**Mark 2:23-28 (also 3:1-5)** June 6, 2021

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*23One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. 24The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” 25He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? 26In 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.” 27Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was a warm afternoon walking down a rutted rural path in Africa. Mr. Kalupeteka, Pastor Chijoka, Moses Banda and I were stretching our legs before a church service. Pastor Chijoka, a visitor who lived in the urban metropolis of Lusaka, spotted a tree along the road. He asked the local man, Mr. Banda, if it was what he thought it was: a wild fruit tree he hadn’t seen since his childhood. It was indeed. Pastor Chijoka hurried to it, found the fruit ripe for picking and started digging in. Pastor Chijoka was in seventh heaven, reliving the happy days of his childhood in a peaceful village. Messrs. Kalupeteka and Banda joined in. I was aghast! Somebody’s fruit tree, and these guys, church men, are eating the thing bare! How could they? Isn’t that stealing? I mean, what if some lady walking her dog down your street just walked over to your raspberries and started shoving those berries in her mouth as fast as she could. Wouldn’t you blow a gasket!

But, the men explained to me: It wasn’t that way in their culture. Of course, if the fruit tree was near a house, you would ask before taking—but what kind of miser would turn you down? This tree just standing alongside a field was for anyone. The only rule was that you’re not supposed to put fruit in your pockets. Eat as much as you need, take none with you.

I say that to make it clear what was *not* the problem in our reading. When Jesus’ disciples walked through the grainfields, the Pharisees did not object because they were eating someone else’s food. In fact, God had made it clear in the Law of Moses, *“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”* (Dt 23:25). God had legislated that his people were to help one another in exactly this way.

No, the Pharisees objected to something else. According to *their* rules, rubbing a couple dozen kernels together in the hands and blowing away the chaff was work, and God’s command from our first reading said, *“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work”* (Dt 5:13-14).

God was serious about this, very serious. In the days of Moses a man was found gathering firewood on the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week. He had clearly broken the Sabbath rest, and done so willfully. The man was put in custody and Moses inquired of the Lord. The Lord said, *“The man must die.”* God was very serious about keeping the Sabbath day (Numbers 15:32-36). But this man had thought, “Sabbath, Schmabbath. Lord’s Day, Schmord’s Day, I’m going out to get something done.”

Because God was very serious about the Sabbath day, from Moses up to the very end of the Old Testament (Nehemiah 13), observance of the Sabbath Day was a litmus test of the Israelites’ spiritual life.

Now, as in any group of people, God’s Sabbath Day law rubbed many people the wrong way. They wanted to make money, to work, to have fun and so they were always trying to find ways around the Sabbath day law. It’s all very convoluted, but for example, some reasoned that maybe you couldn’t take a journey on the Sabbath, but if you started the journey before the Sabbath, then you could keep on journeying on the Sabbath. People would find ways to keep the rules while breaking the rules, to observe the letter of the law while breaking the spirit of the law. So, those who feared and respected God made the Sabbath rules more and more strict to close the loopholes. (You know how we hate loopholes that let billionaires pay no taxes while the working man pays a significant percentage.) My guess is that the Sabbath rules started from a good motive, to close the loopholes. So started the game of cat and mouse that played out over the centuries.

By Jesus’ time the Sabbath laws were one of the chief points of discussion and debate among the rabbis. (For further reference, cf. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Appendix 17) To these wrangling scholars with their dizzying array of rules, it was quite obvious to them that when Jesus’ disciples took the grains of barley in their hands, rubbed their hands together and blew away the chaff—it was quite obvious to them that these disciples were harvesting grain, and harvesting grain was clearly against the Sabbath just as much as gathering firewood. Therefore the disciples were guilty of a most serious sin.

Jesus stepped into the fray with the authority of the Son of God. He had a way of doing that. When he weighed in, you could hear God thunder. He reminded them of something. He said, ***“Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?”*** Just in case you have never heard of the incident, Jesus explained a bit ***“In the days of Abiathar the high priest, [David] 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.”*** So, in the “temple” proper, there was a table, and on this table, every week, the priest put twelve loaves of bread, to symbolize a fellowship meal between God and the twelve tribes of Israel. Every week the bread was removed and replaced. Then the priests, *and only the priests*, were allowed to eat the removed bread (Lev 24:5-9). One day, when some of that leftover holy bread had not yet been eaten by the priests, David showed up. At that time, David wasn’t yet king, but was running for his life. He and his men were starved. Seeing their need, the priest on duty gave some of that bread to David. Now that incident had nothing to do with the Sabbath, but it did have this similarity, that both David and Jesus’ disciples were godly men who did something forbidden for the good of preserving life.

And suddenly, all the human laws that had encrusted God’s Sabbath Law, peeled off in big chunks. In a sentence, Jesus nullified all the human additions. Those Pharisees had been so concentrated on observing the Sabbath that they forgot *why* they were observing the Sabbath.

Imagine a very well off couple who build a large and beautiful house. It has this beautiful, large entryway with a double winding staircase to the second story. A dozen bedrooms and a dozen bathrooms. Lots of glass on the west side overlooking a beautiful view into the sunset, and all that stuff. Let’s just imagine that they step back, admire their house and say, “You know what we need? We need some kids running around to make the picture perfect. So they have some kids. Wouldn’t you love to be those kids? Beautiful house—but you always think, “My parents had us kids, not because they wanted kids, but for their house.”

The Pharisees had forgotten that ***“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”*** That is, God made the Sabbath to be a benefit to people, not for people to be slaves to the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the day for rest from labor and from the worldly pursuit of a buck. The Sabbath was a day to direct thoughts to God, to gather around God’s Word, to enjoy the presence of family, to rejoice in God’s many blessings, to remember what is really important. Instead, the rabbis had filled the Sabbath with arguments, with guilty consciences of “Maybe I didn’t do this or that right,” with thoughts of rule-following instead of reveling in the goodness of God.

We love to see Jesus send these guys packing with all their man-made rules. We love it when meaningless laws are struck down, when people are given freedom. And it applies to our day too. We are now able to do anything we want on Sundays. I can go to Lowe’s at 8:00am on Sunday to get my home improvement project started early. I don’t ever have to worry about Sunday lunch like my mom had to, because now the grocery stores are open, the restaurants are serving. If I need some extra cash, Sunday is as good a day as any to make money, and if you work at the right places, it is an even better day to make money with time-and-a-half or even double-time.

Yes, it’s good to be free of all those Sabbath laws, so we can go and do whatever we want on Sunday. Work, recreation, eating. No reason for God to think he has a monopoly on the day, that church is the only thing going. The horizons are wide open, the possibliities unlimited. Jesus sent those Pharisees packing and so have we. Down with Sabbath laws!

I am being sarcastic, maybe a little too much! The situation of Jesus’ day is nothing like our day. We stand at the opposite extreme. In Jesus’ day they buried the Sabbath under a mountain of rules. Now we have no rules at all about time for God. We rightly cheer Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees, but we have forgotten Jesus’ words at another time, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.”* Looking at another sitting at his feet he said, *“Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*

In the new covenant after Jesus’ death and resurrection, worshipping on the Sabbath has been declared null and void like animal sacrifices. Yet what was accomplished on the Sabbath still is required. We need to take our minds off this world and direct them toward God, and now in our technology invasive days more than ever.

So we have this puzzle: We must be careful about making rules that are not there. But we need to remember God’s commands that *are* there. I cannot say that it is wrong to work on a given Sunday, but I can say that routinely trading off time for God for time for work is wrong. I cannot say that it is wrong to stay home because you are feeling sick on Sunday. I can tell you that it is wrong to neglect God’s Word, the Sacrament, and meeting together with your fellow Christians. I cannot say that you have to find a church to worship every Sunday you’re out on vacation. I can tell you that the attitude of “Vacation = Vacation from God” is sinful.

And so the Christian Church long long ago, while Christ’s apostles still walked the earth, decided to fulfill our human need for time with God. The early Christians quickly developed the custom—not the law but the custom—that they would meet the first day of every week.

Let me finish with a story. A man told me of growing up on a Kentucky farm in the 50s. On their farm his father insisted that his family keep Sunday “holy,” set apart to the Lord. They would do no farm work on Sunday. One year on a Sunday, just when the tobacco out in the field was at exactly the right point to fetch the highest price at auction, the weather report came in that it would rain heavily that evening. The rain would lower the tobacco grade; they would lose money. Besides that, the rain would splatter dirt onto the leaves and the family would have to hand wash each and every single tobacco leaf. So this man, then a teen-ager, together with others of the family, pleaded with dad that they go out and harvest on Sunday. Dad wouldn’t budge. “Think of the money we lose. Think of how much extra work it will be!” Dad wouldn’t change his mind. He said, “We will take what the Lord gives us.” And it rained, and this young man could hardly sleep that night while the rain fell, thinking of all the extra work and lost money. But his father led his family in keeping the Sabbath holy to the Lord.

Was he right? That’s for you to decide. Did he honor God in his heart, among his family? Here’s another question: Could anyone imagine you doing something like that, just to be sure that God is honored in your life?

Having said that, and denying none of the hard questions I have just asked, I close with a quotation, “Our joy as God’s people is not that we have made the right decision in every [situation]. Our overriding joy is this: ‘If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.’ (1 John 2:1,2)” (Harstad, *Joshua: The People’s Bible*, pp.35-36)

Let us make time for God in our lives. Amen.