

“Sabbath Keeping”

Salado UMC—3 June 2018: Second after Pentecost

Communion Sunday

Preaching Text: Mark 2:23—3:6—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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**“Be not so bigoted to any custom as to worship it
at the expense of truth”**—(Johann Georg von Zimmermann).

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We often wish that our society’s laws would be clearer cut. In legal matters as in life matters we want simplicity. But alas, there is always fine print in the law. Steadily, it seems fine print dominates more space. Oddly enough, fine print is intended to do away with interpretation. Yet, the finer the print, the more explanation is required.

We all remember when we signed legal papers. We also knew it was a good thing we trusted those who handed us the papers to sign. Truly, we were too often clueless about the document’s content. Surely, we had a rough understanding of the agreement terms. Yet again, we did not have every “jot and tittle” completely under control. Thus, today’s lesson matter consists of that which some Christians tell other Christians what they can/cannot believe to be a “true believer.” Hear our lesson:

23 One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” 25 And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26 He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” 27 Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. 2 They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” 4 Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. 5 He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him (Mark 2:23-3:6—NRSV).

The Pharisees in Mark are a foil against whom Jesus debates. In most literature, a foil is a character (or group of characters) who contrast their viewpoint to another character. We see this scenario in the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Using the Pharisees as a foil our lesson offers an opportunity to get a little closer to what Mark’s Jesus means when he uses the phrase “kingdom of God.”

Most things we read, have a character foil. Since the foil's values differ, so then do her/his main purpose(s). Mark's purpose contrasts the Pharisees and Jesus. We could even call Jesus something of a contrarian—a person who deliberately takes an opposing position, forcing others to consider a deeper truth. Gandhi, Dr. King, Mark Twain, Steve Jobs, Warren Buffet, and Socrates were/are all classic “contrarians.” Think of all the times that Jesus goes against conventional wisdom. He says things like: “But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God” or “But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer,” or “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:34, 39, 44). May we be clear that Mark uses the Pharisees as a foil or a prop in order to make a theological point. They are we might say “rhetorical strawmen,” in other words.

To be clear, the Pharisees were a Jewish party who were stringent and pious. They operated as something of a politically aware interest group. One of the things they were most interested in was to bring a greater degree of observance to the Jewish ritual law which had declined in this time of Israel's history. Although not strictly part of the ruling class, they tried to influence the Jewish authorities in matters of ritual purity. The Pharisees performed as a voluntary lay movement. They chiefly wanted to maintain purity in the Hebrew observance of Judaism.

Thus, the Pharisees that Mark writes about are probably not representative of the Pharisaic Jews of the first century. For this reason, we put on our interpretive eyeglasses to figure out what Mark—using Jesus—is up to.

Although not completely objective, Mark depicts the Pharisees as the religious elite. As such they bring to bear what we might call part of the “domination system.” As Walter Wink wrote: “These powers are at once good ‘by virtue of their creation to serve the humanizing purposes of God,’ [but] fallen ‘because they put their own interests above the interests of the whole,’ and redeemable ‘because what fell in time can be redeemed in time’ ” (Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* [Doubleday, 1998], 31-36, 42-48). If God made the Sabbath merely as a legal observance, then celebrating Sabbath seems simple.

We then may ask two questions about keeping Sabbath: “Did I work?” and “Did I worship God?” If yes, then we satisfy ourselves that our actions delight God. Yet, I suggest that Jesus reprimands thinking like this because Jesus says “humankind was not made for the Sabbath.” Rather, Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for humankind.” What do you think Jesus means by this? Does Jesus mean anything goes? John Piper writes, “So Jesus didn't come to abolish the Sabbath but to dig it out from under the mountain of legalistic sediment and give it to us again as a blessing rather than a burden.”

I propose if humankind was made for the Sabbath, then we only had to ask two simple questions—Did I stop work? Did I worship God?

Yet, if the Sabbath was made for humankind, Sabbath keeping becomes much more difficult. We need to interpret what God's will is within Sabbath keeping. Consequently, we may need to answer four much more difficult questions:

Is Sabbath a day of blessing?

**Is Sabbath a day of rest?
Is Sabbath a day for God?
And is Sabbath a day to do good?**

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