

The Proper Observance of Sunday.

Text: Matt 12:1-8

Suggested Hymns:

501, 183, 500, 503, 511

1) How the Lord's day came into being.

2) The Pharisees misunderstood the Sabbath

3) The proper observance of Sunday

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 12:1-8 ¹ *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!"*

³ *But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ "how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ "Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?*

⁶ *"Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. ⁷ "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The text for today and this morning's gospel lesson both teach us about the Sabbath Day.

People have asked many questions regarding the proper observance of Sunday. Is it right or wrong to work on Sunday? Is it permissible to go to the movies or to go to a beach party? How about the opening of shops on Sundays? How about something like weeding the garden at home? Would the Bible sanction a farmer's harvesting a crop on the Lord's Day? Do any of the Old

Testament Sabbath day restrictions apply to our New Testament observance of Sunday?

Since we all want to do the will of God let us investigate this subject in the light of God's Word and come to a definite understanding of what is the proper and profitable observance of the Lord's Day. May God the Holy Spirit give us His blessing through His Word.

1. How And Why The Lord's Day Came Into Being

It will be particularly helpful to us to consider first of all how and why our Lord's Day came into being for the church. For us the Lord's Day is Sunday. Originally, in the Old Testament era, the Sabbath, or Saturday, was designated as the day of the week sacred to the Lord and to be sanctified in a God-appointed way by the people of Israel.

The Third Commandment is given in Exodus 20:8-11, ⁸ *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.* ⁹ *Six days you shall labor and do all your work,* ¹⁰ *but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.* ¹¹ *For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.* Severe punishments were dealt out to the Jews who engaged in unnecessary work on the Sabbath.

Why did God give this Sabbath Commandment to Israel? Was it simply to compel the people to rest in order to keep their bodies from wearing out prematurely? This may have been one divine purpose, but there was a far more important one.

Countless passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament make it clear that the Sabbath Commandment was given primarily to give the people an opportunity to attend to their spiritual needs. We read in Luther's Small Catechism, *We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.*

The people were to gather for worship on the Sabbath. Besides hearing the sacred Law read and expounded, they were to have the opportunity to worship

God and also to nourish their souls on the Bread and Water of life as presented in the Gospel.

For the Old Testament church the Gospel consisted primarily in the assurance that God would one day send the people a Messiah, the Son of God Himself, who would redeem them, and indeed all others, too, from ruin through His bitter sufferings and death.

God, had made this clear when He prophesied of the coming Messiah in Isaiah 53:4-5 *4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.*

The faith which grasped the Old Testament Messianic Gospel promises, saved the believing Israelites, just as our faith in Christ, who has come and poured out His lifeblood for us on the cross, has cleansed us from all sin, and has given us life and salvation.

It is not that the people couldn't think of the wonderful truths of God's Word throughout the other six days of the week, of course they could, and in fact, they were told to do so by their preachers. But on the Sabbath day they were given a special time for prolonged undisturbed meditation. They were given formal instruction in the Scriptures and worshipped their glorious God. They were also to transform their spiritual understanding of God's Will into works of love performed for the benefit of family, friends, and neighbours. The Sabbath, then, had been established by God chiefly for the spiritual refreshment and strengthening of His people. The observance of this holy day is to be a high point in each week's activity, a joyous occasion to which we should eagerly look forward.

2. The Pharisees Misunderstood The Sabbath.

However, this fundamental purpose underlying the Sabbath regulations was not understood as it should have been by all the Jewish people. A case in point is presented in our text. Sad to say, the Pharisees of Christ's day, did not appreciate the basic divine intent concerning the Sabbath and Sabbath Laws and were, as a consequence, lacking the true spirit of Sabbath observance.

At that time, says our text, Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. Some of the Pharisees hoped to find something that Jesus would do or say for grounds on which to incriminate Him. Therefore they immediately seized upon this act of the disciples and complained to Jesus, ***“Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!”*** Note that Jesus Himself had not taken any of the ears of grain.

In order to understand the disciples’ action and also the Pharisees’ immediate condemnation we need to know what Scripture says. We read in Deuteronomy 23:25 ²⁵ ***“When you come into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor’s standing grain.*** This means that it was perfectly permissible for the disciples to take of a farmer’s grain growing in the field for the satisfaction of their hunger.

However, the Pharisees regarded this plucking of grain from the field as a type of labour forbidden by the Sabbath ordinance. The fact of the matter is that in formulating this judgment the Pharisees were totally guided by the regulations of the rabbis which had been developed as religious laws. These man made laws were additional to and going far beyond the Law of God. The disciples’ action was nowhere forbidden in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Jesus exposed His enemies’ basic misconceptions concerning the Sabbath ordinances. He showed what these ordinances actually forbade, what they actually required, and for what purpose. ***He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ “how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?*** Jesus refers to 1 Samuel 21, which contains the account of David’s violation of an ordinance of the Ceremonial Law, at the time when he and his companions were fleeing for their lives from King Saul.

Being hungry upon arrival in the town of Nob in the territory of Benjamin, he asked the priest Abimelech to let him and his party have as food the loaves of showbread which the priests had recently removed from the display table in the tabernacle. This bread was, according to Levitical ordinance, to be eaten by the

priests only. However, because of David's plea Abimelech consented to David's request.

Would any of the Pharisees dare criticise the act of David whom they held in such high regard? They certainly would not and nor did Jesus find fault.

The fundamental principle of God's Will that Jesus shows us in this account is simply this: The regulations of the Ceremonial Law, which God had given as an aid to His Moral Law for the special training and education of the Israelite nation, were not to be absolutely binding upon the people. When human life and well-being, both physical and spiritual, demanded it, the requirements of the Ceremonial Law were always to yield to those of a higher law, the law of love, which is the epitome of the Moral Law. Love compels the child of God under all circumstances to provide for the real needs of a neighbour to the limit of his capability. And this is exactly what Jesus did in today's Gospel lesson in which Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath day.

Another example is the duties of the Levitical priests. Through Moses the Lord had given these instruction to the priests as we read in Numbers 28:9-10, *'And on the Sabbath day two lambs in their first year, without blemish, and two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour as a grain offering, mixed with oil, with its drink offering --* ¹⁰ *'this is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering with its drink offering.*

First of all, to bring these sacrifices to the temple on the Sabbath day involved considerable work for the Israelite worshippers. Then the priests were required by divine mandate, on the Sabbath day itself, to offer the sacrifices presented at the Lord's altar. This business of sacrificing involved strenuous activity. They had to slaughter, dismember and burn the sacrificial animals and then dispose of their remains.

Would the Pharisees dare criticise the priests who done these duties? Jesus reminds His opponents that in this temple service the priests were *blameless* before God. Here, in understanding what is a permissible Sabbath day activity, Scripture clearly interprets Scripture.

From these examples we can see that the spiritual good of the people is always of paramount importance to God. What was in their spiritual interest was finally to determine what might or might not be done also on the Sabbath. The

Sabbath ordinance was not to be the absolute. The higher law of love was, and under given circumstances might require that the Sabbath restrictions be set aside.

Now Jesus, who is *Lord even of the Sabbath*¹, makes a fully authoritative pronouncement on the act of the disciples, for the benefit of the Pharisees. The disciples have broken no divinely established law and they are altogether without blame.

If the Pharisees had only known their Scriptures better. If they had only realised how greatly the Lord God of Israel delighted in His people's showing love and mercy toward one another as opportunities presented themselves, they would never have made the criticism about the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath.

The Israelites received rich blessings through observing the Sabbath generation after generation down to the time of Christ. With the coming of Jesus and the completion of His redemptive work, however, God abolished the Ceremonial Law for the people of His church.

3. The Proper Observance Of Sunday

The early Christians selected Sunday for their day of worship. Sunday was selected because it was the day on which Christ rose from the dead. It was also Sunday on which He poured out His Spirit on Pentecost. To this day Sunday has been set aside as the Lord's Day by followers of the Saviour everywhere.

Let us consider what the proper and profitable observance of the Lord's Day in New Testament times is. We can do this by looking at the similarities and differences in the Christian celebration of Sunday and the Old Testament Jewish celebration of the Sabbath.

First, the differences. With the Sabbath Commandment abolished for New Testament Christendom, there is no specific day of worship prescribed for the church. Likewise the external Sabbath day restrictions imposed upon Israel do not have any binding force for New Testament Christian people.

Second, the similarities. The basic principles which underlie the divine establishment of the Old Testament Sabbath, and the Israelites' observance of these, continue to govern Christian Sunday observance in the New Testament era. These are:

(1) The ultimate purpose of Sunday observance is to provide God's people with a special opportunity for the nourishment of their spiritual needs, through divine worship.

(2) God's Word and the law of Christian love are to determine the suitability of all other Sunday activities as well as activities throughout the remaining days of the week.

Therefore the essential element of a proper observance of the Lord's Day today is participation in public, congregational worship. The Third Commandment requires that God's people sanctify the holy day by taking time out to assemble for worship. This clearly applies to the New Testament church as written in the book of Hebrews, ²³ *Let us hold fast the confession ... not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some.*²

Let us consider some of the benefits of regular participation in Sunday worship.

(1) The good conscience that comes with the knowledge of having obeyed the will of God.

(2) The growing understanding of the divine Word, as the result of listening to the Word of God being expounded in the sermon.

(3) The increase of the Holy Spirit's activity in, and operation through us, because the Holy Spirit works through the Word and Sacraments.

(4) The privilege of receiving the soul-strengthening Sacrament of Holy Communion.

(5) The opportunity to help in bringing the Gospel to every creature. This is the duty of all Christians and is carried out through the presentation of our offerings and prayers for missionary work throughout the world.

(6) The encouragement to consistent, Christian living that comes through fellowship with the people of God in His house.

(7) Putting God first in life, by seeking first His kingdom and righteousness, as we do by participating faithfully in public worship.

Thus it can easily be seen that the proper observance of Sunday essentially includes participation in the public Worship of the Lord.

Let us now consider a number of questions relating to the Christian observance of Sunday.

In the light of studying the Word of God, these should not be difficult to answer now. Is it wrong to work on Sunday? No, some people have to, and this for the benefit of others. For instance, the pastor, organist, usher etc. all work at church on Sunday mornings. Medical personnel in hospitals, workers in certain essential industries, chemists, service stations, and the farmer with a field of grain that must be harvested before an impending storm, and so on.

However, all of God's people who must work regularly or occasionally on Sunday ought to make sure that they do not keep away from weekly public worship and deprive themselves of its benefits. The opening of more and more shops on Sunday for purposes of non-essential commercial trade is hardly a wholesome trend on the Australian scene. An increasing number of store and sales personnel are in this way being deprived of the opportunity to attend divine worship.

On the other hand, the practice of refraining from hard physical or mental work on Sundays, when this is possible, has much to commend it. Such periods of rest allow our bodies and minds the much-needed recuperation and refreshment to cope with the following week. There is a saying that goes "*All work and no rest, Makes wrecks of the best.*"³

Our study also answers our questions about recreation on Sundays. We note from our text that after Sabbath worship Jesus and His disciples were out walking in the fields and, no doubt, enjoying nature all about them. As long as worship comes first, it may be generally stated that any recreational activity not inherently sinful and not giving offence to others may be engaged in, to the glory of God.

Sunday is a fine time for families to be together and to do things together. To visit friends or to call on the sick, the shut-ins and the underprivileged in the congregation or community. We should put into practice some of the good works which have been preached from the pulpit and to engage in acts of love and mercy, as our the Lord Jesus had done in this morning's Gospel lesson healing the man who had dropsy.

The mind, heart, and conscience enlightened by the faithful hearing of God's Word on Sunday mornings will have little difficulty in determining what constitutes proper and profitable observance of the Lord's Day.

Therefore let us now praise the Lord, the Almighty in heaven, for the gifts of Sunday, the congregation, the pastor and especially God's soul-strengthening Word and Sacrament. With joyful hearts let us be in the house of God on the Lord's Day and live out our years on earth in the love of Christ and to the glory of God until, through our Saviour's merits, we enter the eternal Sabbath rest of heaven. May God grant this to each one of us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matt 12:8

² Heb 10:23-25

³ Thine forever, p41