

Text Study for Sunday, January 29, 2017
The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath

Prayer of the Day

Lord of the Sabbath,

Your followers were told not to work on the Sabbath, and yet they boldly plucked grain to show that you are Lord of all. The world tells us not to rest on the Sabbath. Show us how to rest boldly, rejecting conventions that go against your will, and instead praying and resting as you did up on the mountain, for the glory of your word and work, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 6:1-16

1 One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. 2 But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 3 Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" 5 Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

6 On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 7 The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. 8 Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. 9 Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" 10 After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. 11 But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

12 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. 13 And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: 14 Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, 15 and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, 16 and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

- * ***Take some time to discuss this passage. What jumps out at you? What do you find curious or confusing?***

The first thing we need to remind ourselves of when we read a passage of scripture that discusses Old Testament laws is that the conversation and situations taking place regarding these laws are among Jewish people who are attempting to understand the laws that have been followed and modified for centuries.

When Jesus ~ a devout Jew ~ appeared on the scene, he began to reinterpret the laws. It wasn't that what he said was wrong; it's just that his perspective was different from the religious leaders. Religious leaders over the centuries had lost the original reason for some of the laws and, instead, began to enforce strict rules as to what it meant to follow the law or laws. It was very confusing for everyone, and subject to change at any moment depending on which religious leader or group was leading the discussion or who was making the accusation against a person.

But we get the idea that every time Jesus met up with religious leaders, there was a fight. That idea is wrong. Unlike our country at this point in our history, questions and debates were welcomed in the day of Jesus. It was not unusual to have a group of men in a town square or at a town gate debating religious laws or the news of the day (women were not allowed to participate!). It was a way of passing the day and considered very respectable to have animated discussions about important things.

A little background here. The laws were originally given to Moses in The Ten Commandments, but there were many more laws and rules for following the laws added to the books, as well as much clarification of existing laws as time went on. The traditional number of Biblical laws is 613. The 613 commandments include "positive commandments" (to perform an act), and "negative commandments" (to refrain from certain acts). The negative commandments number 365, which coincides with the number of days in the solar year, and it is said that the positive commandments number 248, a number that according to ancient documents is said to be the number of bones and main organs in the human body (as recorded in the Babylonian Talmud).

It is no longer possible to follow some of the laws given to the people of God because there is no longer a Temple dedicated to God in Jerusalem where pilgrimages can be made to sacrifice to God on sacred holy days. For the most part, animal sacrifice is no longer practiced in Judaism, although there are pockets of tribes in the Holy Land who still practice it within their own communities.

- * ***Do you think there are some commandments that need no explanation, and can be followed without***

question? Which one(s)? Is it ever ok to break a commandment?

Some of these 613 laws are considered major; some are considered minor. Sabbath laws were especially one of the biggies in Jesus' day. In fact, if you disobeyed a Sabbath law in the time of Jesus, you could be put to death! Didn't show up for prayer that morning? Suspicion rises! Discovered doing something on the Sabbath that religious leaders considered work? You could be subject to harsh treatment or, yes, even death.

The reason for this was that Jewish practices sought to preserve Sabbath as a monument to life, so rest is the order of the day, unless a life needs saving. In that case, all commands to rest are suspended, both in the ancient world and now (*Lutheran Study Bible*).

On to this scene in the life of Jewish history comes Jesus. And from the first time the religious leaders approached him with questions, he began to turn their world upside down. He called them on their practices of the laws of Judaism. And what began as the usual lively local debates and discussions with the men of the villages took a turn as Jesus questioned and challenged some of their sacred major laws and their treatment of the common folk. The religious leaders grew more and more angry at what Jesus was saying because he was not just a local boy with an interesting opinion to share ~ he was drawing followers who were beginning to talk about him as if he could be the long-awaited Messiah.

And so here it is, in today's story, that Jesus challenges their strict rules about the Sabbath law. The Pharisees, known for their very particular and thorough observance of the Mosaic law, had witnessed Jesus' disciples breaking the Sabbath law. Luke makes this point clear when he mentions that the disciples "were picking " heads of grain, which was considered 'reaping'. Luke also adds that the disciples were "rubbing (the grain) in their hands ", which was considered 'threshing'. Luke's point is that the disciples were, in fact, technically breaking the Sabbath law. But note this: the disciples are not accused of stealing because a person was allowed to eat from a field while traveling according to their laws. It was only because they did it on the Sabbath that it became an issue (*Harper Collins Bible Commentary*).

- * ***At one time, not too long ago, there were laws that prohibited businesses from being open on Sunday. This was to allow church and family time for people. Good idea or not?***

This point is further made clear by the fact that, when accused by the Pharisees, Jesus does not deny that His disciples broke the Sabbath. Jesus does not respond by telling the Pharisees that they were incorrect in their accusation. Rather, he simply makes reference to when King David and his companions ate bread that was set aside in the temple specifically for God on a Sabbath. Using David as an example, Jesus even admits that they engaged in an action that was "not lawful ". At first glance, this response may seem surprising ~ Jesus' logic appears to be like that of a child who, once corrected, exclaims 'But I saw him do it first!'.

What point is Jesus trying to make here? Is it that Sabbath observance no longer applies? But Jesus doesn't say this. Jesus does not respond to the Pharisees by telling them that the Sabbath is now abolished. Jesus does not say that the Sabbath is now relaxed. Instead, what Jesus is doing is attempting to return Sabbath observance to its original and proper understanding.

Jesus points to one of the original intentions of the Sabbath in Mark's account when He says that "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sake of the Sabbath "(Mk. 2:27). That is to say that the Sabbath was given by God to benefit us, and not to burden us. The Pharisees had shackled themselves and others with a strict system of Sabbath observance that completely blurred the original intentions God had for the day.

*** *What do you think it means to “Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy”? Do you think it can be interpreted in different ways for different people?***

But Jesus had more to say about the Sabbath, and he did it on another occasion when the religious leaders were once again watching him closely to see how they could catch him at something in order to get rid of him.

And they got their opportunity, because Jesus once again broke their rules about Sabbath-keeping. He was teaching in the synagogue and saw a man whose hand was withered. He called to the man to come and stand by him, and then Jesus turned once again to the religious leaders, looked them in the eye and said, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" But they had no answer for him. And so he did what he knew to be right, even though he also knew he would be in trouble with the religious authorities. He healed the man; he did good on the Sabbath. And the religious leaders were furious.

Jesus' final statement on this occasion also has great significance, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath ". When we hear that Sabbath observance and rituals should not come before human need, we might be tempted to think that the Sabbath is all about us. We must be careful, however, to balance the truth that "The Sabbath was made for

man " with the truth that "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath ". The Sabbath is concerned with humanity's welfare, no doubt, but the Sabbath is not about us. The Sabbath is about God. Yes, God calls us to rest on the Sabbath day, but on this day of rest we are also to acknowledge and honor the One who gave us the day.

- * ***When was the last time you enjoyed a leisurely Sunday? What did you enjoy about the day? What would be a perfect Sunday for you?***

The Pharisees were sincere in wanting to honor God's day of rest, the Sabbath. The problem is that they got so caught up in trying to catch people in the act of breaking the rules of Sabbath, that they missed God's love behind each of the Ten Commandments, including the one about keeping the Sabbath. They missed the fact that being given a holy day of rest was meant not only to rest our bodies from the other six days of work; it was also meant to give us time to nurture relationships with family and friends and, most especially, with our God.

It's a balancing act in some ways. We certainly don't want to be like the Pharisees ~ making rules about what we can and can't do on the Sabbath. Some of us remember those days when you couldn't play ball or cards or watch tv on the Sabbath. When you think about it, the church of that day (and still in some churches today) acted very much like the Pharisees of Jesus' time ~ setting up strict rules about the Sabbath Commandment! But neither do we want to forget to honor ourselves by caring for our body, mind and spirit and by nurturing our relationships with people in our lives. Finally, we certainly don't want to leave God out of the Sabbath days of our lives, for it is through God that we receive each day ~ the work days and the day of rest God set aside for us.

- * ***Were you, or did you know someone, who was brought up with strict Sabbath rules in their home or church? Do you have any stories to share?***

When we start focusing on rules and forget about the needs of the people, we are thinking like the Pharisees and other religious leaders of Jesus' time. Jesus ~ brought up a devout Jew ~ was a bit like Martin Luther was (or Martin Luther was a bit like Jesus!)! If you remember, Martin Luther didn't want to abolish the Roman Catholic Church; he just wanted to point out some mistakes they were making ~ forgetting about the people's needs and focusing on themselves and their rules and regulations. In the case of our Lord, Jesus didn't want to abolish the laws, just clarify them and get people's priorities back on track. But in neither case did the powers that be want to listen. They tried to kill Martin Luther

CLOSING THOUGHTS

THE LORD'S PRAYER