

Phariseeism and the Sabbath

Luke 14:1-11

In the name of the Father, Son, and HS.

Our Gospel text has two topics that we need to understand rightly before we can apply this text to our lives: (1) the Sabbath Day itself. What it even is, and (2) what it means to be a Pharisee.

First, the Sabbath Day. This can be complex, but worth learning the background. It's quite interesting. The 3rd commandment from Mt. Sinai, "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." It hearkens back to the 7th day of creation, Saturday, the day God rested from all He made. In fact, the concept of the Sabbath day is even baked into the Hebrew word Sabbath. The word literally means either "seven" or "rest," depending on context. The Israelites were commanded to take the one day of the week, the 7th day, Saturday, and *rest*. Not work. But what did it mean to rest, or what did it mean to not work? Did it just mean closing the Ancient Israel Chick-fil-as but otherwise living life as normal? Did it mean going to the synagogue for worship and otherwise coming home for Saturday Naphtali versus Judah college football? Or was there more to it? Besides the actual 3rd commandment, God expands on it only a *little* bit more in the OT. He declares that this Sabbath day is to be a day of refreshment; further, a day by which the Lord makes His people holy. It's a beautiful exchange. God says for them to make the day holy – set apart – so that *He* can then make *them* holy – set apart. Go to where I, God, speak to you...where I remind you of my Word, and you will be rested, refreshed, and have holiness *by* my Word.

And while you're doing all of that, don't work, lest you be distracted from receiving the gifts of God. Jesus will re-orient this commandment for us to keep the general concept, but for

the OT people, God was quite strict. Don't work on Saturday. Rest. God even said *to just them* in the OT: "Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death." Exodus 31. This leads to the good question our ancestors asked, "well what in the Lord does 'work' mean!" God only gave two details on what "work" may mean: "You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." And we have one interesting narrative. While the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. When it was discovered, God spoke to Moses and declared, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." And it was so. So, OT saints, don't light fires in your home on Saturday, and don't gather sticks. That's the only help our forefathers were given on what it means to not "work" on Saturday. And this was to carry the death penalty!

Keeping the Sabbath was a serious thing, but God designed it to be a simple thing, a time to rest as they gather to hear the proclamation of the Messiah, as they gather for weekly worship in the synagogue. The Sabbath was made for man to rest, not as a way for man to earn favor with God by how well we're not working.

And it's this simplicity as well as ambiguity of "work" that made this prime Pharisee territory. So we laid the background on the Sabbath. Let's refresh the Pharisees. These were the popular "good" guys that everyone looked up to in the Gospels. Everyone, except Jesus. He knew their hearts. Jesus sought to cleanse their hearts. So also, we should want Jesus to cleanse our hearts of our own Phariseeism.

The Pharisee tendency *begins* with a good desire. I want to be good and righteous and holy and be seen by others and especially seen by God as good and righteous and holy. I want a good name with God and my fellow man. This is fine. What's bad comes in the *how*. What is it that determines what is good and righteous and holy, and how should others see me as such?

What is the *source* of the rules of right and wrong? For Christians, our right and wrong is in God, the Scriptures. This reveals how God truly judges us. And the Law of God *should* (in a perfect world) be also how others see us. Others should look highly upon us for being faithful to God's Law.

But we know that many people, if not most people, don't operate according to the Law. We in our inherited nature operate according to our own *gut* feelings of right and wrong. So to be a Pharisee means to be really skilled in knowing what others think is right and wrong according to *their* gut, and to then seek the right and wrong not of God's Law, but of the Law of man around me so that people think well of me. It's ultimately people-pleasing.

Think on how politicians do this with the phrase "separation of church and state." This phrase isn't in the constitution. But because enough people *think* it's in the constitution in their gut, a politician will throw around that phrase left and right because they know the average American voter thinks the phrase "separation of church and state" is enshrined in American law and can be applied in extreme ways.

But...the politician gets the votes, and the popularity, and this confirms even in himself that what he is saying is actually right, and it becomes then his own version of right and wrong. So the Pharisees wrote down and sought to follow what the majority of people's gut thought was right, even if it went against God's Law.

But they didn't know the Word of God nor the power therein. They pretended to know it, but the Law of God is not popular. The Law of God can be quite offensive. The Law of God is hard. The Law of the Pharisees looked hard, but actually watered-down God's Law. And the watering down is what made it popular. It's achievable, and makes me look good. It may look tough with additional regulations. But "not working" is a tough Law to follow. When we

Pharisees can detail what “work” is, and it happens to be easy enough for me Pharisee to accomplish, it’s watering down the Law of God. This is the Pharisee trick. The Law of the Sabbath was designed to be simple and designed to be a gift for the people to rest in Him. But the Pharisees couldn’t handle this simplicity, so they made rules about how much you could walk, how many steps you could take. How you can spit on a rock, but you can’t spit on the dirt, lest you accidentally end up watering a plant and therefore seen as working on the Sabbath. They would spend time after time trying to figure out every last little bit of daily life to make sure that we all have the right strategies to not work on the Sabbath. They were restless and ironically working so hard to follow *their* version of not working. Instead of worshipping the false little statues of Baal and Ashteroth, it’s as though they had this false God named “Sabbath,” and they would offer up the sacrifice of their anxiety to not work.

We all want to be righteous in the eyes of God, but *we* want to set the rules of the game. We want to determine how God should judge us, and it’s going to be according to my gut and what I’m actually doing, and according to me satisfying what is in other people’s gut so that I’m looked well upon.

And Jesus declares to them and to you: “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” The Sabbath is so much more than “do this; don’t do that.” Jesus says, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... Sabbath. I will give you Sabbath.” Jesus is the Sabbath rest!

The final Saturday Sabbath day of rest for the Old Testament was the Saturday Jesus rested in the tomb between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. There He fulfilled the strict observance of the OT Sabbath, to not work specifically on Saturday, and reorients us to set aside times and especially still one day of the week to lay aside every anxiety from the world and focus

on Jesus, to simply receive His gifts. This is why we retain the 3rd commandment. “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.” What does this mean? “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”

He fulfilled the Sabbath Law and all the Law, for you. We have no need to prove ourselves before God on this or any Law. We have no need to jockey for the approval of our fellow man. The Law doesn't exist so we can walk around prideful, to be good and holy in our *own* sight and the sight of others, or even to please God for the sake of us justifying ourselves in His sight. The Law shows us how to love God and our neighbor. And because we fail, the Law is there to show us our desperate need of God's mercy. The Law shows us what we ought to do, and it acts as a mirror to show us how we have failed, by what we've thought, said, and done. Our place should be next to the devil, in the lowest hottest parts of hell. But Jesus, by his cross and passion says to each one of you, friend come up and sit by me. I've prepared a place for you, that where I am you may be also. You don't have a new Law-giver. You have a savior. Jesus. The Pharisees don't need anybody to save them. They're righteous and holy on their own. Those who are well have no need of a physician. But He, the Great Physician, heals the sick and delivers us. He has died for your sins. His blood cleanses you from all unrighteousness. He says to you, friend, come and eat with me. Come and share in my eternal life. And out of the love of Christ dear beloved, lower your shoulders. It's time to rest in His grace, in His forgiveness. It's time to give others grace, give others forgiveness, and let them rest. After all: heaven has been won for you. It is finished. Amen.