

December 5, 2010

# *A Kingdom of Suspicious Happiness - II*

Mark 2:23-3:6

## INTRODUCTION

Last week we began to see how for Jesus the main characteristic of how the kingdom of God operates in this world is by its chief end of *seeking our highest pleasure in God's greatest glory*. The bad idea that brought it up was when a few of John's disciples confronted Jesus about his disciples being a bunch of sorry slackers who were always celebrating and never fasting. This week we're going to see that same conflict of visions: this time over the issue of the Sabbath. The religious elites come again bearing No-No's—two of them to be exact.

- THOU SHALT NOT HELP YOURSELF ON THE SABBATH!
- THOU SHALT NOT BREAK A SWEAT ON THE SABBATH!

Again we suspect that something of the old creational reason for the Sabbath is preventing us from that chief end of happiness. For all of us—for the sweating sinner in each of us—this happiness is very, very suspicious.

**The Big Idea** is that the new Sabbath is the rest of God for his new people in Christ.

If you want to get deeper into the phrase “rest of God,” study Hebrews 4 especially and see two sermons I've preached that are on the web site called “The Gospel on the Seventh Day” (from Genesis) and “Rest and Receive” (from Signs of Life). I'll do my best though to unpack it in this sermon, but you have to understand that Jesus isn't explicitly setting forth the whole doctrine of the Sabbath so much as he is using object lessons to respond to a wrongheaded and damaging view of it.

Again let me stress this is not “Old-bad / New-good” as if the old function of the Sabbath—which is giving Adam a rest from his day-to-day work—is somehow obsolete or unimportant. It is just that in the gospel the “rest of God” is revealed most clearly in the assembly on the Lord's Day.

## DOCTRINE

## I. THOU SHALT NOT HELP YOURSELF ON THE SABBATH!

*One Sabbath (23a)*—notice that there were many Sabbaths recorded in the Gospels on which Jesus wants to teach us the superiority of how He is “making all things new” [Rev. 21:5]—*he was going through the grainfields (23b)*. Given Jesus’ method of teaching *as they made their way (23c)* we can imagine Him teaching the disciples in the middle of this grainfield, where the only things they could see was the sky and the stalks, many profound things about farmers and seed and soil and sun and rain and growth and life. What an annoying interruption these Pharisees must have been! But what was the charge? It says that *his disciples began to pluck heads of grain (23d)*. So is that it? Are the disciples being accused of a little five-finger discount action? Not quite.

### A) Why Are You Guys Self-Serving on the Sabbath?

1. What began as a series of ignorant, fearful questions about this very unique Rabbi has now become all-out opposition from the religious authorities. In verse 24 we see the first of many calculated attempts to trap Jesus in a theological conundrum and I am frankly dumbfounded when I hear so many professing Christians bringing texts like this to me and saying, “Oh yeah—What do you do with *that!*” pointing out some supposed contradiction in the Scriptures: oblivious that they are joining in lock step with the Pharisees. At any rate: *And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is **not lawful** on the Sabbath? (24)*. Of course they meant—Why are *you* doing this? But speaking as mouthpieces of their father, the devil, they couldn’t bring themselves yet to charge him directly and they loved to accuse the brethren [cf. Rev. 12:9]. But again, fear. The wrong kind of fear of God is dripping from the suspicions of these objections—not that fear of God that is pure, which says that God is great and majestic and final in his omnipotent holy judgment of every soul (not that fear), but—the sniveling, resentful fear that God is stingy, arbitrary, exacting, cruel, hiding good things from us, like wheat grains on a Sunday afternoon. Nevertheless, the Law was specific about work on the Sabbath: “In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest” [Ex. 34:21]. There you have it—no harvesting on the Sabbath; no exceptions.

2. Let me reiterate again that **Jesus never broke the Law**. There are two senses in which we should see this—a) On the one hand Jesus was chosen by God to stand in the same legal place for his people as the first Adam stood for his, so that He was “born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” [Gal. 4:4-5]; and on the other hand, b) the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus was sinless: “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” [Heb. 4:15]. So we’ve got some thinking to do here, some reconciling of

doctrine that we've learned throughout the Bible and some doctrine that we're gathering here in this account. And that's a good thing! But this is serious. Back in the Law, the Lord said about the Sabbath that, "Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people" [Ex. 31:14-15].

3. Jesus draws a parallel between his action and something David did: *he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him (25). For one thing, David was held in the utmost reverence so it was a kind of argument from authority (even though Jesus didn't need to appeal to human authority). But notice that he affirms that this action was in some sense against the Law: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him? (26)* This may seem like a problem at first, but let me bring in a verse from the Sermon on the Mount to see if it helps:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven [Mat. 5:17-19].

So Jesus is saying, 'You see—David did something similar for his men,' *and* He is admitting that it 'is not lawful,' so what do we do? Well let's start by listening to Jesus: what is He driving at here? This was not unintentional. Jesus wasn't just making stuff up on the fly once his disciples got their hands caught in the cookie jar!

#### B) The Sabbath Was Made for Man, Not Man for the Sabbath.

1. The first thing we need to do here is to briefly consider the Bible's teaching on the Sabbath being made for man. We will move from the creation account to the exodus account to the second reading of the Law at the gateway of the Promise Land. Now before we read these three scriptures, why do I say that this is how the biblical teaching of the Sabbath moves? Answer: Because in these three places the Lord institutes the Sabbath and in each place explains why He is giving it to us. So, first back to the seventh day of the creation week on then we'll make two more stops after that:

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation [Gen. 2:2-3].

For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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 [Ex. 20:11].

and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. **Therefore** the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day [Deut. 5:15].

Now did you catch that? The word Deuteronomy means second (*deuteros*) law (*nomos*)—which doesn't really mean “new law,” “new rules,” “another law,” or “alternative law.” It means ‘second reading of the law’ or ‘a second look,’ a deeper look. When Israel was brought under the law at Mount Sinai God's rationale for the Sabbath was **because** I worked for six days—notice that He worked for six days, not five (God defines everything besides church as the sweat of Adam's brow)—**therefore** you shall observe the Sabbath. But when He goes deeper and brings them to the place that would symbolize the rest of God's people in Christ, He says **because** I saved you, **therefore** you shall observe the Sabbath.

In other words, the Sabbath is a gift to man—a powerful gift, a gift that gives you the power that comes from rest—a gift of resting *to* church, *in* church, *by* church, *for* the church (*not from* church)!—building a bonfire of God-satisfaction that warms and shapes the soul like nothing else can. For the Jews in the centuries leading up to Christ this became exactly reversed. Why? Because two things happened during the same four centuries in between the testaments: 1) God withdrew the blessing that comes from his word and the Spirit of prophecy; 2) The nation became the stomping grounds of every tyrant and every conflict in the world. And the natural people of Israel had a very natural response to that: “We have to reclaim our nation and our glory days by returning to obedience to the Law of Moses. We will work and we will raise our families accordingly, and in so doing we will be pure and God will bless us and drive out the pagans from our land.” Does any of that sound familiar? Well that may be the way that conservative Americans tend to view Christianity in the flesh, but it may surprise you that the men and women who first came to this land and made it great had a different view. Listen to the Puritans' belief about the Sabbath:

This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their **common affairs** beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, *from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and*

*recreations*, but also are taken up, *the whole time*, in the **public and private exercises of his worship**, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.<sup>1</sup>

One more statement on God’s rationale for the Sabbath: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you’ [Ex. 31:12-13]. What is God’s ultimate reason for the Sabbath? To preach the gospel to us in the assembly: that I the Lord sanctify you, that “salvation is of the Lord” [Ps. 3:8]—Salvation is not by your effort at the office; salvation is not by your effort in your home. And what if someone says, “Right Matt, and salvation is not by your effort at church either!” Right you are, and the Pharisees in these two accounts said exactly the same! You misunderstand what church is if you have those kind of suspicions!

2. When these disciples were “reaching over” to pluck a head of grain it took no more effort than when I reach over to bowl of nachos while we’re at a Super Bowl party talking theology! The refreshment wasn’t really in the head of grain or the bowl of nachos: it was in what Jesus was telling them and these silly Pharisees interrupted it by some twisted irony, saying, “Whoa, Whoa, Whoa—what are you doing reaching into that bowl of nachos! You’re going to get carpel tunnel! All this work on the Sabbath! And now I’m going to get carpel tunnel because I’ve got to go over and pick up a stone and stone you. I may throw out my shoulder. Did you stop and think about that while you were over there trying to change the world on Sunday!” Now if they said all that—which is the logical equivalent of what they were saying—Jesus and the disciples could have rightly responded: Have you been smoking something on the Sabbath!

I don’t mean to sound trite and compare what I’m doing right now to reaching over to a bowl of nachos (because it is so much greater), but let me let you in a little secret—**this is fun!** Charles Spurgeon said this: “If I were forbidden to enter heaven, but were permitted to select my state for all eternity, I should choose to be as I sometimes feel in preaching the gospel.” And the same goes for setting up the library, setting up chairs, serving parents by ministering to the kids in children’s church, clicking the powerpoint and singing as loud as you possibly can! It’s all a note in a symphony that Pharisees can’t see. It takes the eyes of ultimate pleasure-seeking!

3. Jesus didn’t break the law by satisfying his hunger on the Sabbath. When He says *So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath (28)*, He isn’t breaking out the cheap, convenient,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 21, Section 8

arbitrary Jesus card! He isn't saying, "Um guys, I wrote the Law and wrote the Sabbath into existence, so I can break it whenever I want!" He was saying, "Fellows—I wrote the Law and wrote the Sabbath into existence, and therefore I am in a unique position to tell you *that you have not understood it*. The Sabbath *is* the gospel on the seventh day. That's what the Sabbath is. And you need to go back in my book and wake up before you miss the party on the Lord's Day."

## II. THOU SHALT NOT BREAK A SWEAT ON THE SABBATH!

### A) Why Are You Guys Others-Serving on the Sabbath?

1. You might say, as the Pharisees did, OK, OK, I can see receiving on the Sabbath, but surely this is work or that is work! Surely that act of ministry is self-justification! Surely that will burn you out! So chapter 3 begins by saying, *Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him (1-2)*. Wow. In case you haven't gotten it yet, these religious elite guys were the bad guys. You don't want to be one of these guys. It says that "they watched" him "so that they" can get some dirt on him, so that they can discredit him, so that they can put a stop to this Jesus movement. In the core of every human heart is something much uglier than a Grinch. In the depths of your heart and my heart is a prideful, fearful reaction when we get on a crusade, when someone ticks us off, when we want to make a point, this little green monster—and it's not envy (envy is only a symptom)—becomes a very big green monster and begins to scoff at the happy, hopeful, anticipating movement and can see nothing but trouble and desire nothing but to stop it. If I was honest I would have to confess that there are people who I have seen—either up close or maybe in the public eye—who grew in distaste on my tongue, who I can't even see in the image of God anymore and I just want to see them fail or fall—at least enough so that I can lean back with a grin and say, "Told you so" or "Pssh—Parasite." That's where these religious leaders were at. For the rest of their lives they would rather get fiercer in their resentment and fear that to admit the obvious: "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" [Acts 10:38]. Now let's get specific into this episode.

2. So the Pharisees started in with him again, right? Well, actually, no. Read the next words carefully: *And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here" (3)*. This man didn't

approach Jesus for a healing. Jesus insists—You, come here (I want to make a point): like a magician calling an audience member on stage. What the Pharisees meant for evil, God meant for good. But God did mean it! They wanted to start in with Jesus, to instigate. But Jesus was a million steps ahead of them.

## B) The Sabbath Was Made for Life, and That's No Work at All!

1. First lesson from Jesus is that the Sabbath is for good and life, not for harm and killing: *And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (4a)*. Harm and killing—that's a little dramatic isn't it? So if this man goes home he's going to die? If we don't assemble in the name of the Lord we're going to die? Actually yes—and, oh by the way, you're already dead. It says, *But they were silent (4b)*. Why were they silent? I don't know for sure, but I suspect they at least knew more about the Scriptures than typical Americans do. They knew that God had said to the first parent of the human race that, "in the day that you eat of it (the forbidden fruit) you shall surely die" [Gen. 2:17]. They knew that when Israel assembled God told them that His word "is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land" [Deut. 32:47]. They knew that something about the assembly really was a matter of life and death.

Well in the traditions that began to emerge to protect the Law, it was OK to heal on the Sabbath—but if it wasn't a life-threatening condition, better to wait till the weekend is over. And from a carnal perspective, anyone could have objected that this was not a matter of "saving a life," but of a mere hand. But it was a hand that needed to work during the week. And it is a mockery of those whose jobs and homes are not everything that they should be to prevent their restoration on the Sabbath. What kind of a person can say that 'Receiving from God on the Sabbath is all I have?' One person like that is *this* person—a man who can't use his hand during the rest of the week as well as you can.

2. Is this a big deal to God? Next verse: *And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart (5)*. The words "around at them" suggest that there were quite a few of these Pharisees in attendance gathering around like vultures around a carcass instead of brothers around another brother in need. Remember everyone, just like fasting last week, Jesus isn't saying "resting bad," or "resting not necessary." He's saying rest physically when you're highest desire (immediate need) is sleep but stretch out your withered hand when your

highest desire (ultimate need) is restoration. So think of last week when fasters crashed the wedding party. Jesus never said, “No, no, no—guys you don’t understand, I’ve done away with fasting.” So here He does not say—no, no, no—guys I’ve done away with going on family vacations and taking sabbaticals and keeping the kids home when they’re sick—He doesn’t say that! Those things still have their place. But fasting’s place is not during a wedding. And the old Sabbath’s place is not where you find restoration for your soul and maturity for your family. It is temporary and it is targeted and it is never, ever to be used as an excuse to keep Jesus away from men with withered hands or men with withered hands away from Jesus.

3. If we look at the healing itself, we could look at it through man-centered lenses or God-centered lenses: Jesus *said to the man*, “*Stretch out your hand.*” *He stretched it out, and his hand was restored (5b)*. One way to see it is to see the man stretching his hand as the cause of his hand being restored; the other way to see it is that Christ’s word is what initiated everything. Though both aspects are real causes here, this is no way to interpret Scripture. Narratives and parables always teach theology, but that doesn’t mean that we can isolate every minute muscle spasm and every piece of scenery and construct a whole doctrine out of it. What we can say from a God-centered perspective is that this whole thing is Jesus’ action to make a point to the Pharisees. The account closes with *The Pharisees [going] out and immediately [holding] counsel with the Herodians against him, [to plot] how to destroy him (6)*. Nevermind the sinister ending to this passage—we’ll see it again and again. Jesus was now public enemy number one. Our task to get a good grip on what it was that Jesus was showing and what it was that the Pharisees were not understanding about Law and Gospel, about Life and Death.

You recall the statement at the first institution of the Sabbath, that God “rested on the seventh day from *all his work that he had done*” [Gen. 2:2]. And yet Jesus can say when He came: “My Father is working until now, and I am working” [Jn. 5:17]. What’s going on here? In the Old creation, the labor of Adam was in vain [cf. Gen. 3:17-19], but in the New creation which begins in the present church age, Paul says that we are “always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that **in the Lord** *your labor is not in vain*” [1 Cor. 15:58]. What makes work out there restless is that we suspect, deep down, that it’s in vain. What makes church restoring for the mature Christian is that we know that it’s *not* in vain. Now as it turns out there’s a way for secular work to not be in vain (but that’s another sermon).

But *the reality of restlessness comes from the lack of reality of the things you're working on*. That might be an alternative big idea to this message. Infinity doesn't get tired. And if the thing you're working on is really from God then service becomes the real joy, happiness becomes the real seriousness. Peter says, "whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" [1 Pet. 4:11]. If you're burning out, check your motives and your desires.

Do you see all that is at stake on the Sabbath? God did not give us the gift of the Sabbath so that we can define rest however we want to define it. If we defined rest the old way, as the Pharisees did, some gospel-problems begin to emerge. Here's just one: Some of us are better at some things than others. Some of us have been blessed in an area or with opportunities that others haven't been blessed with. And so, first of all, we have to be careful that we don't set up our own private version of resting in the Old Creation as a mandate for others. You'll be surprised that what is restful for you is complete and utter condemnation for someone else. But secondly, and more important, in the new creational big picture of the Sabbath, you and I don't really even get to decide what is restful for us. God has made us and He knows (even if you and I don't) that the thing that is making us most restless is our attempt to justify ourselves before Him and the thing that restores us is when He says to our withered hands "Come—stretch out your hand: I promise you it won't make you sweat in the same way as going home with that withered hand will!"

## APPLICATION

**To the Skeptic** – First, it is supposed that there is a textual difficulty here when, as always, there is just a lazy skeptic. 1 Samuel 21 calls this priest Ahimelech, yet Jesus says that David committed this action "*in the time of Abiathar the high priest*" (26). **Aha!** The simplest resolution is to note that since Abiathar was Ahimelech's father it would only be natural that the father was the high priest and not the son. The author of the Old Testament book does not claim that Ahimelech was the high priest but only the presiding priest. Lazy.

Second we might ask whether the episode of the disciples being justified in picking grains or David's men eating the holy bread was an example of situational ethics—"and I thought Christians were against situational ethics!" Well whatever term we use, ethics are always situational but justice and righteousness never change. One of the best examples in the Bible is Rahab hiding the spies from the police and lying to the King of Jericho about it. The

author of Hebrews calls this act God-pleasing faith! And yet doesn't the Bible plainly teach to submit to the authorities and thou shalt not lie? Indeed it does. And that tells us that the *essence* of lying is always bad and the *essence* of disobeying the authorities is always bad—but there is a difference between the situation and the essence. Let me give a simple example to show how this works:

1. The Bible says to esteem others as higher than yourselves;
2. Seven year old Johnny says to his mom: “Mom I disapprove of the vegetables you’ve been feeding us. I motion that we alternate Twinkies in their place.”
3. Mom would be disobedient to Scripture’s command to esteem others as higher than herself. Why not? This child is an “other,” and the verse makes no qualifications.

No—you know what’s wrong with that reasoning. It’s not moral reasoning at all. When Jesus calls himself Lord of the Sabbath, He wasn’t saying, “I’m God—I can break my own Law whenever I want!” He was saying, “I’m God—I wrote the Law; and the Law isn’t about *situations*—it’s about Me!”

**To the Saint** – This week in conversation with others it occurred to me that I had better mention a couple things that I *don’t* mean by this. Hopefully you’re not hearing this and saying: Gospel in the assembly (that’s what’s most restful), but since I don’t feel that or since I’m heading into a season where I just have to take a break—condemnation! NO. So let me list a few things that this doesn’t mean just to put some flesh on it:

- If you’re a mom about to have a baby and you need a break from children’s church—that really is needed rest and it’s good (be a good steward of your resources).
- If you’re kids just got sick and we’ve all agreed to keep our germs to ourselves—stay home and get well (that’s being a good steward of all of our resources).
- If you’ve got a family vacation planned—have a blast to the glory of God! Make memories for your kids. That’s good stewardship of your resources.
- If you’re new to The Well and you don’t even know what your spiritual gifts are—relax! Receive! Allow God’s word to inform how you enjoy serving up his gospel.

I could list many other things just like that. Here’s the principle: *If it’s not there, forcing it isn’t restful. But if it is there, repressing it isn’t restful.* I said before that if you’re

burning out check your motives and desires; and someone may say, “But what if I’m just tired?” *Exactly!* What do you when you’re tired? Sleep. If you’re really tired and not sleeping, there’s an anxiety or pride issue. What *I’m* talking about is if you’re locked and loaded and ready to feed or read or teach or sing or serve or pray and you’re not because of some superstition. You don’t know what time it is—just as the critics of Jesus didn’t know what time it was when they wanted to impose self-sacrifice or rest where it didn’t belong. It’s a category mistake we’re seeing here. If you’re starving, eat! If you’re tired, go lay down! If you’re wired specifically to be a flaming light then it would not be restful to put that out. It would go against the nature of reality.

**To the Sinner** – Jesus says to weary sinners: “It is my pleasure to break more than a sweat for you—For the joy set before Me I will break my body and pour out my blood for you.” I think you and I can break a few drops of sweat for sinners to hear that over and over and over again.

END

### **CONCLUSION (read with communion)**

God is not stingy with his bread. So generous is God with his bread that He sent his Son as the bread from heaven to be broken and tasted to see the goodness of God. In John 6 . . .

And He does not say, “You are not worthy of my bread!” Of course we are not! No one is worthy to receive his Son! But instead He simply says ‘Come, Come—“Oh taste and see that the Lord is good” [Ps. 34:8]. That’s what He says to you right now—Come and simply trust Him that He will preserve this gift in you.