

Sabbath Healings *and* Hard Hearts



SABBATH AFTERNOON

TROUBLE BREWING. It wasn't long before controversy started to swirl around Jesus. And that's not hard to understand. Anyone saying what He said, and doing what He did, would create controversy.

And yet, it's not all trouble. Besides the Sabbath healing, we follow Jesus as He ordains the Twelve to ministry, this motley group who will change the world forever. And we see Jesus, too, dealing with His own human family and their own misunderstanding of Him and His mission.

But most of all, this week we get another glimpse of the life and ministry of our Savior, whose every word, every act—even when accused of being in league with Satan or of being a Sabbath breaker—should help us love Him even more.

The Week at a Glance: Why did Jesus do healings on the Sabbath? What was the real issue behind the Pharisees' hatred of Christ? What were they trying to protect? What is the unpardonable sin? Why did Jesus mention it when He did?

Scripture Passage for the Week: *Mark 2:23–3:35.*

Memory Text: “And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath” (*Mark 2:27, 28*).

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 16.*

Made for Man *(Mark 2:23-28)*.

Read the account in Mark 2:23-28. Analyze Jesus' answer to the scribes and Pharisees. What was the principle for David's actions? In this specific context, what does Jesus mean when He says that the Sabbath was "made for man"? What does that teach us about how we should experience the Sabbath ourselves?

In the world of Jesus' day, two characteristics set the Hebrew nation apart from other people—they worshiped one God instead of many gods, and they refrained from work on the seventh day. Centuries earlier, when they were a free nation, they failed on both these matters, falling into idolatry and Sabbath breaking. Prophet after prophet warned them of the disastrous course on which they were headed, but they continued their downward spiritual slide. Eventually they were carried away captive—the ten northern tribes by Assyria and the Southern Kingdom of Judah 140 years later by the Babylonians.

When they returned from Babylonian captivity, they tried hard to avoid the errors that had led to their earlier loss of nationhood. Attempting to put a hedge around the Sabbath, they formulated detailed lists of what was permitted and not permitted.

The *Mishnah*, the codified traditional law of the Jews, lists 39 major types of labor prohibited on the Sabbath. But "these general regulations were further explained in minute detail. In addition to these major regulations there were countless other provisions concerning the observance of the Sabbath. Most commonly known, perhaps, is the so-called 'Sabbath day's journey' of 2,000 cub.—some-what less than 2/3 mi. . . . It was also counted as Sabbathbreaking to look in a mirror fixed to the wall . . . , or even to light a candle. . . . It was counted unlawful to expectorate [spit] upon the ground, lest thereby a blade of grass be irrigated. It was not permissible to carry a handkerchief on the Sabbath, unless one end of it be sewed to one's garment—in which case it was no longer technically a handkerchief but part of the garment."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 587.

Whereas the Jewish leaders had become obsessed with detailed regulations, Jesus restored the Sabbath to the purpose for which He created it. The Sabbath was not meant to be a burden but a delight. It was to be a day of worship, relaxation, and restoration; a day of joy; a day that contributes to the happiness of others.

We are told to call the Sabbath a "delight" (*Isa. 58:13*) and to "keep it holy" (*Exod. 20:8*). What is your concept of "delight" and what it means to be "holy"? Why should there be no contradiction between these ideas? How can we make both a part of our Sabbath experience?

Key Text: *Mark 2:24-28*

Teachers Aims:

1. To demonstrate how even religious people can miss the point of their beliefs and practices.
2. To show how a firm but mistaken belief can blind people to what they need to know.
3. To analyze how religion can become a force that opposes God.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Sabbath: Made for Whom? (*Mark 2:27*).

- A. In Jesus' time the Sabbath had become an end unto itself with little thought as to the meaning of its observance.
- B. Sabbath observance as taught by the Pharisees actually impeded service to God and others.
- C. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus pointed out the original reason for the day.

II. Eyes Wide Shut (*Mark 2:14-20*).

- A. Jesus' enemies—the supposedly devoted religious leaders—were the very people who should have been His friends.
- B. They were willfully blind to the divine origin of both Jesus and His teachings.
- C. Jesus' enemies opposed God in order to preserve the purity of “their” religion.

III. Brothers, Mothers, Disciples (*Mark 3:35*).

- A. Jesus sought people who were open to God's will.
- B. It was this quality that led Him to choose His disciples, although they were unpromising by “worldly” standards.
- C. Jesus set this quality above even family relationships.

Summary: Religion and obedience to what one assumes to be God's will are generally good. However, the Pharisees and others of Jesus' time used religion and God's law to escape from God. Their religion, therefore, became merely another addiction. In contrast, Jesus attempted to demonstrate true godliness, which often appeared to conflict with long-established beliefs and teachings.

COMMENTARY

Our understanding of the great controversy teaches that both God and Satan are at work. In this war, Satan misrepresents God's gifts. Our study this week deals with how Satan led religious leaders to clash with Jesus over the Sabbath, discipleship and God's new family, and the ministry of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The Man With the Withered Hand

Read Mark 3:1-6. Why do you think the leaders wanted to kill Jesus? Was it because He healed on the Sabbath day? Or was there something else going on, a much bigger issue at stake for them? See also John 11:48, Acts 17:6.

Even on the Sabbath, a day for worship and contemplation of heavenly things, the enemies of Jesus could not keep their minds off Him. Instead of opening their hearts to the blessings that God had for them through the reading of Scripture, prayer, and fellowship, they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, waiting to see if they might find an opportunity to accuse Him. They wanted to “prove” that He was a Sabbath breaker, but they themselves were breaking the Sabbath in their hearts.

Mark says that Jesus was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts. Yet, the hardness wasn’t over their firm belief in how the Sabbath should be kept, but it was over their attitude toward Jesus. He threatened their power; He threatened their religious and political influence over the people. That’s why they hated Him so much. Of course, they couldn’t come right out and say that, so they needed to make up some excuses, anything they could find, in order to accuse Him and thus weaken His power. Thus, their fear of losing influence so blinded them that instead of rejoicing in the great power of God being manifested before them by the miracle of the healing, they accused Christ of Sabbath breaking.

Read Mark 3:4. Why didn’t they respond to Christ’s question? Shouldn’t they have had an answer? What does their silence reveal about their true motives?

As human beings, we have a frightening ability to mask our true motives under the cloak of piety or holiness, and what makes it so frightening is that we don’t just cloak it before others, but we cloak it before ourselves. How can we be sure that our religious motives for what we do are pure, or if we are, in our own way, doing the same thing as the Pharisees?

I. The Sabbath: Meaning and Purpose (*Mark 2:23–3:6*).

The Sabbath originated in Creation and is, therefore, universal in its application. When Jesus at Sinai gave Israel custody of the Ten Commandments, He expected them to keep the Sabbath as a day of delight (*Isa. 58:13*). Instead, they made it burdensome by heaping rule after rule upon it. For example, Jews could not light a candle on the Sabbath; but a Gentile could do it for them. A cut finger may be bandaged, but no ointment should be used.

Mark cites two instances to warn us against making Sabbath a burden. First, while crossing a grainfield on a Sabbath, the disciples plucked some grain to eat (*Mark 2:23-28*). The Pharisees rushed to judgment: “ ‘Why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ ” (*vs. 24, NKJV*). Jesus turned to the Bible for an answer: “ ‘Have you never read . . . ?’ ” (*Mark 2:25, NKJV*). Jesus reminded them that when David and his hungry men ate the showbread that only priests could eat (*Lev. 24:5-9*) it was not considered a sin. Then He stated that the “ ‘Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath’ ” (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*). God did not create humans because He needed someone to keep the Sabbath. No person or religion has the right to go beyond what the Lord of the Sabbath has determined the Sabbath should be.

The Jews clashed again with Jesus because He healed a man with a withered hand on Sabbath (*Mark 3:1-6*). But Jesus raised the argument to a higher level by asking: “ ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ ” (*vs. 4, NKJV*). Is Sabbath not a symbol of God’s creative and redemptive power? Does God’s mercy ever take a holiday?

How ironic was the position of the Pharisees! Even while they were condemning Him for breaking the Sabbath, they were plotting to kill Him (*vs. 6*).

II. Discipleship and the New Family (*Mark 3:13-19, 31-35*).

Jesus “called to Him those He Himself wanted” (*Mark 3:13, NKJV*). The authority to choose disciples is in the hands of the Master. We cannot force ourselves to be disciples. He calls whom He wills. Then we obey. How tragic that in today’s church, people campaign for certain positions, forgetting that Jesus calls those *He Himself wants*.

Christianity began with a mixed group—the angry, the ambitious, the timid, the zealot, the doubting, the daring, and the betraying. Each had a place in the group Jesus formed “that He might send them out to preach . . . to heal . . . and to cast out demons” (*vss. 14, 15, NKJV*). Discipleship is thus a call to ministry, not to power. When this is recognized, a fisherman becomes a Pentecostal

The Twelve Apostles *(Mark 3:7-19).*

This lesson marks an important expansion of Jesus' ministry. Previously He had called various individuals to follow Him; that is, to be disciples. As His fame grew and as He traveled around Galilee, the band of followers continued to grow. It was now time to select some from among the many for a special work.

Mark 3:7-14 gives us a brief but vivid portrayal of the strength of Jesus' movement in Galilee by this time. What do the verses say about the popularity of Christ? In what ways might the answer explain why He decided, at that point, to ordain people to work with Him?

At the height of His popularity Jesus withdrew to a mountainside. Luke supplies an important detail—He spent the night in prayer (*Luke 6:12*). Jesus faced an important decision and, as was His custom, He sought His Father's guidance.

What were the two purposes that Jesus intended for the twelve people He selected to be apostles? *Mark 3:13-19*. What larger purpose, though, was intended? *See Matt. 10:5-15, Mark 16:15*.

The word *apostle* literally means “one who is sent.” The Twelve whom Jesus called would be sent out to preach and to drive out demons. That is, they would be an extension of His ministry while He was still on earth, and after He returned to the Father they would carry on His work. But before being sent, they were to be “with Him”—observing His methods and becoming like Him in character.

As we look at the Twelve, we see a mix of backgrounds, personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. Several were fishermen, one a tax-collector, another a member of the zealots, a strongly nationalistic faction that at times resorted to violence. Simon Peter, bold and impetuous, had much to learn. James and John were fiery tempered. And then there was Judas Iscariot, who would betray Jesus.

There were so many other people in Israel—learned, eloquent, erudite, rich—who could have, it would seem, made a much better nucleus for this new movement. And yet, Jesus chose this bunch? What lessons are here for us about (1) judging the outward character of others, (2) judging another person's spiritual potential, (3) judging what characteristics we deem important in people engaged in ministry?

thunder, a doubter becomes a missionary to faraway India, one ambitious brother becomes the first martyr, while another sees the heavens open.

From discipleship, Jesus moved to create a new family, not one of flesh and blood but one formed by “ ‘whoever does the will of God’ ” (*Mark 3:35, NKJV*). Here lies the secret of Christian familyhood. Why did William Carey cross the oceans and land in Calcutta among strangers? Why did Albert Schweitzer leave the fame of being a surgeon or a philosopher to live with the lepers of Africa? Simply because they grasped the meaning of the new family in Jesus.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Mark 2:23–3:35*

- 1 According to Jewish traditions, the disciples were breaking the Sabbath by picking heads of grain (harvesting) and eating them (threshing). What was the significance of Jesus mentioning David and the temple bread? And what did He mean by the statement: “ ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath’ ” (*Mark 2:27, NRSV*)? What are some practical implications of that statement?
- 2 Jesus could have healed the man with the withered hand on any day, not just the Sabbath. Yet, He chose to engage the Pharisees on an issue that was sure to inflame them. Is it any wonder that from that point “the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (*Mark 3:6, NIV*)? What was Jesus’ intent at pursuing such a course? Is this an invitation or a warning about forcing confrontation?
- 3 Of all those who followed Him, Jesus chose 12 and gave them the special designation *apostle*, which means “one who is sent.” This is a technical term indicating the apostle had all the authority of the one who sent him. How well did the apostles demonstrate their special relationship with Christ? What makes our influence effective or ineffective when we attempt to represent Christ in our communities?
- 4 There is no sin God cannot or will not forgive. A sin becomes “unpardonable” when the person who commits it refuses to ask for forgiveness. We can insulate ourselves from the Holy Spirit and His influence, but we can’t stop Him from trying to influence us. Describe three modern object lessons that illustrate what the unpardonable sin really is.

Jesus and Beelzebub *(Mark 3:22-30).*

The miracles of Jesus were too many and too amazing to deny. A power more than human was at work in Him, but the spies who dogged His footsteps seeking to find grounds to accuse Him refused to admit the obvious—that He was the Son of God. Instead, they tried to argue that Jesus was in league with Beelzebub, the devil.

How did Jesus answer the claim of the critics that He was in league with the devil? *Mark 3:22-27.*

By a simple but effective reply Jesus demolished the accusation of the teachers of the law. Jesus' work tore down the kingdom of Satan: He cast out demons, healed the sick, and set men and women free from the chains of sin and bad habits by which they were bound. This was just the opposite of the manner in which Satan works. If Jesus were in league with the devil, He would do the works of Satan and build up Satan's kingdom, not destroy it.

Why did Jesus, after His specific response to the charges, say what He did about “the unpardonable sin”? What was in their words and attitudes toward Him that would have elicited this strong warning? How were they, by their attitude, doing just what he warned about?

“The Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke this warning did not themselves believe the charge they brought against Him. There was not one of those dignitaries but had felt drawn toward the Saviour. They had heard the Spirit's voice in their own hearts declaring Him to be the Anointed of Israel, and urging them to confess themselves to His disciples. In the light of His presence they had realized their unholiness, and had longed for a righteousness which they could not create. But after their rejection of Him it would be too humiliating to receive Him as the Messiah. Having set their feet in the path of unbelief, they were too proud to confess their error.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 322.

How, in this context, do we then understand “the unpardonable sin”? What would you say to someone who thought they had committed it? How is the mere fact that they feel this conviction evidence that they have not committed that sin?

III. The Spirits and the Spirit *(Mark 3:20-27)*.

Name calling is used to destroy a person's character. So, the Pharisees accused Christ as being Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons who casts out demons.

Christ's answer was simple. How can Satan work against himself? To attribute God's work to Satan is to be Satan's instrument.

Witnessing

How we need and love the Sabbath! During the course of any workweek, we exert a lot of mental and physical labor. Whatever our profession, ordinary, daily pressure and stress take their toll. As the week wears on, so do we—irritability, short-temperedness, and frustration tempt us. We may feel so emotionally drained that all we want to do is sleep. Our bodies become sore and tense. Yet, as Seventh-day Adventists, we know that when Friday afternoon comes, our spirits will begin to rise—it's as though a huge weight is lifting itself from us. By evening we are looking forward to spending quality time with our Lord and Savior.

Now, think how hard it must be for those around us who don't know about the joys of the Sabbath. Their Friday nights and Saturdays remain rushed and busy. They don't have the respite from everyday responsibilities and duties that we do. Haven't we received direct instruction from Jesus to share the blessings of the Sabbath with others?

In our study this week we have been reminded that Jesus knew the Sabbath to be a deep blessing to humankind; therefore, He was disturbed over the way the religious leaders of the time twisted its observance so it became ritualistic and burdensome for those who attempted to observe the Sabbath. Christ made it a point to try to change all that—to show the people how spiritually refreshing and welcoming true Sabbath observance could be.

Look around; don't you see others missing out on the Sabbath's blessings? Don't they need and deserve to have the same blessings of the Sabbath as we do? Of course! So, here's something to consider. Call a friend who doesn't observe the Sabbath and invite him or her to spend the day with you. If this person is uncomfortable or reluctant to attend church, see whether he or she will go with you to Sabbath School. If not, tell your friend you'd like to have him or her join you for lunch and then spend the afternoon and evening together, celebrating the Sabbath according to God's plan. Once the day is over, let the person know how much you enjoyed sharing time and companionship. Invite your friend to do it with you again as soon as he or she is able. Be persistent but not pushy. Invite your friend to begin the week with the blessings found only in true Sabbath thanksgiving.

Jesus' Mother and Brothers *(Mark 3:31-34)*.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus did not receive support from His family. John the beloved tells us plainly: “Even his own brothers did not believe in Him” (*John 7:5, NIV*). His mother, Mary, had stored in her heart the events connected with His birth and childhood (*Luke 2:19, 51*), but she did not understand the mission that Jesus as the Messiah had come to fulfill.

With Jesus surrounded by crowds so that He hardly had time to eat, what did His family members decide to do? (*Mark 3:20, 21*).

The New International Version translates Mark 3:21 as “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’ ” Perhaps they were embarrassed by the sort of people Jesus was associating with. Perhaps the accusations of His critics that He was in league with the devil bothered them. And most troubling of all to them was His rejection by the religious leaders, who might have been expected to embrace Him as Israel’s deliverer from the hated Romans.

Analyze Jesus’ response when He received word that Mary and His brothers were standing outside the house looking for Him. Did Jesus not care about His earthly family members? What point was He making by saying: “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother”? *Mark 3:31-34, NIV* See also *Deut. 30:20, Matt. 7:21, John 15:14, 1 John 5:3*.

Elsewhere Mark names Jesus’ brothers—James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. He tells us that Jesus also had sisters (*Mark 6:3*). It is significant that Joseph, the husband of Mary, is not mentioned in this incident. The brothers of Jesus here and elsewhere relate to Jesus as a younger brother, telling Him what to do and wanting to take charge of Him. This indicates that Joseph had been married previously and was a widower when he married Mary. During Jesus’ ministry he is never mentioned; presumably he had died by this time. After His resurrection, Jesus’ family saw Him in a new light. His brothers are mentioned as being among the believers at Pentecost (*Acts 1:14*), while Paul calls James, the Lord’s brother, an “apostle” (*Gal. 1:19*).

If you know someone (or perhaps you’re facing it yourself) who’s struggling with family members who don’t understand or appreciate this person’s Adventist faith, what kind of help can you give them? How does today’s study offer encouragement?

Such people become hardened and perceive evil to be good and good to be evil—until they reach the point where they recognize neither evil nor the need for salvation. When sinners cannot repent, they commit the sin against the Holy Spirit, who alone leads one to repentance.

Hence, Jesus warns us to take sin seriously, lest one commits the sin against the Spirit, for which there is no forgiveness. “The most common manifestation of the sin against the Holy Spirit is in persistently slighting Heaven’s invitation to repent. Every step in the rejection of Christ is a step toward the rejection of salvation, and toward the sin against the Holy Spirit.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 324.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: “The term ‘pharisaic’ has come over into English to refer to hypocrites who fake morality or to legalistic nitpickers. The word is considered to be synonymous with ‘holier than thou,’ ‘preachy,’ ‘sanctimonious,’ and ‘self-righteous.’ This assumption is an inaccurate caricature of Pharisaism and can perpetuate the notion that God extends grace to all sinners except those of the Pharisaic variety. One may not dismiss the Pharisees as a bunch of hypocrites. In the Gospel of Mark, they are guilty instead of being hypercritical.”—David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary, Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), pp. 110, 111.

Thought Questions:

- ① This week’s study is full of examples of how Jesus’ fame and popularity quickly spread. Objectors to Jesus’ interpretations of Scripture posed many questions and challenges. Study the responses of Jesus (for example, in Mark 2:16, 17 He responds with a truism). From His responses, what lessons can you learn about defending your beliefs?
- ② How did Jesus’ actions on the Sabbath not only defy the Pharisees but also vindicate His authority as Creator? What role did the Sabbath play in the fulfillment of Jesus’ mission on earth? What role does the Sabbath play in affirming your spiritual life?

Application Question:

What were the Pharisees’ intentions when they made up the Sabbath laws? What elements of the Sabbath laws did Jesus have problems with? Why? What guidelines for Sabbath keeping can we learn from Jesus’ example?

Further Study: Work through the seven Sabbath miracles of Jesus, noting why He performed each one, the lessons He sought to teach, and the reactions of His enemies. *See Mark 1:21-28, Mark 1:29-31, Mark 3:1-6, Luke 13:10-17, 14:1-4, John 5:1-15, 9:1-41.* Read “The Sabbath,” “He Ordained Twelve,” and “Who Are My Brethren?” *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 281–289, 290–297, and 321–327.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** If some new Adventist came and asked you, What principles can you show me about how to keep the Sabbath, what would you say, and why? Discuss your different approaches as a class.
- 2** What differences will there be in our Sabbath keeping if (1) we observe the Sabbath simply because it is commanded by God or (2) we keep the Sabbath because we love Jesus and want to follow Him? What differences will there be between the two?
- 3** Why is it so difficult to work with someone who has the attitude of the Pharisees; that is, who has indeed squelched the prompting of the Holy Spirit on his or her heart? What different approaches might you take to try to help that person? Is it ever too late, even for someone who has committed the unpardonable sin? Cannot someone repent from that sin, or does the mere fact that they have committed it mean that it’s too late for repentance? Discuss this as a class.

Summary: Jesus was the Lord of the Sabbath, and He showed His authority by the deeds He did on the Sabbath. What a frightful testimony to the hardness of human hearts that the leaders, those who should have known better, closed themselves off to the very Lord they professed to serve with all diligence and faith. There are lessons here for anyone who believes they are living in service to the Lord.