

One Sabbath He was going through the grainfields,  
and as they made their way,  
His disciples began to pluck heads of grain.  
<sup>24</sup> And the Pharisees were saying to Him,  
"Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"  
<sup>25</sup> And He said to them,  
"Have you never read what David did,  
when he was in need and was hungry,  
he and those who were with him:  
<sup>26</sup> how he entered the house of God,  
in the time of Abiathar the high priest,  
and ate the bread of the Presence,  
which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat,  
and also gave it to those who were with him?"  
<sup>27</sup> And He said to them,  
"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.  
<sup>28</sup> So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

This is now the fourth controversy in a row that Jesus has instigated by His actions or the actions of His disciples which He has condoned and for which He has been questioned and criticized. With this He raises the stakes a bit. The first controversy about forgiving the paralytic was undoubtedly a major point of contention. If Jesus is understood to speak in the place of God (and He is not actually God), the charge of blasphemy is apt. It is violation of the First Commandment and/or Second Commandment. The next controversies had more to do with table fellowship and rules about clean/unclean and man-made traditions about fasting. But this controversy about working on the Sabbath potentially puts Jesus in opposition with the Third Commandment, thus completing the trifecta. Again, obviously we know that Jesus is not against or breaking any of the Commandments, but from the point of view of those who thought He was, the case against Jesus is now overwhelming. He isn't just in opposition to human traditions, He very directly has broken the whole of the First Table of the Ten Commandments!

**One Sabbath** – Mark continues to be rather vague on overall timeline of events. The last clear marker of time was in 1:14 where we know Jesus' ministry was taking place after John's arrest by Herod. Here though, the day is important because of the controversy. That Jesus' disciples pluck grain from the fields was not illegal or unethical. Part of the social welfare of the economy was that farmers shouldn't go back to their fields twice to get every last fruit from the crop, but instead leave it for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow to reap a harvest from the leftovers (Deut. 24:19). The Old Testament Book of Ruth describes Ruth in this very situation (Ruth 2:3ff.).

**Deut. 23:25 ESV** If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.

**they made their way** – Although this does not immediately jump out, upon further reflection, there is a slight preview here of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem for Holy Week. Here the disciples make a way for Jesus by plucking grains of wheat, whereas at Holy Week, they will prepare the way for Jesus by cutting palm branches and laying their cloaks on the road. Both scenes have to do with Jesus' identity as the Messiah/Son of David (Mark 11:8ff.).

**to pluck heads of grain** – That is with the intention of eating the grain. In other words, they were hungry, this was one method of getting food to eat. Interestingly, this connects this controversy with the past few. First, was a controversy about the people with whom Jesus would dare to eat, then came the controversy about eating (feasting) versus not eating (fasting), and now this controversy also focuses on working and gathering food to eat on the Sabbath.

**the Pharisees** – The group that objects to Jesus is quite predictable by now. First it was the scribes, then the scribes of the Pharisees and now just the Pharisees.

**what is not lawful on the Sabbath?** – There are two possibilities of what exactly is being contested. Either the Pharisees are arguing that the movement of the disciples is too much for the Sabbath (one could only walk so far according to their traditions before it counted as work) or they are being chastised because the act of plucking grains of wheat counted as work. The Pharisees had a list of 39 types of work which were forbidden on the Sabbath and reaping was one of them.

This is from the Mishnah *Shabbat* 7:1-2 (the Jewish oral tradition that is connected to the Pharisees' traditions): The primary labors are forty less one: sowing, plowing, **reaping**, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, bleaching, hackling, dyeing, spinning, weaving, the making of two loops, weaving two threads, dividing two threads, tying and untying, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, capturing a deer, slaughtering, or flaying, or salting it, curing its hide, scraping it [of its hair], cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters [over the erasure], building, tearing down, extinguishing, kindling, striking with a hammer, [and] carrying out from one domain to another, These are the forty primary labors less one.

In either case, the major problem is that work should cease on the Sabbath and the disciples appear to be breaking that rule with Jesus' knowledge. This is the crux of their argument and it is spoken with great emphasis. The Pharisees believe that they are speaking as proper representatives of the Torah of Moses, received from the very

finger of God! That Jesus would desecrate the Sabbath would be a very clear and easy charge to make against Him (perhaps even clearer than the charge of blasphemy). Of course, the Pharisees would prefer that Jesus had stood up for their traditions, but this violation was against an even greater authority, and it would openly demonstrate Jesus' dangerous and heretical behavior. It's one thing for Jesus to oppose Pharisaic traditions, He would not dare to oppose the Law of God, would He?

**Have you never read what David did** – While the Pharisees know their traditions like the back of their hand, Jesus' question here has a little bit of a barb to it. What is their real focus? Is it their traditions or the Word of God? Jesus is challenging their understanding of Scripture, but also pointing them back to it for a proper understanding which they lack.

The account that Jesus is referring to is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6

**1 Sam. 21:1-6 ESV** Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, "Why are you alone, and no one with you?"<sup>2</sup> And David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, 'Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.' I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place."<sup>3</sup> Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here."<sup>4</sup> And the priest answered David, "I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread-- if the young men have kept themselves from women."<sup>5</sup> And David answered the priest, "Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?"<sup>6</sup> So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

**when he was in need and was hungry** – The rationale for David to eat the bread which wasn't technically his to eat was by no means dire. Yes, David was hungry, but perhaps not starving. Jesus doesn't say that it was a matter of life and death that forced to make such a drastic move, but merely that he was hungry. At times Jesus will question whether an extreme need could drive one to do a work on the Sabbath, but that is mostly for the rhetorical force to show that the Pharisees were wrong. In this case, it is simply a need (not an emergency) that is enough for David to eat this holy bread.

**he and those who were with him** – Just like Jesus has been attacked by the behavior of those who are connected with him, Jesus uses an example that draws attention to the fact that it was not David alone who ate this bread, but his fellow men. Thus it is not merely David's special status that allowed him to do what was normally not

allowed, it also gave his men special approval too. Jesus' special status is going to mean something for His disciples too, as He just pointed out when He talked about Himself parabolically as the bridegroom with his attendants.

**how he entered the house of God** – During this time in Israel's history, this would refer to the mobile Tabernacle, not the Temple in Jerusalem (which was not built until Solomon's kingship). Nevertheless, wherever the Tabernacle was, God's presence rested upon it and it was a holy place.

**in the time of Abiathar the high priest** – This is a small stumbling block for some since the text of 1 Samuel says that the high priest was Ahimelech, not Abiathar, who was his son (for more on him see 1 Sam. 22:18, 20). To make things more complicated 2 Sam. 8:17, 1 Chr. 18:16, and 1 Chr. 24:6 record Ahimelech as the son of an Abiathar.

**ate the bread of the Presence** – Literally in Greek, "the bread loaves of the Presence." The "bread of the Presence" is often translated as "showbread." It was commanded in Exo. 25:30 (with further regulations in Lev. 24:5-9) and was supposed to be for the priests.

**Exod. 25:30 ESV** And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly.

**Lev. 24:5-9 ESV** "You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf.<sup>6</sup> And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the LORD.<sup>7</sup> And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the LORD.<sup>8</sup> Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever.<sup>9</sup> And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due."

**which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat** – Jesus' question to the Pharisees is, at first, glance misguided. They questioned Jesus about His disciples doing what is unlawful *on the Sabbath*. Jesus' question about David does not involve the Sabbath at all. What it does draw attention to, however, is the status of David and his relationship to the Torah, the Law of Moses. Herein lies the issue: How did David do what was wrong (he broke the law by eating the holy bread that was not given to him to eat), and yet he was not condemned by the priests or by Scripture for doing this? If David can break the Law with impunity, in this far greater way, by essentially robbing food from the priests, how can one condemn Jesus' disciples for taking food (which was lawfully given to them by Scriptures). The common thread for both David and his men and Jesus and His disciples is their need. They had need for the food and it was there for them, so why couldn't they take it? One possible take-away from Jesus' example is

that God Himself “does not sweat the small stuff,” as far as getting the necessary food for life is concerned. But perhaps the bigger point here is that God’s Law is not meant to make life difficult or unbearable for His people, especially when there is a need. Meanwhile the Pharisees show such complete and utter devotion to their traditions that they ignore the needs of others and lack compassion for their fellow man.

**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath** – This checks out. On day 6 of Creation, God created humanity, but the Sabbath came on day 7. The rest God took after He was finished creating was given as a gift to humanity.

**Exod. 20:8–11 ESV** "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.<sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work,<sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.<sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

**Deut. 5:12–15 ESV** "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.<sup>13</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work,<sup>14</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.<sup>15</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

See Ezekiel 20:12–23 for God’s own condemnation of His people for not keeping the Sabbath. The day was a gift given to the people to remind them of God’s redemption, but they used them for their own purposes. To remember the Sabbath was to remember God’s covenant that He made with His people.

Jesus has now completely shifted His answer from a question of eating (which seemed to be the connection between His disciples plucking grain and the story of David and his men eating holy bread) to the nature of the Sabbath and people’s relationship to it.

**So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath** – This is the final punchline of Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees. Because the Sabbath was made for man, one could say that humanity’s needs have precedence over the needs of the Sabbath, but Jesus is going to press this even farther.

**the Son of Man** – This phrase, last used in Mark 2:10 when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic, once again is used by Jesus to refer to Himself. The next time Jesus utters the phrase “Son of Man,” it will be to tell the disciples that He will suffer, die, and rise again from the dead (Mark 8:31).

Just like before, Jesus uses this phrase which connects back to Daniel’s vision of “one like a son of man,” who is divine and given absolute authority over all things. But now Jesus uses this phrase in clear conjunction with the example of David. In the Old Testament David was greatly esteemed and himself functioned as a messiah (anointed one), a king chosen by God Himself to lead the Israelites (1 Sam. 16:3, 12). But David was still just a regular (sinful) human whom God chose to partner with. God promised though that one day He would exalt David’s seed (one of his offspring) to be king on an eternal throne (2 Sam. 7:12–16). This promise of God created an expectation among the people of a new son of David who would be greater than David who would rule over God’s people once more. The Daniel vision of “one like a son of man” and the promise of David’s offspring who would rule over all things as the Messiah seem very similar and both point our eyes to Jesus (for an even clearer connection between the Messiah and the Son of Man see Mark 14:61ff). This is what Jesus is ultimately getting at with the Pharisees. If it was acceptable for David to break one of God’s laws, then would it not also be acceptable for one Greater than David to do the same? If the Sabbath was made for man, would it not be acceptable for a man to do good on the Sabbath? If the son of man is the lord of all things, would He not therefore also be the lord of the Sabbath? Jesus’ answer is cryptic in a way, but it should have given the Pharisees more than enough to re-examine their assumptions, but it also would have given them even more ammunition to reject Him because Jesus referred to Himself in this way.

**Mk. 10:47–48 ESV** And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" <sup>48</sup> And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

**Mk. 11:9–10 ESV** And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" <sup>10</sup> Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

**Mk. 12:35–37 ESV** And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? <sup>36</sup> David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, "'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" <sup>37</sup> David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly.

And like the previous challenge, when Jesus said it would be wrong for His disciples to fast because this was a time of joy, now Jesus’ disciples are right in doing what the

Pharisees think is wrong because Jesus has come with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Their whole relationship to the old covenant has now changed in a profound way because Jesus has come to fulfill the old covenant (Matt. 5:17, Rom. 10:4) and give to all the new covenant in His own blood (Mark 14:24). The whole point of the Old Testament is to point us to Jesus, but the Pharisees are too busy looking at themselves and others! Even David foresaw the promise of the Messiah (Psalm 110:1) and knew that pure devotion to the letter of the law without the devotion of the heart and mind to the promises of God and the spirit of His Word were in vain.

**Ps. 51:16-17 ESV** For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.