

# Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of All

## A sermon

April Yamasaki

**W**hen I was in university and part of Campus Crusade for Christ (now Cru), I was given a pamphlet with two diagrams of the Christian life. In both diagrams, life appeared as a circle, and within each, there was an *x* mark for family, another *x* for friends, another for university studies, another for our Bible study group,

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another for a part-time job, another for the weekly discount movie night, and others for whatever other activities engaged us. As busy students, my friends and I had a lot of *x*'s for all the people and activities in our lives.

In each circle, there was also a cross to represent Jesus. In the one diagram, Jesus was simply another mark randomly placed among all of the *x*'s, but in the other diagram, the cross was on a throne with all of the other *x*'s arranged around it. The two diagrams were meant to illustrate the difference between having Jesus as part of our lives, and recognizing

Jesus as the centre and Lord of life who orients everything else. The second diagram was meant to show that the lordship of Jesus determines how we relate to our family and friends, how we choose our courses and do our jobs, how we use our leisure time, how we live out our faith—in the church and in the world at large. The lordship of Jesus changes and challenges our entire way of life.

In the New Testament, Jesus's lordship is the focus of a pair of Sabbath stories in Mark 2:23–3:6. Both stories take place in a particular time and culture, and both can also speak to us today. What do these stories show us about how we are to understand Jesus as Lord? And what does that lordship mean for our understanding of Sabbath?

## **The Sabbath was made for humankind**

In the first story (Mark 2:23–28), some Pharisees criticize Jesus’s disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus defends them by telling the story of how David and his men once ate bread from the temple that was by law reserved only for the priests. Technically, David and his men had broken the law, but practically this story was accepted as part of the Pharisees’ own history. Applying the same logic to the rules concerning the Sabbath, Jesus concludes, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (v. 27).<sup>1</sup>

In the second Sabbath story (3:1–6), Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. According to the rabbis, healing on the Sabbath was allowed only in life-or-death situations. If a sheep or an ox was injured and would die without attention, a person was permitted to do whatever work was necessary to save it—even on the Sabbath. In this case, however, the man with the withered hand was apparently in no danger of imminent death. His healing could have waited until the Sabbath was over.

Instead of waiting, however, Jesus applies the teaching of the rabbis in a new way. “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” he asks the Pharisees who are present (v. 4). When they refuse to answer him, Jesus restores the man’s hand. Once again, he demonstrates that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (2:27).

## **Reorienting Sabbath**

In the world of Mark’s Gospel, the Sabbath played a significant role in Jewish tradition and faith. Sabbath was grounded in the story of creation with its six days of creative work followed by a seventh day of rest. It was shaped by the people’s history of exodus from Egypt and formed part of the Ten Commandments. Sabbath meant setting aside their regular plowing, reaping, baking, sewing, and other work for a day of restoration and worship. It was a mark of their identity as God’s people, and a practical demonstration of their trust in God. Sabbath was a way of life.

Keeping the Sabbath was also a way of life for Jesus. At the start of Jesus’ ministry, Luke 4 describes how Jesus “went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom*” (Luke 4:16;

italics added). He took many more Sabbath moments as he prayed in the early morning (Mark 1:35), at the end of a busy day (Mark 6:46), and late into the night (Mark 14:32–42). After a long mission of teaching and healing, he encouraged his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a

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while” (Mark 6:31). Sabbath was woven into the fabric of Jesus’s life as much as it was for any observant Jew of his day.

But in these two stories, Jesus defends his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, and he himself performs the work of healing on a Sabbath day. Instead of following the letter of the law concerning the Sabbath, Jesus reflects God’s intention for the Sabbath as a time of restoration. Instead of orienting his life around the Sabbath as it was narrowly interpreted by the Pharisees, Jesus reorients the Sabbath. As in my diagram from Campus Crusade, it’s as if Jesus takes his place on the

throne and puts the Sabbath in its appropriate place. For all its significance, the Sabbath is not an end in itself. As Jesus says to the Pharisees, “the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mark 2:28).

The Gospel of John proclaims that “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3). This conviction is echoed by Colossians 1:15–16: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.” In other words, everything—including Sabbath rest—came into being through Christ, the divine Word of God. The Sabbath was created through him and for him. So Jesus Christ, the incarnate one, is Lord of the Sabbath.

### **A matter of healthy balance?**

Flash forward to our own day, where there seems to be a renewed interest in the Sabbath. Physician Matthew Sleeth shares his account of Sabbath practice in his book *24/6: A Prescription for a*

*Healthier, Happier Life*. Mary McKibben Dana writes about her family's yearlong experiment in *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time*. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition and beyond, others speak of the need for rest and restoration, of finding an appropriate balance between work and the rest of life, of recovering a sustainable rhythm of life that is productive and with sufficient margin for rest.

All of that is well and good. For those of us struggling with multiple demands and multiple roles, Sabbath rest is a welcome release. It pulls us back from the edge of burnout to a simpler and healthier way of living. Sabbath time that allows us to recharge as individuals and as families, that provides time for rest and worship, is a wonderful gift. With the psalmist we acknowledge:

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul. (Ps. 23:1–3a).*

### **A matter of justice**

If that's all Jesus meant by the Sabbath, I don't think the Pharisees would have been so angry, nor would they have immediately

**If Jesus had just been talking about self-care, I don't think the Pharisees would have been so angry, nor would they have immediately begun plotting to get rid of him. And if we just see Sabbath as a time to relax, it won't make waves.**

begun plotting to get rid of him, as they did at the end of our text (Mark 3:6). And if we just see Sabbath today as a time to relax and take care of ourselves, it won't make any waves for us. But Jesus's claim to be Lord of the Sabbath pushes us beyond Sabbath as self-care to something more.

In the first of the two Sabbath stories, Jesus allows his disciples to pick and eat the grain, just as David and his men ate the bread of the temple—because they were hungry. In the second story, he heals the man with the withered hand because the man is in need of

healing. In both, Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath exercises his power in good and life-giving ways in behalf of humankind.

In both, Jesus is not exactly resting, but he is keeping the Sabbath as in Isaiah 56, where the prophet clearly links Sabbath keeping with maintaining justice and doing what is right:

*Thus says the LORD:  
Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.*

*Happy is the mortal who does this,  
the one who holds it fast,  
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,  
and refrains from doing any evil. (Isa. 56:1–2)*

In these words from the prophet Isaiah, and in Jesus's own example, Sabbath keeping means doing good instead of evil, acting in life-giving ways instead of causing harm or allowing harm to go unchecked. This doesn't by any means contradict the practice of Sabbath as rest and restoration, but it enlarges the meaning of Sabbath beyond individual and personal refreshment to focus on the good of others.

### **A communal good**

After all, the rhythm of work and rest embedded in creation was not for any one individual but for the benefit of the human community. In Exodus 23:12, Sabbath rest is not only for the Hebrew people as God's chosen ones but also for their animals and their slaves and the strangers living among them: "Six days

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you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed."

What would Sabbath look like if we thought of it less as individual self-care and more as a quality of our life together as a community? What if we thought of it less as a time to be free of responsibilities and to "do nothing" and more as a time to act in life-giving ways both for ourselves and for others? If Jesus is truly Lord of our Sabbath, what would that look like?

### **"You shall keep my sabbaths"**

Even as I write this, I know that I'm not saying it quite right—because over and over in scripture, God says, "You shall keep my

sabbaths” (Exod. 31:13; Lev. 19:3, 30; 26:2); “I gave them *my sabbaths*” (Ezek. 20:12); “They shall keep *my sabbaths holy*” (Ezek. 44:24) (italics added). So when we keep the Sabbath, it’s not really “my” Sabbath or “our” Sabbath—it’s *God’s Sabbath* that refreshes and restores us; it’s *God’s Sabbath* that is to be lived out in good and life-giving ways.

As Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of All, Jesus radically redefines all of life. Let us follow where he leads us, in Sabbath rest and worship, in doing good and expressing ourselves in life-giving ways, for ourselves and others. Amen.

### **Note**

Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

### **About the author**

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