



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Lord Over the Sabbath

Mark 2.23 - 3.6

David Anguish

### *Sabbath: A Big Deal*

In October 2011, Rabbi Shais Taub posted a commentary blog on the Huffington Post website that included the following paragraphs.

It was the fall of 1965 and the Los Angeles Dodgers were up against the Minnesota Twins in the World Series. The opening game was scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 6—a date with little other significance than happening to fall that year on the Jewish high holiday of Yom Kippur. No doubt, that coincidence would have gone largely unnoted except for the additional fact that the Dodger's [sic] star pitcher, Sandy Koufax, also happened to be Jewish. Koufax was not particularly observant, but as he later stated, "There was never any decision to make ... because there was never any possibility that I would pitch. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish religion. The club knows that I don't work that day."

That Yom Kippur in the Twin Cities, there were Sandy Koufax sightings in synagogues all over town. . . . The truth is, however, as insiders will tell you, that Koufax chose to spend the day by himself in his hotel room. Whether he prayed there or not, nobody knows. He never talked about it. Who knows what he did? What we all know is what he didn't do. He didn't pitch.

The Dodgers lost that game 8-2. . . .

The rest of the story is that Koufax returned to start three of the remaining six games and was named the Series MVP after pitching a shutout in the deciding Game 7.<sup>1</sup>

What Sandy Koufax, the best pitcher in baseball at the time, did on October 6, 1965 was noteworthy then. His example has inspired a few players since to do similarly.<sup>2</sup> But, increasingly, it has become harder to even imagine someone today doing what Koufax did. However, Galileans in the late 20s AD would have understood. They knew the fourth commandment (Exod 20.8-11). They also knew stories from their history like that of the rebels in the early days of the Maccabean revolt (ca. 165 BC) who, because it was the Sabbath when they were attacked, refused to answer or fight their Greek enemies, choosing instead to "die in our innocence." Including their wives and children, a thousand people were killed (1 Macc 2.36-38).<sup>3</sup>

The people who heard Jesus also knew the expectations of their day. The command to do "no labor on the Sabbath" had been elaborated into a whole complex body of religious customs. In the later collection of rabbinic discussion of this commandment (the tractate 'Sabbath' in the Talmud) there are thirty-nine types of activities discussed and regulated. The scribal elaboration had already gotten well underway by Jesus' day, . . ."<sup>4</sup> Two labors forbidden in that tractate (*Shabbat* 7.2) were reaping and threshing. The Mishnah also forbade the healing on the Sabbath of someone whose life was not in danger (*Yoma* 8.6).<sup>5</sup> These labors are at issue in our text.

### *The Sabbath Exceptions Mark Reports (2.23-24; 3.1-2, 5)*

At issue in 2.23-28 was the exercise of a right granted under the Mosaic law that, in the eyes of the Pharisees, was being practiced on a day when it was forbidden labor.

- OT law allowed the poor and hungry to pluck grain as the disciples did (Lev 19.9-10).
- If Jesus routinely did as he told the disciples to do on the mission described in Mark 6.7-11 (= Matt 10.5-15), they would have carried no supplies on their travels (Hurtado, 48).
- Hurtado also observes that the point of v. 23 is not that the disciples were “just out for a stroll,” but were traveling for the sake of their mission; in other words, they were accompanying Jesus as he was doing his work (Hurtado, 47).

The issue in 3.1-6 was whether healing was allowed on the Sabbath. As the boundaries regarding Sabbath work had developed, some things were allowed, but others were not. So, it appears most agreed that if the eighth day after a birth fell on a Sabbath, circumcision could be performed (cf. Lev 12.1-3). Matthew 12.11-12 and Luke 14.5 indicate that the Pharisees permitted the saving of human or animal life if necessary on the Sabbath. However, in our text, the man’s life was not in danger.

Also worth noting is that OT law prohibited the maimed, disabled, lepers, and others like them from entering the temple and participating fully in the religious life (Lev. 21.16-24). When Jesus healed the man, he also gave him new religious and social acceptance.

### *What Jesus Did Instead*

In 2.23-28, Jesus used the case of David from 1 Samuel 21.1-6 to justify his actions. David was on the run from King Saul when that episode occurred.

- Note that David actually broke the written law, not just an oral law or custom as in Jesus’ case (cf. Lev 24.5-9); Jesus acknowledged this in 2.26 (Blomberg, 276).
- Note also that “David was chosen by God to replace Saul as the rightful king, and the description of David’s action without comment in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 implies that the divine appointment of David justified his action” (Hurtado, 49).
- In light of the last point, keep in mind that Jesus and his disciples did what they did “in the context of their itinerant ministry, in which they proclaimed with urgency the approach of the kingdom of God” (Hurtado, 48).
- The point, then, is that the mission of Jesus was so important that it allowed for setting aside religious custom (which in this case was not written law).

In 3.1-6, Jesus used his divine authority to heal, even on the Sabbath. Perceiving the critical eyes of the Pharisees (v. 2), Jesus called the man to him and then confronted their criticisms (v. 3).

- The word “lawful” (ἐξεστίν, *exestin*) in v. 4 connects 3.1-6 with 2.24, 26 and the previous incident. At the most basic level, Jesus’ question about the lawfulness of healing raises the issue of not doing a good deed just because it was a Sabbath, a legitimate question and at least some part of what these stories can show us (see 2.27).
- But, in light of Mark’s emphasis through all five of the conflict stories (2.1-3.6), Hurtado may be right in suggesting that there is more to Jesus’ lawfulness question. “[H]is question constitutes a challenge to his audience to decide whether his treating the

Sabbath as a day for conducting his ministry is good or not. This is why the response of his critics is a sullen refusal to answer (3:4b-5). The real issue is not the principle of humanitarian aid on the Sabbath but the validity of Jesus' message and implicit claim for himself" (Hurtado, 51).

- Verse 5's reference to the critics' "hardness of heart" followed by v. 6's report that the Pharisees and Herodians immediately began to scheme to kill him adds merit to Hurtado's suggestion. What most angered them was Jesus' claim about his nature and work.

### *Taking the Point to Heart*

Both episodes continue to show Jesus' authority, Mark's theme in the book's first section (1.21-3.6).

- Jesus, the Son of Man, has authority to forgive sins (2.1-12).
- His authority extends to all sinners; he heals the spiritually sick (2.13-17).
- His mission of declaring, bringing, and exemplifying the promised reign of God is both a time of urgency and joy; fasting to prepare for the coming reign is no longer necessary, for new times have arrived (2.18-22).
- His mission is so urgent that even something as important as Sabbath observance can be set aside (2.23-28).
- In keeping with the expectations of the Messiah's age, Jesus the healer could continue to work, even healing on the Sabbath (3.1-6).

The two episodes in our text turn on the declaration in 2.28, "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." If Jesus' calling justifies his actions, then he has authority, even over something as important as the Jewish loyalty practice of Sabbath keeping.

As we enter into Mark's story, we face the same decision presented to the witnesses of his ministry and his original readers. Does Jesus' calling justify his actions? Does he have such authority? Will we submit to him or criticize and reject him?

Since most hearing this are already disciples, I know the fundamental decision has already been made. We affirm his authority. Our present challenge is to continue to display the behavior that justifies our claim.

*www.davidanguish.com*

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shais Taub, "Why Sandy Koufax Sat Out the World Series on Yom Kippur," 12/06/11, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-shais-taub/sand-koufax-yom-kippur\\_b\\_996111.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-shais-taub/sand-koufax-yom-kippur_b_996111.html). Accessed February 19, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See Jeff Merron, "Green, Koufax and Greenberg—same dilemma, different decisions," September 26, 2001, [http://espn.go.com/classic/s/merron\\_on\\_green.html](http://espn.go.com/classic/s/merron_on_green.html). Accessed February 19, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The next three verses reveal that the movement's leaders adjusted their position in light of that slaughter (1 Macc 2.39-41).

<sup>4</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 47.

<sup>5</sup> See Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009), 276.