

The **Gift** of Sabbath

Mark 2:23-3:6

Pastor Jim Rademaker

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. ... "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain ... "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

(Exodus 20)

God, their God, had graciously delivered them out of slavery in Egypt. They were free. Free at last! How were they to *live* in this new freedom? Was it a freedom to do whatever they wanted? Whatever their hearts desired? Total independence, with the only goal being to indulge the self? Or was it a new freedom to live in relationship to God and others? To love God and others? To live as God's child, safe in His care? Learning what it means to trust Him above all else?

The rule-makers were there that day, which always takes the fun out of things, doesn't it? To them, that's what the Sabbath was about. Not so much about trusting God and resting in God as a loving Father caring for them, enjoying God and His creation and His goodness and all His gifts. For the Pharisees, the Sabbath was about more rule-keeping. That was the focus.

The Hebrew word Sabbath means "rest." The rules of the Sabbath were simple: No work on Saturday. Six days you worked - from sunrise to sunset. But on the seventh day you rested. No work for 24 hours, from sunset Friday until sunset Saturday. No work, whatsoever.

If you worked, you were breaking the rules, and you were in trouble. So you'd better always be on alert during Sabbath, lest you end up doing some form of work and getting in trouble. And what *was* work, and what *wasn't* work? And *who* decided? What *could* you do and what *couldn't* you do? It was enough to wear you down. The day of rest must have been exhausting!

The Pharisees were there that day, watching as Jesus' disciples walked through the grain fields. And you know what they saw? God forbid - Jesus' disciples were rolling pieces of wheat in their hands and taking out the pieces of grain and EATING them!!! Can you believe that! I know, shocking! On the Sabbath! On the day of rest, they were enjoying eating!

And the Pharisees, out of "loving concern" for Jesus' disciples, point out to Jesus what they're doing! *And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"* Unlawful? By whose standards? Who's law? Not God's law, but theirs. (from William Cwirla)

The disciples were breaking *their* laws. And what does Jesus say? "Really! Are you sure about that? Don't you remember David, and what he and his men did? When they were in need and hungry, they entered the tabernacle, God's house, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat"

And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Not that God was tired out from creating everything and needed rest. But because we needed an example to follow, because we're not God, and we need rest. A day of rest, sabbath, was God's GIFT to us. Again, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

The following is from the book "The Rest of God" by Mark Buchanan:

*"To **cease** from that which is **necessary**. This is Sabbath's golden rule. The one rule to which all other rules distill. **Stop doing what you ought to do.** There are six days to do what you ought. Six days to be caught in the web of economic and political and social necessity. And then one day to take wing."*

"Sabbath is that one day. It is a *reprieve* from what you *ought* to do, even though the list of oughts is infinitely long and never done. Oughts are tyrants, noisy and surly, chronically dissatisfied. Sabbath is the day you trade places with them: they go in the salt mine, and you go out dancing!

It's the one day when the *only* thing you *must* do is to *not* do the things you must. You are given permission - issued a command, to be blunt - to turn your back on all those oughts. You get to willfully ignore the many niggling things your existence genuinely depends on - and is often hobbled beneath - so that you can turn to whatever you've put off and pushed away for lack of time, lack of room, lack of breath. You get to shuck the have-tos and lay hold of the get-tos."

"So can I, or can I not, chop wood on Sabbath? Well, is it *necessary*? Is it something I *must* do, that I feel under obligation to do? Then no, I won't. It smells like an ought. But I often chop wood for the sheer exhilaration of it. It makes me feel alive. It puts me in touch with earth and sky, savoring the saltiness of my sweat, the good ache in muscles seldom used, the folksy music of dry alder cracking under the swing of my maul.

The same goes with cutting grass. A rhythm and luxury are there that, for me, are the exact opposite of work. The work I do most every other day - that I *must* do - involved reading, writing, preaching, teaching, counseling attending meetings. I sit around a lot, advising actions, plotting courses, preparing speeches. I make numerous phone calls and always have a few dozen e-mails in the bottleneck. I talk and talk and talk, I write and write and write. To cut the grass, most times at least, pours something back into me that all that other work siphons off. It feels like playing hooky. ... It feels like a night on the town.

I even shop sometimes. I try to avoid the getting-the-milk-for-the-kids'-breakfast kind of shopping ... but if Cheryl and I and our children are driving home on a summer evening from a river where we've spent the afternoon swimming and then falling asleep warming ourselves on the sunbaked rocks, and we pass a roadside fruit stand and I say, "Oh, look at those plums!" or if we are returning on a wintry twilight from a snowy hill where we've just spent an hour or two swooping and tumbling earthward in inner tubes and magic carpets, and we drive by a country quilt shop and Cheryl says, "Oh, look at those pillowcases!" - well, in either case, neither of us turns all stern and scowly and starts haranguing the other about a lack of piety. We stop, we shop, we buy.

And that touches on Sabbath's second golden rule, or the other half of the first golden rule: ***to embrace that which gives life***. The first golden rule, or the first half of it, is ***to cease from that which is necessary***. But we need this other part. We need to know, not just what to avoid, but what to pursue. Avoid the necessary, pursue that which give life.

"J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*) gives one of the most entrancing descriptions of the true nature of Sabbath. In book 1 of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, he describes a time of rest and healing in the house of Elrond in Rivendell. The hobbits, along with Strider, their guide, have made a dangerous, almost fatal journey to this place. They will soon have to make an even more dangerous, almost certainly fatal journey away from this place. But in the meantime, this:

For a while, the hobbits continued to talk and think of the past journey and of the perils that lay ahead; but such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have power over the present. That's Sabbath."

"In our culture, busyness is [everything] and stillness is seen as laziness. But without [Sabbath], we miss the rest of God: the rest he invites us to enter more fully, so that we might know him more deeply."

What did the Psalmist say? "*Be still, and know that I am God.*" (Ps 46)

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

For the Pharisees watching Jesus' disciples walking through the grain fields or healing wasn't really about the Sabbath. It wasn't even about the rules. It was about getting Jesus. Trapping Him and embarrassing Him and discrediting Him.

As they see it, healing on the Sabbath is forbidden, but plotting murder is perfectly acceptable. That's where the road of legalism leads. It reduces the life of faith, the life of trust in God, rejoicing in God, worshipping God, to mere technicalities. And the most bizarre lines of reasoning, appear completely natural. "You must never heal on the Sabbath, but it's okay to plot the death of those who do." (Buchanan)

Israel had been led out of slavery in Egypt and was being led by God in the desert. And they soon became restless. They grew tired of the sand, the heat, the picking up and moving. They were restless for land, for a home. But underneath it all, they were *restless of heart*. Worried and uneasy, not able to rest, to be still and rest in God's care.

Do you ever get restless? Worried? Frazzled? Uneasy? Unable to relax, and rest in God's care?

"In some ways, the whole point of the Exodus was Sabbath. *Let my people go*, became God's rallying cry, that they might worship me. At the heart of liberty - of being let go - is worship. But **at the heart of worship is rest** - a stopping from all work, all worry, all scheming, all fleeing - to stand amazed and thankful before God and *His* work. There can be no real worship, without true rest." (Buchanan)

Why did God give them the Sabbath? WHY did God set aside a day of REST? To make our lives difficult? Because He likes making rules for us to follow? Because He's out to get us? Or maybe ... the Sabbath was for our good. To benefit us. A blessing. A GIFT, even? Not a "have to", but a "get to"? God's gift to us? A gift to our bodies. A gift to our minds. A gift to our souls. The gift of rest. Restoration. Healing. "The Law of Sabbath is not legalistic. It's a command given to save us from ourselves."

But rest didn't mean what we normally think of - doing nothing - vegging in front of the screen all day. Rather, how did the Sabbath begin? It began with a meal. A family meal, as the sun went down on Friday evening. The Sabbath was a party! A celebration. You went to the synagogue in the morning to hear God's Word, to hear God speak. And you sang. Psalms, and hymns, and other songs. You hung out with God and with His people. The Sabbath was a day filled with eating and drinking and listening and singing. A change of pace, from all the "have tos" that hound us all the rest of the days of the week.

What was Sabbath? A piece of paradise. Heaven on earth. A day of praise and play. The Sabbath was also a *SHADOW*. A shadow of a far greater Rest. As Paul writes to the Colossians, "*Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*" (Coloss 2:16-17)

The Old Testament Sabbath pointed ahead to the REST that our Savior would bring - the rest that we have in having our sins forgiven, being washed clean by God, and the resulting ultimate rest we'll enjoy fully in heaven one day! That's why the apostles chose Sunday as their primary day for corporate worship. It was the day Jesus *rose* from the dead. It marked the dawn of a *new* day, the *first* day of a *new* creation. Thus, the apostles called Sunday what? "The Lord's Day."

The *first* day came to *replace* the seventh day as Sabbath, the day of rest. In the New Testament, there's no longer any special Sabbath day, just as there is no tithe, no daily sacrifice, no temple, no high priest. Everything of the Old Covenant, Old Testament, is fulfilled in Jesus. Sunday is not a New Testament Sabbath. JESUS is!

True rest is found, not in a *day*, but in a Person. What does Jesus say in Mt. 11? "*Come to ME, all who labor and are heavy laden ...*" Laboring under the Law. Weighed down by your burden of sin - your failing over and over to keep God's Law, failing to love God and your neighbor. *Come to ME and rest.*" That's why we come to church on Sunday; to REST. Rest in Jesus. (Cwirila)

In place of all your working, come REST. Rest in Jesus, and all His doing on your behalf - living, dying, rising - for you. As one person put it, "Every time we *turn to Christ* in faith, it's like a moment of Sabbath, a little foretaste of eternal rest and glory. The gift of that moment lies not in what we do, but what we receive. It's the holy time set aside to receive the greatest gift of God ever has to give, which is Himself, [the Lord of the Sabbath]." (Phillip Cary)