

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.” (Mark 2:23-28)

What is the Sabbath?

What is the Sabbath? If you're a student in a school like ours or if you're taking catechism class, you memorize the third commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” But does memorizing “Remember the Sabbath day” explain what it is? The Sabbath is the Jewish day of rest and worship and on a weekly basis, it's Saturday. So does that mean that for you and me, Saturday is supposed to be the Sabbath? Or is there such a thing as a Christian Sabbath that falls on Sunday? If so, what would it consist of? In my youth, I took a class at a local junior college and pretty girl sat in front of me. I asked her to go to out one Sunday. At first, she was willing, but then her mother reminded her that it was the Sabbath. Her church taught that Sunday should be reserved for studying and meditating on the Bible. That idea has had a strong influence in our society. Originally, mail was delivered on Sundays. But in the late 1800's, that changed because too many Americans thought it was a violation of the Sabbath. Blue laws restricting the sale of alcohol and even opening stores on Sunday were once common. All of that sounds a lot like what Jesus was talking about in our gospel lesson for this morning. When we understand what he was saying, we will understand what God intended with the 3rd Commandment. It all boils down to a simple question: **What is the Sabbath?**

I.

One Sabbath day Jesus and his disciples were walking through some grain fields. It must have been close to harvest time, because the grain was ripe enough that they could pluck it off the stalks, rub the husks off with their hands and eat it raw. I suppose it wasn't much different than eating nuts or sunflower seeds. Even before we get into the criticism this caused, we should ask another question: were the disciples stealing? The answer is no. God said in the Old Testament law: **“If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain.”** So it wasn't stealing to pick it and eat as you were passing through because you were hungry. This was in a time before there were McDonald's or 7-11's on every corner, and God was providing for people not to collapse from hunger on the road. And of course, the people most likely to use this law were poor people. There was no welfare or social security back then. This was how God provided for people who needed help. They could not harvest someone else's grain. But they could pick what they needed at that moment to keep body and soul together.

That distinction was lost on the Pharisees who criticized Jesus. Now they did not accuse the disciples of stealing. But they did accuse them of breaking the Sabbath. Why? Because the basic law that God did give for the Sabbath day – and he repeated at least twelve times – was **“do no regular work.”** But what does that mean? Different Bibles translate this expression as daily or customary or ordinary or even laborious work. A Jewish translation says “do not work at your occupations.” The point is, this command was not actually a prohibition against any kind of work. Rather, God commanded them to rest from ordinary work. But the Jews split hairs endlessly over what constituted “regular work.” They would have said that the disciples were indeed harvesting grain on that day because they were picking it and rubbing the husks off. That accusation was the essence of their criticism.

Of course, Jesus was the real target. And notice, he didn't spend one second on the narrow question of whether or not this counted as “regular work.” For Christ, the real question was the purpose and meaning of God's law. Jesus pointed to another situation involving the Old Testament laws. Before King David became king, he was on the run from King Saul. He went to the tabernacle with some of his soldiers and he asked the priest there for food. The only food the priest had was the consecrated bread. This was bread that was laid out

each day on the altar. Under the law, only the priests could eat it. But the priest gave it to David and his men and they ate it. Yet, neither David nor the priest was considered to be guilty of a sin. Why not? Because their emergency need for food was more important than the specific worship regulation.

Jesus said, **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”** In the Old Testament, God put it another way: **“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”** God did command Old Testament sacrifices. And God did command that the people of Israel do no regular work on the Sabbath day. But when God gave those commands, he was instituting a system that was designed to benefit man. It was never his intention to enslave people with those laws. Yet, that is exactly what had happened by Jesus’ day. The Jewish people had written thousands of laws and endless opinions about every aspect of what God had said. They had concluded that hungry people picking a few heads of grain and eating them was the same as harvesting and threshing wheat. They would have preferred to have people starve on those days to learn a lesson. In that respect, they were not following God.

The Sabbath was made for man. God gave it to teach his people something. The Sabbath rest is all about finding peace in God. God commanded them to set this day aside for him. Farmers who work every single day were supposed to trust him and not work one day each week and dedicate that day to their spiritual needs. In the ancient world, the Jews were criticized as lazy for following this law. But that physical rest was a symbol of spiritual rest. First of all, it symbolized the rest we receive in heaven. When we reach eternal life, all the things that exhaust us and worry us will be over and we will be at perfect rest. And secondly, the spiritual rest was about focusing on God and his promises. People then, like people today, had things that they had to wrestle with. Farmers spent months planting and caring for crops. But all their labor could be wiped out if enough rain didn’t fall or if too many bugs ate their crops. They had marriages to maintain. They had children to raise. They had elderly relatives to care for. They had bills to pay and clothes to buy and the list goes on and on. Like today, they could get so caught up in how hard it was that they despaired. The Sabbath was about taking a rest for all the cares and worries of this life and hearing about God’s love. Through that message of love, God gave his people peace.

It is still about that today. The 3rd Commandment is unique in that God specifically says in the New Testament that it doesn’t apply to us anymore. We are not obligated to worship on Saturday. We are not prohibited from doing any regular work on the day we worship. But there was very important principle behind this law that does apply to us today. This law was about setting aside time to hear God’s word. Today, we can violate the spirit of this law in two ways. First of all, we can be guilty of not cherishing our time with God. God calls us to gladly hear and learn God’s Word. God calls his people to regularly come and hear. God calls his people to make it a priority in their lives. We should want to come to church. When we don’t like coming, when we have to be dragged to church, when we only come once in a while, we are sinning.

The other way that we can violate the principle is if we’re legalistic about our church attendance. It’s not a sin to work on Sunday, especially when you have the option to hear the word on other days. It’s not a sin to go to a movie on Sundays, unless the movie itself is sinful. It’s not a sin to socialize or to do yard work on Sunday. There is no Christian Sabbath. There is no command for us to have a day when we do no regular work. Legalism that forbids what God does not forbid or that thinks I’m a better Christian because I would never work on Sundays is just as sinful as not caring and not coming.

God made the Sabbath for man, not man for the Sabbath. God gives us a blessing when we come here. He gives a greater peace than even the peace that comes from relief from the cares and worries of our lives. God gives us the peace that our sins are forgiven. Yes it is a sin for us to fail to come to church regularly. Yes it is a sin for us to invent a Christian Sabbath and make ourselves Pharisees. But Jesus died to pay for all that sin. He rose and forgave it. We come here to be forgiven. We come to set our hearts at rest in his word. That’s what the Old Testament Sabbath symbolized. So in a very real way, that is the answer to our question. **What is the Sabbath? A gift to God’s people.**

II.

That gift is what Jesus wanted his people to understand. The Sabbath, as the Jews practiced it, was part of what we call the ceremonial law. That means laws that dealt with how Israel was supposed to worship God. That worship was very different from what happens when we come to worship. When’s the last time we killed an animal during a church service? It never happens, right? But it happened almost every time the Jews

worshipped. They sacrificed animals and burned part or all of those animals on the altar as a part of their worship services. Why? Because God commanded it.

But even more importantly, because God was teaching them something about Christ. Every Jewish sacrifice was intended to teach the people that when Jesus came, he would lay down his life on the cross to pay for their sins. His blood would make peace with God. His death would give them eternal life. In the same way, every ceremonial law taught the people about Jesus. The priesthood taught them that there was one man who would stand between them and God. That one man would end the warfare that sin causes between us and God. That one man would take our prayers to God and bring his words back to us. Jesus was that one man.

And the Sabbath, too, taught about Jesus. It promised rest from their sins. It promised eternal life, a rest that never ends. Just as the people had one day when they weren't supposed to worry about other things, but were supposed to focus on God, so Christ gives us one eternal day when we will be free from all the cares and worries of this life. Until that day comes, we dedicate ourselves to hearing his promises – not to earn points with God, but to give ourselves peace and rest until we reach heaven.

Jesus said, **“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”** Jesus invented the Sabbath. When Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, he received them from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So he received them from Jesus. And the same is true for all of Scripture. God gave us a gift when he gave us time to hear his word. God does not require us to worship on Saturday. But he does require us to set aside time to hear his word and he promises to give us peace through that gift.

Because Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, he was the only one who could properly judge when someone broke it. The disciples hadn't, but those Pharisees who were falsely accusing them had. Jesus is our judge, too. He knows the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. He knows when we love to hear his word and he knows when we're bored with it. He knows when we appreciate his gift and when we don't. And even when we've violated the spirit of the Sabbath, even when we don't love that word and we deserve hell, Jesus gave us this time to comfort us with his love and forgiveness. The Lord of the Sabbath is the Lord who gives rest, the Lord who gives peace, the Lord who wants us to take refuge in him. That was true already in the Old Testament.

What is the Sabbath? A sign that points to Christ.

We don't have to follow any of the Old Testament rules about the Sabbath. We will offer no burnt offerings today. We will have church on Mondays all summer long. We may mow our lawns or go to work this afternoon. All those things are acceptable because in all those things we give glory to God. But God did give us gift when he gave the Old Testament Sabbath. He gave a rule that pointed to the coming rest we have in heaven. And he gave a rule that has within it that New Testament principle that God calls us to set aside time for him, not because we're slaves, but because we are children, dearly loved and bought with the blood of Christ. Jesus wants us to set that time aside because he wants us have peace now and to live with him forever. Enjoy that gift of God. Amen.