

Mark 2:23-28
The Third Sunday After Pentecost
Finding Freedom in Forgiveness
The Blessing of Divine Service

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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.”

“Do I have to go to church?” How do you answer a question like that? It’s a question that children ask their parents. It’s sometimes thrown out as a challenge by those who don’t take much stock in religion. And often it has a tendency to creep into our own thoughts as well, doesn’t it? “Do I have to go to church, today?”

Although the situation was different, the behavior of the Pharisees in our Gospel text this morning clearly shows how they would have answered that question. “Yes!” they would have said, “You do have to go to church. That’s the rule. It’s the law!”

Jesus rejects that answer. But Jesus doesn’t say, “No, you don’t have to go to church.” But what Jesus does is show us that the mindset that asks the question, “Do I have to go to church?” has already headed down the wrong road. He beneath the surface of the question to challenge the way we think about worship and going to church services. Instead of a mandatory obligation, Jesus wants us to see and to believe that going to church is a blessing for you and me.

When you first arrive here on a Sunday morning one of the first things that you will notice as you look at our worship folders is the title of the order of service that we’ll be using. Often, it is the Common Service, other times it’s an order called the Divine Service, the Service of the Word, or the Service of Word and Sacrament. Occasionally, like this morning, we use an order of Service called Morning Praise. While there may be a few different orders of service, they are all still quite similar. Their focus, in particular, is always the same: service. Not our service to God, but His divine service to us. Church services bless us. They bless us when they meet our real need. They bless us when they honor our true Lord. They bless us, by bringing us by bringing us the freedom of rest, through the forgiveness that our Lord serves to us in His Word and Sacraments. When we focus on that blessing, and when we see the reason God has for us to gather weekly for worship, then we don’t even think of asking, “Do I have to go to church?”

To understand what is happening in our Gospel lesson, we need to take ourselves back to the first century Jewish world. God’s people were still living under the Old Testament laws given by God through Moses at Mt. Sinai, because Jesus hadn’t yet completed His work of salvation. Many of those laws governed the religious life of the nation of Israel. 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 such ceremonial law was the Sabbath law. The word *Sabbath* means “rest.” Each week, on the seventh day, God’s people were to rest from their daily labor in anticipation of the spiritual rest the Messiah would bring as they heard and pondered God’s Word and promises.

The Jewish teachers considered the law about physical rest so important that they made extra rules to make sure that no one would be doing work on that day. They came out with categories and subcategories of all different kinds of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath.

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. The disciples were not strictly observing the rabbi’s interpretation of God’s ceremonial law.

But rather than descending into a legalistic discussion of what was or wasn’t forbidden on the Sabbath, Jesus took aim at the core of the Pharisees’ thinking. They viewed the outward keeping of the ceremonial laws like the Sabbath as the means through which they would climb closer to God. So Jesus reminded them how David one of the greatest Israelites, a man after God’s own heart, had purposely broken God’s ceremonially law in a time of need and was guiltless.

You see, David was running for his life. Even though he had faithfully served King Saul by killing Goliath and leading the Israelite army, King Saul wanted him dead. He knew that God was going to hand the kingdom over to David. So David ran with a trusted few, and when they reached the town of Nob, they was hungry. David asked the priest for some bread. But the only bread on hand was the consecrated show bread from the tabernacle. Each week twelve loaves of bread were baked and set before the presence of the Lord on a gold table in the tabernacle. The loaves from the previous week were to be eaten only by the priests.

That was one of God’s ceremonial laws. Yet it wasn’t wrong for David in his need to eat it and share it with his men. Because 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. Now if that was the case with a ceremonial law from God, Himself, how much more wasn’t it the case with the Jewish teachers’ interpretation of the ceremonial laws about the Sabbath! As Jesus puts it, **The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.** The ceremonial laws like the Sabbath were made as a blessing and benefit for God’s people, not as a legalistic club to bend man’s will to the bidding of others.

What is our real need and how alone is it met? **The Sabbath was made for man.** It was made to be a blessing for God’s people. What sort of blessings did it bring? For starters, it brought the blessing of physical rest. So it ought not to have been used by anyone to deprive others of their physical need for food.

But even more importantly, the Sabbath was a blessing because it was a shadow promising the coming of the true Rest-giver. Far greater than any physical need is our need for spiritual rest. That’s our number one need. Who alone can bring rest to a guilt-ridden conscience that haunts our quiet moments? Who alone can bring peace to a heart troubled by sin? Who alone can drive out the terrors of hell? Who alone can end our restless wandering through the dark night of this world? Who alone can end our warfare against God and reconcile us to Him? Who alone can bring rest to our soul, the rest which we really need?

Only Jesus. **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 in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light** (Mt 11:28-30). Only Jesus can truly speak those words to you. He alone is the giver of rest. And so, we no

longer need the shadow of the Sabbath, because we have the reality. We have Jesus who 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, excitement, intellectual stimulation, or a how-to manual for fixing all of life's problems, but they meet our number one need. Here, as we gather for Divine Service, God brings Jesus to us—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: He has paid for all your sins. He has met your greatest need. You have the freedom of forgiveness, of peace with your God. What blessing His rest brings!

Our worship is not only a blessing to us, it does also honor our Lord. In verse 28, Jesus ended His response to the Pharisees by saying, **So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.** Just as the Sabbath served Jesus by pointing forward to Him, so our worship serves Him by pointing back, pointing back to the work He accomplished for you. The Divine Service points to Jesus as your Lord, who ransomed you with His suffering and death so that you belong to Him. He's purchased you with His blood, redeemed you as His own people. He's conquered sin, Satan, and death for you by rising from the dead. He's placed His name on you in Baptism. Through faith in Him you call Him Lord, for He is your true Lord as surely as you are His blood-bought people. Our church services honor Jesus as our Lord as we listen to His Word and sing his praises.

If we skip worship, who or what are we honoring instead Him? Granted, at times, a pressing need may keep us from coming. We may not want others to catch the serious sickness we have. Or maybe someone truly needs our care or help on that Sunday morning and we have an opportunity to honor Jesus by showing His love to them. The time may even come when we're unable to get out anymore. But in those cases, our words and actions will clearly show that we want to be honoring our Lord with His people in church. And we shouldn't view those things as excuses because again, the whole idea of asking, "What is a legitimate excuse for missing church?" misses the point; it's a question flowing out of the same legalistic mindset the Pharisees had.

What we want to ask instead is, "How can I best honor my Lord Jesus?" So often, missing worship has nothing to do with honoring Jesus, but rather with serving our own desires and conveniences. We use our freedom to indulge our pleasures. And that's sinful. It's sinful not because we're breaking a command of God that says we have to be in church once a week. He hasn't said that to us. It's sin because of what's going on in our hearts. We're honoring someone or something else more than Jesus. Likewise, simply coming to church only because you think you're supposed to isn't honoring Jesus either, even if you are here every week.

We honor Jesus as our true Lord when we come here to contemplate and celebrate His great love and mercy. In the Divine Service, we ponder and proclaim the Good News of our crucified and risen Savior. Through word and song we remember our Lord and encourage each other by pointing to Him. We come here seeking His forgiveness, even for those many times we have failed to honor Him as our Lord. And what greater honor can we give Him than to believe His promise: **I, your Lord, freely forgive you. For 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?

“Do I have to go to church?” Don’t get tied up in the knots of that question. Just see your real need. Like me, you are a sinner. Our consciences will never find true peace and rest without the Rest-giver, Jesus Christ. What a blessing that our Divine Service focuses on Him and His saving work! What a great opportunity to honor Him as our Lord as we publicly gather to gladly hear and learn His saving word! Yes, the Divine Service blesses us because it points us to Jesus. So the real question is: “Why would I not 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.”

We thank our Lord for the opportunity to do just that. Amen.