

Our Appointment With God, And The Way It Is To Be Kept.

Text: Mat 12:1-8

1) Not in the observance of a mere ritual

Suggested Hymns:

2) In the Spirit of Christ

507, 189, 502, 503, 506

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,

In Genesis 2:2-3 we read, ² *And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.* ³ *Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.*

After this very early mention of the "day of rest" in Holy Scripture we find no direct reference to the Sabbath day, although many centuries passed, until the giving of the Ten Commandments. After this the history of the Sabbath becomes chequered, much like the history of the people to whom it was committed.

Then Christ came to earth and hallowed and sanctified the day, and it appears on the pages of Scripture as a “day to be remembered.” Then in another brief but joyful event, when Christ’s resurrection gave the signal, the day was observed on the first day of the week instead of the seventh.

In about A. D. 300 Emperor Constantine made it the legal holiday for his vast kingdom, and all the world accepted the pattern.

Today our Sunday Sabbath is a day which is flagrantly misused and abused by the world, and also much misunderstood even by many Christians. Therefore, on the basis of the incident in the life of Jesus and His disciples recorded in our text, let us consider *“Our Appointment with God, and the Way It Is to Be Kept.”* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Our Appointment With God On Sunday Is Not To Be The Observance Of A Mere Ritual

We cannot state definitely when misunderstandings concerning the observance of the Sabbath began. It is sufficient to say that it occurred when the noose of church legalism began to choke off the spirit of Christian freedom. We know that legalists made a very early appearance in the Church Militant. That is when confusion concerning the observance of the Sabbath began.

The rabbis of our Lord’s time turned the Sabbath into a matter of mere externalism. They converted it from a day of rest and joy into an unbearable burden caused by endless man-made-laws of what constituted work.

One of the rules imposed upon the people was that they were not to travel more than 900 metres on the Sabbath. This and countless other external observances were preserved in the Christian tradition for many centuries.

In later centuries one Sabbath rule required a woman to have no bow on her dress unless it was sewn on and therefore a part of the dress. If this was not done it would be considered work because she would be carrying a bow.

When we examine the Scriptures carefully, we find that six times, either directly or through His disciples, our “Lord was accused with Sabbath-breaking. One of the occasions we find in our text.

After our Lord had, in a miraculous manner, restored health to the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda, the Pharisees, His sworn enemies, conspired to do away

with Him. From that time on they kept constant surveillance and dogged His steps and those of His disciples night and day with the hope that they might catch Him in some violation of ritual or Jewish law.

Their continuous malicious vigilance paid off, they thought, when on a Sabbath day the Lord was journeying through a field of grain with His disciples on the way to the synagogue. In their hunger the disciples plucked some of the grain by the wayside, which was entirely permissible according to the Law of Moses. They rubbed it in the palms of their hands to remove the chaff, and ate it.

Immediately the Pharisees accused the disciples of violating the Sabbath. They contended that the plucking was, in kind, the same as reaping, and the rubbing of the grain in the hands the same as threshing, and therefore constituted work, which, in turn, was a direct violation of the Sabbath laws.

Our Lord immediately rises to the defence of His disciples by citing two cases where supposed Sabbath violations had taken place. First, He refers them to an incident in the life of their favourite national hero, David, and then He refers them to the work that is done by the priests in the Temple on the Sabbath day.

When David fled before the wrath of Saul and was in need and hungry, he came to the sanctuary of God at Nob, where Abiathar, with the sanction of Ahimelech, the priest, supplied him with show-bread, which it was not lawful for him to eat, but for the priests only. The case of David was an emergency. The Lord regarded also the case of His disciples as an emergency.

Now, if David, their national hero and saint, had thus violated the letter of the Law and yet had been held blameless on the plea of its having been a necessity, why should the disciples be blamed for the harmless act of appeasing their hunger?

The second argument the Lord presented in defence of His disciples refers to the discharge of priestly duties on the Sabbath day. The priests and Levites had to procure wood, light fires, place hot, fresh-baked show-bread on the tables, kill the animals for sacrifice, and perform various other duties, and certainly this constituted work.

If they were held blameless, should not the servants of the Lord of the Temple be held blameless? Jesus concludes the defence of His disciples by referring to prophecy¹ and stating, *‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’* And Jesus terminates the entire incident by saying, *“For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”*

The clear statement to the Pharisees indicated that when ceremonial laws stand in the way, they are to be overruled by higher considerations and by acts of love and mercy. In parallel passages in the Gospel according to St. Mark, the Lord states that *“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”*²

2. Observe The Sabbath In The Spirit Of Christ

Knowing, then, that the Sabbath day is not a burden placed upon us for the exercising of an external ritual, but rather a day of joy and rest, in which we are to perform acts of love and mercy, and that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath day, how are we to keep this Sabbath-day appointment with God?

The pace at which we live today and the whole tenor of our modern society tend to make people think that work, or business, or pleasure is all there is in life. Such a tendency is rebuked and checked by the proper observance of the Sabbath day.

Every Lord’s Day should say to us, *“You are not merely a machine; you are a man. You are not in this world only to manufacture material articles and accumulate money. You are here to serve your fellow man, to educate yourself in all that is good, to know God, and through Christ become prepared for the inheritance of the saints in light.”*

Macaulay wrote of the Sabbath day, *“That day is not lost while industry is suspended, while the plough lies in the furrow, while no smoke ascends from the factory.*

A process is going on quite as important to the wealth of the nation as any process that is performing on more busy days. Man, the machine of machines, is repairing and winding up so that he returns to his labour on Monday with clearer intellect, with livelier spirit, and with renewed bodily vigour.”

We observe the Sabbath properly only when we do it in the spirit of Christ. This does not mean keeping it for its own sake, as an ordinance valuable in itself. It does not mean obeying the letter of the Law to the neglect of the spirit; but it does mean drawing as close to our Lord and Saviour as possible through the medium and privilege of worship.

In meditation, in faith in the Unseen, in prayer, in praise, and in the natural conditions of the growth of Christian love which we find in the Lord's house, we have the best opportunities of observing the Sabbath in a God-pleasing way.

Luther often calls attention to the fact that hearing the Word of God on Sunday is of prime importance. He wrote, *My friends, in order properly to sanctify and celebrate the holy day to the praise of God, we want to preach and proclaim His dear Word.*

For He has instituted the Sabbath so that both we who preach and you who hear should use His Word. Thereby we accord God the highest praise, and this is also the greatest service we are able to render God.

And, on the other hand, nothing more irksomely pains the devil than the teaching and the using of God's Word; and if we want to inflict the most severe injury on him, then we should diligently hear God's Word.

*Besides, we surely need to strengthen ourselves with the Word of God so that we do not drown altogether in worldly cares but warm ourselves at the sermon and await another life after this one. Otherwise, when one by-passes God's Word, one forgets yonder life and scrapes and scratches here below as though one had nothing else to do.*³

Again Luther writes, that a sincere Christian sanctifies every day. *Every day should be a "Sabbath" for us Christians; for we should hear God's Word every day and should lead our lives in accordance with it.*

*At the same time Sunday has been arranged for the common people, so that everyone may on that day in particular hear and learn God's Word and live in accordance with it. For during the other days of the week the common man must tend to his work and earn a living.*⁴

With these thoughts in mind we should all realise that for six days of the week every one of us finds himself in a different place, in different thoughts, in

different types of work, with different attitudes, and with different aspirations. Every one of us has differences in character, age, position, and necessity imposed upon us by a complex world.

But Sunday can be and is to be different to the true Christian. On this one day, one place, seems to hold all, irrespective of how different they may have been during the week. One God and Father attracts us all. One Saviour's love meets us all. One Holy Spirit's energy draws, enlightens, and sanctifies us all.

On the Lord's Day, if properly observed, in the Lord's house, we assemble with one thought, one hope, we seek one heaven, we sing, as it were, one grand hymn, as one we bow down before the unseen presence of our Saviour. The wholesome and salutary effect that such an observance of the Sabbath has upon the spiritual life of a Christian is really beyond our estimation.

The wholesome and life-giving influence of the Holy Spirit that is exercised upon the Christian when he is found in God's house, on God's day, worshipping with God's people, and as the Psalmist says, *"I will lift up my eyes to the hills -- From whence comes my help?"* is illustrated in this little story.

A certain man had been very active in the work of his church. One day something happened in the administration of the congregation that he did not like. He stayed at home on Sunday. He did not attend church. This went on for several weeks.

One evening the pastor came to see him. The man received the pastor into his home and took him over by the fireplace, in which a warm fire was glowing. They sat down in chairs. Neither said a word. They just looked at the fire. The pastor knew the man was waiting for him to say something. After many minutes of silence the pastor picked up the fire tongs. He reached into the fire and picked out a piece of coal that was burning brightly. Then he laid it on the hearth all by itself. He put down the tongs and sat back in the chair. Still neither man said a word.

Both watched that coal. In the fire with the other coals it had burned brightly. Alone on the hearth its glow gradually faded. After a while its fire died out completely. Still neither man said a word. Finally the man could stand it no longer. He looked at the pastor and said, *"I will be there next Sunday."*

Yes, it should be quite apparent to all of us that without the strengthening warmth of our fellow worshipers, without the healing glow of the Gospel, and without the enlightening fire of the Holy Spirit, we would all soon become cold, dead, and Christians in name only.

The mightiest impact that the Sabbath day can make in the life of the Christian is made when that day is observed as a most grateful memorial of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The crowning fact of Christianity is the Resurrection.

The Resurrection is the guarantee of everything that the Christian hopes for, namely, a life of blissful eternity with his Saviour. And each Lord's Day is, in a way, a little Easter Day, reminding us of these glorious truths.

Let us conclude with the words of the hymnist,⁵

This is the day the Lord hath made:
He calls the hours His own;
Let heav'n rejoice, let earth be glad,
And praise surround the throne. Amen.

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

¹ Hosea 6:6

² Mark 2:27

³ E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1991, No. 4275

⁴ E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1991, No. 4277

⁵ Hymn 502