

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 11, 2021

Holy Rest

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."¹ 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."²

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.

During June and the first Sunday of July, our sermons focused on the theme of Christian maturity. We looked at the importance of making progress in holiness, especially as holiness is expressed through wisdom, vocation, love, and joy. In view of today's text, we could add sabbath to that list as well. In the life of God's people, being holy, and reflecting God's holiness, has always been inseparable from the Sabbath, not only as a single day but as a way of life. A couple of years ago, in an opinion piece, Margaret Renkl, reflecting on the Fourth Commandment, wrote:

Reading those verses again made me wonder: What if resting, all by itself, is the real act of holiness? What if honoring the gift of our only life in this gorgeous world means taking time every week to slow down? To sleep? To breathe? The world has never needed us more than it needs us now, but we can't be of much use to it if we remain in a perpetual state of exhaustion and despair.³

I spoke to someone this past week who had returned from some time off. He didn't actually take a trip. It sounded like more of a staycation, in the most minimal sense. He said he just stayed at home, emphasizing the fact that he didn't even go fishing. All that "doing nothing" seemed to have helped. He was smiling and laughing more.

He seemed more energetic. He had even jokingly told his wife, "You know, I don't think I've felt like this since I was 16 or 17 years old. This from a man who is probably in his late fifties.

Our Sunday morning gathering should have a similar effect in your own life. I don't guarantee that when you leave this sanctuary your body will feel like the clock has been rolled back a few decades. But there should be a certain refreshment and renewal, a revival of heart, mind, and soul that comes from assembling with God's people for praise and thanks. True, this gathering takes effort. Worship involves a certain kind of working. But at the same time, there's a kind of resting that comes from putting ourselves in the presence of the Lord.

Now as for how you should use the rest of this day, once you leave this gathering, as I noted earlier, interpretations of what constitutes sabbath will vary. Some folks leave the Lord's house and head to their place of employment. For them, making ends meet may require clocking in on Sundays. Being completely off from work isn't always an option. That may be even more common now that remote work or working from home have become widespread. Technological and cultural trends can make it seem like our jobs are always with us, 24/7. It's harder than ever to feel like we've set our work aside, in order to focus on other priorities like home, family, recreation, physical well-being, and the cultivation of deeper relationships in community with others.

During the coronavirus pandemic, many people have taken a second look at their priorities. The hardships and challenges of the past year have created space for reassessing the pace of our lives and revising the ways that we use the time given to us in this present life. In April 2020, when COVID-19 was still in its early stages, one journalist wrote, "When this is all over, next month, or whenever it diminishes, can we please keep some of this sweet slowness? Can we purposefully hold on to our extended Sabbath and slow down at least once a week and find the quiet and peace?"⁴

Observing the Sabbath faithfully, and practicing other forms of sabbath during our daily lives, means not only rest, and worship that keeps us aligned with God's priorities, but also the doing of God's will. 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 with the days in between Sundays. Jesus captures this in his declaration, "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

B & H Photo is a huge electronics retailer in New York City. The owners are Hasidic Jews who don't conduct business on the Sabbath, or on some other Jewish holidays during the year. During the Sabbath, customers can peruse the store's website, but can't make an online order. A customer once asked B & H's director of communications how they could close not only the retail store but also the website on Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year. The director simply replied, "We respond to a higher authority."⁵

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 on 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.

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

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

³ Margaret Renkl, "What If the Real Act of Holiness Is Rest?" The New York Times website. October 21, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/opinion/sabbath-day.html> (July 7, 2021).

⁴ Melissa Mackenzie, "Coronavirus: The Extended Sabbath." The American Spectator website. April 4, 2020. <https://spectator.org/coronavirus-the-extended-sabbath/> (July 7, 2021).

⁵ Pete Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) 159-160.