

# GOOD OR EVIL, LIFE OR DEATH?

## *Series: "Questions Jesus Asked"*

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Words occur in context. We don't understand a word or a phrase unless we understand the context in which it's given. Consider the phrase "Adults Only." Most of us immediately think of something fairly sordid, either promiscuous or violent or both. But for a long time here at PBC, we have had a room with a prominent sign designating it for "Adults Only." In that room are the colored pens, animal crackers, and other supplies for the children's ministry, strong temptations to put before children. The sign on the door needs to be understood in its context.

In this series of messages we are considering questions Jesus asked in a variety of settings. These questions always prove to be more provocative and important when the context in which they occur is carefully examined.

The question before us now comes from Mark 3:4. Jesus was addressing Pharisees who were looking for an excuse to oppose him. They were poised to pounce as soon as he did something that contradicted tradition. So "...Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?'" But they remained silent." The law, of course, was an expression of God's heart. So Jesus' question was, "What would please God on the Sabbath day, to do good or to do evil, to give life or to kill?" This should not be a difficult question. The answer, in fact, is so obvious that although we don't trust children with the store of animal crackers, we would easily trust them to correctly answer this question.

However, Jesus' antagonists refused to answer the question. Eventually they would indicate an answer that defied the heart of God. By the end of this passage we'll find that they were choosing both evil and death. They were determined to kill Jesus.

### TAKING A STEP BACK

In Mark 2:23-3:6 there are two Sabbath stories back-to-back. For most of us Sabbath activities are not an ethical problem. But we have similar habits and behaviors. Something you're doing to please God will look foolish or hurtful, if you take a step back and examine it. We are capable of doing the ungodly things in God's name. Sometimes we need to be asked the sort of simple question Jesus asked: "Why are you doing this? Is this what God really wants human beings to live like? Is this healthy and honoring and sane and wise? Is it right in God's name to do good or evil? Is it right to kill or make alive?"

Let's read the first of the two Sabbath stories in 2:23-28:

**One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"**

**He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he 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."**

**Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**

This was not a tense exchange. Jesus' questioners were clearly disapproving, but this text doesn't describe

them as being angry or antagonistic to the Lord. They asked a real question, and he gave them a very thoughtful, challenging answer. Jesus made powerful claims about the nature of the Sabbath and about himself, drawing on the Scriptures.

The second story, in contrast, is filled with confrontation. Let's read 3:1-6:

**Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."**

**Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.**

**He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.**

Here, Jesus was in the presence of enemies. His actions were a clear challenge ("Stand up in front of everyone.") Jesus was both angry and sorrowful at the hard hearts of traditionalists in this synagogue.

Now, to make sense of these stories, we need to ask, What is the point of the Sabbath? Why is the Sabbath a reason for the difficulties that are in this passage?

As I was considering these questions, I realized that we would do well in this culture to ask the Lord to teach us the lessons of Sabbath, or rest. We live in a time and place in which people are wound too tightly and they take themselves too seriously and work at a feverish pace. Therefore, let's consider the lessons as we examine the two accounts in Mark.

## SABBATH LESSONS

The Sabbath is an important theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The fourth commandment concerns the seventh day, and there were other laws about the seventh and forty-ninth year. There is a simple core to the idea of Sabbath. The word *shabbâth*, transliterated into English as Sabbath, is the word for rest in Hebrew. It means at its heart to relax, to cease from activities.

Sabbath rest is not a reward that is earned. I have a friend who is a travel agent, and she just got back from a trip to New Zealand that she earned because she was the highest produce among her peers. She was given red-carpet treatment, and she had a marvelous time, but she earned it. That's not Sabbath. Sabbath is the opposite, if anything. It is a determination to not take ourselves seriously, to not add up our accomplishments and decide whether or not they're good enough, to deliberately set ourselves aside and gaze at God and all that he has made. It's the choice to make God important and ourselves unimportant, on a regular basis, from the heart.

## YOU CAN REST

There are two different reasons given for the fourth commandment, in which the children of Israel were told to keep the Sabbath holy and do no work. The ten commandments are listed twice, in Exodus and Deuteronomy. First, Exodus 20:11:

**For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**

The reason to keep the Sabbath in this case is that God rested, having completed everything that needed to be done. How many of us live with a desperate sense that no matter how much we do, it's never enough?

But, tasks can be finished. Work doesn't have to go on forever. We aren't required to carry every burden. Some of us fear that a moment's relaxing of vigilance will lead to the unraveling of everything. Who knows what horrible things will happen if we relax? But God's Sabbath calls for us to rest in Him.

Psalms 127:1-2 makes a wonderful point about vigilance:

**"Unless the LORD builds the house,**

**its builders labor in vain.**

**Unless the LORD watches over the city,**

**the watchmen stand guard in vain.**

**In vain you rise early**

**and stay up late,**

**toiling for food to eat-**

**for he grants sleep to [or while they sleep he provides for] those he loves."**

It's foolishness to imagine we are indispensable. God makes the watchman successful and the builder successful, and he gives to his beloved in their sleep. God's work is done, and he invites us to enjoy a sense of completion with him, not to be distracted and pressed always to do more and more.

There was a conversation between the reformers Martin Luther and his younger friend Philip Melancthon. Melancthon understood grace less well than Luther did. One day Melancthon said, "Martin, this day we will discuss the governance of the universe."

Luther replied, "Philip, this day you and I will go fishing and leave the governance of the universe to God."

## THE SLAVERY IS OVER

The second reason for the Sabbath is that slavery is ended. Deuteronomy 5:15:

**Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.**

We can identify with the children of Israel. Once we too were enslaved, to ourselves and to the world. We were guilty of failing to meet the requirements, and we had to live a life of slavery. But now we're free, and we don't have to think like a slave anymore. We are no longer under the command of anyone but God himself, and he intends for us to exercise our freedom. Every time we act in fear, believing that we don't deserve anything better than toil and desperation, we're violating the call the Lord gives us to be free people.

God calls us to reject the sense of foolish responsibility that makes us live without rest. The Sabbath is a marvelous gift, an incredible blessing. But it is a gift that every generation resists. In modern Silicon Valley we live at the height of workaholism. We don't receive gifts from God very well. Sabbath rest is physically refreshing, it encourages community, it makes worship a priority, it teaches us the deep lessons of dependence on God. The freedom to let go, to relax and enjoy the world God has made, the privilege of setting ourselves aside and gazing at him, the marvel of enjoying each other, of not having to pay attention and keep records and account for everything-it's an incredible gift. And we resist it. Why is grace so hard to receive?

The law of the Sabbath was undermined quickly in Israel's history. The questions became, If God says to

do no work on the Sabbath day and keep it holy, what is work? In order for us to do no work, we need some accurate sense of measurement as to who's working and who isn't. And since this is a test, not only do I want to get it right, but I want to do better than everybody else. And so the ancient teachers wrote lengthy commentaries, trying to decide what was work and what wasn't. These commentaries on Sabbath-keeping bring us back to the story in Mark 2:23-3:6.

Dragging a stick on the ground was forbidden on the Sabbath as a form of plowing. It was permitted to spit on a rock but not on the ground. If you spit on a rock, the spit would eventually evaporate, but if you spit in the dirt, it might actually make the dirt come together and form some sort of clay, which could conceivably be made into a brick.

This year a number of us were in Israel together, and we were staying in a hotel in Jerusalem on a Sabbath day. They had a Sabbath elevator in the hotel. This elevator is programmed to stop at every floor all twenty-four hours of the Sabbath. The rationale is that if you happen to be walking down the hall and the door opens, you can step into the car, and then if the car comes to a floor where you want to be anyway and the door opens, you can walk out, without having done any work. But if you push the button, that's work, and you're violating the Sabbath.

The very commandment that called for joyful rest became an incredible burden. You have to work very hard to keep the Sabbath, as it turns out. You have to plan ahead and do many things on the sixth day, getting everything prepared, in order to be ready for the seventh. So the sixth day becomes especially burdensome. Further, you spend all of the seventh day wary of inadvertent failure: "What if I look the wrong direction? What if I say the wrong thing?"

The interaction that Jesus had with his accusers is very much like the struggle we have. Whenever God wants to give us something, we resist. Why does it feel like I'm being a better witness for the Lord when I'm most judgmental of my non-Christian friends? Why does it feel like I'm the best parent when I'm the most severe? Why do I imagine that God is pleased when I am the least joyful? Why do I think that the harsher I am, the better I am, or, conversely, that the more spontaneous I am, the more wicked I am? Where does that thinking come from? If we just take one step back and look at it, we see that it doesn't make any sense at all. That was Jesus' argument. The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. Rest is a gift, not a burden.

## FREEDOM AND CONFRONTATION

Let's look again at these two stories in Mark 2:23-3:6. Regarding the picking of heads of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus was asked, "Why are your disciples doing what is unlawful?" In reply he asked them an important question: "Haven't you ever read the Bible? God often appoints his servants to break conventions." God is interested in love and righteousness. People who hear the message of the Bible will find themselves unable to settle for rigidity and narrowness and negativity. They won't assume that it's a good thing to do evil on the Sabbath, to kill rather than to make alive on the Sabbath, because the Bible is not like that.

In the second story, which tells of the healing in the synagogue on the Sabbath, we can observe that there will come a time when we need to be confrontational with our tendency to resist God's gifts. It may be that you will have to disappoint the circle of friends, acting in a way that honors God but dishonors the tradition, and you will have to live with the consequences. But it is more likely that you're going to have to confront your own psychology. The bondage of your own heart will prevent you from doing what the Lord wants you to, and you'll have to take a stand against yourself. For many of us, the important confrontation will be with the interior voice that calls for traditional behaviors that dishonor God.

Finally, note that Jesus said that he is Lord of the Sabbath. Do you think of him with that name very often? He is in charge of dispensing freedom and rest, taking off burdens. We're not supposed to be driven and desperate and confused. He intends for us to experience rest and contentment and joy that come from the Spirit. The work has been accomplished, the slaves are free, life is a gift. He is the Lord of the Sabbath, and if he is your Lord, that is his intention for you.

The country song *Desperado* (1) is about a wanderer who has not rest. The chorus offers simple, important advice: "You better let somebody love you before it's too late." This is Jesus' point exactly.

**"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33.)**

## NOTES:

1. Don Henley, *Desperado*, 1973.

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