

7.18.09 / Mark 2:23-28

This passage follows directly after the one read last week.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

Is picking grain against the Law? The answer is “probably”. Even such small actions as lighting a fire counted as working on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:3), and there are specific injunctions against skipping the Sabbath during harvest (Exodus 34:21). The manna which fed the Israelites in the Exodus was not available for gathering on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:26), which also suggests that gathering food counts as work. However, there is no specific definition of work offered in the Law. It is also notable that Jesus does not choose to dispute the unlawfulness of his action, but, rather, justifies it.

The story Jesus references is in 1 Samuel 21. It is worth reading this story, since it serves as the base for Jesus’ statement, but it will be summarized here as well. David has just begun, at this point, to flee from Saul, having been warned by his friend, the prince Jonathan. David flees to Nob, described as a city of priests (i.e., probably a city owned by the tribe of Levi, in which many priestly families lived), and asks for provisions. The priest tells him that there is only holy bread, but he will let David and his men eat it if they have “kept themselves from women”. David says they have, eats the bread, and takes Goliath’s sword, which is kept there, and leaves.

There is some dispute about “In the days of Abiathar the high priest”. First, the Greek is somewhat strange. Second, Abiathar is not high priest – Abiathar is son of the high priest at this point. Jesus may simply be pointing to a general time period (“around the days of”), or we may simply not understand what is happening.

This passage is essentially one argument. It is, however, a complicated one, and the questions about what it would have meant to those who first heard it will focus on understanding what Jesus’ response actually says and means.

1) Does Jesus portray David’s actions as Lawful? Does he portray them as good? Does he seem to expect the Pharisees to see them as Lawful or good?

2) What justifies David? You may have to read the first part of 1 Samuel 21 to answer this. What argument does Ahimelech use to justify his actions in the story? What does David argue? What does Jesus think justifies David (or what does Jesus expect the Pharisees to think justifies David)?

3) Does what justifies David justify Jesus? How?

4) Why does David and the bread demonstrate that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath? How does this even remotely make sense? Does requiring the David example to end with this statement change any of your answers above?

5) Why does it follow that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath because the Sabbath is made for man? And why does that make it OK for Jesus’ disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath?

What does it mean in our current context?

1) Should we keep the Sabbath? On what day (the Jewish Sabbath is sunset Friday to sunset Saturday), or is that trivial? Do we keep the Sabbath? Why or why not? Regardless of a general prohibition or allowance, are we making the right choices, or are our decisions based on bad reasons?

2) Should we care? This is an argument about the Law, which few to none of us keep. Is the Law really more valuable to us than, say, the Code of Hammurabi (another set of laws from the Ancient Near East)? How (the temptation will be to say “yes, God gave it,” but that’s not a real answer to “how?”)? Does Jesus’ approach to the Law help us gain something from the Law that we didn’t before?

3) How does Jesus answer the question about why they are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? Who could understand the answer (do you need certain knowledge, intelligence, experience, compassion, etc)? Is the answer confrontational, winning an argument, or primarily explanatory? What do both segments of this question say about how we might deal with hostile questions?

4) Many things are made for people, and not people for them. Does this justify ignoring laws concerning these things? Are, conversely, all laws to be followed, always? How does purpose help us sort out good laws from bad laws?

Weekly Questions to Ask the Group

What do we notice about God’s love for us in this passage?

How is my life in conflict with this passage?