

Sermon for June 10, 2012 – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-28

Theme: Celebrate the Sabbath

- 1) Not as a Pharisee.
- 2) But as a disciple of Jesus.

²³ *One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.* ²⁴ *The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"* ²⁵ *He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"* ²⁶ *In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."* ²⁷ *Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."* ²⁸ *So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."*

What does worship mean to you? Is it merely a set of rules, rites and customs that need to be done a certain way in order to please God? I hope none of us would have this view of worship, but sometimes we act like this. We can worry about so many little things - like what color the altar cloths should be or what candles should be lit when. And we are tempted to get upset when one of these "rules" regarding worship is broken. These customs, however, are not "rules" for worship. What is more, we completely miss the beauty of these customs if we insist that they be followed slavishly. The purpose of all our worship practices is to draw attention to Christ and his work for us. But when we worry and get upset about these customs, are they really serving the purpose for which they were intended?

Let us learn from Jesus how to worship him with a proper heart, under the theme: **Celebrate the Sabbath** 1) Not as a Pharisee. 2) But as a disciple of Jesus.

Part One: Not as a Pharisee.

Our text begins: *"One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain."* We should not imagine that Jesus was traveling any great distance, or that they were too far from any place where the disciples could buy food. They were probably no more than half a Sabbath's walk (around a 1/4 mile) away from the place where they were celebrating Sabbath.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that the disciples became hungry. Even though they were close to town and could have easily waited, the disciples decided to snack on some of the ripened grain standing in the field. Jesus found nothing wrong with what they did (cf. Deuteronomy 23:25)

It seems as if there were some Pharisees near that grain field - a strange sight indeed considering that a Pharisee wouldn't want to break the Sabbath by walking too far. What were these Pharisees doing? Probably watching Jesus' every move to see if he or his disciples would break the Sabbath.

Jesus wasn't eating any grain, but his disciples were! "Ah, ha!", thought the Pharisees, "Now we have him. He is their Rabbi. He is responsible for their sin!" And so they, pretending to be horrified, say to Jesus, *"Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"* You see, God's law clearly forbade harvesting grain on the Sabbath. That was work. And isn't that what the disciples were doing - harvesting grain (as they plucked a few heads for a snack)? The Pharisees thought so! Jesus can't be the Messiah if he allows his disciples to break the Sabbath.

But it wasn't the disciples who were breaking the Sabbath, it was the Pharisees! How so? Because, with their strict adherence to their misinterpretation of the law, they completely missed the purpose of the Sabbath. The word Sabbath means rest. God instituted the Sabbath in order to force his people to take a day off work so that they could relax and reflect on God's goodness - all the while being reminded of the spiritual rest the Messiah would bring. The Pharisees, however, turned this day of rest into a day of work-righteousness. They add all sorts of petty protocols and ordinances to the Sabbath, turning this day of rest into a day of worry: making sure you didn't do this, that or the other thing so you didn't lose favor with God. The Pharisees were guilty of legalism - of trying to earn righteousness before God through

their own works and petty laws. And what was the result of this legalism? They could not see their Savior – the person the Sabbath pointed to - who was standing right in front of them.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as you celebrate the Sabbath, don't be a Pharisee. Don't focus so much on the outward adherence of customs that you lose sight of Christ in the process. And don't think you are standing so firm that you won't fall into this trap. The best of us do all the time. Our sinful natures are quick to criticize. Sometimes we get bent out of shape if the altar cloth is the wrong color, or if the altar flowers are fake instead of real. Should our thoughts be focused on those things during worship? No, they should be focused on Christ and his work.

And there is yet another way we are tempted to act like Pharisees. Sometimes we are overly interested in what our fellow brothers and sisters are doing. Like the Pharisees in our sermon text, we watch and judge others when it is not ours to judge.

Now, someone might say, "Doesn't Christ command us to warn a brother who is in danger and to call him to repentance when he sins?" Absolutely, Christ commands this.

But what Christ does not command is spying on each other, judging that as sin which Scripture does not, and gossiping about it to others. When we do this, we are acting exactly like the Pharisees in our sermon text. To this the Scriptures say: *"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls."* (Romans 14:4)

Lord, have mercy on us for all the times we act like Pharisees - trying to celebrate your Sabbath outwardly, but not inwardly; sinfully judging our brothers and sisters instead of rejoicing with them in peace you have won for us.

Part Two: As a disciple of Jesus

Jesus masterfully responds to the charge of the Pharisees by showing them the purpose of the law. And what is it? In a word: love, as the Scriptures say: "Love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:10)

[Jesus] answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Our 1st lesson recounted this incident. In Old Testament times, God's law required that the priest place 12 large loaves of bread before the LORD in the tabernacle. When these loaves were replaced, only the priests were allowed to eat the old ones. (Leviticus 24:5-9)

Yet, when David came to the LORD's tent hungry (although probably not starving), the priests did not turn him away. Even though they could have insisted that God himself forbade it, that David should seek bread elsewhere, they didn't. In love they broke God's law in order to help a fellow brother in need.

And did God condemn this action? No. And why not? Because love is the fulfillment of the law. One Lutheran commentator puts it this way: "God cares more for the right spiritual condition of the heart than for the outward observance of his own ceremonial regulations."

And so Jesus continues: *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."* In other words, God instituted his day of rest for the benefit of man, that a person may grow in knowledge and faith in the LORD's promises. God did not intend that the Sabbath regulation become a means of salvation by serving it slavishly. This turns the Sabbath into an idol, and this is exactly what the Pharisees were doing.

And what gave Jesus the authority to make this assessment? He says: *"So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."*

Now, did you catch the little play on words that happened between the last two verses I just read? The Sabbath was made for man and Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. The term "Son of Man" is an Old Testament term for the coming Messiah. By using this term, Jesus was saying that He is the Savior, true God and true man - born of a woman, born under law, to redeem us who are under the law. (Galatians 4:4-5) The Sabbath was made for man, and Jesus, the Son

of man, is Lord of the Sabbath - not only in the sense that He is God and instituted the Sabbath, but in the sense that the Sabbath pointed to and is fulfilled in him.

Sabbath means rest and, through repentance and faith in Jesus, we find rest from the burden of sin and guilt. He himself says: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* (Matthew 11:28, 29).

"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God." (Hebrews 4:9) Our Sabbath rest is Jesus himself, who forgives our sins and offers us the eternal hope of salvation through the Gospel.

So, if Christ himself is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, how then are we to celebrate the Sabbath? That's simple: keep the Sabbath by keeping Christ. And how do we do that? By treasuring the Gospel which reveals all who Christ is and has done for us.

This is why Martin Luther explained the third commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy," in this way: "We should fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it."

It is only through the Word of God that we come into contact with Christ and are able to learn from him. And this is what being a disciple of Jesus is all about: sitting at his feet and learning how he saved us from our sins, not only so that we can go to heaven when we die, but also so that we can start living to his glory now by serving him and our neighbor in love. We keep the Sabbath by being disciples of Jesus, and we can only be his disciples if we are studying the Word of God both at home and at church.

Celebrating the Sabbath means much more than merely coming to Church in order to fulfill certain customs and expectations. This is how the Pharisees kept the Sabbath. No, celebrating the Sabbath means listening to Jesus in repentance and faith - learning about who he is and all he has done to save us, and learning about how we can show love to God and our neighbor in thanksgiving for it. May the LORD lead us all to see the importance of our Sabbath Savior, and keep us steadfast in his Word. Amen.