

<Read Text: Mark 2:23-28>.

God's word that we consider today involves a dispute over the law between Jesus and the Pharisees. The question was over the correct application of the Sabbath. You see, this was a particular sticking point for the Pharisees, as *they* were the legal experts, they were the ones people were supposed to go when they weren't sure what to do to make God happy. Anyone could become a Pharisee, but you had to do a lot of work and put in a lot of effort to be one. In doing so, you were acknowledged as being sort of "religiously superior". They were the guys who really took the law seriously, who really gave their all for the Lord and really put in the effort and study to know and understand and follow the law. Probably the closest analogy today would be the esteem in which Roman Catholics hold their monks and nuns.

Except now there was this guy Jesus. A nobody from nowhere. And now he's telling people about the law and what it means. And they're listening to *him*. What a miscarriage of justice! How unbelievably unfair! After all, what effort had he put in? And now he's getting all the attention and praise? Ridiculous. And even worse, he keeps contradicting what the laws handed down from their elders taught. So, some out of jealousy, some out of pride, some in defense of their way of life, they all tried to bring down Jesus whenever they could.

Now in our reading today, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field, and as was allowed by the law written in Leviticus, they were picking grain from the stalks and helping themselves to it as they went along. Since they were essentially homeless, and welfare offices didn't exist yet, God had provided for those in need with this stipulation; those who passed through a farmer's field were allow to take and eat what they needed as they went. But the Pharisees are upset because it was the Sabbath, the day when God commanded them to rest! You can't harvest grain on the Sabbath, that's work! They call Jesus out on this. "Oh so you know the law so well, huh? Then how come you let your disciples break the Sabbath like that?"

Naturally, they completely misunderstand what the Sabbath was about, and we'll get to that more in-depth in a bit. So to set them straight, Jesus pulls an example from the Old Testament, where the High Priest gave David and his men bread to eat that by law was only to be eaten by the priests. No one reprimanded David for this "violation" of the law, because it was the right thing to do. It fulfilled the ultimate law of God; to show love for your neighbor and consider his good above your own.

Jesus makes the point even clearer when he tells them, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**" (v27). To unpack that a little, the law of the Sabbath, like all the laws God handed down to the people, was intended to be a blessing and guide for them. It was given to protect man. Not the other way around. Man was not created to fulfill the Sabbath or any other law. Man was created and the law was given to help and protect. The Pharisees had lost sight of that. The law of God is a good thing that brings blessings.

Maybe you're a little surprised to hear me say that. We do tend to talk about the law of God in its negative sense more often, after all. And that is one of its uses. But let's not oversimplify things into thinking "Law – bad; Gospel – good". The law and gospel and ourselves have a more complicated relationship than that. When it comes to the law of God, we humans have a sort of love/hate/love relationship waltz with it. So let me explain exactly how that love/hate/love step goes.

The Pharisees were still on the first step of that waltz. They loved the law. But why did they love the law? They loved it because they loved themselves! The law was a way to stroke their own ego, it was a way to feel good about themselves. And who doesn't love that? This is, by nature, how we all feel about the law. We all like the law at first because it gives us a standard to live up to, a challenge to meet. And then when we meet that challenge, we get that rush of knowing that I'm awesome, I overcame, I did it all by myself and look at what a great person I am. Now, it doesn't always come out sounding so overtly egotistical, but this is the gist. Think of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The prayer of the Pharisee sounded very pious. "I fast twice a day and I give a tenth of all I get." Seem like noble things to do, but again, the man was pandering to his own ego.

The problem with this approach to the law and this kind of love for the law is that in order for it to succeed, it has to corrupt the law itself. The true law of God, summarized as, "Love the Lord your God above all else and love your neighbor as yourself," is incredibly vague! How am I supposed to know if I did that? How am I supposed to feel good about accomplishing that? We need to get a little more concrete, I need clearly defined tasks that I can check off my list every day. Just like the teacher of the law wanted to know, "Who is my neighbor?" so that he would know if he'd done it. Likewise our example today, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," well that was just too vague for those who wanted to know if they kept it. So, they set up thousands of sub-rules about this one. What was acceptable on the

Sabbath? What wasn't? How much work could you get away with before it was considered work? How many steps could you walk before you weren't really resting like you should?

All these things were decided by the elders and the teachers of the law, and handed out as restrictions on people so that those who did them could feel great about doing something right "for God". But both in the extra laws they came up with and in their ultimate purpose, whom were they really doing it for? Themselves. And then what about those without the strength or the willpower or the energy to carry out or to even know these thousands of additional restrictions to any one law? To them, these additions became a burden. Something, if you took them seriously, you had to watch out for every moment of every day, a constant terror that you accidentally did something wrong, forgot a stipulation, angered God without knowing it. To those who suffered under it like this, the law became something to hate. To almost be angry at God for putting such ridiculous restrictions on a person; who could possibly live up to them?

The soul that arrived at this state had actually progressed to the next stage of the waltz with the law: hate. They hated the law for the burden it placed on them. They hated the law for its unending restrictions. They hated the law for its constant accusations, constant reminder of guilt and failure. But that was the point. You see, the law given to the Israelites through Moses was unreasonable. It was too much. Even in the ten commandments we are most familiar with it made it clear that the law governed not just words and actions but even their very thoughts! These elders missed the point. They thought if they defined the laws carefully enough, it would be doable.

But again, that wasn't the point of the Law of Moses. The point of that law was to drive home further the undeniable truth that every one of us cannot live up to God's standards. Not even his simple standards that have existed before the Law of Moses and still exist long after. Not even the single standard to love the Lord your God. They couldn't make God happy with their actions. You can't make God happy with your actions. You cannot and have not kept his law. And the harder you struggle to keep it, the harder you try to please God by doing it, the further into despair you will be driven by your own failure, and the more you will hate the law for insisting on the impossible from you.

It is then that we are ready to hear that "**the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.**" (v28). It is here that the waltz of the Law is interrupted by the truth of the gospel. The good news. And after what we learn about ourselves in the law, we sure could use some good news. So here it is. Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord. He is Lord even of the Sabbath, he is Lord of all the law of God. Everything that the law demands, he fulfilled. He kept the Sabbath, just as God intended. He kept all the law, exactly as God wanted. Exactly as we ought to but haven't. And in doing so he earned us real Sabbath rest. His perfect life is counted to you. The Lord looks at your deeds in the books and sees that you have done everything right, because Jesus' record is standing in place of yours. And the guilt of all you have done wrong is paid through his sacrifice, through the blood of God shed on the cross.

This is our freedom from the law. It can no longer accuse, it can no longer harass or terrify. The law holds no power over us because Jesus, by his life and death, fulfilled the law and took its power away. Now, here comes the last step. With the threat of law removed, we can look at the law of God and for the first time see it as it really is. It is not there to make us feel strong and powerful and better about ourselves. It is also not there to burden us, to reprimand us or to terrify us. What the law is for us now as Christians is a guide. It is the manual of how to be who we really are in Christ. The old self, the one full of everything evil; that is not you. The new self, born of the word and water and Spirit; that is you. But that new self is young, it needs guidance and direction. It needs to be taught the ways to walk, and that is God's law.

This is the purpose of the law for us as Christians. Not a burden, but a guide to show us the way to live best for ourselves and our Lord. As Christians in Christ, we love the law because it is a helpful blessing to us. When we ignore the law, when we corrupt the law, we only hurt ourselves and others. When we learn, study and follow the law, we are blessed. Take the very example of our reading, the Sabbath. God gave it as a blessing. He told us to take a day of rest because as our Creator he understood our very real need for rest. He also realized the importance of taking time to worship him and be with him in his word. In the Old Testament he set a specific day that must take place on. He said, "Worship on Saturday." Today he simply instructs us to worship him, and leaves it to us to determine when that might be best.

So you see, we don't follow the law because we might get in trouble if we don't. We don't come to church to get the pastor off our backs for another week. We don't do what is right so that everyone can see how great we are. The law was given to help us, and with the threat of the law removed in Christ, we are free to live it as our guide. A guide to keep us from the most heartache and pain, to keep us safely on the narrow path as we continue our walk homeward. May the love of the Lord's sacrifice for you fill you with a love of the Lord's law for you, that you may learn and follow it every day with joy. Amen.