

Ruling, Humanly
Menno Mennonite Church

Purpose: To explore the ways that God's law is conceived of in our theological imagination.

Message: The rule of how to do what we ought is always biased toward human need and nature.

Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6 (I will read); Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (Please read)

Synopsis: When we think of keeping sabbath holy, we readily think of the work of keeping rules. Likely there was the whole litany of the things that just were not done on Sunday no matter what. We may well carry a pang when the circumstances align just so to make tasks simply must-do on the holy day. These rules are well meant—to carve out time that is meant to maintain difference and other-ness that is important—we also know well that rules can also take life as well. Jesus' invitation into the gift of sabbath is connecting, always, to life, even when that takes you outside the rules.

Mark 2:23—3:6

²³One sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields;
and as they made their way
his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

²⁴The Pharisees said to him,
“Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?”

²⁵And he said to them,
“Have you never read what David did when he and his companions
were hungry and in need of food?”

²⁶He 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.”

²⁷Then he said to them,
“The sabbath was made for humankind,
and not humankind for the sabbath;
²⁸so 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.

²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath,
so that they might accuse him.

³And he said to the man who had the withered hand,
“Come forward.”

⁴Then 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.

⁵He 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.

⁶The Pharisees went out
and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him,
how to destroy him.

Chances are you have memories of keeping the Sabbath Day holy. Were we to take the time to pass the microphone around and share our best Sabbath stories, I am sure there would any number of rules, regulations and the way that those were enforced for you in your youth about how things were or were not done. The way you dressed, what you did or did not do, when the sabbath started and ended all have a way of sticking with you. I am guessing too that there are likely just as many stories if not more about what you perhaps did to stretch those rule within their limits and likely beyond. It is a rare rule indeed that people don't take at least equal pleasure in breaking, bending or otherwise getting around. That is what rules are meant for after all—to find a way around them. For me I can recall the outrage (or at least some concerned rumble) when it was announced that the local grocery store would adopt a 7 day a week schedule, much to everyone's chagrin. There was concern, comment, and disagreement, but soon enough it was rather convenient to be able to pick up the last ingredient for dinner on your way home from church. We are used to our world running as it does: full throttle all the time, without regard to the time or place. It is just what we expect. When we were there Manitoba had a provincial curfew on retails sales of Sundays, closing the doors at 6 to at least allow an evening of rest for non-essential stores. More than once I would find myself frustrated on a Sunday evening hardware—or worse yet—diaper run. Sabbath observation seems like something that has gone the way of men wearing fedoras and women sporting white elbow gloves. The time of Sabbath is a thing of the past, full of strict rules of thou shall nots and stiff collars of exactly what is in and what is out.

With these experiences of the rule bound nature of Sabbath, how can we not be cheering for Jesus in these stories. I mean; yes—he's Jesus. He is the one for whom we are always cheering to be sure, but even more so now. This is one more episode of the ongoing contest between the law and grace; the way of judgement and the way of Jesus. There are certainly enough experiences for us to think in those terms as it occupies the black and white sort of view that we bring to the stories of how Jesus encountered the powers that be. Yet what is going on here is less about the law, important though that may be, and far more to do with the nature of the who was interpreting the law and to what end.

It is easy to dismiss Sabbath as that big of a deal, even way back when as we are here with Jesus. There is a temptation to apply our sort of easy-come-easy go sort of notion to the whole thing and think it not that big of a deal. Yet it is Sabbath keeping, the habit of releasing

oneself into the goodness and provision of God are hallmarks of what it means to be Jewish especially in these times. This is what YHWH undertook at the very beginning and what the people were commanded toward in the most basic of law. From sundown Friday until Saturdays sunset you rested. You and all who are with you; no exceptions. Sabbath then and now implores us to break from labor and striving in order to rest in the goodness of God's provision. We need sabbath to save us from the delusion that our existence depends singularly on our ability and our competence but to be reminded of the far more fundamental truth: we exist because God wishes us to exist. Sabbath was made for and gift to us so that we can remember this. Yet this good thing is subject to our impulse to regulate and erect laws and insist on performance meaning to preserve the gift that we can sometimes lose in the process.

The ways that Jesus and disciples go about violating the sabbath rules bring this into focus. The disciples, walking along as is their wont pluck some grain ripe for the eating. Mark doesn't bother to explain why, how or to what end. We assume that they were hungry and were looking for a snack, but we can easily imagine them wondering along mindlessly passing the miles on the road with conversation and the grain that came readily to hand. It was just what happened one way or another.

But to the pharisees this is harvesting and reaping grain, something that falls well out of the range of what can be done on the sabbath. The why here doesn't matter; the only way to keep the sabbath was to be strict in your ability to observe and maintain the law. Rules cannot be broken and still have someone claiming righteousness. But with Jesus, rules are meant to be fulfilled, embodied, lived in their fullness. Yes; there are sabbath rules about resting from labor, but the point, again, isn't about the stuff we do or do not do as it is the opportunity to stop and be reoriented toward God as the root and the provider of all things. Law at its best gives structure to help maintain the spirit of how it is that we want to live in the right way. More often than not we make it a prison around which we are bent.

Jesus doesn't take a lot of time to defend what is happening here or to explain why what the disciples are doing actually falls within the rules if you read subsection B part 6. Instead he takes the time to hold up the mirror to the Pharisees in suggesting that they have gotten their zeal wrong. What's more Jesus continues to do what he has been doing—advancing the conflict that has been building already within these short chapters of Mark. He has declared his ability to forgive sins, to read the times and places of the Spirit, and now he claims his

rightful authority to interpret the law. The next story brings all this home as there is no room left for doubt. This is not something done out on the way to where ever they were going, but right in the synagogue with everyone watching for the next violation. It is a trap for Jesus, meant to prove that he is exactly as unworthy as they already think him to be, but it becomes a trap for themselves and for others. Sometimes the letter of the law can so violate the spirit of the law that the two cannot be reconciled. Here their letter disallows them to even consider the possibility that the spirit of the law has something else in mind entirely: That Jesus has come that life might be known fully and abundantly.

The conflict here is not between pharisees and Jesus, or necessarily between law and grace as we are so often given to thinking about it. What is at work here is a conversation between the law that would observe requirements and the spirit of that law that is meant to celebrate the gift that was given and the law was meant to protect. *What Good is the Law* Jesus asks, *if it prevents you from doing good? From helping when it is time to help?* Making the sabbath real, knowing the gift of it all in its divine nature nurtures goodness and generous sharing in the broadest circles possible. Any representation of God's will that fails this basic test of does it draw you to greater generosity and goodness I submit remains suspect and must always be closely examined. For our God creates in us not just the capacity to do good but the ongoing mandate to create alongside what God is already doing around us to bring about the fullness of God's shalom in us and around us. It is always a worthwhile first step in examining a way of being as we take up any new thing with this in mind—how does it bring life, and then judge accordingly.

In the world of rules, the only right choice would have been for Jesus to ignore the need right in front of him and to accept these things as they are. There is an opportunity for God's shalom to be known, for wholeness to act, but the right thing to do was nothing whatsoever. Jesus refuses to accept those rules as they were both because the rules denied the way of the kingdom that was his to represent, but even more so denies the true nature of that which God intends.

It's worth noting that Jesus likens their inaction with causing harm and doing evil. The Lord of the sabbath is telling us that our self-preservation or law-keeping, cannot come at the cost of our neighbor—even at a sliding scale.

After all, when we gather on our sabbath days for worship, we are meant to be reoriented to the law's purpose of experiencing the redemptive and transforming work of the Spirit that makes us more Christlike. More like the one who fulfilled the spirit of the law and showed us its purpose, which is to be like God the Creator, who made everything good and blessed others with it.

Erring on the side of doing good may ruffle some feathers and make you some enemies, but it is in obedience to the Lord of the sabbath. It is this bias that fulfills the law, not necessarily follows it, that brings Jesus into conflict with the Pharisees. It is the bias toward the fullest meaning of knowing sabbath that may also put us at odds with the way things are done when it is our turn to know what is right.

May we live in God's good gifts—all of them—and be filled with the spirit of the one who brings goodness to all in the many gifts of the sabbath. Amen.