

MARK 2:23—3:6. (EHV)

Once on a Sabbath day, Jesus was passing through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick heads of grain as they walked along. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?” He replied to them, “**Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry (he and his companions)? He entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the Bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone to eat, except for the priests. He also gave some to his companions.**” Then Jesus said to them, “**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is the Lord even of the Sabbath.**” Jesus entered the synagogue again, and a man was there with a withered hand. They were watching Jesus closely to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath day, so that they could accuse him. He said to the man with the withered hand, “**Step forward!**” Then he said to them, “**Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?**” But they were silent. Then he looked around at them with anger, deeply grieved at the hardness of their hearts. He said to the man, “**Stretch out your hand.**” The man stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees left and immediately began to conspire against Jesus with the Herodians, plotting how they might kill him.

What do you think of when you hear the word *Evangelical*? Some of you might think of Protestant Christians in general, since many people use the term *evangelical* basically to refer to any Christians who are not Roman Catholic. I hope at least a few of you think of the word in the middle of the names of most of the churches in our church body, including ours—Trinity *Evangelical* Lutheran Church.

I think most of the time we Lutherans pass over the name Evangelical as that big word in the middle of our name that we can't pronounce and don't know what it means, and so, if it gets any attention at all, it's abbreviated as “Ev.” when writing out a check to put in the offering plate.

There are others—not in our church that I know of, but in others—who have taken it a step further and wished to drop the name Evangelical altogether, and maybe the name Lutheran too, in an attempt to make the church's name much more palatable, pronounceable, and marketable.

But the name Evangelical comes from the Latin and Greek word for “good news” or “gospel.” Evangelical means “having to do with the gospel,” which is exactly what our church is, exactly what our church body is. So ignoring the name Evangelical is not an option. Rather, we ought to explore and become more familiar with what it means.

Today Jesus invites us gladly to be Lutheran Christians who have to do with the gospel, to be *evangelical* Lutherans. He invites us to do that in two ways—to not be preoccupied with the law, and to apply the law with gospel-filled hearts.

1.

Nowadays if we want to go from point A to point B, we use paved asphalt roads or gravel roads. There weren't many roads like ours in Jesus's day. Especially in the remoter parts of

Galilee, if you wanted to get from point A to point B, you used simple, rough foot-paths that had existed as long as people could remember.

If you were a grain farmer who owned land that was adjacent to or included the footpaths, you plowed and planted as much of the land as you could. If the ground of the footpath was too hard from a lot of use, you plowed as close to it as possible. If it was plowable, you plowed it. And if grain grew up in the footpath, neither the farmer nor the traveler minded. God had told his people that if they entered their neighbor's standing grain, they could pluck the heads of grain with their hand. They just couldn't put a sickle to it and harvest it. Grain growing in or near the footpath was a free meal, and a God-fearing farmer was happy to provide it.

On this particular spring Saturday, as the grain harvest was approaching, the disciples were apparently traveling along one such foot-path through the grainfields. As they went along, they were hungry, so they began to pick heads of grain off the stalks. They rubbed them in their hands to free the kernels from the husks, then probably gently blew on them to remove the chaff, then popped the kernels into their mouths.

Again, this was not stealing. God had explicitly told the people they could do it and the farmers to expect it. The Pharisees who saw Jesus's disciples doing this were not troubled by the action itself. They did not accuse the disciples of breaking the Seventh Commandment, "You shall not steal." They accused them of breaking the Third, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy."

"Look, Jesus," they said. "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath day?"

God had instituted the Sabbath primarily for two purposes—one, for physical rest, and two, for spiritual rest, for taking time to gather with other believers to listen to his word. Now, in giving the command to rest, God wasn't very specific about what constituted work. He told them they should rest on the Sabbath even during the plowing and harvesting season, and they should not even light a fire in any of their homes that day. But even though God was not super-specific, his wishes were crystal clear—complete rest. If anyone did any work, he or she was to be executed. So if an Israelite wasn't sure whether something constituted work, he was probably better off just not doing it.

But the Israelites wanted things more black and white than that. Over time, the rabbis came up with thirty-nine chief works that were forbidden on the Sabbath. They came up with them on the basis of the work needed to set up and operate their tabernacle. These chief works included plowing, harvesting, and kindling a fire. They also included kneading and baking, shearing, spinning, and sewing, snaring, slaughtering, and skinning, writing, building, and hitting anything with a hammer. Not such a bad list; these things clearly involve work, don't they?

But that wasn't enough. The rabbis also came up with secondary works under each one of the thirty-nine chief works. For instance, the chief work of harvesting included harvesting, vine-dressing, olive gathering, clipping, fig gathering, and plucking, like the kind the disciples were doing here.

And it didn't even stop there. The rabbis added even more works to these chief and secondary works, so that eventually it was forbidden to climb a tree, ride a horse, take a swim, get engaged, dance, pay your taxes or give an offering, or slap your hips on the Sabbath (which was the way people showed they were excited), and many other things. We see from the account

of the man with the withered hand that they also considered it wrong to heal someone on the Sabbath.

Do you see what the problem was? The Jews had become so preoccupied with the law, that the laws they were now enforcing went beyond what God himself wanted. They imagined God *only* to be an angry judge who wasn't happy with them unless they perfectly kept every last little law. They forgot about the primary way God wanted to be known—as the God of compassion and grace, slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin (Exod. 34:6–7).

Martin Luther complained about the same thing in his day. “If a priest is asked about doing God’s will,” he said, “he tells the person who asked to go on a pilgrimage to Spain along the Way of St. James, or to go on a pilgrimage to Rome, or to run to a cloister and become a monk for all to see.” But none of these were things that God actually commanded, and the extra burden of laws prevented the people from seeing God as a gracious and forgiving God.

Our church and our church body are often viewed as the ones against this or that. And maybe that’s deserved sometimes. Too often we are preoccupied with the law and forget that the name of our church and church body includes the word Evangelical.

Too often we make it known that we are against homosexuality to the point that we give the impression that God has forbidden homosexuals even to step foot in our church. Too often we fail to stress that ours is the church that welcomes tax collectors and sinners, as Jesus did, because we offer the forgiveness of God that they need as desperately as we do. If they’re going to step foot in a church, unless they only intend to disrupt the service, we should want our church should be the *first* one they step into.

Too often we make it known that our congregations practice close Communion to the point that we give the impression that God does not *want* anyone else to commune there beside the current membership rosters. Too often we fail to stress that, as fellow people redeemed by Christ’s blood, we *want* to teach others what God has done for them too so that they too are one with us in faith and can commune with us.

Too often we are more vigorous in upholding the finer details of our church’s constitution and bylaws or what was decided at the last council or voters’ meeting than we are in upholding the Ten Commandments, what God has actually commanded. And too often we are more vigorous in promoting the Ten Commandments than we are in promoting the Savior who fulfilled them in our place and paid for all the times we have broken them.

Brothers and sisters, ask yourselves: If a friend came up to you today and said, “What does your church teach?”, how would you respond? Would your answer be one preoccupied with the law, or with the gospel? Let’s gladly be *evangelical* Lutherans, and not be preoccupied with the law like the Pharisees, but with the gospel like Jesus was.

2.

Jesus shows that he was preoccupied with the gospel, not only in *what* laws he concerned himself with, but also in *how* he applied them.

Notice that Jesus didn’t actually argue with the Pharisees that plucking heads of grain and rubbing them in your hands was not actually harvesting. The fact is that many of these laws, even if they were foolish and ill-founded, were nevertheless in force. Just as we don’t have the option

of disobeying a foolishly placed stop sign, Jesus, who had humbled himself under law, didn't have the option of disobeying even foolish and ill-founded laws. So he didn't go that route.

Instead he said, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry (he and his companions)? He entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the Bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone to eat, except for the priests. He also gave some to his companions. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

For each Sabbath, the priests were to bake twelve loaves of bread and set them in two rows of six on a table in the temple. This was called the Bread of the Presence. When these loaves were removed and replaced with fresh, hot loaves every Sabbath, God only permitted the priests to eat them. But when David was fleeing from King Saul with his companions, none of whom were priests, and they showed up hungry at the tabernacle at the town of Nob, the high priest did not hesitate to give them the consecrated bread that had been recently removed.

Why? "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." The Sabbath and all of God's laws were made and given for mankind's benefit, not to make mankind mindless law-slaves. The letter of the Sabbath laws was standing between the disciples and their need for food, so they rightly set aside the letter of the Sabbath laws in favor of the spirit of the Sabbath laws. So too whenever the letter of the law stands between us and helping a neighbor in need, then we rightly set aside the letter of the law in favor of the spirit of the law.

To a certain extent, even secular authorities recognize this distinction. If a woman is pregnant and is about to give birth and she and her husband are breaking the speed limit to get to the hospital as fast as they can, and an officer pulls them over and learns why they are speeding, what will he do? Write them a ticket and tell them to slow down? No, if he's an officer worth any salt, he will not only forego writing them a ticket, but will likely escort them himself with flashing lights so that they can speed without any danger of an accident.

If secular authorities understand this, friends, then we as Christians should understand it and practice it even more and better. Being an *evangelical* Lutheran means that we apply the law with gospel-filled hearts that are sensitive to our neighbor's needs.

That means first of all dealing with each other patiently. Think of those who do not keep the Sabbath in the present day. We no longer have to rest on Saturday, but God does still expect us to meet together regularly to listen to his word. What should we do if we notice that one or more members are not doing this? Certainly we should not overlook it, but should we send them one warning letter, then another two weeks later, and then drop them two weeks later if we don't hear back from them? Or do we talk to them face to face about what God has done for us and what he wants from us, and allow some time for the Holy Spirit to work on their hearts? Well, how does our patient God deal with us?

Second, this means making exceptions to God's laws in circumstances of need. If you're going to church and you see someone in desperate need and are able to safely help them, should you speed right past because you don't want to be late for church? Wouldn't it be better to put what you've been learning at church into practice?

Of course, we need to be aware of two things: First, God gave his laws for a reason. Under normal circumstances, showing love and being sensitive to our neighbor's needs means following the letter of God's laws, because God gave his laws out of love. If we make exceptions to the law, they should be just that—exceptions, not the norm.

Second, the exceptions should be made mindful of our neighbor's needs, not his wants. We should not make exceptions just because someone is going to get ticked off if we do not.

Friends, what a joy to be *evangelical*. What a joy to know what Jesus has done for us. He was charged by God with keeping God's law perfectly for us. If he hadn't let his disciples eat on the one Sabbath day, if he didn't heal the man with the withered hand on another Sabbath day, out of some over-zealous interpretation of God's law, he would have actually been breaking God's law—and there would have gone our salvation.

But by not being preoccupied with the law, and by applying the law with a heart of love, he kept all of God's laws, including his Sabbath laws, perfectly in our place. And then he went to the cross to pay for all of the times we have broken God's laws, or tried to win his salvation by obeying his laws, or applied them to others unlovingly.

That's good news. That's gospel. What a joy to be gospel Christians, to be *evangelical* Lutheran Christians. What a joy not to be preoccupied with the law! What a joy to apply it to ourselves and others with a gospel-filled heart! God grant that we may always be *evangelical* Lutherans. Amen.