CELEBRATE THE SABBATH!
1. Not as a Pharisee
2. As a disciple of Jesus

What does worship mean to you? Is it merely a set of rules, rites and customs that need to be done a certain way in order to please God? I hope none of us would have this view of worship, but sometimes we act like this. We can worry about so many little things - like what color the altar cloths should be or what candles should be lit when, what instruments can be used in church. And we are tempted to get upset when one of these rules regarding worship is broken. These customs, however, are not rules for worship. What is more, we completely miss the beauty of these customs if we insist that they be followed slavishly. The purpose of all our worship practices is to draw attention to Christ and his work for us. But when we worry and get upset about these customs, are they really serving the purpose for which they were intended?

Let's learn from Jesus how to worship him with a proper heart. Celebrate the Sabbath - not as a Pharisee, but as a disciple of Jesus.

Our text begins: Once on a Sabbath Day, Jesus was passing through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick heads of grain as they walked along. We should not imagine that Jesus was traveling any great distance or that they were too far from any place where the disciples could buy food. They were probably no more than half a Sabbath's walk (about ¼ mile) away from the place where they were celebrating Sabbath.

Matthew tells us in his Gospel that the disciples became hungry. Even though they were close to town and could have easily waited, the disciples decided to snack on some of the ripened grain standing in the field. Jesus found nothing wrong with what they did. Old Testament law said they were allowed to eat the grain next to the pathway.

It seems as if there were some Pharisees near that grain field - a strange sight indeed considering that a Pharisee would not want to break the Sabbath by walking too far. What were these Pharisees doing? Probably watching Jesus' every move to see if he or his disciples would break the Sabbath.

Jesus was not eating any grain, but his disciples were! Ah, ha!, thought the Pharisees, Now we have him. He is their rabbi. He is responsible for their sin! And so they, pretending to be horrified, said to Jesus: Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath Day? You see, God's law clearly forbid harvesting grain on the Sabbath. That was work. And isn't that what the disciples were doing - harvesting grain as they plucked a few heads for a snack? The Pharisees thought so! That would mean that Jesus cannot be the Messiah if he allows his disciples to break the Sabbath.

But it was not the disciples who were breaking the Sabbath, it was the Pharisees! How so? Because, with their strict adherence to their misinterpretation of the law, they completely missed the purpose of the Sabbath. The word Sabbath means rest. God instituted the Sabbath in order to force his people to take a day off work so that they could relax and reflect on God's goodness - all the while being reminded of the spiritual rest the Messiah would bring.

The Pharisees, however, turned this day of rest into a day of work-righteousness. They added all sorts of petty protocols and ordinances to the Sabbath, turning this day of
rest into a day of worry: making sure you did not do this or did that, or the other thing so
you did not lose favor with God. The Pharisees were guilty of legalism - of trying to earn
righteousness before God through their own works and petty laws. And what was the
result of this legalism? They could not see their Savior – the person the Sabbath pointed
to - who was standing right in front of them.

My friends, as you celebrate the Sabbath, do not be a Pharisee. Do not focus so
much on the outward adherence of customs that you lose sight of Christ in the process.
And do not think you are standing so firm that you will not fall into this trap. The best of us
do all the time. Our sinful natures are quick to criticize. Sometimes we get bent out of
shape if the altar cloth is the wrong color, or if the altar flowers are fake instead of real.
Should our thoughts be focused on those things during worship? No, they should be
focused on Christ and his work.

And there is yet another way we are tempted to act like Pharisees. Sometimes we
are overly interested in what our fellow brothers and sisters are doing. Like the Pharisees
in our sermon text, we watch and judge others when it is not ours to judge.

Now, someone might say: Doesn't Christ command us to warn a brother who is
in danger and to call him to repentance when he sins? Absolutely, Christ commands
this.

But what Christ does not command is spying on each other, judging that as sin
which Scripture does not, and gossiping about it to others. When we do this, we are acting
exactly like the Pharisees in our text. To this the Scriptures say: Who are you to judge
someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.

May God have mercy on us for all the times we act like Pharisees - trying to
celebrate his Sabbath outwardly, but not inwardly; sinfully judging our brothers and sisters
instead of rejoicing with them in peace Christ has won for us.

Jesus masterfully responds to the charge of the Pharisees by showing them the
purpose of the law. And what is it? In a word: love, as the Scriptures say: Love is the
fulfillment of the law.

We are told: He replied to them, Have you never read what David did when he
was in need and hungry (he and his companions)? He entered the house of God in
the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the bread of the presence, which is not
lawful for anyone to eat, except for the priests. He also gave some to his
companions.

In Old Testament times, God's law required that the priest place 12 large loaves of
bread before the Lord in the tabernacle. When these loves were replaced, only the priests
were allowed to eat the old ones.

Yet, when David came to the Lord's tent hungry (although probably not starving),
the priests did not turn him away. Even though they could have insisted that God himself
forbid it, that David should seek bread elsewhere, they did not. In love they broke God's
law in order to help a fellow brother in need.

And did God condemn this action? No. and why not? Because love is the fulfillment
of the law. One commentator put it this way: God cares more for the right spiritual
condition of the heart than for the outward observance of his own ceremonial
regulations.

And so Jesus continues: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the
Sabbath. In other words, God instituted his day of rest for the benefit of man - that a
person may grow in knowledge and faith in the Lord's promises. God did not intend that the Sabbath regulation become a means of salvation by serving it slavishly. This turns the Sabbath into an idol, and that is exactly what the Pharisees were doing.

And what gave Jesus the authority to make this assessment? He says: **So the Son of Man is the Lord even of the Sabbath.**

Now, did you catch the little play on words that happened between the last 2 verses I just read? The Sabbath was made for man and Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. The term **Son of Man** is an Old Testament term for the coming Messiah. By using this term, Jesus was saying that he is the Savior, true God and true man - **born of a woman, born under law, to redeem us who are under the law.** The Sabbath was made for man, and Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath - not only in the sense that he is God and instituted the Sabbath, but in the sense that the Sabbath pointed to and is fulfilled in him.

Sabbath means rest and, through repentance and faith in Jesus, we find rest from the burden of sin and guilt. He himself says: **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.**

The writer to Hebrews says: **There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.** Our Sabbath rest is Jesus himself, who forgives our sins and offers us the eternal hope of salvation through the Gospel.

So, if Christ himself is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, how then are we to celebrate the Sabbath? That is simple: keep the Sabbath by keeping Christ. And how do we do that? By treasuring the Gospel which reveals all who Christ is and has done for us.

That is why Martin Luther explained the 3rd Commandment: **Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.** In this way: **We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy, and gladly hear and learn it.**

It is only through the Word of God that we come into contact with Christ and are able to learn from him. And this is what being a disciple of Jesus is all about: sitting at his feet and learning how he saved us from our sins, not only so that we can go to heaven when we die, but also so that we can start living to his glory now by serving him and our neighbor in love. We keep the Sabbath by being disciples of Jesus, and we can only be his disciples if we are studying the Word of God both at home and at church.

Celebrating the Sabbath means much more than merely coming to church in order to fulfill certain customs and expectations. This is how the Pharisees kept the Sabbath. No, celebrating the Sabbath means listening to Jesus in repentance and faith - learning about who he is and all he has done to save us, and learning about how we can show love to God and our neighbor in thanksgiving for it. May the Lord lead us all to see the importance of our Sabbath Savior, and keep us steadfast in his Word. Amen.

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