

# Lord of the Sabbath

Isaiah 43:1–7, Luke 6:1–11

Consider both our Old and New Testament texts:

“I am the *LORD* your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isa. 43:3).

“The Son of Man is also *Lord of the Sabbath*” (Luke 6:5).

The whole church—Eastern, Western and Protestant—worships on the first day of the week. But some conscientious souls wonder: is the church keeping the right day? They correctly point out that the people of God in the Old Testament kept the seventh day, and there is no explicit command in the New Testament to keep the first day. They raise a valid point. Since there is no command in the New Testament to keep the first day of the week holy to God as the day of public worship, should the church be doing that? That question deserves an answer. The supreme judge by which truth is established is the Holy Bible. God has spoken, and man has no authority to change his Word. All our thinking—all of it!—must be brought into conformity with Holy Scripture. Any teaching that contradicts the Bible is error and must be rejected. God’s people need to be assured that the church is doing the right thing.

In our text today Jesus makes a bold claim: “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” What did he mean, and what significance does it have for us today? Consider three points this morning: (1) a false claim, (2) a claim to deity, and (3) a claim on our affection; first,

## 1. A false claim

Our text this morning begins with Luke’s observation: “Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that he went through the grainfields. And his disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands. And some of the Pharisees said to them, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?’”

The phrase translated “second Sabbath after the first” is literally “second-first Sabbath”—an unusual expression. This expression is found in the majority of the Byzantine texts but missing in the critical text and most English versions such as the ESV (though it is mentioned in a footnote).

“Second-first” could be taken two ways, either temporally, meaning something like *a week or so later*, or qualitatively: the second most important Sabbath of the year. Calvin says, “It is beyond all question that this Sabbath belonged to some one of the festival-days which the Law enjoined to be observed once every year. . . . the second-first Sabbath, because, among the great Sabbaths which were annually observed, it was the second in the order of time. Now the first was the Passover, and it is therefore probable that this was the feast of first-fruits.” This could well be the meaning of the expression.

Exodus 23:14ff. says, “You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before me empty); and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field.”

In our New Testament text Jesus and the disciples were walking through the fields of grain at a time when the grain was ripening, which would be consistent with the annual feast of firstfruits.

It is noteworthy that the disciples were not accused of stealing. Leviticus 19 gives the background: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God” (vv. 9–10). Under Old Testament law, God’s people were to plant a little extra for the poor, and temporary residents—people who did not own land and worked as day-laborers, living hand-to-mouth. If they didn’t have work, and got hungry, under Old Testament law they had a legal right to do the hard work of gathering the *gleanings*—that is, what was left over after the property owner had harvested his land. This was the less desirable produce of the land, perhaps harder to get to, harder to reach, more thinly dispersed—what in rural areas might be called the “slim pickins.” The gleanings might be less economical for a commercial farmer to deal with, but it was a lifesaver for the poor of the land. Under Old Testament law there was no gigantic Department of Health and Human Services bureaucracy to take care of the poor. Tax money did not have to be extracted from productive citizens, sent to Washington, then sent back to the states to dole out to the poor, who would do no work, just collect a check. Instead, under Old Testament law the poor would do the hard work of gleaning and have something to show for their labors, giving them self-respect, dignity, and a sense of having a stake in the economy. The poor, if they were hardworking and diligent, could in turn help people who were poorer than themselves. God’s law is wise.

Those parts of the land that were less productive and less economical to harvest were left for the poor. They could not trespass on a man’s land and help themselves to the most desirable harvest, but they were legally permitted to glean from the borders and corners of a piece of property. Under the law a landowner was compelled to allow the poor onto part of his land, but in return he enjoyed freedom from oppressive taxation. It was a win-win situation: the poor were cared for, and a landowner did not have the burden of declaring his income and filing income-tax returns.

Our Lord, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, in eternity was rich beyond compare, but in redemption he made himself *poor*, so that we, through his poverty,

might be rich. Jesus was not born into wealth, but to a poor, hardworking couple who lived hand-to-mouth. When a young mother gave birth to a child, the law required that a sacrifice be offered: “a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering” (Lev. 12:8). Luke documents that Jesus’ family brought “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons”<sup>1</sup> to the temple, instead of a more valuable lamb, indicating their relative poverty. Mary and Joseph were poor by human standards but rich in God.

So on the “second-first” Sabbath, at the time of firstfruits, Jesus’ disciples went through the grainfields and picked heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands to soften them before eating them. It wasn’t a Big Mac and cheese. It wasn’t the tastiest meal. It required a lot of chewing and didn’t have a lot of flavor, but it filled their stomachs, gave them nutrition, and staved off hunger. The Pharisees saw them and used the opportunity to find fault. They did not accuse them of trespassing or stealing but rather charged, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” They accused the disciples, not of breaking the eighth commandment (“thou shalt not steal”), but of breaking the fourth commandment (“remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”).

Satan is the accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:10), and the wicked follow in his footsteps, finding fault and accusing those who love God of inconsistency and of failure to measure up to God’s perfect standard. If this happens to us, what should we do? We should acknowledge our faults and testify that our only hope of heaven is Christ. He died for our sins, taking our guilt upon himself. If we look to him in faith, then we have the assurance that, believing in the Lord, it is accounted to us for righteousness. Those who trust in him are clothed with garments of salvation and robed in a robe of righteousness.<sup>2</sup> When the Savior looks at us, he doesn’t see our sin, but the perfect righteousness of Christ. Looking to him, we are saved. That is the gospel!

What the disciples were accused of doing in our text was Sabbath-breaking: “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” This is a very serious charge. The penalty for violating the Sabbath was death. When a man was caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath, God said, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp” (Num. 15:35). But were the disciples breaking the Sabbath? No! Clearly, works of necessity are permitted on the Sabbath. The disciples were not running a commercial farming operation but eating in order to survive.

God’s law clearly permits works of necessity, mercy and worship on the Sabbath day. We should buy sufficient food and fuel before the Lord’s day, so as to avoid having to buy it on the Lord’s day. Taking meals or other necessities to the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:24

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 61:10

sick, praying with them and encouraging them in the Lord on a Sunday afternoon are acts of mercy. We should worship with God's people on the Lord's day unless providentially hindered (one of our brethren yesterday told of his car breaking down on a Saturday, hundreds of miles from home, and family members having to drive through the night to come pick him up and bring him home, necessitating their missing regular Sabbath worship—an act of necessity).

Jesus' enemies tried to accuse him and his disciples of sin, but he refuted their false claim with truth. How did he do this? He made

## **2. A claim to deity**

We read, "But Jesus answering them said, 'Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?' And he said to them, 'The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.'"

When David was fleeing from Saul, he asked the high priest, Ahimelech, if he could give him food. Since there was no ordinary food at hand, Ahimelech gave him some of the showbread—ceremonial, "hallowed" (holy) bread made of the finest flour. These were flat, thin loaves, placed in two rows of six on a table in the holy place before the LORD, renewed every Sabbath. Those that were taken away to give place to new ones were to be eaten by the priests only in the holy place.<sup>3</sup> They were hallowed bread, claimed by God himself to be used as he had appointed, and never to be eaten by the common people. But when David was fleeing from Saul, the high priest Ahimelech gave some of it to David, because he was hungry.

Jesus point seems to be that if David's eating of the hallowed bread on account of necessity excused him, then necessity ought to excuse his disciples' picking and rubbing heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath. But do not miss the important twist: having said that, Christ made the astonishing statement, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Think of what this meant. The Sabbath is a creation ordinance. From the time of creation people had followed God's example in working six days, then resting on the seventh. Man rested, following the example of God himself. No one ever before in history had claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath. The word *Lord* means someone who rules with absolute authority. When a person makes a public profession of faith in Christ as Lord, he or she is stating, "I declare that from this moment on, Jesus is absolute Lord of my life. I dedicate myself to think his thoughts after him at all times and to obey him absolutely. What he says to do, I

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<sup>3</sup> Easton's Bible Dictionary, Logos Bible Software

will do immediately without question. What he says *not* to do, I will absolutely not do. I am his. He has unquestioned authority over my life.”

Now notice something about the wording. The NKJV has “The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” The critical text has a slightly different word order and lacks the word “also.” But the NKJV translation of this phrase can be improved upon. What it literally says is this: “The Son of man is Lord *also* of the Sabbath.” Christ is claiming to be Lord of all. As God in human flesh he has undisputed, absolute authority. Now Christ comes along and claims to be Lord *also* of the Sabbath, of how man is to use the gift of time. Here is a strong and intentional claim to deity, akin to the assertion in our Old Testament text, “I am the LORD”—literally, “I am Yahweh your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isa. 43:3).

Jesus claims that he is Lord. If not true, then what he said was *blasphemy*—a serious crime punishable by death. But if it is true—and it is!—then it is the most wonderful news that could ever be expressed, for it means that the Lord Jesus Christ is God come in human flesh to save unworthy sinners.

Jesus is Lord of all. As such he is Lord also of the Sabbath. He is the one who at creation established the pattern of six days of labor followed by one day of rest. He is the one who gave the law at Sinai, and he is the one who is uniquely qualified to interpret that law—and even to change it.

Why do Christians in the New Testament era worship on the first day of the week? Did the *church* change the day? No! The church has no authority to change a divine command. The only one who has authority to change the day is *Christ*, and he clearly claims that authority: “The Son of man is Lord also [or *even*] of the Sabbath.”

Now the fourth commandment states: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God.” It clearly sets up a pattern of six days of labor, followed by one day of rest. The fourth commandment does not state, “The seventh day *of the week*” but simply “the seventh *day* is the Sabbath of the LORD your God.” So the church’s practice of keeping the first day as the day of rest is perfectly consistent with the fourth commandment itself. The commandment itself has not changed, but the day of rest and worship is now the first day of the week. Man is to work Monday through Saturday—six days—then rest and worship on the following day: the first day of the week, the Lord’s day.

“The Son of man is Lord of all—even of the Sabbath.” He is God, not a mere man, and he has authority to interpret his law. Our Shorter Catechism states: “From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since,

to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian sabbath.”<sup>4</sup> God, not man, appointed the first day of the week to be the day of the church’s worship. On what basis can the Catechism make this claim?

It is right here in our text this morning. Jesus Christ was no ordinary man. He is God in human flesh, born of a virgin, taking upon him our nature so that he could bear our sin. This is not merely something that others attributed to him. He himself declared in no uncertain terms: “The Son of man is Lord over all—Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Jesus is clearly man: “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same” (Heb. 2:14). But he is also clearly divine. He is the Lord of all—Yahweh of hosts—and particularly Lord of the Sabbath. He possesses all right to interpret and even to change God’s law, for he is the lawgiver come in human flesh. His example at creation established the pattern of six days of labor followed by a whole day of rest. Under the New Testament he kept the same pattern but changed the day from the seventh to the first day of the week. It is the same pattern. By his resurrection the Lord of creation shows himself to be the Lord of life.

Why does the church worship on the first day of the week? Not because of an explicit command, but because of Jesus’ *example*. All throughout his life he went to the temple or synagogue on the seventh-day Sabbath. Luke 4:16 records that “He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And *as His custom was*, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.” This was his lifelong custom. He would have gotten a red star for perfect attendance.

But shortly before he went to the cross, as he went out of the temple, he said, “See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, *you shall see Me no more* till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matt. 23:38ff.)

On resurrection Sunday he worshipped with his disciples in the Upper Room. Again, one week later—eight days later (Jewish inclusive time, counting both the first and the last days<sup>5</sup>)—he again worshipped with his disciples in the same room. Never again during his earthly sojourn did he go back into the temple on the seventh-day to worship with the Jews. The important takeaway: Jesus’ *practice* established the church’s worship on the first day. Christians are Jesus’ disciples. We are to follow the practice of our Master. *His practice is just as binding as his words*. The church follows her Lord in first-day worship. That is point two: a claim to deity. Now point three,

### **3. A claim on our affection**

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<sup>4</sup> Shorter Catechism 59, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

<sup>5</sup> Other examples: the time he spent in the tomb: three days and three nights (counting the first and the last days); “fifteen days” (Gal. 1:18), that is two weeks (counting the first and the last days); Pentecost (from the Greek word for fifty): fifty days, counting the first and last days, but what we would call forty-nine days, or seven weeks).

Our text continues: “Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that he entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. So the scribes and Pharisees watched him closely, whether he would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against him. But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Arise and stand here.’ And he arose and stood. Then Jesus said to them, ‘I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?’ And when he had looked around at them all, he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

The Jewish leaders understood our Lord’s teaching, but rather than receiving it to the salvation of their souls, they rejected it. They were filled with rage, and plotted to kill Jesus. Rather than receive the truth, they rejected it and killed the Messenger (and went to hell).

God’s Messiah certainly occupied no part of the religious leaders’ affections. In fact, they hated him and wanted to destroy him. Eventually they did destroy him—though what they thought was his undoing was actually our salvation. It was God’s eternal plan.

Jesus claims not only our obedience, but our very affections. Here is a claim on our affection. Our Lord Jesus Christ wants us not only to receive and keep the Sabbath, he wants us to *love* it. He wants us to have the attitude of the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD.’”

Brothers and sisters, let us love the Sabbath. Let us love the Lord of the Sabbath. Let us love his worship. Amen.