

1) Rest Even as You Obey the Lord

Mark 2:23-28 • 2021-06-06 • Series: Defy Expectations



Has someone ever told you, “You did better than I expected”? I know someone who likes to use that as a joke. The joke of course is that it is both a compliment and a hidden jab at the same time. If you told a friend, “Hey, this soup you made turned out better than I expected.” It might sound like a compliment. But it also reveals that you don’t hold the highest opinion of your friend’s cooking. Much of this world holds a low regard for Christians. In fact, many assume that because we follow Christ, we are foolish, have our heads buried in the sand, and are hoping for what’s hopeless. The world doesn’t expect much from Christians. Should it? We are at the start of a five-week series that says it should! We are looking at how the Christian will far exceed expectations. God works for us an outcome that defies all expectations. Today we’ll see from Mark 2 how we defy expectations as we are right with God not by working hard but by resting.

The enemies of Jesus were working hard to find some fault with him. The religious group called the Pharisees took note of what happened on one Sabbath day. Sometimes Jesus’ disciples were so busy following him they had a working lunch on the go. Since the disciples were passing by a grain field, they swooped their hands to grasp the heads of grain. The fact that the disciples took the grain wasn’t the issue at all. The law given to the people of Israel allowed for this type of casual grazing. It reminded the landowner that everything was a gift from God, and it showed mercy to the needy. The problem wasn’t stealing. The problem was *when* they grabbed it: the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath was a day of rest. That’s what the word means, “rest.” In order that the people of Israel might make time for reflecting on the work of their God they were supposed to rest. God gave them a day of rest so they might reflect on his work of creation. God rested at the beginning of time after six days of creation. It also was meant to be a time to reflect on God’s redeeming work to save his people from slavery and bring them to the promised land of rest. The Sabbath command was first recorded when the manna appeared in the wilderness. It was repeated at Mount Sinai in the Ten Commandments. They were supposed to take the Sabbath observance very seriously. It was a day for sacred assembly (Lev 23:3). To break the Sabbath rest was to break away from worship of the Lord to idolatry.

But don’t misunderstand. The Sabbath was given to Israel to lead them to the Christ. Once the Christ had completed his work and rested in the tomb on the Sabbath it no longer remained a binding command to observe that rest on the Sabbath day. Our worship life in the New Testament is under the freedom we have in Christ. Yes, it is still wrong for Christians to constantly work instead of taking regular time to meditate on God’s Word. And it is wrong to despise the preaching and teaching of God’s Word so that we use our resting time solely for leisure and sport. But because the Christ has come and completed his work, we are free to use any day for our worship. (Col 2:16) Those who demand worship on Saturday have missed out on the freedom we have with the Advent of Christ. They are in the same danger as those who demand circumcision and ceremonial foods. And they are in danger of putting boundaries and laws which God has not made for us. The command to rest on Saturday is never repeated for the New Testament church. The Spirit made that clear and the apostles taught that truth.

Though we may not be under the command to observe a particular day for rest, Jesus and his disciples were. So, were the Pharisees right in calling out his disciples as lawbreakers? God said no work on the Sabbath day. That meant no harvesting of grain. The disciples were ‘technically’ harvesting. Did this constitute a violation of the Sabbath rest? The Pharisees attacked Jesus for tolerating his disciples’ lunch on the go, “*Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?*” Didn’t Jesus care? Was the third commandment not important to him?

Jesus wasn’t going to play their game of “Calvin-Ball.” Are you familiar with that phrase? I always liked the *Calvin and Hobbes* comics. The little boy Calvin carries out his childhood conversations and adventures with Hobbes, his toy tiger friend. They had a funny way of playing sports together. Whatever sport they played ended up being played according to their own rules. Baseball changed into a marathon between the bases. Football became a wrestling match. They just made up the rules as they went along. The game wasn’t baseball or football; it was “Calvin-ball.” They quickly learned that you don’t win by following the rules, you win by having the rules on your side. That’s how the Pharisees like to treat God’s laws. They adjusted the rules so that it fit their own way of playing.

Could we ever end up treating God’s law like it’s a game of “Calvin-ball”? Luther reminds us that the principle behind the Sabbath law still applies to all people. It was a day for not just physical rest, but sacred assembly. The third commandment for us today simply means regarding the Word of God as holy. We should not despise preaching and his Word, but gladly hear and learn it. Might we ever deem ourselves to be little lords of the Sabbath and set the standard for proper observance? Do we get to decide if we’ve kept ourselves pure and holy in these matters and others haven’t? I know the temptation is real. In pride I like to know when I’m keeping the 3rd commandment with perfect reverence. It’s the pride in knowing your attendance at worship succeeds that of your neighbor. It’s the arrogance in looking down on others who fail to meet the standard you set for reverence in worship. We are quick to notice when others fail our own rules. Have you ever noticed someone in church not following what you deem proper worship? Maybe they weren’t bowing their head low enough for you. Maybe they weren’t lifting their hands high

enough. Maybe they weren't keeping their children as orderly as you thought they ought. Maybe they weren't singing as loudly as you thought they ought. Maybe you quickly judged their valid reasons for missing worship as not worthy enough. We sometimes seek to make ourselves a "lord of the Sabbath." We try to set exactly when and where we think people are being irreverent and breaking our own standards. Our rules are broken, our finger or darting glare points: "Why is that other person doing what is not supposed to be done during our time of worship?"

But has someone really broken a law of God? Or are we really beginning to play Calvin-ball with God's law? Like the Pharisees we can miss the point of God's law and end up changing it into the very opposite! God asks us to set aside time to regard his Word as holy. He asks us to rest. Jesus invites the weighed down sinner, "Come all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest, rest for your souls." But with our own standards and ideas we make it into a rat-race of scrutiny, protocol, traditions--our own judgments. We guilt-trip ourselves and others into church attendance, offerings, and participation at church. The sinful mind of man that would take a command for rest and make it into a heavy burden! This can happen when we use the law a mere guide on how you merit good standing. Or when we treat it like a mere tool for beating people over the head when they fail to follow it, a mere pedestal to stand on in pride when we keep it. Our own keeping of our own version of the law makes us feel good about ourselves.

God's law, however, is not a bargaining tool which he left with us fallen sinners to gain his favor. It is holy. Failure to keep the Sabbath meant being cut off from God's people. Failure to rightly worship the Lord rightly means death for all. If we really want to talk about who is worthy because they kept the commandments of God, we must realize we can never meet the expectations. The law firstly must cut to the heart and expose how we have failed! Have I always stopped my busy schedule as I ought to in order to reflect on and worship God? No.

The law is not for us to feel good about ourselves. It is for us to feel good about our God! Jesus goes on to explain the reason behind all God's laws, including the Sabbath law. *"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."* David did something far worse than a Sabbath breach. He actually ate the special bread of the presence which was the ceremonial bread that only the priests were supposed to have. And the high priest broke the rules with David. For one simple reason: David was hungry. The point: God didn't give the ceremonial laws to Israel to be a burden or a way to earn his favor. It was given for their benefit. *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."*

All of God's laws, including the Sabbath, are there to point us to our need for Christ. The failure to keep the Sabbath was indeed a grievous sin in Israel. Still today the failure to set aside time in God's Word is a grievous sin. Our culture has made such a virtue out of hard work that failure to rest and rest also in God's Word has led to the physical and spiritual downfall of many families. But we dare not claim that keeping the third commandment according our own standards and rules makes us sinless and better. The Sabbath is to lead us to Christ. Just as all the other laws.

It leads us to our only true rest. Though we have broken all God's laws, what we hear from his Word is the whole point of the 3rd Commandment. The disciples understood what the Sabbath was really for. Jesus asserts this as he defends them and then says, *"So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."* He isn't saying he disregards the Sabbath. He is saying he has the right to judge if the rule is broken or not. The disciples were innocent. Rather than viewing the Sabbath law as a means to judge others and gain heaven, they understood the most important part of the law: They were taking the time to find rest in Jesus. They spent their Sabbath not worrying if they kept the Sabbath law. They spent their Sabbath hearing the Word of Christ. So much so that they nearly missed out on their supper!

And it is in that word of Christ that they learned of the Son of Man. He is Lord of the Sabbath, but he came to keep it perfectly as he lived in our place. He made himself like us in every way. He was born under the law to redeem us from the law. All the things that we're unable to accomplish he did -exceeding expectations. He was without any sin. He never broke the Sabbath, never even in the smallest way. He always honored God's Word. And as the perfect life he took our place and our punishment, was separated from the love of the Father, and cut off for us. He invites us to find our rest in his promises and his forgiveness. We worship him as we take rest and time for hearing his gospel.

All the other commandments convict the sinful heart. This commandment convicts the heart not for the times it failed to work, but for the times it failed to stop working and listen to God's Word. It is only in that Word that we find rest from all our labor and relief from all our burden. Jesus never stopped working until his work was complete and our sins were covered. And so, God, on the Sabbath, once again rested from all his work. This time not just the work of creation, but the work of redemption. His body rested on the Sabbath in the tomb. Then he rose in victory!

The disciples were doing what the Pharisees might have never expected: obeying God by resting. God wants you to have his rest. And despite what one might expect that rest isn't gained by the hardest working Christian. It is gained by every Christian who has stopped trying to secure their own holiness and found rest in the righteousness won by Christ. They find rest as they stop focusing on their own hands and look to the hands pierced once for them. The burden is removed, rest is won. Beyond all expectations the disciples really did nothing, yet they found their everything and true rest in Jesus. And beyond all expectations so do we.