

LORD OF REST

Mark 2:23-3:6

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

June 3, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel according to Mark*, beginning in chapter 2, verse 23, and reading through chapter 3, verse 6. It is on page 708 of the pew Bible. This reading is closely connected with the Old Testament lesson concerning the Third Commandment. And in this gospel lesson, Jesus helps us see the gift in the Third Commandment. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Mark 2, beginning at verse 23, we read in Jesus' name.

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ 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: ²⁶ 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?" ²⁷ And 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."

^{3:1} Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." ⁴ And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

Dear saints, your sins are forgiven, and Jesus promises you rest. He gives you rest from the burden of the Law. No longer do God's commandments condemn you, because Jesus has borne the full weight of our condemnation, he has made satisfaction for our sins, and he has freed us from the burden of the Law. This weight, which is too much for us to carry, has been lifted. Your sins are forgiven.

Jesus also promises us eternal rest from the toilsome labors of this life. And by "eternal rest" I do not mean physical death, which we often refer to as "sleep" for Christians. Sometimes you hear the phrase "rest in peace" when someone dies. I'm not sure what the origin of the phrase is, but for Christians, death is not rest. When we talk about rest, we are talking about *life*. The phrase "eternal rest" might invoke the idea of sleeping for eternity. But that's not what

it means. The rest Jesus promises us is a conscious and physical life in God's new creation. It's more like the rest you have when you're sipping lemonade on the back porch or tending your garden when you actually want to tend your garden. There's activity involved, but it's not labor. It's perfectly enjoyable.

That's the point of this text, and that's the point of this sermon. Your sins are forgiven, and Jesus promises you rest.

Sometimes I make you wait until the end before the main point of the sermon is finally revealed. And I realize that sometimes that takes some work on the part of you as listeners. I hope it's worth the effort of paying attention and thinking with me, but since the theme of this text and the theme of this sermon is "rest," I thought it best to not require you to work too hard in order to get the point. Jesus gives you rest from the burden of the Law and the toilsome labors of this life. That's the point.

But how do we get to this conclusion? I hope you don't just take my word for it. I do hope you believe me when I tell you that your sins are forgiven and Jesus promises you eternal rest. But don't just take my word for it. Don't just think, *Oh, he went to seminary. He knows this stuff.* You have to make a pastor show his work. I have to prove it from the Scriptures. We do the work of looking at the Scriptures, and we consider the way Jesus is revealed to us in the Scriptures.

We have before us two different encounters Jesus has with the Pharisees on the Sabbath day. In the first account Jesus and his disciples were passing through a grain field. And the disciples were hungry, so they plucked some grain from the field and ate it. The Pharisees took issue with this, thinking it was a violation of the Law of Moses. Now, it wasn't a violation of the Law. On one level, to us it kind of seems like stealing. The grain belonged to someone else, but they took it and ate it. But the Law of Moses actually allowed for this (Deut. 23:25). It was against the law to take a sickle to your neighbor's field and harvest it; that was stealing. But it was perfectly legal to pluck some as you walked by and eat it. That was allowed by the Law of Moses. So they weren't stealing, and the Pharisees knew this, so they didn't accuse them of stealing.

What the Pharisees accused them of was breaking the Sabbath law, that is, the Third Commandment. This is what we read in the Old Testament lesson. God commanded the Israelites to work for six days and rest on the seventh. They were to do no work on the seventh day. And this is an odd thing about our fallen human condition: that God has to command us to rest. The Sabbath was given to the Israelites as a gift. God promised to provide for all the needs of their lives—seven days a week—even though they only had to work six.

This maybe doesn't sound that great to us since we have a standard five-day work week, but that's mostly because of our technology. We've made our work easy enough that we can afford a couple days off every week. But in 1400 BC, people usually worked every day; they had to in order to survive. So imagine the privilege of having every seventh day off. They had this privilege because God promised to provide for their needs. It was a gift to them, but God also knew that if he didn't give a commandment to protect this gift, the people would throw it away and work every day. That's because most of the world had to work every day just to survive. So, yes, the Third Commandment is a commandment, but the whole point of it is to protect the gift of rest.

So the Israelites had this law to protect the gift, but the Pharisees turned it into a burden, so they actually robbed the people of rest. The primary theological error of the Pharisees was the belief that God's favor was to be earned rather than given. So the Law was seen as the means for earning God's favor. If a person wanted to be in good with God, they had to perfectly keep the Law. So violations of the Law were to be avoided at all costs. And we agree that one should not violate God's Law; that shouldn't be controversial. But in order to make sure they didn't even accidentally break God's Law, the Pharisees built a fence around the Law. They would take the commandment one step further than what God actually commanded. If God commanded them not to eat a certain food, they would make a rule that you weren't allowed to touch it, because then a tiny little bit of it might stay on your hands and get into your mouth. In order to avoid breaking the Law, they put a fence around it. But they didn't put a fence on the boundary. They put a fence twenty feet back from the boundary. They made a whole bunch of extra laws to protect people from getting close to breaking the real laws. And it became a real burden.

And with the Sabbath commandment, they couldn't just let it rest at, "You shall not do any work" (Deut. 5:14). Of course they had to define what "work" meant. And that question was bound to come up anyway, but they were extremely nit-picky with it. The result was that there were so many Sabbath regulations that the Sabbath became a burden to people. And so the Sabbath became the exact opposite of what God intended. Remember: it's supposed to be about rest. So when the Pharisees got after the disciples for plucking grain, Jesus put them in their place. He said, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" (2:27). Or, in other words, *This is a gift; don't make them slaves to it.*

The whole point of the Sabbath is rest. And that's actually what the word means. It comes from the Hebrew verb *shabat* (שָׁבַת), which means "to rest." And the basis of the Sabbath is in the creation of the world. Actually it's based on both the creation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt. The Ten Commandments are recorded by Moses in two different places, and the reason for the Sabbath is different between them. The first place is Exodus 20. There the reason for the Sabbath command is that God created everything in six days and rested on the seventh (Ex. 20:11). And this rest of the seventh day wasn't just for God, but it was intended for all of creation. And this Sabbath rest was intended to last forever. Man was created to live eternally in God's Sabbath rest. It was only because of the fall into sin that the first Sabbath came to an end. So the Sabbath day is a reminder to us of how God intends his creation to be. And if God intends for his creation to be a certain way, then we can be sure that it will be again. So this provides a framework for the entire Bible. We can see the whole Bible as the history of God restoring the Sabbath rest that was lost in the fall. And at the center of this history is the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus' work—primarily in his death and resurrection—is the means God uses to restore his eternal Sabbath.

The other place the Ten Commandments are recorded is in Deuteronomy 5, which we read from today. There the reason for the Sabbath is the Exodus—because the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought them out (Deut. 5:15). He had proven his power and mercy to them, so now they should trust him to provide for their needs, even when they take a day off from working. So the Israelites were to keep the Sabbath both because God had created them and because he had delivered them from Egypt. And the whole point of it was *rest*.

So in the first part of the gospel lesson—the one with the disciples eating grain—Jesus teaches that the commandment is not supposed to be a burden. And in the second account Jesus demonstrates that he has come to restore perfect and eternal rest. It also hints at how he is going to do this.

It takes place in the synagogue. And there's a man there with a withered hand. So the Pharisees watch to see if Jesus would heal him. And this is kind of funny because there was no commandment against healing on the Sabbath day. All Jesus did was speak to the man. He told him to stretch out his hand, and it was restored. Not only did Jesus not break any biblical command; he didn't even break the Pharisees' extra rules. But they had it out for him anyway. They had already set themselves against Jesus, and Jesus knew this.

Jesus knew beforehand that he was going to heal the man, and he knew the Pharisees would be angry about it. So he asks them, “**Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?**” (3:4) And this is interesting. Throughout this whole lesson, the Pharisees are silent when Jesus speaks. They can't refute him. They rebuke the disciples, but then Jesus defends them. Then Jesus speaks again. Then he speaks again, and again, and again. And throughout the whole text, the Pharisees are silent until they go off and make plans to kill him.

And Jesus knew this too. He knew what they were plotting. That's why he asks, “**Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?**” The irony is just rich. Jesus uses the Sabbath day to restore this man's hand. And this is perfectly in line with the whole idea of the Sabbath. He is restoring the man's hand to the way God intended it to be. And it's a picture of Jesus' entire mission. He came to restore God's creation to the way God intended it to be. And when this is done—when everything is restored in the new creation—then the Sabbath will be perfectly restored. And it won't just be one day a week; it will be every day, because that is how God intended it. So the restoration of the man's hand is just a tiny little sample of the restoration of all things and Jesus' eternal Sabbath rest.

But while Jesus uses the Sabbath day to restore life, the Pharisees use it to plot death. And this is so ironic. Their zeal for the Sabbath commandment leads them to plot death. But, remember, death is the opposite of the whole idea of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is about life and the restoration of life to God's good creation. So their zeal for the commandment sets them at odds with the Sabbath.

But it also fits into the whole scheme of Jesus' ministry, because the one thing necessary for Jesus to do in order to restore eternal rest is to die. The fall into sin and the curse of death that came upon the creation is what brought an end to the first Sabbath rest. So in order for Jesus to restore the Sabbath rest, he must bear this curse of death and put an end to it. It's not enough to just tell the man to stretch out his hand; Jesus must also go to the cross and remove the curse of sin and death, which caused the hand to be withered in the first place. Jesus intends to die in order to restore the Sabbath rest. The Pharisees plot to kill Jesus out of zeal for the Sabbath command—a command Jesus didn't actually break. But Jesus intends this death to restore the Sabbath rest.

They hate him because he gives rest. He forgives sins, granting rest to burdened consciences. He restores wholeness to broken bodies, granting rest from the curse of death. And the death they inflict upon him will be the very thing he uses to restore the eternal Sabbath rest.

LORD OF REST (Mark 2:23-3:6)

So dear saints, your sins are forgiven, and Jesus promises you rest. He gives you rest from the burden of the Law. No longer do God's commandments condemn you, because Jesus has borne the full weight of our condemnation, he has made satisfaction for our sins, and he has freed us from the burden of the Law. Your sins are forgiven.

And Jesus promises us eternal rest from the toilsome labors of this life. At his return, the curse of sin and death will be lifted, and his forgiven saints will be set at rest in the perfect and eternal new creation. The Sabbath rest will be restored forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.