

**“THE LORD OF THE SABBATH”**

This passage provides us with an opportunity to reflect upon Jesus’ attitude towards the 4th commandment, the law in which God requires us to cease from our normal labors and keep the Sabbath day holy. And today’s church certainly needs to spend time reflecting upon this matter. For in our world, Sunday, which is the day that has been celebrated as the Christian Sabbath ever since the time of the New Testament church, has largely ceased to be set apart in any significant sense. And for the most part, this is just as true for Christians as it is for the broader culture. Sunday is simply the latter-half of the weekend. It is a day to catch up on things that need done around the house, a day to pursue favorite hobbies, or a day consumed by watching televised sports. The question for us is this: would Jesus be pleased with this state of affairs? Is this what he envisioned when he rebuked the Pharisees for their way of keeping the Sabbath? Was his message to them essentially that they needed to lighten up and stop taking the law so seriously?

It is difficult to reconcile that view with the fact that Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And there is no biblical evidence to suggest that Jesus did not keep the Sabbath exactly as the law of Moses said that it should be kept.

Nevertheless, there is a tendency among many Christians to think that Jesus is taking a somewhat negative stance towards the law here; to think that his statement “The Sabbath

was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” is tantamount to saying that we are free to do as we please on the Sabbath day. One of the reasons we are inclined to read the text in this way is because we live in a culture in which rule-keeping is seen as a stifling intrusion upon our personal autonomy. There is a very real danger of reading our own assumptions, assumptions often conditioned by the conventional wisdom of our society, into the biblical text. But if God’s Word is to be the supreme authority over our Sabbath beliefs and practices, we need to understand Jesus’ teachings here in light of the context in which they were given, a context that includes the 1st century world in which Jesus lived as well as the overall biblical theology of the Sabbath that permeated his thinking. That is the task before us as we study this passage today.

The first thing for us to consider is the charge made against Jesus’ disciples for plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees’ problem was not with the action itself - the Old Testament actually made provision for eating a small amount of grain from someone else’s field if you were in need (Deut. 23:25). Instead, the Pharisees took issue with the day on which the disciples were doing this - the Sabbath day. The Pharisees interpreted the disciples’ action as a form of reaping, and from there they reasoned that reaping is work and that work is forbidden on the Sabbath. Of course, you would not come to this conclusion by reading the Old Testament itself. The Old Testament law never says that this particular activity was forbidden on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees sought to improve upon God’s law by formulating their own long list of things that constituted

work - a list that contained detailed regulations pertaining to some 39 different categories of work. They had rules for how much weight a person could lift and how far he could travel, rules about tying and loosening knots, rules for how to rescue people from a collapsed building without doing any unnecessary work, and they even had rules for how to handle your bath towel without being in danger of doing any work by accidentally wringing water out of it. In the words of John Calvin, the Pharisees' teachings on the Sabbath made it "so that one could scarcely move a finger without making the conscience tremble."

Jesus could have responded to the Pharisees by pointing out that his disciples' action did not break any of God's laws, even though they did violate the laws created by the Pharisees. But he did not do that. Instead, he used a story from the Old Testament to point to his unique identity and what that meant for his relationship to the Sabbath. The story comes from 1 Samuel 21, the text that we read earlier in the worship service. In that passage, David, who had been anointed as Israel's rightful king, was on the run because of Saul's desire to put him to death. When he came to the town of Nob, he asked the priest for food, but the only thing available was the showbread that was used in the temple, bread which no one except the priests was permitted to eat. Nevertheless, David instructed the priest to give him that bread. David was Israel's rightful king, he was the Lord's anointed one. And it was right for him, as the Lord's appointed servant, to make use of this bread that had been devoted to the Lord when he was in need.

By the way, you may have noticed that while Mark says that all of this happened in the time of Abiathar, it was actually Abiathar's father Ahimelech who gave the bread to David. We do not know why Mark refers to Abiathar instead of Ahimelech, but there is certainly no reason to see this as an inaccuracy. Abiathar was present when all of this took place, as the next chapter clearly shows, and he became high priest after Saul had his father put to death. So these events did in fact take place in the days of Abiathar.

Jesus refers to this event in David's life in order to draw a comparison between himself and David. If David had the authority to interpret how God's law should be kept under such special circumstances, how much more does Jesus have the authority to do the same. As Jesus says, he himself is the Lord of the Sabbath. And so, he responds to the Pharisees by explaining the purpose for which the Sabbath was originally given. He says that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. It was given to be a blessing, not to be a burden. In the Bible, the Sabbath functions as a sign that points to the completion of God's redemptive purposes for the world. We find this spelled out most clearly in the letter to the Hebrews, which repeatedly uses the concept of the Sabbath to signify the promise of entering into God's eternal rest in heaven. Jesus stands in a special relationship to the Sabbath because he came in order to bring God's plan of redemption to its climactic fulfillment. The Pharisees' attempt to drive a wedge between

Jesus and the Sabbath proved that they did not really understand what the Sabbath was all about.

The second incident recorded in this passage has to do with Jesus' willingness to heal on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had categorized healing as a type of work. While they allowed for healing in cases in which a life was at risk, this was clearly not such a case. But this story further reveals the Pharisees' failure to understand what the Sabbath was really about. Jesus came in order to undo the curse that has come upon this world as a result of mankind's sinful rebellion against God. This man's crippled hand was a part of the curse. If the Sabbath points to the renewal of the world, then it was exceedingly appropriate for Jesus to restore this man's hand on the Sabbath day. This is what is implied in Jesus' question: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

There is also an irony to that question, as we discover in verse 6. While Jesus is using the Sabbath day to restore life, the Pharisees are using it to join together with an unlikely ally, the Herodians, to plot Jesus' murder. As supporters of a Roman client king, the Herodians would not have been natural friends to Jewish patriots like the Pharisees. But these two groups had one common interest: they both wanted Jesus dead. Here is a striking example of the kind of hatred that Jesus incites from the world. People have no problem with a Jesus of their own imagining, the Jesus of liberal theology or the Jesus of

New Age religion. But the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus who confronts the idolatries of every culture, this Jesus is met with murderous hatred by those whose hearts are hardened to his message. We do not want a God who asserts his authority over us. We are God's enemies, as Paul says in Romans 5. In our fallen nature, we hate Jesus because of the threat that he poses to our self-righteousness and autonomy. That is why the Pharisees hated him so much, and that is what led them to plot to kill him.

Jesus' teaching in this passage reminds us that, in the Bible, the fundamental antithesis is between life and death. All life that is lived apart from Jesus Christ is not really life at all, because it is a life that is enslaved to sin, and the wages of sin is death. But those who are united to Christ by faith share in his life, and his life is resurrection life, the life of the age to come. If you are a Christian, then you have that life because of your participation in Christ and his saving benefits. He is your life, and his life is the life of the new creation. And this has profound ramifications for how we should live in this evil age. It means that we should be "pro-life" in the fullest possible sense. We should use our lives to save life, to testify to the new life proclaimed in the gospel, to do things that point us and other people to the new creation found in Jesus Christ. As we sang earlier,

*Today he rose and left the dead, and Satan's empire fell;*

*Today the saints his triumphs spread, and all his wonders tell.*

[“This is the Day the Lord Has Made”]

No Christian who has genuine, living faith would argue that the church should not be spreading Christ's triumphs and telling of his wonders. But we all know that our lives are very easily consumed with the things of this world and the concerns of this life. We are very busy. We often feel as though we do not have time to do even half of the things that we should be doing. But this is where we begin to see what a gift the Lord has given us in the Sabbath. The Christian Sabbath is the day of new creation, the day of Jesus' resurrection. It is a day that should be devoted to the life of the new creation.

What does this mean? What does it look like in practice? Well, first and foremost, the Sabbath is a day to be spent in the worship of God. Worship is the central act in the Christian life: it is the time when we are reminded of who we are as God's redeemed humanity; it is the regular occasion when God renews his covenant with us and provides for our spiritual nourishment through his appointed means of grace; it is a foretaste of heaven. As William Still says, "This is the church: worshipping, praying, receiving the living Word." [*Letters*, 85] This is why we are going to be adding a Sunday evening worship service to our schedule starting next month. Throughout church history, many Christians have been greatly helped in their Sabbath-keeping by gathering for worship twice on each Lord's Day. It is a practice that provides a helpful framework around which the rest of the day can be organized. Can you think of a good reason why you would not want to worship twice on the Lord's Day?

The Sabbath is also a day to spend extra time reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating upon God's Word. Do you struggle to find time for those things in your life? And if you have children at home, do you struggle to find time to teach them about God and his ways? The Sabbath is the perfect day to focus upon such things.

The Sabbath is also a day for seeking the welfare of other people, as we see by Jesus' own example in this passage. It is the perfect time to do those things that tend to get crowded out of our busy lives. It is a day for taking extra time to talk to your non-Christian neighbor, looking for ways to point him to Christ. It is a day to visit, and care for, and pray with those who are sick, or elderly, or in need of company. And it is a day to open your home to others, especially by sharing a meal together.

There are so many ways in which we can be "pro-life" in our use of the Sabbath, ways in which the Sabbath can truly testify to the fact that we do not belong to this dying world, but to the new creation that God is bringing about in Jesus Christ. When you begin to focus upon using the Sabbath towards that end, you will find that those other activities that have little to do with the inbreaking new creation will get pushed aside. When we truly understand what Jesus meant when he said that the Sabbath was made for man, the questions about what we can and cannot do on the Lord's Day become much easier to answer. It will be much less a matter of what is permissible, and much more a question

of how we can use this day for the greatest spiritual benefit, both for ourselves and for those around us.

It should not be left unsaid that this passage does contain a warning for us. We do need to be careful not to make the mistake that was made by the Pharisees. They made the law into something it was never intended to be. God intended his people to keep the law as a loving and grateful response to the grace that he had shown them by taking them to be his people. But the Pharisees made the law into a system of salvation by works. And this is a tendency that we all have within our hearts. Walter Marshall has it right when he says,

“The enquiry of most, when they begin to have a sense of religion, is, ‘What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?’ (Mt. 19:16); not ‘How shall I be enabled to do anything that is good?’” [*The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification*, 4]

While the greater danger in our context probably lies in the direction of failing to take the 4th commandment seriously, the opposite danger is also present: the temptation to overlay God’s law with our own manmade rules and regulations. One of the ways we can avoid this is to remember that one of the key differences between our Sabbath observance and that of Israel in the Old Testament era is that we are not living in a theocratic state, a state that is governed by God’s law. Ours is a mixed culture, a culture that we share with non-Christians, and it will remain this way until the day of Christ’s return. We are always

going to have non-Christians around us, and they are not going to keep the Sabbath. This sometimes creates challenges and questions with regard to our practice of Sabbath-keeping, and it requires us to be able to apply biblical principles about the Sabbath in a context that is in many ways very different than the world of the Bible. For example, some Christians would argue that faithful Sabbath-keeping today requires us to avoid activities that would make it necessary for another person to work on Sunday, such as taking public transportation or purchasing a Sunday newspaper or dining at a restaurant. Regardless of what you personally decide about such issues, and we do need to be charitable towards each other in this area, do not forget that our context is different than that of Israel in the Old Testament. We are living in a shared culture, a society in which it is both possible and necessary for Christians to practice their faith alongside those who do not share the same faith. In such a context, there are some ways in which our celebration of the Sabbath can actually be helped by the work that our non-Christian neighbors are willing to do on Sundays. One obvious example would be those situations in which the only way for a Christian to get Sundays off is to have a co-worker who is willing to work in his place.

Questions will arise as we seek to keep the Sabbath in our day and age. But none of these questions alter what Jesus teaches us in this passage. The Sabbath is not a burden, but a gift from God. It points to God's promise to complete his purposes for this world. It is a

**Sermon on Mark 2:23-3:6**

**Grace PC, Laconia (8/3/08)**

**OT Reading: 1 Sam. 21:1-9; 22:6-23**

**An Exposition of the Gospel of Mark, #11**

**Rev. Andy Wilson**

sign of new life, a sign that assures us that God will bring us into our eternal Sabbath rest.

In the words of one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

*This is the day that God has blessed, the brightest of the sev'n,*

*Type of that everlasting rest the saints enjoy in heav'n.*

[“Come, Let Us Join with One Accord”]