

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.”

The Lord of the Sabbath Has Come to Give us Rest

Sabbath means rest. This is the season where many of us go and try and get some rest by taking a vacation of some sort - maybe go camping or rent a cabin up north for a week or two. One of the most restful things I like to do is to sit on my back porch and watch the sun set over the corn field in my backyard after a long day.

Another type of rest is a spiritual one - when you are not beaten down by a guilty conscience. The push on American society is to live and let live. Don't judge anyone or anything so that nobody feels guilty about anything and we call all just feel good about ourselves. “If Bruce Jenner wants to put on a dress and call himself Caitlyn - go ahead!” That is the progressive gospel that is being placed on us in our American culture. The only problem is that it doesn't work with them or with God.

What a peaceful picture we have of Jesus walking through the grain fields with His disciples and picking a little grain to chew on. (It was permissible in Jewish Law to do so.) But when the Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples doing this, they pointed the finger at them and said to Jesus, “They're working on the Sabbath!” So was Jesus doing this just to irritate the Pharisees? We might be tempted to look at this and rail on the Pharisees for their legalism. But that really wasn't Jesus' point and it wasn't how He responded.

The Pharisees were zealous for the law. That's not all bad. Look back to the Old Testament Sabbath. God was zealous for the law too. In Numbers 15 a man was found gathering wood on a Sabbath Day to make a fire. God had not only forbidden work but also fires to be lit on the Sabbath. So they brought him to Moses and Aaron; they weren't even sure what to do. The word says,

³⁴ they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. ³⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.” ³⁶ So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses.

God didn't look at even gathering sticks as a “little thing.” Any sin - even a seemingly small thing - is serious in God's eyes. Yet even that harsh initial judgment didn't keep people from testing the waters. Time and again they stretched the boundaries and did more and more. Nehemiah came to Jerusalem to enact a reform - and you can see how far the Israelites had fallen down the slippery slope. This is what the word says in Nehemiah 13

¹⁵ In those days I saw men in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. ¹⁶ Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. ¹⁷ I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

¹⁹ When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹ But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.

Nehemiah was zealous for the Sabbath; and God’s Word remembers him favorably. So it is clear to see that God wanted the Sabbath to be kept holy; precious; set aside as a special day to listen to the Word and not work. When the law was broken it was supposed to be regarded as a great offense; a deadly offense.

It is easy to make fun of the Pharisees and it’s hard to defend them since they were so legalistic. Yet listen to how Jesus responds. Instead of making fun of their laws, He just opens up the Bible for them and refers back to the story of David. In 1 Samuel 21, our Old Testament lesson for today, David and his followers had to run for their lives from Saul. They ended up at Abiathar’s in need of some food. David gave Ahimelech a type of cloak and dagger story; telling him how they were on a secret and holy mission from King Saul. So the high priest allowed him and his men to eat food that was supposed to be for the priests because it was a “royal emergency” of sorts and David and his men were supposed to be working on behalf of the king. Jesus used that story to show a precedence of sorts. The law of holy royalty took precedence over the ceremonial law. Five loaves of bread could be used on this “holy mission” of sorts.

The principle also was that the Sabbath; all of this sitting down and resting and gathering at worship; was given for the benefit of those who participated in it. They were supposed to be refreshed both physically and spiritually. The Sabbath was not established to make the people have hundreds of “do’s” and “don’ts” to worry about. It wasn’t written to enslave the Israelites, but to give them rest.

There was also another principle at work. Some people did have to work on the Sabbath; and that was the priests who made the sacrifices; did the teaching; prepared the new loaves of bread for the tabernacle.

Jesus used all of these principles and made an argument from the lesser to the greater. If that is how it was applied to David and his men; how much more so to the Son of David; who was the actual Lord; and His men.

He said to the Pharisees, **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”** As the disciples were serving and following Jesus - the Son of Man - on His holy mission from God - they had every right to grab some wheat and eat it on the Sabbath. Jesus, as the Great High Priest; also came to work on the Sabbath; to be the One who would provide the sacrifice for the sins of the world. He came to be the Sabbath. He said, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.”** Jesus was really the whole reason for the Sabbath. Therefore He and His disciples had every right to eat of that grain on that Sabbath.

My wife has some Catholic cousins who would talk about going to Mass or not. They would talk about whether they got “credit” for coming or not by going to a wedding or a funeral during the week. And I suppose there are some who look at that little check mark on the computer as having “done their duty” for the week; something achieved to keep the church from hunting them down. But this isn’t supposed to be the purpose of worship; just to “get credit.” It’s so Jesus can give us rest. We turn off of our phones. We tune out the world. We come all worn out from the week. We come with feelings of guilt over our failures. But here you hear Jesus speak to you through the mouth of the pastor, “I forgive you.” We listen to the Word. We hear the Law and the Gospel. It crushes us and it comforts us.

Instead of having us pick grain, He feeds us with bread, gives us some liquid grapes; and through these gifts He gives us His body and blood. He says to us, “Here is the payment for your sins. I am coming to you here and now - and your sins are forgiven.” We take and eat and drink. We find rest for our souls. Our sins are forgiven. We sing to each other about Jesus and what He did for us. This is meant to refresh us. It’s meant to make you feel good and forgiven. He actually comes to us with the most healing balm of all; His own body and blood. How can this not refresh you?

I see it on the faces of those who take the Supper. I experience it in the smiles of those who show their appreciation for the Word and come week after week. They enjoy being here. I love to see this! We have people in their 80’s and 90’s who have a hard time getting out of bed; getting all dressed up and making it here every Sunday; walking behind walkers and with canes! And they LOVE being here. It is a blessed thing. It seems to be the highlight of their week. This is what the Sabbath is all about. Whether it’s on a Sunday or a Monday or a Saturday; the specific day doesn’t matter anymore; (Colossians 2:16-17) it’s all about receiving Christ.

The devil wants to take this rest from you. He wants you to regard this as a lot of work to come here. It used to be that our culture was much more zealous about keeping the Sabbath than they are now. Now anything and everything in the name of rest, relaxation, and entertainment take priority over good old worship. And so people are so busy relaxing that they are completely worn out. “My kids have a tournament this weekend. We have company coming. We’re heading up north.” He wants you to put yourself in such a tight budget with your spending habits; your cars and the house you live in; that you have “no choice” but to work two or three jobs. Then there are also those who come who have so much planned for the day they can’t wait to get out and get at it. God forbid you simplify your life a little.

But don’t forget this life you have chosen to have and do - it isn’t just “your” life or “your” time. It’s the time that God has given you and He wants you to manage. He wants you to take time to rest **in the Lord of the**

Sabbath. If God didn't really care about taking time to worship, if it really is no big deal, then why did He set up a once a week worship in the Old Testament? Why did He set aside a whole day? Maybe He knew how if you let a portion of the day be encroached upon; pretty soon the whole day will be gone.

But again, it's not just about the law and how it was enforced in the old covenant. Jesus was trying to draw the Pharisees into forgetting about the minute details about what was right or wrong; and to see that HE was the Lord of the Sabbath; the King of rest. He KNOWS we need rest. This is what we come here for. What I'm trying to say is that Christ is here; in the Word; in the water; in the bread and wine. Jesus said, "**Come to me.**" so that you can find rest for your soul. Do you not believe that the Word is powerful? Do you not believe in the Real Presence of the Lord's Supper? Don't you need His forgiveness? Don't you need His comfort? Should you need someone telling you to come? Shouldn't you crave Christ more than anything else in the world?

Imagine if you spent hours on a nice home cooked meal and prepared it for hours. You invite your son. He says, "Do I have to? I don't have time mom. It takes too long. I'll just eat at McDonald's." Or imagine if he came and said, "You didn't cook this right. You didn't set the table right. I don't want to eat with my brother. Your house is too warm. You live too far away. Dad isn't very nice. I don't like this part of town." Wouldn't you have a right to be angry, especially if McDonald's was further away and cost much more money than a free home cooked meal that was good for you?

You would think resting would be the easiest thing in the world to do. Ironically, in this sinful world, resting is a difficult thing. When we're younger, we always want to be doing something. Kids can't sit still. Young adults think they need to work and work and work to afford this and that and the other thing. They can't wait to get the new car or the house or to pay off school. When you have children you feel constrained to get them everything they want and give them every opportunity that you never had. So you run yourself to death to make them happy and successful. When you get older and slow down, it's harder and harder to get a good night's rest. Your back hurts. You have to use the restroom three times. Your legs twitch. You try and set up a great vacation; but it takes work to set up the camper; get the boat prepared; find some entertainment for the kids; reserve the spot. . . It's a lot easier to just go to work than it is to go on vacation.

Last year when the Packers lost in the playoffs I had to reexamine why I was watching the game in the first place. I got all worked up and angry over a stupid game. I forgot what it was supposed to be for. I was determined to be done with it. There are many things in life that we need to reexamine sometimes; why do we do it in the first place? If I decide to watch them again this year; I am going to have to watch myself even more carefully to make sure I am not consumed with my emotions so that I can actually enjoy the entertainment instead of being ruined by it.

The Sabbath was established for what it was named for - rest. The Pharisees - with their good intentions - turned it into a rule book and a game of gotcha with Jesus. It wasn't meant to be that hard. What a wonderful thing He tried to do by just opening up the Bible and reminding them what the Sabbath was supposed to be about. He wanted them to look beyond their rules and regulations, and see the whole purpose behind the Sabbath and who the Sabbath was really for.

He used the simple act of eating grain to say to them, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath. Relax, and find your rest in me.” So today, I have tried to open up a few morsels of God’s Word for you to sit and chew on with your soul. I will give you the Lord’s Supper to taste and see that Jesus and His forgiveness are still for you. They were meant to remind you of what we come here for in the first place. It isn’t to “get credit.” It isn’t supposed to be just to make your spouse or parents happy. We come here to chew on the Word, digest on God’s mercy in Christ, and come out refreshed. We come here to find rest in Jesus. The Pharisees would have none of it. Will you? Amen.