

# The Best Of The Rest

Mark 2:23-28 April 23, 2025

In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte wanted to establish himself as the new authority in France. He staged a coup within a coup, arriving in the legislature surrounded by soldiers.

In his address to the Council of Elders he said, "No attempt should be made to look in the past for examples of what is happening; nothing in history resembles the end of the 18th century."<sup>1</sup> In his mind, this was an altogether *new* administration.

The Council demanded that he swear allegiance to their constitution.<sup>2</sup> The tiny tyrant had not anticipated their response. He wanted a *new* constitution submitted to his rule.

One side of the legislature reluctantly got on board with his new plan. The other was indignant at Napoleon's pride and self-authorization. They started shouting that he was an outlaw. In that moment, Napoleon has been described as pale, emotional, hesitating - even trembling. His armed guards surrounded him but that didn't stop members of the Council from pressing in, grabbing his collar, and slapping him around. Napoleon scurried out and retreated on his horse. This phase of the coup had been botched and he was forced to regroup with bribes, schemes, and fear mongering to set himself up as the new leader of France and the sole arbiter of her future.

There are no drawn swords in our text. No riot or fisticuffs. But tonight we witness a *huge* shift in religious history. In this scene Jesus makes *bold* statements about His unique authority. When the law-men demand that He affirm their rules and traditions, He calmly and resolutely declares that *He* decides what is and isn't Law and that *He* is in charge of how things will be done from now on.

**Mark 2:23 - 23 On the Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to make their way, picking some heads of grain.**

It can be hard to get a sense of timing in the Gospel of Mark, but even though this is only chapter 2, it's probably only 10 or 12 months before the Lord was crucified.<sup>3</sup>

If you're in the King James Version, you're told it's a corn field, but this is Galilee, not Nebraska. It's a wheat or barley field.<sup>4</sup> In his telling, Matthew adds the detail that the disciples were *hungry*.<sup>5</sup>

Now, if you recall, we're in a section of Mark where there are five conflict stories all back to back. Scenes where religious Jews - usually Pharisees - challenge Jesus about the way He or His disciples

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Roberts *Napoleon: A Life*

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.worldhistory.org/Coup\\_of\\_18\\_Brumaire/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Coup_of_18_Brumaire/)

<sup>3</sup> James Brooks *The New American Commentary: Mark*

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Earle *Mark: The Gospel Of Action*

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 12:1

do things. How He eats with tax collectors. How He claims to be able to forgive sins. How they don't fast. The final two stories have to do with how Jesus and His disciples behave on the Sabbath.

For Jews, the Sabbath was sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. It was *immensely* important on a religious level *and* a cultural level *and* a political level. This was not something only a few pious people did. The observance of the Sabbath had been a core aspect of Jewish life for centuries.

### **Mark 2:24 - <sup>24</sup> The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"**

Were there Pharisees hiding behind every shrub or what? It's like they're constantly popping out and blowing a whistle and holding up a red card.

The truth is, some Pharisees *may* have actually been traveling *with* Jesus *on purpose!*<sup>6</sup> That may seem surprising, but consider this: Even hostile biographers will sometimes be granted access to, say, the White House as they conduct interviews and research books they are writing.

The Pharisees saw themselves as keepers of the Law. They were the religious police. *They* were the ones who decided what was "kosher." When a new rabbi came along and gained a following and was teaching in synagogues, of course they're going to send members to investigate and evaluate.

They immediately called foul on the disciples' behavior. It's not that they weren't allowed to eat some of this grain - in fact what they were doing was *specifically* discussed and allowed in Deuteronomy.<sup>7</sup> It's that the Pharisees said they couldn't do it *on the Sabbath*.

There was so much you couldn't do on the Sabbath. The Mishnah is the written record of the oral traditions of the rabbis around this time. It was published at the end of the second century, so it is a great index of what the Pharisees thought and the way they did things.

The Mishnah has 24 complicated chapters which detail how to "properly" commemorate the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> There were 39 separate categories of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisees, when the disciples grabbed some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them, they were violating all sorts of Sabbath rules. They considered it to be harvesting and threshing and winnowing and the preparing of a meal. All prohibited.

But here's the thing: They said what they were doing was not "lawful." It wasn't about what was in the *Law*, it was about what they permitted. The truth is, there is almost *no* discussion in the Law of Moses about *how* you were supposed to observe the Sabbath. Essentially it gives two instructions: Cease from labor<sup>9</sup> and don't kindle a fire.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, 2nd Edition*

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 23:25

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/mountains-hanging-by-a-hair/>

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 34:21

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 35:3

The Mishnah acknowledges that there is almost *no* specific, Biblical instruction on *how* a person was to keep the Sabbath. It even admits that the regulations they complied were “mountains hanging by a hair.”<sup>11</sup>

And what a mountain it was. You can go to orthodox Jewish websites to learn how a Jew today is supposed to keep the Sabbath according to the Mishnah. You can have hot food, but no act of cooking can be done. You can't cut any object into a desired shape...*unless* you're cutting food, then it's fine. You can't write or draw or erase or take measurements or make calculations. I wonder if that applies to *mental* calculations.

You can't tear through words or letters. You *can* tear open a package if there's food inside, but avoid ripping any of the words. You also can't open a library book, since they are almost always stamped with words on the edge. So, opening the book would be “tearing” letters.

No placing cut flowers in water or even changing their water - that would be *planting*. No stapling paper, no sealing envelopes. No squeezing a fruit for its juice. If you're eating berries, you cannot pick out the bad ones before eating the good ones. You don't *have* to eat the bad ones, but you have to leave them in place.<sup>12</sup> The Pharisees lived their lives in *this* realm of unending regulation, thinking that *that* made God pleased with them.

Mountains hanging by a hair, indeed. You know, a human hair can support about 100 grams of weight.<sup>13</sup> Like a stick of butter. Not a mountain. It's not strong enough.

Do we think that when God established the Sabbath, a day of *rest*, that *this* is what He wanted? He didn't. And that's what Jesus tells them.

**Mark 2:25-26 - <sup>25</sup> He said to them, “Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry—<sup>26</sup> how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the bread of the Presence—which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests—and also gave some to his companions?”**

Notice that Jesus did *not* say, “We didn't violate your rules.” The point He's going to make is that He had the authority to override their rules *and* that they were totally wrong in their perspective, their priorities, and their practices.

This was a violation of the oral tradition, but Jesus just didn't care. In fact, some have described Jesus as being “remarkably indifferent” to their accusation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mishnah Hagigah 1:8

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.ou.org/holidays/the\\_thirty\\_nine\\_categories\\_of\\_sabbath\\_work\\_prohibited\\_by\\_law](https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law)

<sup>13</sup> <https://crownclinic.co.uk/coping-with-hair-loss/the-strength-of-human-hair/>

<sup>14</sup> Donald Hagner *Jesus And The Synoptic Sabbath Controversies* BBR 19:2

Jesus said, "David and his guys were hungry." Now, Jewish scholars tried to make the case that David was *starving*, but the text doesn't say that and you can't even really get there, logically. But they say, "Well, he must've been *starving*, and that made it ok for him to eat this bread."<sup>15</sup>

But, in the other accounts, Jesus also pointed out how the priests in the Temple violate the Sabbath all the time and are seen as totally innocent. This was a perspective issue. God didn't establish the Law because ceremony is the most important thing to Him. He always wants to relate to us on a *heart* level.

Now, when they appealed to tradition, Jesus pointed to revelation. What does the Word of God say and what does that teach us not only about holiness and devotion, but what does it teach us about the heart of God and how He wants us to relate to Him and Him to us?

Jesus says, "Have you never read...?" It's *obvious* to Jesus that eating a few oats on Saturday wasn't a problem. He declared it was *not* a violation of the Sabbath commandment.

According to the rabbis it was not permitted to fast on the Sabbath.<sup>16</sup> But they were hungry. If they refuse to eat when they're hungry and they *could* eat...isn't that fasting? Issues like that were filling up scrolls of discussion, but every time the traditionalists thought they solved a problem, they made another. It's silly and tragic when we try to live by that kind of human reasoned legalism.

Now, in citing this example, Jesus was not only giving a Biblical precedent, He was also making a bold claim. Because this was not a one-for-one parallel. What the disciples did wasn't really the same thing that David did.

What Jesus was saying was, "I have the spiritual authority to make a call on this the way David and the high priest did."<sup>17</sup> This is a dramatic claim. Their highest judge and greatest king.

### **Mark 2:27 - <sup>27</sup> Then he told them, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.**

This is what legalism and traditionalism always gets wrong. The Sabbath was meant to be a *gift* from God to His people. A time of rest and joy and refreshment, not a time for affliction - a weekly ordeal that we have to dread. As one source puts it: The Sabbath was never meant to be a straight jacket.<sup>18</sup> But that's not only what the Sabbath had become, but *all* of the practices of the Pharisees.

In Luke, Jesus calls them out and says, "you guys are just loading people with burden after burden and you don't raise one finger to help them."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

<sup>16</sup> Clifton Allen *Matthew-Mark*

<sup>17</sup> R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

<sup>18</sup> Frank Gaebelin, D. A. Carson, Walter Wessel, and Walter Liefeld *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*

<sup>19</sup> Luke 11:46

We can easily identify Pharisee behavior among the Pharisees, but we really need to be careful about this in our own lives and traditions as well.

The human heart gravitates toward traditionalism and legalism of one kind or another. We want to think we've solved every issue, that we've cracked every code - that the things we practice and prioritize are the most spiritual or are the things that best please God.

But, if you were a Jew there in Mark chapter 2, when do you think the last time was when you truly *enjoyed* the Sabbath? Do you think children looked forward to Saturday? That's what the Lord wanted for His people.

**Mark 2:28 - <sup>28</sup> So then, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**

This was a "clear, unambiguous declaration that He was the Messiah."<sup>20</sup> Some try to make the case that when Jesus said, "Son of Man," they would've thought He meant that "humans" are lord of the Sabbath, but that cancels out the whole argument.<sup>21</sup> Because the Pharisees were there saying, "We know the right way to keep the Sabbath," and Jesus says, "No you don't. Not by a long shot. You've ruined it with your human legalism. *I'M* telling you how to think about the Sabbath."

Once again Jesus calls Himself by His favorite title, found in Daniel 7: The Son of Man. The One Who is in charge of *everything*, even of the Sabbath.

Not only is He once again claiming that title, He is suggesting that He is taking the place of the Torah.<sup>22</sup> That is, of course, *exactly* what Jesus did. It's not that the Torah was wrong - it was absolutely necessary and part of God's unfolding plan. But Jesus came to *fulfill* the Law and to establish a *new* system. A new covenant where He decides how we relate to Him - what we do, how we do it, what it's based on.

That is why the Sabbath *no longer applies to believers*. You do not have to "keep" a day of rest. Of all the Ten Commandments, that is the *only one* that is not repeated in the New Testament. Rather, we should make every effort to enter into the rest that Jesus ushered in: A rest for our souls.<sup>23</sup> Not laboriously striving in our flesh, but serving in the Spirit.

Jesus was announcing that He was the culmination of God's historic work to bring a perpetual Sabbath to the people of earth. But more than that, He is declaring that He is the final Authority on how God wants to relate to Him. And, as usual, we can see the overflow of His tender grace in the scene.

You see, Jesus *knew* this was going to happen. He *knew* His disciples would be hungry. So what did He do? He led them on a walk near a grain field. A place where their need could be freely met.

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<sup>20</sup> Lloyd Ogilvie *Life Without Limits: The Message Of Mark's Gospel*

<sup>21</sup> James Brooks *The New American Commentary: Mark*

<sup>22</sup> Hagner

<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 4:8-11, Matthew 11:28-30

And then, the Lord made it clear that His goal is not to make all of us feel *bad* all the time, but that His hope is that we would be able to be *refreshed* in our relationship with Him. Full of joy and rest, knowing that our Lord is mindful of us and leads us in ways that result in our satisfaction.

And then we get the philosophical blessing that we do not have to construct some complicated system to convince ourselves we're spiritual or we're pleasing God. Instead, Jesus demonstrates that we can go to the Scripture and know *exactly* what the heart of God is like and how He wants us to walk with Him and how we can lay hold of Godliness. We don't have to sit around debating whether opening a library book makes God angry. We can go to the Bible and see God's grace, His mercy, His provision, His lovingkindness, His tender patience, His affection, His care for us.

Our part is not to then turn around and build rituals instead of cultivating relationship with the Lord. To not become Pharisees in our perspective, our priorities, or our practices. Pharisees, who live only to criticize others. Pharisees who make rules out of thin air that no one could ever really do. Pharisees who care more about the outward form of religion than a heart that hears from God, is sensitive to the Spirit of God, and obeys the leading of God.

As we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, let's always remember that Christ is the center, Christ is the anchor, Christ is the Decider, Christ is Authority. And He has revealed what He wants, how He thinks, the way He does things. We find true relationship with God *not* in human reasoned legalism, not in traditionalism, but by growing in our understanding of the grace of God as it has been revealed in the Bible.