

“Do I Have To?”

Mark to: 23-28

June 3, 2018

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

It is one of the first questions which children learn to ask. They use it with regard to many things which are good for them but they quite honestly don't want to do. This includes going to bed early, eating their vegetables, going to school, doing their homework, and many other unpleasant choices. The question is: “Do I have to?” Do I have to eat my vegetables? Do I have to go to bed now? Do I have to go to school? Do I have to do my homework? By the whiny tone with which they speak, it is quite clear that children don't wish to do these things. Rather, they are looking for some justification for not having to do whatever is given to them to do.

There is one more situation in which this question is also used and it is used by adults, as well as with children. It has to do with our spiritual lives. The question goes like this. Do I have to go to church? Do I have to go to Sunday school? Do I have to go to Bible class? While none of us would like to come out and simply say, “No, I don't want to do any of those things,” the fact that we are using that question indicates that we want justification for not doing those activities.

Today, we enter into the second half of the church year. The first half of the church year is devoted to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The second half of the church year is devoted to the life and ministry of His Church. In other words, having been forgiven and saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, how do we then live as Christians? Since our gathering together around the Word of God for study and in worship is foundational to our lives as Christians, it is imperative that we rightly understand why, when, and how our reception of the Word is to take place. The confrontation over this matter in our text is but one of many such conflicts Jesus had with the religious leaders over this issue – the proper observation of the Sabbath day.

“Sabbath” is a Hebrew word which means rest. The Third Commandment of the law of Moses says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” The command was that people should rest, both physically and spiritually. Negatively speaking, they were not to do something – work – and to rest physically. Positively speaking, they were to do something – gather together to worship – and thus rest spiritually. These things were not optional. They were commands of God.

The Pharisees, religious leaders of the Jews, were often in conflict with Jesus over the matter of the Sabbath. Our text for today is one of those conflicts and it has to do with the “not working” part of the commandment. Jesus and the disciples were walking through grain fields, plucking heads of grain, and eating them. This was considered to be harvesting and, thus, work. That meant it was a violation of the Sabbath law. There were two basic reactions to this. The Pharisees complained that the disciples and Jesus were doing what was not lawful on the Sabbath day. Jesus and His disciples take the position that they were hungry and needed to eat. Therefore, the law didn't apply in the way the Pharisees were trying to apply it.

Today, we have the same conflict over the “gathering together to worship” part of the Sabbath. While it is true that we are no longer under the jurisdiction specifically of

the Third Commandment since the Sabbath day was a sign pointing to Christ and has expired, there are numerous commands in the New Testament which still command us to gather together to worship. The book of Hebrews says, we are to be “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,” (Hebrews 10:25). St. Paul writes in Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

On the basis of these and other scriptural texts, many people will act exactly as the Pharisees did. The Bible says very clearly that you have to go to church. The Bible says very clearly you have to teach and learn the word of God. These are not options. This is the Word of God.

However, other people look at our text for today and say that Jesus and his disciples failed to obey the “not work” part of the Third Commandment. Therefore, we are free to do what we want. If they wanted to work by picking grain, they could work. If we want to do something else on Sunday morning or not stay for Bible class after worship, we can.

Which position is correct? Is it a matter of rules or a matter of freedom? The answer is: neither position is entirely correct. The correct position is summed up in Jesus words to the Pharisees. He says to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

The problem which the Pharisees had and which many people today still have is a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Law. Many people feel that God gave us His Law in order to regulate our behavior and spoiler fun. People view the Law as a bad thing and, therefore, are always fighting against it.

However, this is not true. The Law is a good thing which God gave to humanity for a good purpose: to enrich and to enhance our relationship with Him and with one another. This is especially true of the Third Commandment dealing with the Sabbath day. The origin of the Sabbath day is in creation where, after creating all things in six days, God rested on the seventh day. A commandment regarding the Sabbath day was a gift given by God for humanity and for our good.

The purpose of the Sabbath is to be a benefit, physically and spiritually, for all people. Physical rest from the burden of work and labor is important and something we should probably pay more attention to when considering this commandment.. Spiritual rest from the burden of sin and guilt is important, as well. Therefore, because He loves us so much, the Lord commanded His people to rest from physical work and labor (as we heard in our Old Testament lesson for the day) and to gather together to worship Him as we read in Leviticus, “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly.” (Leviticus 23:3)

Physical rest can be obtained from others – our boss at work, our parents, and, most importantly from ourselves as we are the ones who fill up our calendar with activities. Spiritual rest is given by Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

This is how God made Sabbath for man: by providing rest, both physical and spiritual, to enhance our relationship with Him and with one another. God did not make man for the Sabbath, Jesus says. In other words, God did not create the Law, especially this one on the Sabbath, in order to become a taskmaster ruling over us to which we old obedience for obedience's sake.

Therefore, people are not required to follow dubious interpretations of the Sabbath law (as, for example, in our text) or to insist on blind obedience to a rule instead of serving one another. It would not have been obedience to the Sabbath law for the disciples to starve. Jesus often healed people on the Sabbath because showing mercy to a person in need is more important than following a rule. Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan shows two religious leaders bypassing the wounded man on the road, partially in order to get to Jerusalem to do their religious duties, something which Jesus condemns.

What about us in our day and age? It is true that we are no longer bound to the Sabbath day regulations which forbid work and command worship on a Saturday. Some would say, "I am therefore free not to worship because the law no longer applies." When we ask, "Do I have to?" with regard to worship and Bible study, we are asking the wrong question. It is not a matter of "having to". The correct question is, "Do I need to?"

Do we still have the need for which the Sabbath provides assistance? Do our bodies become overworked and tired? I think the answer is obvious. Of course, that is true. Deny or ignore this reality at your own peril. You will wear yourself out and become sick, even die, if you fail to take care of your body.

Do our souls become weary and burdened by sin? Suppose we don't "feel" that burden? Then something is wrong. If we are not coming to God's house on a regular basis to gain rest for our souls, it likely means one of two things. One, it means we don't think we have the need for such rest for our souls. However, the word of God says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) Or, two, it means that we deny the effectiveness of the Word of God and Sacraments to provide rest and relief and we search for spiritual relief elsewhere.

Back in the 70's, Barry Manilow wrote a song called, "Trying to Get The Feeling Again" in which he lamented the apparent lack of love for his lover simply because he didn't feel it. That's the way our culture operates even today. If we don't feel something, it doesn't exist. If I don't feel guilt and remorse for sin, then it doesn't exist. If I don't feel forgiven through the Word of God and His Holy Sacraments, then they must be an effective.

In his "Christian Questions with Their Answers", Martin Luther proposed three actions to take if you don't "feel" sin and your need for forgiveness. First, he said touch your body and see if it still has flesh and blood. Since all humans who live are sinners, if you are alive, you are a sinner. Second, he said you should look around and see if you're still living in the world. In this world, there will be no lack of sin and trouble as the Scriptures say. Third, he said to recall that you certainly will have the devil around you; who with his lying and murdering day and night will let you have no peace.

If you don't feel God's comfort and consolation in the Means of Grace, the answer is not to absent yourself from them, but immerse yourself in them all the more. Continue to hear the Word of God and dwell upon all of its promises of forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation with God. Continue to look at the baptismal font which, although not always used, is always at the front and center of our sanctuary as a beacon and a reminder of our adoption as sons and daughters of God through the waters of Holy Baptism. Continue to participate in Holy Communion and focus on the words of Jesus, "given for you" and "shed for you" for the forgiveness of sins.

When we fully realize the spiritual and emotional weariness which sin causes and fully appreciate the complete and total rest for our souls which the Word of God, the Holy Sacraments, and the fellowship in which we receive these gifts gives, there will be nothing which we will want more and nothing which will prevent us from always coming to receive them. When there ever comes in occasion when we do miss out, it will not be because we want to for our own selfish reasons. It will be like Jesus – serving the needs of others as He did in healing and showing mercy to those in need as He did for His hungry disciples. In that case, it will not be breaking a rule, but serving another important part of God's will: "love your neighbor, as yourself."

"Do I have to?" Is always asking the wrong question when it comes to worship and Bible Study. Two other questions are more important. Do I have the need? If you feel you do not, then you do not understand the seriousness of sin. Do I crave the cure? If you do not, then you do not understand the richness of God's mercy in the Means of Grace. However, if you are to ask the question, "Why do I want to?", The answer is not "because I have to" or "the rule says so". The answer is easy: forgiveness and peace with God; comfort and assurance during the difficult times of this life (as we read in our epistle reading for today); and the guarantee of eternal healing for us all. God grant us a knowledge of that need and the joy from His cure for that need. Amen.