

June 3, 2018

Mark 2:23-28:

“Jesus And Our Endless Sabbath Day!”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The story was told some years ago of a pastor who found the roads blocked on a Sunday morning and was forced to ice skate on the river to get to church. When he arrived, the elders of the church were horrified that their preacher had skated on the Lord's day - a day of rest. After the service they held a meeting where the pastor explained it was either skate to church or not go at all. Finally one elder asked, "Did you enjoy it?" When the preacher answered, "No," the board decided it was okay then!

I have no idea if this story is true or not. We might think the whole thing is silly, but it wasn't that long ago when stores were supposed to be closed on Sundays in this country, and people would even avoid doing yard work. It was a time set aside for church, to spend time with the family, to rest and relax. It was a time when people would eat their big dinner of the week and maybe look forward to a family Sunday drive or doing things with family and friends, ideas that pretty much died out in the 1970s.

Every now and then I come across a Seventh Day Adventist. They are the ones who insist that you must worship on Saturday (Sabbath) instead of Sunday. They quote the third commandment - "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" - and then confuse and condemn Christians for not following this Old Testament religious law that ultimately pointed to and was fulfilled in Jesus. Never mind the fact that Paul writes, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:16-17)." You would think that they would listen to Paul's crystal clear words. We are no longer required to worship on Saturdays, just like we are not required to circumcise our sons on the eighth day after their birth, or observe any other Old Testament religious law, for that matter.

Anyway, I place these things in front of you by way of introduction and to beg the question: What is the Sabbath day really all about? After all, it is the main topic of our Old Testament and Gospel lessons for this morning and almost unavoidable. If you don't understand the heart of the Sabbath day and how it is fulfilled in Jesus, then you will end up like the religious leaders of the Jews. It will become nothing more than a law that you have to do in order to please God. Worship will become nothing more than what we do for God when, in fact, worship is what God has done for us. May the Lord help us this morning to understand the Sabbath, not as the Pharisees did but as disciples of Jesus, who is our Sabbath!

Our text begins: "One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him [to Jesus], 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'" For these Pharisees, picking heads of grain to still hunger was in their book equivalent to reaping, threshing, and winnowing which were all violations of the Sabbath. The truth is that they had misunderstood and misinterpreted the Sabbath law. They had made the law into a way by which a person could somehow earn their way to heaven, which was patently false.

Now, the Sabbath law was given to Israel in two places. In Exodus 20:8-11, after the third commandment was set forward at Mt. Sinai, it goes on to say: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work . . . For in

six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” When the third commandment was reaffirmed through Moses on the plains of Moab in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 it adds: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” As you can see from both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Sabbath offers Israel the experience of resting in God, in his accomplished actions of the original creation and deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In the creation and the exodus, the two accounts point to the coming redemption in Jesus the Savior who delivers us from our slavery to sin, death, and the devil, who recreates us, and who promises to bring us to his forever rest in his holy presence.

The Sabbath was to point to an ultimate destination of rest in the holiness of God. It was natural then to consider the goodness of God in the sending of the Messiah. Holiness must come only from he who makes us holy through the holy one - our Savior Jesus Christ. The Pharisees had turned all of this upside down by making the command into a law whereby a person would become holy by good works and make God give them rest. They could not see the Savior - the person the Sabbath pointed to - Jesus Christ who was standing right in front of them. The third commandment pointed to the ultimate Sabbath, the kingdom of God. With the arrival of Jesus, the Sabbath was fulfilled, for he lived a holy life and suffered and died for our unholiness. Both the original creation and the deliverance from Egypt are now fulfilled.

Our Gospel lesson goes on to record: “And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.’”

This is a powerful passage and somewhat difficult to explain. In Leviticus 24:5-9, God commanded the priests to place twelve 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. Yet, when David and others who were with him came to the house of God, they were hungry and the priest gave him the bread. But, before he did so he asked, “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women (1 Samuel 21:4).” Holy bread cannot be given to those who are unholy. Holiness only comes by faith in the holy Savior of the world. David and his men were counted holy by faith in the holiness of the Messiah, and had demonstrated this faith and holiness in Christ by not willfully, unrepentantly sinning against God with women.

Because David and his men were holy in the Messiah by faith, as evidenced by their abstinence from women, God did not condemn them for eating the bread that was meant only for the priests according to the law. In the words of one Lutheran commentator, “God cares more for the right spiritual condition of the heart than for the outward observance of his own ceremonial regulations.” Indeed, only faith in the Messiah can fulfill the law, give us holiness, and further give us access to all things that are counted holy. This is why Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is

lord even of the Sabbath.” In other words, God instituted the day of rest for the benefit of mankind, that a person may know that our true holiness and rest is found only in the Messiah - Jesus of Nazareth. God did not intend that the Sabbath regulation become a means by which we earn our salvation by following it slavishly. Jesus is the lord even of the Sabbath. This is wonderful news! It means that the lord of the Sabbath will not permit his disciples to violate the Sabbath in any way. Even more than that, they are truly following the Sabbath day because they believe in Jesus who is the fulfillment of the Sabbath day - he is our rest. Most appropriate are the words of Christ at this point when he says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28-29).”

Despite the fact that we have sinned and made ourselves restless, in Christ, who has lived a perfect life and died on the cross, we are to know and believe what it says in the book of Hebrews (4:9-11): “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” Sabbath means rest, and through faith in Jesus we find rest from the burden of sin and guilt and the promise of being with him forever. With that understanding, we can talk about **Jesus and Our Endless Sabbath Day!**

So, if Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, but we are still looking forward to our eternal rest in being with him face to face, how should we then be true keepers of the Endless Sabbath Day until we see him as he is? That is quite a question. Luther has the answer in the *Small Catechism*: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” Indeed! If we are to continue to have contact with our Sabbath day who is Jesus, we should find ourselves steadfast in his Word where we are declared holy. The day really doesn't matter, though we are all aware of the fact that the disciples did meet regularly on Sunday - the day of Christ's resurrection. The point is that we genuinely remain in the Sabbath day down here by being disciples of Jesus by faith, and we can only be the disciples of Jesus when faith is created and preserved in us by his Word and sacraments. Therefore, whenever we are in the Word and sacraments, we can be sure that even now we are with **Jesus and Our Endless Sabbath Day!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott