

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.”**

Keep the Sabbath!

1. Not by making rest a work...
2. But by finding rest in Christ

On top of Mt. Sinai, God gave his people the Law. For four chapters in the book of Exodus, he outlined how he wanted them to live their lives as his children.

But do you remember what the first thing he said to them was? Before any of the laws, just before the first commandment, he said, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Why did God do that? Wasn’t he saying to them, “Remember what I’ve done for you. I love you. I have your best interests in mind. That’s why I’m giving you these laws – for your benefit.”

One of the laws he gave them that day – keeping the Sabbath – is a perfect example of that. In his love, God set aside a day for the Israelites to be refreshed physically, and more importantly, spiritually. He wanted to give them a chance to worship, to remember everything he’d done for them, and to look forward to the coming Messiah.

In the gospel this morning, we see how the Pharisees had lost sight of God’s loving purpose for this law. They had twisted keeping the Sabbath into something they did to earn God’s favor. What God intended for spiritual rest, they had turned into a work. And sometimes we do the same thing.

So this morning, listen to what Jesus tells us about keeping the Sabbath the way God intended it to be kept: Not by making rest into a work, but by finding true rest in Christ.

1. Not by making rest a work

You’ve met the Pharisees before. They pop up over and over again during Jesus’ ministry. And there are a few things that you can be sure of whenever they do: First, you can be sure they’ll oppose Jesus. They were always trying to catch him in some sin, or at least run his name through the mud, to prove that he wasn’t the Messiah. Second, their work-righteous attitude always shows through. They thought that by keeping God’s laws they were earning their way to heaven.

You have a perfect example of that kind of encounter in our lesson today. 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?”** The Pharisees thought they had caught the disciples red-handed, and they tried to make their poor grade reflect on their teacher.

But the truth is that the disciples weren’t breaking any laws. They weren’t stealing – the Old Testament law allowed for this. It was like their “food pantry” - hungry people could grab a few heads of grain from a field, rub them in their hands, blow away the hulls, and eat the kernels.

And they weren’t breaking the Sabbath, either. God’s command was simply, “The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.” “Ah, but they’re working,”

the Pharisees said. Really? Picking a few seeds and eating them? That was work? According to the extra rules the Pharisees had invented, yes. Picking a few heads of grain – that was harvesting, they claimed. Rubbing them, blowing away the hulls – that was threshing. Ridiculous, isn't it?

There were other rules they had invented that were just as ridiculous. To keep the Sabbath, they said, you could only walk 3000 feet. You couldn't light a fire, or put one out. You couldn't tie or untie a knot. If you spilled something, you couldn't clean it up – that's working. We could go on and on. The rabbis did – for 24 chapters in their Talmud, telling what was and wasn't "lawful" on the Sabbath.

Can you imagine trying to keep the Sabbath like that? What a horrible day! All those rules were oppressing. God never intended the Sabbath to be like that. He wanted it to be a blessing for his people. This was a day to ponder God's love and God's blessings, and to find rest in the forgiveness they had in the promised Messiah.

The Pharisees turned that rest into a work. For them, keeping the Sabbath was just another way to earn God's favor. The more rules they added, the more they could check off of their self-righteous list, and hold up for God and everyone else to see how 'holy' they were.

What about us? I know, keeping the Sabbath is different for us. It's really any and every time we hear and study God's Word, isn't it? God's given us certain freedoms. You can do it on Sunday, or on any other day of the week. You can take the day off, or mow your lawn after church. You can come to church in dress clothes or casual clothes, use the liturgy or change it up... We don't look down on any of that, because we don't add our own rules like the Pharisees did.

But we do sometimes lose sight of God's loving purpose in keeping the Sabbath, like the Pharisees did. Sometimes we turn rest into a work. Let me explain. Sometimes, we see our worship and our study of God's Word simply as something we do for God, and not as God doing something for us. We come to church on Sunday, punch our timecards at the door, and punch them again on the way out. There. We've done our duty for the week. Some Sundays, don't we find ourselves dragging our feet to church, just because this is something we're supposed to do, instead of coming joyfully, to be reminded of what God has done for us?

And sometimes we might even think we're earning something because of it. Not earning heaven, but maybe we're a little better off in our standing with God. Or at least we're better than those other Christians who don't come to church every Sunday, like we do.

II. But by finding rest in Christ

"Keep the Sabbath," God tells us, but not like that. Listen how Jesus points us to the truth. King Saul was trying to kill David. He and his men were on the run, and out of food. They went to the tabernacle, to the priests, and asked for help. The only food on hand was the consecrated bread, and God's law said that only the priests could eat it.

But like all of God's law, God gave that rule as a blessing. He didn't give it to keep starving men from eating. The priests knew that, so they gave the bread to David and his men to eat.

The Sabbath is the same way, Jesus is saying. God didn't give that law to keep his disciples from eating. It wasn't some oppressing rule you needed to keep to earn God's favor. **The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**, he told them. People weren't created as slaves to the Sabbath law; the Sabbath was given to people for their spiritual benefit.

The disciples had found that spiritual benefit. They weren't breaking the Sabbath; they were keeping it. They were spending their day with Jesus, listening to him teach about God's plan of salvation as they walked along, finding in him true rest and peace.

That's why you come to church, isn't it? That's why you study God's Word here and in your homes. Not just because you're supposed to, or to earn God's favor, but to spend a few hours with Jesus. It's because you know what Jesus said: "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 at heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

That spiritual rest we have in Christ is a rest that you can't find anywhere else. It's rest from the guilt of our sins that troubles our consciences, because all of those sins have been placed on Christ and were paid for in full by his sacrifice on the cross. That's what Jesus', "It is finished!" from the cross meant. "I have paid the full price for all of your sins! You're at peace with God! There's nothing more that you have to add to my sacrifice. It was perfect. You are at rest!"

That's what keeping the Sabbath is all about: Jesus, and what God has done for us through him. That's what it has always been about. **So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath,** Jesus said. Not only did Jesus give that law to his people at Mt. Sinai, he was it's fulfillment. "These are a shadow of the things to come," Paul wrote. "The reality is found in Christ." Real Sabbath rest is found in Christ. It's the peace that flows from the forgiveness he won for us on the cross. For 1500 years, every Sabbath rest celebrated by the Jews pointed ahead to Christ and his rest.

And now, every time we worship, we focus on Christ and his rest, too. That's why there are so many crosses in this building. That's why I make the sign of the cross with my hands. That's why every sermon your pastor preaches has Christ as its heart and core. That's why you're all eager to come to Communion in a few minutes. We want to be reminded of what Christ has done for us as often as we can.

Yes, when we worship, we "give" – our offerings, our prayers and our praises. But worship is one place where that old rule, "Better to give than to receive," doesn't apply. For us, the focus isn't giving. It's receiving. And that's the way God wants it to be. He loves to give us what Christ has won for us. At our baptism, at the Lord's Supper, and in his Word he comes to us and sets before us the banquet of his salvation. He gives us his forgiveness and peace and strengthens our faith, all because of Christ.

So love to receive those blessings! Gladly hear and learn God's Word, and partake of his body and blood – not just on Sundays, but whenever you have the opportunity. Keep the Sabbath the way that God intended it to be kept: Not by making it a work, but by finding rest in Christ. Amen.