and He ceased from His efforts.

It follows that we have a rest in which we cease from our efforts.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this:

Heb 4:9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.

Heb 4:10 For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.

"There remains therefore a rest" means that the weekly Sabbath was never meant to be permanent, but only to point us to the rest God intended for us as His followers.

What is the rest God intends for us, and has provided?

One commentator said of this, "the Sabbath-keeping [that is now] expected of God's people consists in resting from one's own works, as God did from His; it consists in trusting and being faithful to God... all self-struggle, in which one relies on one's own efforts instead of trusting God, is to be avoided."

You and I, as Christians, keep the Sabbath **everyday** as we decrease and let God increase; as we depend upon Him; as we are led by Him, and empowered by Him.

Rest is a spiritual quality of life that is available to Christians every moment of everyday. It is independent of circumstances and sufferings. It is a matter of walking in the sufficiency of God's grace regardless your trials and tragedies.

If it's an everyday thing, then obviously we are going to be serving on the Sabbath as we walk with the Lord.

With that in mind, the healing of a man's withered hand, on the Sabbath, takes on a whole new significance for us. Jesus rested in the Father's power, and it ministered help and healing.

When we rest in God's power, we, too, can be used to powerfully minister to others.

[Mar 3:1](#) And He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand.

It's worded in such a way that we know this man's hand had been injured somehow, and he had lost the use of it. The damage was permanent. There were no surgeries, no physical therapies, that could aid him.

There is a tradition says that the man was a stone mason and that the condition of his hand had forced him to beg for a living.

You have to wonder how there was anyone left in Capernaum that had yet to be healed. There were only so many hours in the day, and no matter how long the Lord labored, there were always more suffering, sick and dying.

We can't afford the luxury of being overwhelmed by needs in our world. We simply go forth and say, and do, the things the Lord shows us. There will always be more poor, more sick, more suffering, and we should follow Jesus' lead by always first giving them the Gospel, then whatever help the Lord provides through us.

[Mar 3:2](#) So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

It's clear that the Pharisees were the watchers. Too often the folks who think themselves spiritual are only watchers:

- They watch for others to fail and fall, feeling superior to them.
- Or they watch in the sense that they don't really serve anyone, but only set themselves up to be served. They are always willing to lead, but never to serve.

According to their list of Sabbath regulations, to perform a work of healing on the Sabbath would be unlawful. Healing measures might be taken on the Sabbath only when there was danger of death.

Does that sound like God - wanting you to suffer instead of being healed because it's Saturday? Sadly, that is how a lot of people see God, because that is how He is portrayed by folks, even today.

Their motive was to accuse Jesus. Thinking themselves so righteous for keeping these extra-biblical Sabbath rules, they refused to see the sinful condition of their own hearts.

Mar 3:3 And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward."

I think everyone knew Jesus would heal this man. It's what He would say about it that had them all breathless with anticipation.

Mar 3:4 Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they kept silent.

If only they would apply that principle to their analysis of the Sabbath, everything would change. It would be impossible to come to the stupid and senseless conclusion that it was "work" to heal someone unless they were about to die.

The conversation would go like this:

- Disciple: "Rabbi, it seems like providing medical care to a person is work. If work is prohibited on the Sabbath, should we therefore withhold care - except, maybe, in urgent, life-threatening cases?"
- Rabbi: "Well, let me ask you this: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"
- Disciple: "I see your point! Since God wants us to do good, and to save life, then it is OK to give medical care on the Sabbath. In fact, we *must* do so, to show the compassion of God."

Their silence spoke volumes:

- First, it stated that they knew they were wrong, but wouldn't admit it.
- Second, it shouted that they were unconcerned about people's sufferings.

Mar 3:5 And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.

As a man, Jesus experienced normal human emotions, among them anger, only without sin.

Mark will go on to say that Jesus "is 'grieved' at men's hardness of heart (3:5); that He marvels at their unbelief (6:6); that He has 'compassion' on the hungry crowd (6:34; 8:2); that He 'sighs deeply in his spirit' when Pharisees seek a sign from him (8:12); that He is 'indignant' at the disciples' treatment of children (10:14); and that He is 'greatly distressed and troubled,' his soul is 'very sorrowful' at Gethsemane (14:33–34).

The Lord knows exactly what you feel. Nobody knows you like He does. If you are lonely, you're the one shutting Him out - not the other way around.

Mar 3:6 Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Herodians were Jewish supporters of Herod, and of Rome. Ordinarily they'd be hated by the patriotic Pharisees, but having a mutual enemy in Jesus brought them together.

If you want an example of where religion will lead you, this is it. They regarded as a terrible crime Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, but they had no qualms about plotting a murder on the Sabbath.

Jesus was, and is, the Sabbath expert. As I pointed out, He was there, as Creator, resting from His perfect work on the very first seventh day. Definitely the Lord of the Sabbath.

Fast forward to His coming as the God-man. His example of observing the Sabbath was to, **everyday**, rest in His Father. And that rest included serving God by depending upon the empowering and the leading of the Holy Spirit, Who was in Jesus, and Who had come upon Him at His baptism.

We are to follow Jesus' example, are we not? There remains, everyday, a rest for us to enter, a spiritual rest of ceasing from our own efforts, and believing God. That is the real Sabbath.

It starts when we cease from our own efforts to be saved and simply receive the salvation that is offered by grace through faith in Jesus.

It continues moment-by-moment, day-by-day, as we choose to yield to the indwelling Spirit, rather than walk in our own energy.

We are not "seventh-day" anything, but, rather, are "all-seven-days" believers who can enter into the spiritual rest provided by grace.