

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-28

Sermon #692

June 7, 2015

Erich Jonathan Hoeft

23 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 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: 26 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?" 27 And 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 fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our crucified and risen Savior,

Beep! Beep! Beep! The alarm clock goes off and soon a pot of coffee is filling the air with the unmistakable promise of a good morning. It's Sunday and soon you will be heading off for church. A smile is on your face after a long week and now it is time to gather the family and go to church and worship the Lord.

But, as you try and rouse your kids (or your spouse), they throw the covers back over their heads with "do I have to go to church.. I'm tired."

Do I have to go to church? How do you answer a question like that? It's a challenge thrown out by children, inactive church members and non-Christians. How often doesn't it creep into our own thoughts? Do I have to go to church, today? Or even more bluntly "I don't need to go to church." The Pharisee's behavior in the text clearly shows how they would have answered it. "Yes, you have to go to church. That's the rule."

Jesus rejects that answer. But Jesus isn't saying, "No, you don't have to go to church." Rather, Jesus shows that the mindset that asks this question has already well down the wrong road. He goes underneath the question to change the way we think about worship and going to church. Let's focus on the question:

“DO I HAVE TO GO TO CHURCH?”

1. The Lord meets all my real needs.
2. The Lord brings me His greatest blessings.

To understand Jesus' answer, put yourself back in Jesus' day. God's people still lived under the Old Testament laws given by God through Moses at Mt. Sinai. Many of these laws governed their religious life. We call them ceremonial laws. They told the people how, when, where, and why to bring sacrifices. They prescribed what religious festivals to observe. They detailed the dress and duties of the priests. And so on.

One ceremonial law was the Sabbath law. The word Sabbath means “rest.” Every week on the seventh day, God's people were to rest from their regular labor and hear God's word and promises anticipating the spiritual rest the Messiah would bring. The Sabbath regularly reminded them of when they had no rest as slaves in Egypt. It was to remind them of His rescue. It provided God's people with an opportunity to recharge their spiritual batteries. The rabbis considered the law about physical rest so important that they made extra rules to make sure that no one would be doing work that day. They came out with categories and subcategories of different kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath all the way down to pulling threads apart or climbing a tree.

But the understanding of the Sabbath day which the Pharisees had created turned every Jew into a slave of the Sabbath day. The focus of Sabbath had shifted from the great things God had done to all the little things people could and could not do, to the point that it was considered a great offense to pick a kernel of grain. So when the Pharisees saw the disciples picking grain, rubbing it in their hands to get the husk off, and eating it, they knew this fell under the forbidden categories of harvesting and threshing that the rabbis had developed.

Rather than descending into a legalistic discussion of what was or wasn't forbidden on the Sabbath, Jesus aims at the core of the Pharisees' thinking. He wants them (and us) to ask ourselves who rules our lives, laws or the Giver of the laws. Jesus reminds them of how one of the greatest Israelites,

a man after the Lord's own heart, David, purposely broke God's ceremonial law in a time of need. David was running for his life from King Saul. When he came to the tabernacle he asked the priest for some food. But the only food there was the consecrated bread which God had said was to be eaten only by the priests (Leviticus 24). But the priest gave it to David anyway.

According to the letter of the law, this was wrong. But neither David nor the priest was condemned by God for their actions. You see, the ceremonial laws were meant to be a blessing for God's people, not a way to deprive them of what they really needed. Or as Jesus put it, **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."** (Mark 2:27).

So what does this mean for us? God no longer commands us to worship or to cease our regular work on the Sabbath. But, God's command for us to highly regard, to gladly hear and learn his Word hasn't changed.

It's still true that we are sinning when we have a very low regard for hearing God's Word or for regularly being in God's house. If Jesus told Martha, Mary's sister, that hearing his Word is the one thing needful, then using the excuse, "I have too much going on in my life to get to church every week," is saying that I really have no time for what Jesus says is my greatest need. God's intention regarding our regular worship hasn't changed. But going to church isn't supposed to be a slavish keeping of rules about going to church. It's something God has told us to do for our benefit.

In the Old Testament one of the blessings it brought was physical rest. So it should not have been used by the Pharisees to deprive the disciples of their physical need for food.

But even more the Sabbath was a blessing because it was a shadow promising the coming of the true Rest-giver. That's our greatest need. Who alone can bring rest to your guilt-ridden conscience that haunts your quiet moments? Who alone can bring peace to the heart troubled by sin? Who alone can drive out the terrors of hell? Who alone can bring you peace and strength for your troubles? Who alone can end your warfare against

God and reconcile you to him? Who alone can bring rest to your soul, the rest which you really need?

Only Jesus. **“²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”** (Matthew 11). Only Jesus, dear friends, only Jesus can truly speak those words to you. He alone is the Rest-giver. We no longer need the shadow of the Sabbath, for we have the reality. We have Jesus. He meets all our real needs.

That's why our church services are a blessing for us. They may not meet some of our perceived needs for entertainment or excitement or foot-stomping music or intellectual stimulation or a how-to-manual for fixing life's problems. But they meet our real need. They bring us Jesus. They bring us Jesus, not as a shadow, but as flesh and blood, the incarnate God, our crucified and risen Savior. He comes to you through his Word and Sacraments. He holds before you his nail-pierced hands so that you know and believe we are forgiven. That's our greatest need.

So our worship, our church services, honor our true Lord. Just as the Old Testament Sabbath served the Lord by pointing ahead to him, so our church services serve him by pointing back, pointing back to the work he accomplished for you. Our church services honor Jesus as our Lord who placed His name of you.

Now if we skip church, who or what are we honoring instead of our Lord? I'm not talking about illnesses, the occasional being out of town or emergencies that pop up or the effect of age that keeps us from attending. We don't view those things as excuses. For that whole idea of asking what is a legitimate excuse for missing church flows out of the legalistic mindset of the Pharisees.

Rather, we ask: How can I best honor my Lord Jesus? So often missing church has nothing to do with honoring Jesus, but rather with serving our own desires and conveniences. That's sin. It's sin not because we're breaking a command of God that says we should be in church once a week.

It's sin because you're honoring someone or something else more than Jesus.

And you can do that even if you are here every week.

How often haven't we made worship about what we're doing for God instead of what he does for us? The one who established the law that we could never keep has also kept the law in our place. We honor our true Lord as we contemplate and celebrate his great love and mercy. In our church services we ponder and proclaim the Good News of our crucified and risen Savior. What greater honor can we give him than to believe his promise: "I, your Lord, freely forgive you. I have paid the full price for all your sins." Why would we not want to come together as often as we can to honor our Lord, who has done such great things for us?

This is the reality of the Sabbath rest. The rest from Jesus comes because he kept every commandment, including this Sabbath commandment. When Jesus' parents lost track of him and he, at age twelve, was in the temple courts listening to the Word, that was Jesus keeping this commandment for you and me, because you and I haven't always had the highest regard for the Word of God or have done all the right things for wrong motives. When Jesus went to Calvary's cross, bleeding and dying under the curse of God, that was Jesus paying the price for the sin of low regard for God's Word. Jesus made good on every promise of God. And because he did, true rest, spiritual rest, eternal rest is ours.

"Do I have to go to church?" Don't get tied up in the legalistic knots of that question. Rather, we should ask the question: "Why wouldn't I want to gather together with my fellow believers to honor my true Lord who meets all my real needs and brings me his greatest blessings?" Amen.