

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Lord of the Sabbath**

Mark 2:23-3:6

Janet Weaver tells about a time when she was quizzing her preschool class on the story of creation. She asked the children what God did on the seventh day. A dark-eyed three-year-old raised her hand and said, "I think he mowed the yard." You may see some grass-cutting going on today on your way to and from church. You yourself may even have some plans for taking care of your lawn, gardening, or doing some other form of outdoor labor and activity this afternoon. The fact is, faithful followers of Jesus still differ in their interpretations of what should or shouldn't be done on the Lord's Day. Though there has always been solid agreement about the call for God's people to practice Sabbath rest, there have been, and continue to be, diverse opinions about exactly how we should do that.

This diversity of interpretation is reflected in this morning's text from the Gospel of Mark. Mark narrates two episodes from the ministry of Jesus, both of which take place on the Sabbath. In the first one, Jesus and his disciples are walking along, pushing their way through a field of grain. That's okay. Then the disciples began picking some heads from the stalks. That's not okay. Immediately, some Pharisees accuse Jesus and his followers of violating the Law. What they've done constitutes reaping or harvesting, which is prohibited on the Sabbath.

Jesus counters with an example about David, who once went into the sanctuary and took some consecrated bread in order to feed his companions. Now if David could commit such a sacrilege on behalf of his followers, no one should accuse Jesus and his disciples of being law breakers. After all, even the strictest adherents of the Law would generally acknowledge that human need takes precedent over Sabbath rules. So Jesus argues that in this particular case, he and his followers should be given some wiggle room.

But notice that Jesus goes beyond debates about the minutiae of Sabbath law. He digs deeper. He steers the discussion in another direction by emphasizing God's purpose in giving the Law. What was God's intention in the first place? According to Jesus, God gave the Sabbath law out of his commitment to the welfare of humankind. "The Sabbath was made for man," says Jesus, "not man for the Sabbath" (v. 27).

This issue of God's intention, and thus the purpose of the Sabbath law, also comes up in the second part of today's Scripture passage, where Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. As the congregation looks on, Jesus asks a very pointed question, aimed especially at some of the religious leaders. He says, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (3:4). At that point, you could hear a pin drop in the sanctuary. As one commentator has put it, "Their silence is poisonous, for it says they care more about their custom than they do about their brother; they are more eager to bring Jesus down than to restore the man's useless hand."<sup>1</sup> In other words, many of the people there in that place of worship had lost sight of the fact that God had given the Sabbath for human good.

They were turning God's gift into an occasion to pursue their own agenda, rather than God's agenda.

At this point, let me just step back and note that I've been using the term "Sabbath" in a fairly broad sense. Strictly speaking, the Lord's Day, Sunday, is not the same thing as the Sabbath, which is a weekly day of rest in Judaism, observed from before sundown on Friday until after nightfall on Saturday. Most of the first Christians were Jews, and they continued to observe the Sabbath while observing the day of Jesus' resurrection as well. With time, though, the early Christians differentiated themselves by focusing on Sunday, the day on which the disciples had first encountered the risen Lord. This day of resurrection became the church's special day, a time of rest and worship. But even so, the Jewish term Sabbath is still used in a broad sense to refer to Christian observance of the Lord's Day.

Having said that, let's return to our text and continue to reflect on what Jesus is saying to us about the Sabbath. As I indicated, Jesus warns us about taking what God intends for human well-being and turning it into a heavy, burdensome experience driven more by rules and customs than by divine mercy. Preacher David H. C. Read tells about an episode that happened one Sunday when he was a boy. He was whittling on a piece of wood when his grandmother, whom he describes as a "strong-minded Methodist," asked him what he was doing. "I'm making a boat," he replied innocently. "They must be hard up for boats," she said, "if they have to be made on the Sabbath."<sup>2</sup>

Maybe you've had experiences in your own life that left you feeling like the Sabbath is basically a grim day when fun is strictly prohibited. Some views of the Sabbath have often focused more on what we shouldn't do than what we should do, leaving us with the impression that faithful Sabbath observance means keeping a somber face and staying away from inappropriate activity.

It's certainly true that the Sabbath isn't to be taken lightly or casually. But being serious about the Sabbath doesn't mean extinguishing the joy of this special day. When we look back into the life of God's people Israel, the Sabbath was supposed to be a time of rest and refreshment, a time of uplifting fellowship with family and friends. It was a time to pause and reflect on God's saving acts in the life of his people, a time to be renewed for the life and work of the days ahead.

This same atmosphere of joy and celebration characterized the life of the early church when it gathered on the Lord's Day. For those early believers, and for us, Sabbath practices help keep us in touch with the heart of God, whose will is to save and heal and restore. Preacher and author Matt Woodley recalls an old Jewish story about a four-year-old boy named Mortakai who refused to attend school and study Hebrew. According to Woodley,

Whenever his parents tried to immerse his mind in the Torah [or the Word of God], he would sneak away and play on the swing set. Every form of persuasion failed. Mortakai remained stubborn and defiant. The exasperated parents even brought him to a famous psychiatrist, but that also proved futile. Nothing changed the young boy's heart, which seemed to grow more distant, lonely, and hardened every week.

Finally, in utter desperation, Mortakai's parents brought him to the local rabbi, a warm and wise spiritual guide. As the parents explained their plight, pouring out their frustration and despair, the rabbi listened intently. Without saying a word, he gently picked up Mortakai, took him in his arms and held him close to his chest. The rabbi held Mortakai close enough and tight enough so the young boy could feel the safe, rhythmic beating of the rabbi's heart. Then, still without a word, he gently handed the child back to his parents. From that point on, Mortakai listened to his parents, studied

the Torah and, when it was appropriate, he also slipped away to play on the swing set.<sup>3</sup>

As Mortakai was changed by being close enough to the rabbi to hear his heartbeat, so practicing the Sabbath is a way for us to stop and be with God, so that we can hear his heartbeat, and in the process be transformed and made whole. On the Sabbath, we purposefully step aside from many of the routines and rhythms of our daily lives in order to draw close to God and to connect in an even deeper way with his heart and will and purpose for our lives, and for humankind. In other words, on the Lord's Day, we aim to get even more of God's heart into our hearts.

But we don't stop there. Observing the Sabbath faithfully means not only rest, and worship that brings us closer to the heart and will of God, but also the doing of God's will, the communication of God's heart to others through lives of reverence for God and love of neighbor. The Lord's Day isn't simply about what we don't do, what we refrain from, though that's important. It's also about what we do with this special God-given day each week. And I stress God-given because this day isn't our creation, our achievement, or our possession to do with as we please. It's not my day or your day, but the Lord's Day, and therefore a sign that all time belongs to God, and is entrusted to us to be used for God's purposes, not our own purposes.

Jesus captures this in his declaration, "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." As believers we live under the reign and authority of the risen Jesus. That includes what we do with this special day each week. I like the story of a company called B & H Photo, located on Ninth Avenue in New York City. As author Pete Scazzero writes:

B & H Photo is the largest non-chain photo and video equipment store in the United States and the second largest in the world—only Yodobashi Camera in downtown Tokyo is bigger. The owners, along with many of their employees, are Hasidic Jews who dress just as their eighteenth-century ancestors did in Eastern Europe. On any given day, 8,000 to 9,000 people pass through the front door. Yet 70 percent of their business is online, serviced by a 200,000-square-foot warehouse located nearby in Brooklyn.

Even in a competitive marketplace, B&H won't conduct business on the Sabbath or on about a half-dozen Jewish holidays during the year. They close their doors at 1 p.m. on Fridays and keep them closed all day Saturday, the biggest shopping day of the week. During Sabbath, customers can peruse the B&H website, but they can't make an online order.

Recently a customer asked the B&H director of communications how they could close not just the retail store but also the website on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving and the busiest shopping day of the year. The director simply replied, "We respond to a higher authority."<sup>4</sup>

From a Christian standpoint, as people who believe that Jesus is Lord over our lives, including our Sabbath practice, we too can say that the reason we do what we do with this day is because we too answer to a higher authority. So today, as every Sunday, we're commanded to use this day in the spirit of our Lord, in keeping with the will of our Lord, and for the purposes of our Lord. This means we're called to rest and worship, and to do good in ways that bring restoration, healing, and wholeness to the lives of others.

<sup>1</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Mark*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 193) n.p.

<sup>2</sup> David H. C. Read, *This Grace Given* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 12.

<sup>3</sup> Matt Woodley, *The Folly of Prayer* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2009) 141-142.

<sup>4</sup> Pete Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) 159-160.