

Second Sunday after Pentecost – June 7, 2015
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Mark 2:23-28 (NIV)

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."

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus;

A clergyman by the name of Joseph Prince wrote: "It is the truth of grace and not of the law that brings you true freedom. The truth of the law only binds you. In fact, religious bondage is one of the most crippling bondages with which a person can be encumbered. Religious bondage keeps one in constant fear, guilt, and anxiety."¹

At the time of Jesus' the teachers of the law and the Pharisees had numerous laws which they made in an effort to help people follow the Laws God had given his people in the OT. God's laws were intended to be a blessing for his people but unfortunately the religious leaders of the people turned them into a burden. This becomes obvious when we see how they tried to use their laws to discredit Jesus as a teacher.

To some extent the Pharisees actions were spurred by their jealousy because people were paying more attention to Jesus that they were to them. But there was more. The teachings of the Pharisees were in conflict with the teachings of Jesus. They looked at the OT Laws as providing a way to salvation. That's why they added so many of their own rules to those Laws. Jesus, on the other hand understood that God had given his people those rules to point out their need for a Savior. He had come to be the one who would do what no sinful being could do – he would keep God's Laws perfectly and he didn't need the additional laws of the Pharisees to show him how to do that.

The Pharisees refused to recognize their need for a Savior. They wanted to earn their own salvation. They wanted credit for obeying God's Law even though they were unable to be holy as the Lord God was holy. (cf. Leviticus 19:2) The Pharisees hated Jesus because they did not understand their need for a Savior. They stubbornly insisted that salvation came through the law. That's why they confronted Jesus because his disciples had picked and eaten some heads of grain on the Sabbath.

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?" In response to this question, Jesus spoke the words we will use as our theme in considering this Gospel lesson today:

Theme: The Sabbath Was Made for Man

1. Not to be a burden to him
2. But to be a blessing for him

¹ "Joseph Prince." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2015. 6 June 2015. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/josephprin637228.html>

Perhaps you might wonder why the Pharisees questioned Jesus about why his disciples had done something that was unlawful on the Sabbath. It's true that it was the Sabbath – the sixth day of the week – the day about which the Lord had said: **"Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. 13) Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14) but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work..."** (Deuteronomy 5:12-14a) Wouldn't it be unlawful to pick grain from someone else's field on other days too? Wouldn't that be a violation of God's command: **"You shall not steal?"** (cf. Exodus 20:15, Deuteronomy 5:19 NIV)

Actually, the Pharisees knew God's laws very well – even some of the more obscure laws like Deuteronomy 23:25. **"If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain."** (NIV) This was one way in which the Lord wanted his laws to be a blessing to his people – he wanted to protect property and possessions but at the same time he wanted to be sure that the hungry would be fed. Jesus's disciples had not broken the 7th commandment. But they had violated one of the manmade laws of the Pharisees.

Over the years the Jewish legal experts had attempted to define what was work and what wasn't so that they could more easily explain what activities were permissible and what activities were not acceptable on the Sabbath. According to the Jewish religious Rabbi's or teachers there were 39 different categories of activities which were forbidden on the Sabbath. Harvesting was one of the forbidden activities. To show you the great extent to which the Rabbinical Laws went winnowing is also a forbidden activity. Winnowing is the separation of edible materials from inedible. **"Example: If one has a handful of peanuts, in their paper-thin brown skins, and one blows on the mixture of peanuts and skins, dispersing the unwanted skins from the peanuts, this would be an act of 'winnowing'."**² The disciples were not only guilty of "harvesting" on the Sabbath but also of "winnowing" since they would have had to separate the outer shell of the grain from the edible inner kernel! Such were the burdens of the Rabbinical Laws!

Perhaps you and I don't go to quite those extremes but our sinful nature has a tendency to get a bit legalistic at times too. At times we try to add human rules to God's Laws too. A comment like, "All God requires is just one hour a week, can't people at least come to church every week" may sound pious. However God has no such rule! Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath – he not only established it but he also "abolished it" when he fulfilled its purpose of providing us with spiritual rest – the rest we have from the forgiveness of our sins and the rest we will enjoy in heaven. We are no longer obligated to set aside one day a week as a Sabbath to the Lord. That "burden" or obligation was removed by Christ.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write: **Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. (17) These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.** (Colossians 2:16-17 NIV)

The Pharisees did not understand the purpose of God's Law regarding the Sabbath – they focused on the aspect of physical rest and the avoidance of work as they explained the Sabbath Laws to the people. They seemed to miss the most important aspect that this was to be a day of rest in the Lord – a Sabbath to the Lord. This was to be a day set apart to focus on the Lord and his blessings -- A time to learn of him and to be blessed by him. That's why Jesus said: **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."**

How did Jesus respond when he was questioned about his disciples' activities? He could have launched into a lengthy discussion about what was work and what wasn't. He could have taken the Pharisees to task for

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activities_prohibited_on_Shabbat#Gathering

their improper focus on the physical burdens of the Law rather than the Spiritual blessings. But he didn't do that either. Instead he attempted to show them just how hypocritical they were being with their accusations.

Jesus pointed out the error of their thinking by referring to an incident that would have been well known to the Pharisees from the study of the history of their people. **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."** (NIV)

The account Jesus referred to is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. In his jealousy, King Saul had decided to kill young David. David and his men fled from Saul and that Abiathar (who would ultimately become High Priest after the death of his father Ahimelech who is mentioned in 1 Samuel) gave David and his men bread that had been set apart for use in the tabernacle and was only to be eaten by the priests. No one accused David and his men of sin and the Pharisees would not be ready to do that either because "in the case of necessity, above all, love is the fulfillment of the law." (Kretzmann) Once again the Rabbinical Laws approved an action like this. According to those laws when a life is in jeopardy it was not only allowed but required to violate the Sabbath laws! It appears that both what David did and what the disciples did would be included in this legal exception. (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activities_prohibited_on_Shabbat#Saving_of_human_life)

By questioning Jesus about the actions of his disciples the Pharisees were actually seeking to discredit Jesus by accusing him of allowing his disciples to do something which was allegedly contrary to the Law. But it was actually the Pharisees who were in the wrong. On another occasion Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their hypocrisy: **"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7) They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' 8) You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."** (Mark 7:6-8 NIV)

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"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (NIV) With those words Jesus stated an important principal for us to follow. These words really suggest an application of this text. Jesus is pointing out the fact that man was created before the OT laws came into existence. God gave his laws to benefit his people. The Old Testament believers understood this important truth. David who wrote: **"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, 2) but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night."** (Psalm 1:1-2 NIV) He also wrote; **"I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word."** (Psalm 119:16 NIV)

God commanded his people to observe the seventh day as a Sabbath to the Lord because he understood man's sinful inclinations. He understood how difficult it would be for his people to remain true to his word and to receive encouragement from his promises once they had settled into the land of promise – that's why he told them through Moses to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. We could say that that the Lord is telling his people to be on our guard, to be careful not to let the challenges of their everyday life to interfere with taking time to focus on his word. "Guard the Sabbath", he said. Keep it holy – set it apart so you don't miss out on my blessings of spiritual rest.

As we have already seen Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. The OT worship laws including the setting aside of the seventh day as a day of rest have been set aside for us. Never the less, there is value in taking time off from our daily routines. There is value in resting from our physical labors. And in our freedom we will look for ways to do just that. But, as we have seen the Lord's desire was to bless his people as they used his word. How wonderful it is then that even though the OT Sabbath rules are no longer in force that there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. (cf. Hebrews 4:9) Jesus invites us to enjoy that rest saying, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29) 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 NIV)

In modern language Jesus might say, "Hitch your wagon to me and learn from me." Jesus wants to lift us up and take away the burden of our guilt and sin. He wants to lead us along the path that will allow us to enjoy all of the many blessings that he has won for us. Blessings such as the privilege of coming to him in prayer, the opportunity to serve in his kingdom, and the blessings of the Holy Spirit who fills enlightens us to see the will of God not as a burden but a blessing.

The truth of grace – the Gospel – has set given us freedom as Joseph Prince wrote. In that freedom the early Christians decided to set aside the first day of the week as the Lord's Day – a day in which they would freely gather together to remember the Lord and his resurrection. Sunday is still a day of worship for many Christians – but it's not the only day we worship. The early Christians understood that as well. In their freedom they understood that worship isn't a once a week activity – it's a life style. That's why, **"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47) praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."** (Acts 2:46-47 NIV)

In freedom, we will rejoice with those who say to us, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." (cf. Psalm 122:1) In grace whatever we do whether in word or deed we will in the name of Jesus and to the glory of God (cf. Colossians 3:17 & 1 Corinthians 10:31) – serving him and each other in response to his love and with the freedoms that we have in Christ Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.