

Our worship theme highlights a foreign concept. Rest is something *given*? In nearly all aspects of life, rest is something *earned*. That's the way the world works. Work hard, put in your 40, 50, or 60 hours—the weekend is yours. You've earned it. *Rest*.

It's so easy to forget—that's not how God works. That's not how we obtain spiritual rest—rest from guilt, from worry, from shame, and hopelessness. In fact, the harder we work to gain even the smallest sliver of spiritual rest, the more exhausted, weary, and burdened we become. All of our work will never be enough. And the devil takes those attempts and whispers accusations. *Be better. Try harder. You call yourself a Christian? Christians don't do what you keep doing. You don't deserve to rest.*

Dear Christians, *listen*. Listen to our Savior's words. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest*. Let those words from our Savior live in your hearts and minds. *He gives us rest through faith in him*.

That was the whole point of the Sabbath. God wanted his people to *rest* and *remember*. Rest from their labors and remember that when they were slaves in Egypt, God rescued them. He delivered them with his mighty hand and outstretched arm. How would they remember? *By spending time in worship*. By hearing of God's great mercy and love. By hearing his promises of life and salvation to his people through the promised Messiah.

God wanted his people to focus on and remember his wondrous acts of love and mercy each Sabbath day. And while the Sabbath is no longer something we observe as Christians because Jesus has fulfilled the law for us, God still wants us to gather together—to rest and remember.

What a different understanding of the Sabbath our Gospel Reading reveals! We see the religious leaders—the teachers and experts of the law—so focused on fulfilling the letter of the law, that

they completely miss its *purpose*, why God gave the law. Because they didn't understand the law's purpose, they certainly didn't see the one who came to *fulfill* it.

Well, that's not exactly true. The Pharisees saw Jesus. They saw him and his disciples walking along the road through the grainfields. Then they saw Jesus' disciples pick heads of grain and eat while they walked—and Jesus did nothing to stop them! And so, the Pharisees called him out on this blatant transgression. “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” On any other day, what Jesus' disciples were doing wouldn't even be worth mentioning. No one would blink—not even the owner of the fields, because God instructed his people to leave the edges of their fields for those who were hungry and in need, as a way of showing love to their neighbor. The *transgression* was that the disciples were doing this on the Sabbath. God made it clear—no work was to be done on the Sabbath.

What counted as work? Well... God didn't exactly elaborate on the definition in the Third Commandment, so over the years, the religious leaders decided they'd help fill in the gaps where God's commands were lacking. They came up with 39 things that counted as work and, according to their tradition, were unlawful on the Sabbath. One of those was harvesting, which was *technically* what the disciples were doing.

Why all this fuss over a few kernels of wheat? It seems so... trivial. But we have to remember—the Pharisees were fixated on keeping God's law to the letter. And, in many cases, by going above and beyond what the letter of the law said. They thought that by doing so, they could earn God's favor. They could earn spiritual rest for themselves.

But that was never God's purpose for giving the law, never the point of the Sabbath. It was meant to highlight God's love and mercy to his people. It was meant to point ahead to Christ, as Paul wrote in Colossians, that the Sabbath and other festivals foreshadowed the reality—the rest

found in Christ. The spiritual rest which *is* Christ, who fulfilled the law perfectly for us—because we never could.

That’s what Jesus tried to show the Pharisees. “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest (which was when David was fleeing for his life from King Saul), David entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

Abiathar had to make a choice. On the one hand, according to the letter of the law, the consecrated bread was only lawful for the priests to eat, but that was all he had to offer David and his companions—and they were hungry and in need. So he gave it to them, because he realized what the Pharisees should have known all along: the letter of the law does not trump the purpose for which it was established. As Jesus further explained to the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

God established the Sabbath for the good of his people because he loved them. How would letting someone starve to death on the Sabbath, or any other day, highlight God’s mercy and love? As Jesus told the Pharisees in Matthew’s record of this account, “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Jesus was trying to show the Pharisees that they had it all wrong. He wanted them to turn from their exhausting, impossible pursuit of self-earned righteousness. *Come to me! I will give you rest.* But the Pharisees continued holding on to their robes of self-righteousness with a white-knuckled grip.

On another Sabbath day, we even see them go so far as to watch Jesus closely when he entered the synagogue because there was a man with a shriveled hand there. The Pharisees were looking for a reason to accuse him—they couldn't care less that this poor man was in need of mercy and love, all they cared about was seeing if they could accuse Jesus of healing on the Sabbath!

Jesus knew their hearts. And he reached out to them all the same. *Trying to make them see.* “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” In Matthew's record, Jesus drove his point home even further. “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!”

But the Pharisees remained silent. The religious leaders of God's people were unable to let go of how they viewed God's law—their mistaken belief that they could earn salvation by following the law. Mark tells us that the stubbornness of their hearts deeply distressed Jesus. They couldn't see that they weren't following God's law at all! Jesus came to save them—he came to give them rest. But they didn't want it from him.

For Jesus, he knew what was lawful in God's eyes. It was no question at all. “Stretch out your hand,” he told the man. He stretched it out, and his hand was completely healed. Jesus chose to show love to his neighbor. He chose to save. Because the Sabbath was a day for rest—yes—but also to remember God's mercy and love, and to look ahead to what he promised to do with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He would save his people—he would save *us*—from sin freely out of his undeserved mercy and love.

The Pharisees completely missed that beautiful, free invitation. They didn't see the Lord of the Sabbath, come to save them from their sins. They saw a threat to their way of earning

salvation. And so, they plotted with the Herodians—their political rivals—how they might kill Jesus.

Let's take a step back for a moment, because Mark packed a lot of Jewish culture and tradition into these two, short Sabbath day accounts. In some ways, Jesus' day and age was very different from ours. In other ways, not so different at all.

We can lose sight of our Savior, too, can't we? We can get so wrapped up in all the things that we do as Christians—for God and for our neighbor—that we miss out on the joy and the rest that are already ours because of Jesus.

Life is exhausting enough as is—and we desperately need spiritual rest from our sins, guilt, and shame—but so often, our understanding of rest gets warped with the worldly view of rest being earned, that we fall for a trap similar to the Pharisees!

We might not think we can earn salvation for ourselves, but how about this: *I'll feel more at peace when I'm a better son, a better daughter, brother, sister, mother, father, employee—a better Christian—I just have to try harder. I just have to work harder...* Those exhausting thoughts might be more familiar, and the list of things we can do better never gets any shorter because we inevitably fail time and again to be better. We're sinful. We need a Savior.

When we fall into that mindset, dear Christians, we put the focus on ourselves instead of on where it needs to be. We lose sight of what our loving and gracious God has done and is doing for us, right here and now! *Fix your eyes on Jesus. Listen to him.*

Listen to the one who says to you in his Word and Sacraments: “Come to me! I see that you are weary and burdened. I see sin's crushing weight, life's sorrows, and the guilt and shame you can't get rid of. Come to me. Listen to my Word. Hear what I have done for you. Look to the Baptismal font and remember—there I washed you and made you my dearly loved child. You are

mine! Look to the cross—remember the victory I won for you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. I have taken away your guilt and shame—they are gone. I have freed you from slavery to sin—there’s nothing you need to do to earn my love. *It’s yours.* Come to my Supper—taste the bread, it is my body, given for you, drink the wine, it is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins. You have peace with God, now and forever. You have peace because of *me*. So come to me. I will give you rest.”

So, dear Christians—today, just... *rest*. Here in our Father’s house. That’s why it’s here, for you and me. Put down your burdens. Lay them at your Savior’s feet and know that he holds you in his loving arms. Rest and remember what Jesus has done for you, the rest that he has graciously, lovingly, given to you. Amen.