RULES ABOUT THE RULES

Following their exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Jews determined not to repeat their forefathers’ errors that had led them into captivity—in particular, Sabbath observance, returning a faithful tithe, and marrying unbelievers (Nehemiah 13). They made rules about the rules to make sure that they would not fall into those sins again. Not only would they refrain from marrying unbelievers, but they would avoid interacting with Gentiles altogether (cf. Luke 10:25–37). They would be meticulous in returning their tithe (cf. Matt. 23:23). And they made rules to guide what was and was not permissible behavior on the Sabbath (cf. John 5:10).

By the time Jesus came to earth, the Sabbath was so weighed down by humanity’s requirements that He had to ask so rudimentary a question as, “Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy it?” (Luke 6:9, KJV). The Sabbath was, for the Pharisees, more about what you ought not do than it was about what you should experience.

Throughout this study we have highlighted the importance of the Sabbath. We end the study by reorienting ourselves to the purpose of Sabbath. This week, we consider Christ’s assertion that the Sabbath was made for humanity and not the other way around.
Write out Mark 2:23–28 from the Bible translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

At the close of the creation week, God rested “from all his work which he had made” (Gen. 2:2). Yet God did not cease from all activity because He holds everything together (Col. 1:17). While He ended His work of creation, He continued His work of sustaining all life. From His example we learn that Sabbath is not a day for complete inactivity. Rather, we must consider what activity is appropriate. Clearly, at a bare minimum, activities that sustain life are appropriate on the Sabbath day.

On any other day, the Pharisees would have found no fault with the disciples’ actions because it was permissible for someone hungry who was passing through a field to eat from said field. The Pharisees’ contention was that the action of preparing the grain for consumption constituted work and was thus forbidden on the Sabbath day (Luke 6:1, 2). To eat the grain was permissible, to take grain from a field you do not own was permissible, but in an attempt to guard the sanctity of the Sabbath, the Pharisees had made it impossible for the grain to satiate its harvester, leading to a miserable Sabbath experience.

It was likely a Sabbath when David reached Nob in 1 Samuel 21. The showbread was replaced once a week on the Sabbath day (1 Chron. 9:32), and the priests would eat the one that had been removed from the sanctuary. Since holy bread was all that Ahimelech had on hand (1 Sam. 21:4), it was likely the Sabbath day. God had instructed that the showbread was to be eaten by the priests (Lev. 24:5–9), yet here were hungry men in need of nourishment.

The Sabbath and the sanctuary service were instituted for the benefit of humanity. In fact, after Christ fulfilled its services, there was no longer a need for the sanctuary rituals (Heb. 7:27). As has been discussed in lesson 4, the Sabbath is a reminder of our place in creation order. How we keep it, then, is subsidiary to its intended purpose. A correct observance of God’s statutes cannot contravene His very nature as the Giver of life. The practice must follow the principle, and not vice versa.

Outside of the context of a loving relationship with the Creator, the Pharisees found themselves serving the Sabbath instead of benefiting from its blessings. No rest can be experienced when the mind is perpetually taxed with the burden of ensuring compliance with a set of rules. In their attempts to keep the Sabbath holy with their supplementary rules, they disregarded what was plainly required in the commandment—to rest.

Ahimelech had it right. The ceremonial law was not the principle but the practice. The disciples were not wrong. To sustain life on the Sabbath day is very much in harmony with God’s own example. Care must be taken not to contravene the principle in the name of preserving the practice.
FREEDOM IN ACTION

Many hold the misguided view that surrender to God automatically results in a restriction of their freedom, a curtailing of “fun.” This springs from the notion that serving God is nothing more than enslavement to an endless list of “thou shalt not” rules. It requires a mere review of the brief but dense preamble to the Ten Commandments to topple this view.

The sacred record states, “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exod. 20:2, KJV). The “land of Egypt” and “house of bondage” are effectively the same thing (as in the case of “Israel also came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham”; Israel is Jacob, and Egypt is the land of Ham [Ps. 105:23, KJV]). In these words, God outlines His justification for requiring their obedience: He freed them! He did for them what they could not do for themselves.

Forty years later, in recalling the Ten Commandments from memory, Moses adds this comment regarding Sabbath observance, “And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15).

God freed the enslaved Israelites first, then He required of them compliance with His entire holy law of righteousness. He freed them so that they might obey Him. Obedience to God is freedom in action at the highest level. Of the Ten Commandments, the freedom component is specifically attached to the fourth, thus associating it with the Israelites’ history.

After healing a woman from severe curvature of the spine, Jesus (who liberated the enslaved Israelites) said, “And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:16, KJV). The sons and daughters of Abraham, bound and bent over by Satan in Egyptian bondage, were loosed by Moses (a type of Christ) that they might serve their liberator. The Sabbath is a weekly celebration of God-given freedom from the ultimate bondage—sin!

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy and to celebrate the freedom that is found only in Christ. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1, KJV).
inSpect

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Galatians 4:1–5:1
John 10:10
Exodus 23:12
Matthew 11:28–30

What other parables come to mind in connection with Mark 2:23–28?

Review your memorized verse from Mark 2:23–28.
ALL VACANCIES FILLED

The Greek philosopher and polymath Aristotle is credited with saying, “Nature abhors a vacuum.”

Nature certainly does!

After the summary statement of creation in Genesis 1:1, the Bible describes the condition of the raw matter that existed: “And the earth was without form, and void” (Gen. 1:2, KJV). Without form (tohu) and void (bohu). Chaos and emptiness! Creation introduced order and symmetry where there was chaos, and vibrant life where there was emptiness. Creation week lists three shining examples of God filling emptiness.

On the second day of creation, God made the firmament, and on the third day of creation, God separated land from water. On the fourth day, God filled the firmament with heavenly bodies (sun, moon stars). After creating fish and birds on the fifth day, God said “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth” (Gen. 1:22, KJV). Clearly, the seas, separated from dry land on day three of creation, were empty, as was the firmament that appeared on day two. God filled the seas with fish and filled the skies with birds.

On days three and six, God filled the earth with three forms of life: plant, animal, and human. All vacancies filled!

Physical creation was made with spiritual lessons built into it, which is why Christ (God’s active agent in creation) taught mainly by parables. Ellen White writes, “In the natural world God has placed in the hands of the children of men the key to unlock the treasure house of His Word. The unseen is illustrated by the seen; divine wisdom, eternal truth, infinite grace, are understood by the things that God has made.” (White, Child Guidance, 46.)

The God of creation, the God of the seventh-day Sabbath, knows how to fill vacancies, and He stands ready to fill vacancies in the lives of His children. The vacancy may have been created by death, by divorce, by unemployment, by romantic breakups, or by educational disappointment. The situation may seem to be “without form and void,” but the loving Creator can fill those voids. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does God!
KEEP IT HOLY

You should not feel it your duty to introduce arguments upon the Sabbath question as you meet the people. If persons mention the subject, tell them that this is not your burden now. But when they surrender heart and mind and will to God, they are then prepared candidly to weigh evidence in regard to these solemn, testing truths. (White, Evangelism, 228.)

We should not provide for the Sabbath a more liberal supply or a greater variety of food than for other days. Instead of this the food should be more simple, and less should be eaten, in order that the mind may be clear and vigorous to comprehend spiritual things. Overeating befogs the brain. The most precious words may be heard and not appreciated, because the mind is confused by an improper diet. By overeating on the Sabbath, many have done more than they think to dishonor God.

While cooking upon the Sabbath should be avoided, it is not necessary to eat cold food. In cold weather let the food prepared the day before be heated. And let the meals, though simple, be palatable and attractive. Provide something that will be regarded as a treat, something the family do not have every day. (White, Child Guidance, 532.)

Jesus was a perfect pattern of what we should be. He was the strictest observer of His Father’s law, yet He moved in perfect freedom. He had all the fervor of the enthusiast, yet He was calm, sober, and self-possessed. He was elevated above the common affairs of the world, yet He did not exclude Himself from society. He dined with publicans and sinners, played with little children, and took them in His arms and blessed them. He graced the wedding feast with His presence. He shed tears at the grave of Lazarus. He was a lover of the beautiful in nature and used the lilies to illustrate the value of natural simplicity in the sight of God, above artificial display. He used the occupation of the husbandman to illustrate the most sublime truths....

His zeal never degenerated into passion nor His consistency into selfish obstinacy. His benevolence never savored of weakness nor His sympathy of sentimentalism. He combined the innocence and simplicity of the child with manly strength, all-absorbing devotion to God with tender love for man. He possessed commanding dignity combined with winning grace of humility. He manifested unyielding firmness with gentleness. May we live daily in close connection with this perfect, faultless character. (Ellen G. White, In Heavenly Places (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1967), 54.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How have you had a miserable experience by keeping the Sabbath “in your own way”?

How would the principles of the Sabbath be broken by keeping it “in your own way” as well?

What are examples of practice following principle? What are examples of principles erroneously following practice?

What are the current vacuums that you have in your life?

How has or how can the Creator fill in these vacuums?

What Sabbath traditions do you hold, and what are the principles behind them?

Why does humanity need the Sabbath?

How has this topic increased the quality of your spiritual development and biblical understanding?

Made for Humanity