

## Mark 2:23-3:6

### Introduction

I want you to picture someone who has authority. What's that person like? They're probably the kind of person who's used to getting their own way. They're the one who gives the orders and calls the shots. They're confident. Assertive. When they say jump, people ask how high. When they're around, no one's in any doubt as to who's in charge.

Now picture someone who has compassion. What's *that* person like? They're probably the first to notice when something's wrong. They're gentle. Approachable. Empathetic. Humble. They're the kind of person you can confide in without fear of being mocked or judged. They care. They're the kind of person who goes out of their way to help you in a time of need.

When we picture a person with authority and a person with compassion, my guess is that we tend to think of two very different types of people. Yet as we read Mark's book, we find those two qualities coming together in Jesus, time and time again.

He has authority. When he calls people to follow him, they drop everything at once. When he commands evil spirits, their obedience is immediate. He says, 'Be clean!' and a leper is healed. He tells a paralytic man to, 'Get up, take your mat and walk,' and he does. That's authority.

And yet he uses his authority only for good. He makes such a habit of healing those with diseases and driving out demons that crowds are drawn to him from far and wide. Four of them even break a hole in a roof to bring their paralytic friend to Jesus. He shares a meal with tax collectors and sinners, who are hated and looked down upon. Jesus is known for his compassion.

Authority and compassion. The combination of those two qualities is very attractive. And in our passage this morning, we see them on full display once again. Jesus speaks with divine authority. And he acts with divine compassion. Mark is showing us God's King. And he wants us to delight in him. So, firstly then, Jesus acts with divine authority. That's our first heading.

### Jesus speaks with divine authority

Please look down at verse 23. **One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn. 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.'**

By now, Jesus is firmly on the radar of the Pharisees. We get the impression that they're following him around to keep a close eye on him. And that's what they're doing on this particular Sabbath day. Jesus and his disciples are walking. They're hungry. And in God's goodness, there's food to eat all around them in the cornfields. The law permitted them to pick a few ears of corn as long as they did it with their hands and didn't use a sickle (Deut. 23:25). It was part of God's gracious provision for those who lacked food. But when the disciples reach out their hands to pick some corn, the Pharisees are ready to jump in with an accusation of wrongdoing. They're like a referee in a Six Nations rugby match blowing his whistle and calling for a review. The issue wasn't that the disciples had picked some corn from someone's field. That was perfectly lawful. The issue was that they did it on the Sabbath. To the mind of the Pharisees, plucking an ear of corn was a form of work which, on the Sabbath, was unlawful. And they hold Jesus responsible.

Jesus answers by drawing a parallel with an incident in the Old Testament, when King David's men had eaten bread that only the priests should eat. They were hungry and there was no ordinary bread available. So, on that occasion, the priest allowed them to eat the consecrated bread. And the point Jesus is making is that the Pharisees are being even stricter in their interpretation of the law than the high priest had been in the time of David. They were going too far. And Jesus will not be subject to their trivial, over-strict interpretation of the law.

The Sabbath was a day of rest from work. God had given the Sabbath law for people's benefit. It was intended to be a day of enjoyment and refreshment. Yet the Pharisees had obscured that intention and turned the Sabbath into a crushing burden. So, Jesus dismisses their accusation. He won't have it. He claims freedom to break their man-made rules. And he claims that freedom because he is Lord of the Sabbath: **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.'**

Don't miss what Jesus is saying here. He's making a huge claim for himself. He's claiming authority to declare what is and isn't permissible on the Sabbath because he **'...is Lord even of the Sabbath.'**

Perhaps you've played a board game and an argument's broken out about the rules. Some people think they're one thing and other people think differently. So, what do you do? You get the instructions out. They come from the maker. They speak with the maker's authority. So, what they say goes.

And that's the authority that Jesus is claiming here. He can define what's lawful on the Sabbath because he speaks with the authority of the one who made the Sabbath. It's a claim to *divine* authority.

We've seen already as we've read Mark's book that Jesus has authority to heal disease. He has authority to drive out demons. He has authority to forgive sins. And he has authority to interpret God's law. As we read his book, Mark wants us to recognise the authority with which Jesus speaks. If we recognise his authority, then we will listen to him and learn from him and obey him.

He speaks with divine authority. And he acts with divine compassion. That's our next heading.

### Jesus acts with divine compassion

Please look down at chapter 3, verse 1. **Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled 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 shrivelled 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.**

It's the Sabbath once again. And again, the Pharisees are watching Jesus closely, looking for a reason to accuse him. And this time, Jesus takes the battle to *them*. He knows what they're waiting for and he takes the initiative. There's a man with a shrivelled hand at the synagogue. He hasn't asked for healing although he would no doubt welcome it. And Jesus calls him to stand up in front of everyone, so they can all see him. Then he asks a question: **'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?'**

Jesus wants them to choose what is good, the man's healing. But their hearts are hard. They're stubborn. They don't seem to doubt Jesus' ability to heal. But as far as they're concerned, the Sabbath is not the time to do it. A shrivelled hand is not a life-threatening condition. So as far as they're concerned, his healing could and should wait. And that's what their refusal to answer conveys. If you've ever tried to reason with someone who refuses to admit they're wrong, you know how frustrating that is.

And Jesus gets angry. He's angry because they're forgetting what is good. That's what the law is for. It's for people's good and blessing. But these Pharisees had forgotten that. They

were so preoccupied with keeping their own set of man-made rules that they'd become insensitive to this man's suffering. And that is to go completely against the true nature of God's law. The psalms celebrate the goodness of God's law: it refreshes the soul and gives joy to the heart. It reflects God's good and loving character. Yet these Pharisees have forgotten that. Theirs is a compassionless legalism. And their strict adherence to their own man-made rules means denying this man the joy of the Sabbath. They choose evil over good and death over life.

And once again, Jesus won't have it. Once again, he claims authority to define the true intention of the law. Where they choose evil and death, he chooses good and life. And where they lack compassion, he personifies it. In defiance of their rules, he tells the man to stretch out his hand and heals him. And we can only imagine his joy as his hand is restored.

Jesus couldn't have done anything more deliberately provocative. And the Pharisees start plotting to kill him. It's the beginnings of the plot that will lead ultimately to his crucifixion.

### Conclusion

So, what should we make of all this?

Well, I could spend some time talking about the dangers of the petty legalism displayed by the Pharisees. That might be worthwhile. It would certainly be helpful to spend time reflecting on ways you and I could slip into that same kind of legalism. But if we stopped there, that would be to miss the point of what Jesus is doing.

This isn't simply an attack on legalism. These incidents haven't been recorded for us merely as a warning against adopting the same mindset as the Pharisees.

It's all about Jesus.

Mark told us in chapter 1 that he came proclaiming a message. And I've reminded us, many times, what that message is. **'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'** Everything Jesus said and did proclaim the coming of the kingdom. And this passage is no exception.

The Pharisees longed for the coming of the kingdom. They thought that when it came, the nation would enjoy a great Sabbath day. It would be a day of celebration and rejoicing. The coming of the kingdom of God would mean release from captivity, redemption from slavery, the defeat of their Roman enemies and rest from all their troubles and afflictions.

So, it's no accident that Jesus heals this man on the Sabbath and releases him from his distress. The choice of the Sabbath day to perform this healing is deliberate. It's an acted sign. He's demonstrating through his actions that the great Sabbath day the Pharisees longed for was breaking into history already, albeit in a way they didn't expect. They thought the Sabbath day wasn't the right day for this man's healing. Jesus is saying that

there couldn't be a more appropriate day. This man's relief from his affliction was a sign that the blessings foreshadowed in the Sabbath were breaking into history in his ministry.

The tragedy is that the Pharisees couldn't see it. And as we read these verses, the challenge for us is whether we can see it. As you hear Jesus speak with God's authority and see him act with God's compassion, can you see before you God's King, who is bringing in the blessings of God's kingdom?

The Sabbath rest he offers is not a rescue from a Roman enemy. Nor is it merely a day of rest from work or release from affliction. He's come to give us a far greater rest. He's come to do battle with Satan, to free us from his grasp and liberate us from his control. He's come to bring forgiveness for our sins and release us from the burden of guilt we carry in our hearts. He's come to restore us to the joy of fellowship with our heavenly Father through faith alone, fellowship we enjoy each day through his Spirit in our hearts. And he's come so that we might enjoy the blessing of life as it should be in a world made new, when he returns at the end of history. This is the rest that Jesus holds out to each of us. And we can enter this rest today.

Will you do that? Will you come to him and receive the blessings that he wants to pour out on you? Please speak with me after the service if you want to know what that involves.

And if you have done that, then rejoice in him. Rejoice in the King who gives you rest. Delight in the King who always exercises his authority with compassion and kindness. Whatever situation you are in, rejoice in the knowledge that he is working in it only for your good and blessing. And commit yourself wholeheartedly to him.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for all the blessings you extend to us through faith in him. Thank you that he reigns over us as our King with authority and compassion. Please help us to submit to his rule confident of his kindness. And help us to rejoice in him each day. We ask it for his glory and our good. Amen.