

Mark 2:23-28

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text for today is from Mark's Gospel, "One Sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 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: 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?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

This account is given to us by Mark in the midst of a number of accounts to show Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees escalating. In the texts immediately prior to this, the Pharisees take issue with Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners as well as the fact that Jesus' disciples did not fast as disciples of other teachers did. And following this account, we see the Pharisees incensed that Jesus would dare to heal a man on the Sabbath day.

And this is the central conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees; the Pharisees had created a hedge around the Law, demanding more from people than the Law itself required in an effort to ensure that the Law would not be broken again. Jesus brings a different understanding of the Law with him. The Law is something that reveals to us the will of God and his desire for us.

Now, we must be careful here. There is a fine line upon which we must walk because there are two options available to us and if we look around at American Christianity, we can see both options lived out to the full. On the one hand, we can be like the Pharisees ourselves. We can insist upon the letter of the law and demand that everyone who would ever walk through our doors adhere to the same forms and norms that the rest of us share lest they be run out as the wicked heathens they are, regardless of what they actually believe. Sadly, this way of thinking is alive and well within many churches in this nation, including some of our own.

It is easy to see the appeal of this way of thinking as well. You end up with a nice, uniform congregation with very little deviation. Further, if we are going to place a high priority on the works that we perform, then this even better because we can set the standard for everyone to be able to prove that they are good

Christians to themselves and sometimes more importantly, others.

But I said that Jesus came to fulfill the Law. This is a common refrain for many and it offers a kind of freedom from what I just described. Indeed, this often becomes the rallying cry for those who have been abused and driven out by those who demand an adherence to the Law that no one can actually fulfill. So instead, because Jesus has fulfilled the Law for us, we don't need to worry about the Law at all. Truly, anyone who would want to speak of the Law in any way should be rejected as a bigot and someone who is no real Christian. "True Christians" understand that the Law is meaningless. As the Beatles said, "all we need is love."

Indeed, as we read our text this morning, Jesus firmly appears to be in the second camp, right? He thumbs his nose at the manufactured laws of the Pharisees. What's more, he even

does one better and gives them an example of how David himself did something that was not lawful to do, and yet his action is not condemned. How much more so should the actions of Jesus himself, the one who David called his Lord, be above question? It seems to certainly defy reason.

And make no mistake. There is no shortage of people who would love to lay claim to Jesus as some sort of political radical. He was someone who came to disrupt everything because the whole system was corrupt. And because the system is still corrupt, it is our job as Christians to continue this legacy as people who cause turmoil and disruption because Jesus was a radical and we should be too.

But you see, if we take that road, we are grossly misunderstanding both the work and person of Jesus. The same Jesus who says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Also says, “Do not think that I have come to

abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

The problem is that legalism such as that taught by the Pharisees and those today who would insist upon extra-biblical rules or misinterpreted passages miss the point entirely of the cross. Jesus says that nothing will pass away from the Law until all is accomplished. Recall if you will the last words of Christ as he hung on the cross, “It is finished.” You see, we have been set free from the Law because Jesus kept it perfectly. His death on the cross fulfills the burden of the Law and his perfect

righteousness is given and credited to each one of us through faith.

There is no need for us to be legalists requiring every Christian to look or act exactly the same way that we do because Christ himself does not require it. Remember that the Apostles themselves were a very diverse group, and yet they were all united around the common faith that they shared in Christ. In the same way, as we've been seeing in our Acts study, the first generations of Christians were hardly a homogeneous group, but they were united around the Gospel. In the same way, we see that Christ is indeed the Lord of the Sabbath, as he said he was. He is the Lord of the Sabbath because he is the Lord of all. All things have been placed under his feet and all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him by the Father because of what he accomplished for us all at the cross.

But on the other hand, we would be wrong to pretend that the Law has been completely dissolved and is irrelevant. The moral Law of God still stands and it describes God's will for his creation. The basic moralities of right and wrong still must stand, or else everything falls apart; as we are beginning to see. The Law of God is still good and useful to guide us and shape our thinking and lives.

If we would reduce the Gospel down to something as simple as "Jesus loves you and nothing you do really matters or counts," then we are emptying the cross of its meaning and we are robbing Christ of his glory. If nothing really matters in the eyes of God, then the death of Christ was pointless. If the Father is willing to simply turn a blind eye to sin and pretend that it isn't there, there was absolutely no reason for Jesus to suffer and die for us.

And what's more, Jesus becomes a figurehead savior because his death and resurrection isn't really important. If there is no sin, there is no need for a savior to redeem us from those sins any longer. What becomes more important is his teachings, and this gives way to the perversion that Jesus was some political radical.

The greater danger of both legalism and gospel reductionism is that both robs sinners of the comfort that is ours in Christ. Through legalism, the comfort for the sinner is found in their works. Have you done enough to make sure that you're worthy of forgiveness? Have you been a good enough Christian for Jesus to be happy with you and receive you when you die? There is no comfort in Christ for the person who must find comfort in their own works rather than the work of Christ at the cross for us.

And when we reduce the gospel down to a generic kind of love that doesn't really mean anything, there is no more comfort for sinners. When we transgress the Law, we know that we have sinned. But if we are told that there is no sin there to forgive, that guilt remains with us. The comfort that Christ offers by actually forgiving our sins is stolen.

But dear friends, the joyous good news of the Gospel is that our sins are actually forgiven in Christ! We have nothing to fear. We are set free from the threat of the Law. There is no one to stand and condemn us because Christ himself has stood in our place and taken our punishment. Even Satan himself cannot make the case that we are undeserving of Christ's compassion and forgiveness because we are able to say to him, "Yes, I am unworthy. I am a poor miserable sinner. What of it? My Lord Jesus Christ has suffered and died for me. His blood has cleansed me and made me whole."

Christ is our Sabbath because he is our comfort. In him we find true rest. We find rest from our labors of self-justification. We find rest from our efforts to argue with others whether or not we are good enough. We find rest from the voice in our heads that says we are unworthy and wicked people. More importantly, we find our rest from our constant struggle with sin. We find our rest and our comfort in the fact that through Christ, it is finished. Our salvation is secure and our sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God for his great mercy and love that he shows to us that we may be comforted. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting. Amen.