

JESUS IS LORD OF THE SABBATH

Luke 6:1-5

Key Verse: 6:5

Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

In the last passage Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to his guests at the wedding. The life with Jesus is joyful. This joy does not depend on our situation. It is based on our relationship with Jesus. If we have no joy, we need to come closer to Jesus through fasting and prayer. To follow Jesus as his disciples, we must be like new wineskins, willing to learn from the word of God and willing to let Jesus change our lives.

In today's passage Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees who accuse his disciples for violating the Sabbath law. Jesus turns this into an opportunity to teach that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. Let us think about what this means to us.

First, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (1-2) Look at verse 1. *"One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels."* At this time, Jesus' ministry was in its beginning stage. Jesus was full of vision to bring all sinners to God through repentance. As he went through the grainfields, he probably thought about the harvest of souls. There were so many people who needed the grace of salvation. The world was like a giant field that was ripe for harvest (Jn 4:35). For his young disciples, it was just another day to follow Jesus. Everyday, Jesus worked so hard to heal the sick and preach the good news of the kingdom of God that they scarcely had time to eat (Mk 3:20). So they were always hungry. As they followed Jesus through the grainfields, growling noise began to erupt here and there. It was coming from the disciples' stomachs. Some of them couldn't help themselves but pick some heads of grain. They rubbed them in their hands to remove the husks and ate the kernels. They might have looked like young men walking down the street, cracking open peanut shells and tossing the peanuts in their mouths.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, some Pharisees appeared. Pointing their fingers at the disciples, they said, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (2) It seemed that the Pharisees had caught the disciples in a very serious crime. What was it? At first glance, we might think it was for stealing grain from another person's field without permission. But that was not their charge. There was a specific provision in the Jewish law that allowed travelers to eat some grain in another person's field. Deuteronomy 23:25 says, "If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain." In those days, there were no fast food restaurants every two miles. Travelers had no option of stopping for burgers and fries. So the law allowed them to eat some kernels as they passed through the fields, as long as they did not use a sickle to steal a lot of grain. The Pharisees knew this very well. Then what was their charge against the disciples? It was "working" on the Sabbath day. In their opinion, by picking heads of grain, the disciples were harvesting; by

rubbing them in their hands, they were threshing; by removing the husks, they were winnowing.

Remembering the Sabbath day by keeping it holy is one of the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment specifically says, “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...” (Ex 20:9-10a). God wants his people to set aside one day of the week to come to him and have fellowship with him. God wants us to unburden ourselves from our work and worship him wholeheartedly on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees took this command to an extreme degree. To define what constituted work, they developed 39 articles with many sub-categories. For example, carrying anything heavier than two dried figs was considered work. Even today, hotels in Israel and some in the U.S. have “Shabbat elevators.” They are programmed to stop every floor so that people do not have to press the button which would violate the law. Modern day orthodox Jews are forbidden to do any cooking, laundry or kindling a fire on Sabbath. Lights that need to be on must be turned on before Sabbath. Automatic timers are allowed. But the light in the fridge must be disconnected before Sabbath so that it does not turn on when you open the door. It is interesting that the Pharisees did not enforce with the same fervor the part of the law that says we should keep the day holy and also we shall work hard for six days. They could have made many categories that defined laziness on the other six days. But they strictly enforced the law of not doing any work on the Sabbath day.

However, we must not trivialize the Pharisees’ efforts to keep the Sabbath day holy. You may say that we should worship the Lord everyday, not just on Sunday. That is true, but if you cannot keep the Sabbath day holy, what are your chances of worshipping God on other days? Once, shortly after receiving God’s Ten Commandments through Moses, an Israelite man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. The Lord said to Moses, “The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.” And they did so (Nu 15:32-36). During the time of the Maccabean revolt (2nd century B.C.), many sincere Jews were willing to sacrifice their lives to keep the Sabbath holy. When their enemies attacked them on the Sabbath, they would not fight back. They were like Eric Liddell (1902-45), a Christian athlete from Scotland and a missionary to China. He was a favorite runner to win a gold medal in the Olympic Games. But when he found out the final competition was scheduled for Sunday, he refused to run in the race. It was to keep the Lord’s Day holy. Until recently in America, shopping malls and stores were not allowed to open on Sunday mornings by state and local laws. Such efforts are disappearing fast, however.

The Pharisees’ problem was not their zeal to keep the Sabbath law. Their problem was their legalistic approach to Sabbath. God set aside one day of the week so that we may come to him to have fellowship with him and with one another. It is supposed to be a joyful day of rest, after living a busy week of hardworking. But the Pharisees turned the Sabbath into a chore with a long list of things that shouldn’t be done. Their legalistic attitude toward the blessed day robbed the people of joy. It was a tragedy. With their legalistic finger pointing, they criticized Jesus for allowing his disciples to behave badly on the Sabbath.

Second, “Have you never read what David did?” (3-4) What the Pharisees did was really offensive to Jesus. But Jesus did not dismiss them for their legalism. Instead, he appealed to them on the basis of God’s word to learn the heart of God in applying the law. Look at verses 3-4. *Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”* King David was an important person in Israel. All Jews past and present respect him. According to St Matthew, the three pillars of Israel’s history are Abraham, David and Jesus (Mt 1:1). But before he became king, David was a shepherd boy who received a lot of spiritual training. In this event Jesus is referring to, David was running for his life from King Saul who wanted to kill the young David out of his jealousy. In that desperate situation, David went into the house of God in Nob (1Sa 21:1-6). To David, the Lord was his Shepherd (Ps 23:1). He came to God in times of trouble and distress. Ahimelech the priest gave David the consecrated bread which was lawful only for priests to eat. Taking the consecrated bread was literally a violation of ceremonial law. But David took the bread for his starving men and for himself. He did so believing that God is a God of mercy and compassion. Jesus cited this precedence, not to negate the law, but to teach them that the law must be practiced with God’s compassion. Observing the law to the letter without knowing God’s love and compassion is like taking shower everyday while the heart is full of dirty thoughts.

In the Bible, David is called a man after God’s own heart (Ac 13:22). This is said of no one else in the Bible. To really know someone we must know what is in his heart. If we only hear the words he says and do not discern what is in his heart we cannot say that we really know him. The Pharisees claimed to be experts in the law based on their Bible knowledge. But they did not know God personally and they did not discern what was in God’s heart. This is why Jesus told them that although they studied the Scriptures diligently, they missed the point. They refused to come to Jesus for salvation even though the Bible testifies about Jesus the Messiah (Jn 5:39-40). On the other hand, David knew God personally. To David, God was his Shepherd. David believed that God loves his people one by one and wants to lead us to green pasture if we let him. Of course, included in this divine love is God’s spiritual discipline, with which David was quite familiar. David deeply recognized God’s sovereignty in his life. He knew that God held his life in the palm of his hand. When David believed God’s absolute sovereignty and lived for God’s holy purpose every day, he was free from legalism. He also became a shepherd for others’ souls, after God’s own heart. He is known as the shadow of Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” When we practice the law of God, we must know the shepherd’s heart of Jesus; we must know the heart of God.

As we discuss the problem of the Pharisees’ legalism, there is one point we need to make clear, that is, we should not confuse obedience with legalism. A Bible teacher telling his student to keep the Sabbath day holy, for example, is not legalism. Jesus kept the Sabbath day holy, in obedience to God’s words. And he told us to obey the word of God. We should encourage one another to obey the word of God so that we are built up in Christ. So what is legalism? One distinctive mark of legalists is their self-righteousness and pride. They would say, “We keep these rules and regulations and you

don't. So we are better than you." Another mark of legalists is that their emphasis is on human traditions and human interpretations of the Scriptures rather than on how to build up a person in Christ. The Pharisees' question was about the disciples' outward actions. It was not about their love for God or for other people. Legalism does not honor God because it is focused on outward performance rather than inward change. We should ask God to help us not to become legalistic which is easy to do. I really like what Mother Barry said about this: "We should be legalistic toward ourselves and be gracious toward others." The Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples not because they cared about their spiritual growth. They did so to bring down Jesus whom they were jealous of (7). Their hearts were hardened.

Third, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (5). Jesus taught the Pharisees to practice the law with the compassion of God using David as an example. And just as they were about to say to him, "Who are you, comparing yourself to our great ancestor, King David?" Jesus told them an even more important truth. Let's read verse 5. *Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."* When Jesus said, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," he declared to them his true identity. Jesus is the Son of Man, a title reserved for the Messiah by the Prophet Daniel (Da 7:13-14). This means that Jesus is the Messiah who came to fulfill all of God's promises. Jesus is the Son of God who came down to this world to save us from our sin and death. Then how is Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath? Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath because he is the Creator God who created the universe in the beginning, and designated the 7th day as the Sabbath. John 1:3 says, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Jesus is the one who created the Sabbath. So Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. What does this mean to us? It means that Jesus must be the focus of the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, we must honor and worship Jesus, the Creator God. Jesus must be the focal point of the Sabbath. We must actively worship Jesus on the Sabbath. Lying down on your bed, doing nothing or entertaining sinful thoughts, is not the way to keep the Sabbath holy. Jesus himself honored his Father God on the Sabbath. He worked hard to heal the sick for the glory of God. Because of that, he was persecuted, but he did not mind. He only wanted to please his Father in heaven. He said in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

Jesus came to fulfill the true meaning of the Sabbath, which is to help all people to worship God and find true rest for their souls. To do this, Jesus became the Lamb of God who shed his blood on the cross. All people are restless because of their sins. But Jesus shed his precious blood on the cross to set us free from our sin and death. We don't have to be restless wanderers on earth. We can find true peace and rest for our souls when we are in Christ Jesus. Jesus gives this promise in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."

In today's passage, Jesus declares that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. Our Sunday worship must be more than just routine weekly activity. We must remember and worship Jesus on the Sabbath in spirit and in truth. Jesus must be the center of our thoughts and actions. May God help us to honor and glorify Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath!