

Do Good, Save Life!

Mark 2:23–3:6 (ESV)

August 18, 2002

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” These three things Jesus said to the Pharisees, two statements and one question, and when he got through, they decided to kill him. Good preaching always evokes a strong response, one way or the other. These three things Jesus said to the Pharisees, and by so doing, he is saying them to us. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” What do these mean for us today? How shall we react?

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” To understand this, we must understand the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. It is a day of rest and a day of worship, a day of remembering that God created heaven and earth and all that is in them (Exodus 20:11), a day of remembering that God saved his people for himself, bringing them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deuteronomy 5:15). So, it is not the purpose of the Sabbath to promote arbitrary restrictions on behavior or to place burdensome regulations upon people. Instead, the purpose of the Sabbath is to promote the relationship of humanity with God, its creator and redeemer. Thus, we humans were not made to serve the Sabbath as some esoteric institution. Instead, the Sabbath was made to serve and assist us, to help us realize who and what we are, to help us to become who we are meant to be, the children of God.

The same thing could be said of the religious institutions of our own day: “The church was made for man, not man for the church.” The church was made for the good of humanity, not the other way around. The church is here to help us. The church is here to enhance our lives, not to detract from them. The church is here not to constrain us arbitrarily, but to provide for the full expression of our humanity, to help us become and be all that God intends for us. There are important truths here. How many people have wrongly thought that church was meant to take away from the joy of life, to take away time from family, to take away time from individual hobbies or recreation? How many people have had a largely negative view of church because they did not realize that the church exists for the good of humanity, not the other way around? It is not the purpose of human life to build up the church; instead, it is the purpose of the church to build up human life. That is good!

This principle applies to all institutions, not just to the Sabbath or to the church. That is, governments exist for the good of humanity, not the other way around; humanity does not exist for the good of governments. Often this is forgotten by those in power in governments. Kings think they rule by divine right. Dictators see their people as means to accomplish their ends, and even democracies sometimes reduce citizens to voiceless taxpayers. But that is not the way things are meant to be. When institutions become too strong and too important, they tend to think they are all-powerful and all-important. They become hard to resist. But Christians are able to name such self-importance for what it is—the sin of idolatry. And on the basis of this principle, Christians are in a unique position, and therefore have a special responsibility, to call governments and all other institutions back to their true reason for being: they exist solely for the good of humanity, not the other way around. However, this does not mean that we are simply free to do whatever we want to do. Even the intended subservience of institutions to humanity exists within a larger context.

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Moreover, “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” The Son of Man is, of course, Jesus Christ. And even though the Sabbath was made for man and not the other way around, nevertheless the Sabbath belongs to Jesus Christ, not to us. It is intended to serve his purposes, not ours. We are not slaves to the Sabbath, but we are not lord over it, either. Jesus is.

Again, in our day, we might say, “Jesus Christ is lord even of the church.” The church is not simply ours, to do with as we please. If it were a club, we could do whatever we wanted. But since it is the church, it is the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are to follow his wishes, not our own.

This leads to several of interesting implications. If the first thing Jesus said speaks especially to those people for whom the church is sometimes burdensome, this second thing is also a reminder that we are not free simply to set the church aside. On the other hand, this may also speak to those of us who are deeply attached to the church. There is a danger for those who love the church dearly, that we may begin to worship the church more than we worship its Lord. This is ruled out here. There is a danger that we may make the history of the church into a lord over the church, allowing the history of the church—as good as it may be—to determine the present and future life and mission of the church. This is ruled out here. The church does not belong to its history. The church does not belong to its members. The church does not belong to its denomination. The church does not belong to a particular community, to a race, to a social or economic class, to a political party, or to a nation. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. Alone. Period. Jesus is lord of the church; we are, at our best, his followers. This is the kind of gospel insight that

allowed the Protestant Reformation to listen to the Lord in scripture in a fresh way and to leave behind some of its medieval history. So we listen today for what the Lord wants us to be and to do here at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and in the church around the world.

So, when we say that the church was made for the good of humanity, that does not mean that we are free to redefine or shape the church in any way that we want to in order to fit our current understanding of human good. It means instead that we are free to listen to, and to obey, our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. This means, of course, that we are not even capable of properly defining human good apart from our relationship with God. We might think that defining the good life would be easy—a certain level of income, an absence of adversity, a loving family, good friends, a nice neighborhood, political freedom, and so forth.

These are nice, but they are not the defining realities of human existence or of the good life. Given that the church exists for the sake of human good and that Jesus Christ is lord of the church, the highest human good, the very purpose of our lives, is to worship, praise, and serve the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and to enjoy him forever. This is the good of human life. All other goods of human life flow out of this. Otherwise, they mean nothing at all. If we miss this relationship with God, nothing else matters or counts for anything.

The reason for our existence, the purpose, meaning, and direction of our lives, the basis of all we value and hold dear, our only safety and security—all of these are wrapped up in our worship of God, the centering of our lives and being and energy upon God, and our attachment to God, particularly through his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and therefore through the church which belongs to Jesus Christ.

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” Now, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” Again, “Is it lawful in the church to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” That is a sharp question. But you remember the story we read. The people were waiting for Jesus to do something so they could accuse him. And when he healed the man’s hand—showing that his is lord over health and disease, lord over life and death, as well as lord of the Sabbath and the church—when he healed the man’s hand, they decided to kill him. Why? It was against the law to labor on the Sabbath, and it was therefore against the law to perform non-emergency healings. The man was not dying. Jesus could have waited until the next day. Those who were watching him in order to accuse him were more concerned about their traditions than they were about the well being of their brother. Does that ever happen in the Christian church today? Are there people in our pews silently suffering pain, loss, guilt, unspeakable grief, loneliness, sorrow, or a thousand other

hurts? Are there people here with withered hands, withered hearts, or withered souls? Are there people coming for here help people whom we do not even see or hear, because for us to love them, for us to welcome them, for us to do the things that make for wholeness of life, would be too disruptive to the way we worship or to the way we have always done things? I hope not. But there may be. This story is remembered in the Bible not to put down the synagogue of long ago but as a warning to us today, a warning to the Christian church. So I take it very seriously. The Pharisees and Herodians were committed to history, to tradition, and to maintaining the status quo. Jesus was committed to helping people. Their hardness of heart is named in order to help us avoid it. It is a warning about what the church should not be—cold, uncaring, or even hateful. And therefore it is a word about what we should be—warm, caring, healing, and loving.

Jesus says that the church was made for humanity, that the church belongs to him, and that the church is defined by doing good and saving life. Jesus contrasts doing good with doing harm, saving life with killing. There is no middle ground. Even doing nothing is doing harm and killing. As John Calvin wrote in his commentary on this passage, “He who takes a man’s life is guilty of doing evil, but those who do not trouble to help the needy are little different from murderers.”

So, we do not worship God in a vacuum. Instead, we worship God in a sea of human hurt and misery. Part of who we are and what we do is to tend to that and to care for each other. This may be as simple as an unspoken act of friendship, sitting beside someone who is otherwise alone in a pew. This may be as explicit and involved as a blood drive, or a food collection or a clothing drive, or the CROP walk, or a Habitat house, or the meals ministry, or providing shelter for the homeless, or putting money into the offering to be used for various healing ministries of the church here and around the world.

Part of the human good for which the church of Jesus Christ exists is hereby defined as doing good and saving life. This is not an option or an extra for the Christian church. This is part of our God-given, Christ-shaped identity. This is who we are.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, VA 23220-2925
Telephone 804-359-2463
Facsimile 804-278-6298
goodloe@grace-covenant.org