

"The True Sabbath Rest"

Mark 2:23-28

Second S. a. Pentecost

Messiah, Boerne

June 2, 2024

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Text: Mark 2:23-28

Dear Friends in Christ:

A Sunday School student once asked her parents a riddle:
"Why do people go to church on Sunday?" After a brief pause,
she answered, "Because all the stores are closed!" Now, I
realize that joke is a bit dated, but it still brings up an
important point about worship. What is the *purpose* of worship?
Is it to fulfill the letter of the law, or does God have a
deeper, *spiritual* reason for keeping the Sabbath day?

In our text for today, some Pharisees asked Jesus about the
Sabbath. Now, when we hear the word *Sabbath*, most of us think
of Sunday, the day when we worship, or Saturday, the day of
worship for God's people in the Old Testament. But the Sabbath
encompasses much more than just closing stores or choosing a day
for public worship services. In our Gospel reading from St.
Mark, Jesus caused the Pharisees to consider *why* God had
established the Sabbath in the first place. Jesus also wants us
to see that as God's Son, He came to set us free from the guilt
of sin and worry about our standing with God. Jesus came to

bring us forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and the true Sabbath rest.

Our text this morning begins with Jesus walking through a grain field with His disciples on the Sabbath day. While they are walking through the field, some of His disciples begin to pluck heads of grain from the stalks, probably to roll them between the palms of their hands in order to separate the chaff from the grain to eat. According to Jewish extra-biblical laws, what the disciples were doing was breaking the Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." You see, the harvesting of the grain by hand was considered *work* by the Pharisees, and Jews were not supposed to work on the Sabbath. Furthermore, Jesus was also breaking God's commandment by allowing such Sabbath breaking to occur among His disciples—by failing to warn them against such unlawful behavior.

In response to the Pharisees' accusations, Jesus refers them to the story of David and his men and the bread of the Presence in the temple at Nob. There's no indication that Jesus had joined his disciples in picking and eating grain—He kept the law perfectly (Gal 4:4). But as their Rabbi, he assumed responsibility for His followers. So He answered the Pharisee's concerns by pointing them to the *purpose* of the Sabbath as illustrated by this story. He used it to show how God gave His commandments not to *condemn* but to *benefit* His people.

Remember that God's people were around well before the written command governing the Sabbath was established. For example, the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—lived over four hundred years before the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, yet Abraham is considered the father of *all* who trust in God's promises, including you and me (Rom 4:16). Also, Enoch, the father of Methuselah, lived hundreds of years before Noah and the flood, but Enoch "walked with God" (Gen 5:24) in righteousness by faith and was commended as having pleased God long before the Ten Commandments were given (Heb 11:5).

You see, God established the Sabbath, indeed, *all* the commandments, to *aid* His people in their salvation, not to place further limitations and restrictions on them. On the Sabbath day, human beings and beasts of burden were to rest their bodies from work, and people were to meditate upon the wonders God had done and their deliverance from evil, for example, creation and their exodus from Egypt. So, rather than ask what is *lawful* on the Sabbath, God's people should consider how God established the Sabbath for their *good* (LSB 579).

Unfortunately, it's common to find so-called "religious" people emphasizing the *letter* rather than the *spirit* of the law. For example, they may emphasize the negative and the details of obedience to the commandments. Since they imagine that they are

"healthy," they think they don't need a doctor (v 12). The Pharisees, for example, burdened people with further requirements to serve as a guard or hedge around the Commandments, so that people wouldn't break any of the "Big Ten." They did this, however, without diagnosing the real spiritual problem that beset them and all people. While they were precise in their observation of the law, demonstrating a strong concern for useless detail, they lacked genuine regard for people, justice, mercy, faithfulness—even life itself (Mt 23:3, 23-24).

You see, the real issue here is God's grace in Jesus Christ. It alone is able to cure our spiritual diseases and restore us to a proper relationship with God. We receive God's grace, His forgiveness of sins, for Christ's sake, through faith, for, as the writer to the Hebrews says, "without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (Heb 11:6). The Sabbath is a day to receive and celebrate God's grace, that is, the forgiveness of sins through faith in the Messiah, Jesus.

The importance of receiving God's grace on the Sabbath is highlighted in one of my favorite films, *Chariots of Fire*. In the movie, the Scottish Olympian Eric Liddell refused to run the race he had prepared for in the Olympic Games in Paris because the heat for his race was run on the Sabbath day, Sunday. According to his religious tradition, He considered Sunday as

the day of rest, including *physical* rest, in honor of God. His act of refusing to run on the Lord's Day was a powerful witness to others of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and God honored his faithfulness and blessed him with victory in another race at the Olympics.

You see, God is *gracious* toward His people. Jesus responds to the Pharisees' false accusation against his disciples by referring them to the incident in the life of David mentioned previously. David and his men were on the run from King Saul, who was seeking David's life. They were hungry and came to the LORD's temple at Nob. David asked Ahimelech the priest for whatever bread was available, and the priest gave him the holy bread set before the Lord which was only to be eaten by the priests. Thus, by means of this example, Jesus shows that God is more interested in the genuine needs of his people than with the letter of the law.

God demonstrates His awareness of our needs, too, by filling us with *rest*. God promises a Sabbath rest to his people, but rest is more than relief from the physical exertion of work. In Jesus Christ God forgives us all our sins and He also promises to provide for our daily needs. God's rest includes the peaceful, spiritual comfort that comes from knowing that our past sins are completely forgiven, our present is

filled with God's gracious presence, and our future is in God's merciful hands.

In his explanation of the Third Commandment, Luther says that one of the *chief benefits* of the Sabbath is the opportunity to gather to hear and learn God's Word and to receive the Holy Sacraments for the forgiveness of sins. As God's people, we should examine our Sabbath practice in the light of God's Word and Luther's explanation and live accordingly. Is our Sabbath practice just an empty ritual, perhaps only an opportunity to enjoy physical rest, or is it a day we set apart as special for gladly hearing and learning God's Word, for administering Holy Baptism, and for receiving the Holy Sacrament of the Altar?

Through His Word and Sacraments, God gives us the *forgiveness of sins*. In Christ's shed blood, God's people receive the forgiveness won for them by Jesus. The penalty for sin is death, but by means of Christ's sacrificial death in our place, our sins are paid for in full. The Sabbath is the day to hear the Good News of God's love demonstrated by Christ's suffering and death on the cross for us and to gather to receive Christ's true body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins, in the Lord's Supper. Therefore, with joy and eager expectation, we celebrate our fellowship with Him in weekly worship and in the regular reception of Holy Communion.

Finally, God fills us with *freedom*. Just as Jesus freed his disciples from bondage to the letter of the law, so also we are freed to serve Him in Spirit and in truth. We are not bound to the ceremonial regulations or religious traditions of the Old Testament or religious legalists. Rather, we are set free by the Lord Jesus Christ, true Son of God and true Son of Man, to celebrate every day as sanctified, set apart, and holy to the Lord our God.

Dear Friends in Christ, God first created people, and then He established the Sabbath. It is the day for us Christians to gather in Jesus' name and in remembrance of God's marvelous work of redemption. We receive by grace *rest in Jesus* because we do not depend on our own careful observation of the details of the law for our salvation, but on Christ's obedient life in fulfillment of the law for us, His substitutionary death on our behalf, His resurrection from the dead and ascension to heaven. One day our Lord will return to take us to be with Him in heaven, where we will enjoy *the true and eternal Sabbath rest*.
Amen.