

The Sabbath God's Gift of Sanity

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[0 : 00] Our texts today are from the Old Testament book of Exodus and the New Testament book of Mark. They're printed on the back of the order of worship for you, and if you are able, I invite you now to stand for the reading of the Word.

Hear the Word of God. Exodus 20, verses 8 to 12. Remember the Sabbath day and 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.

You shall not do any work, you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.

Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. Then Mark 2, 23 through chapter 3, verse 6. One Sabbath, he, Jesus, was going through the grain fields.

And as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, Look, why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?

[1 : 12] And he said to them, Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and he ate the bread of the presence, which is not lawful for any but the priest to eat, and he gave some to his companions.

Then he said to them, The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath. Again, he, Jesus, entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand.

They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had a withered hand, Come forward. And then he said to them, Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath to save or to kill?

But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger. He was grieved at the hardness of their heart, and he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him how to destroy him. Spirit of the living God, we believe that you superintended the writing of these words long ago for us.

[2 : 31] And now we pray that in your mercy and grace, you would take these words off the page and work them deep into our hearts and minds. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated. I'm not so sure I'm ready to do the second part in this series on the Sabbath.

Given the volatile reaction in a number of people last Sunday, I knew that I would stir up the waters. I knew that.

But I didn't think I was going to stir up the hornet's nest. I suppose I should have anticipated it, given the fact that talk about the Sabbath touches one of the three forbidden areas of public conversation.

Sex, money, and time. You see, I thought last week that I was giving a gift. A wonderful gift.

[3 : 35] The fourth commandment, which we just read, is good for us. In it, our Maker, Redeemer, and Lover is calling us to sanity, calling us to wholeness.

The Sabbath command reveals a mystery. The mystery is that we human beings have been constituted sabbatically.

The six plus one rhythm has been built into the fabric of our existence. The fourth commandment is simply calling us to live in harmony with our own natural rhythm.

Last Sunday, I tried to put the fourth commandment in the spirit of the promise God made through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 58. If because of the Sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on my holy day and call the Sabbath a delight, a holy day of Yahweh most honorable, and you shall honor it, desisting from your own way, seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in Yahweh.

I will make you ride on the heights of the earth, and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob. Wow. If I can be given greater delight in the living God, and if I can be empowered to live the next six days with strength, and if I can be fed all of the riches that are inherent in the covenant God made with Israel, and do that simply by obeying the natural rhythm of my being, then I would be crazy not to try to do it.

[5 : 16] The biggest question generated by last Sunday's study has to do with the relationship between Jesus and the law.

In one way or another, the question was, doesn't the coming of Jesus Christ, doesn't His finished work on the cross, now put us in a different relationship with the Ten Commandments?

Don't they now have a new place in our lives? The answer to that question warrants a whole lot more time than I have this morning, but let me at least briefly outline what I think is the biblical answer to that.

When we use this term, the law, we need to remember that it refers to at least three dimensions of God's law. It refers to the so-called moral law, which we find chiefly in the Ten Commandments.

It refers to the so-called sacrificial law, all the rules that have to do with bulls and goats and sheep and blood and all of that, which we find in the book of Leviticus. And it has to do with the so-called ceremonial law, which has to do with how to be pure, how to be holy, all the regulations about the way of holiness.

[6 : 29] The coming of Jesus Christ affects all three of these, but in different ways. In the coming of Jesus Christ, He fulfills all three of these, but in different ways.

He fulfills the sacrificial law by offering Himself as the final sacrifice, as the sacrifice of all sacrifices, therefore making all of them and the whole system of sacrifice obsolete.

He fulfills the ceremonial laws by opening up the way into the holy of holies through His own shed blood, and then by clothing us with His own righteousness, making all of those rituals obsolete.

Though the rituals can be helped to us because they help us understand something of the dynamics of worship. And He fulfills the moral law by embracing it as God's will, by embodying it Himself in His own life, by drawing out the deeper implications of it, as He does in the Sermon on the Mount, by taking upon Himself the curse of our disobedience, and then by breathing His Spirit in us, giving us power to obey.

Which is to say, that Jesus' coming does not negate nor set aside the moral law. How that idea got into the evangelical reform tradition is a long discussion.

- [8 : 03] We'll have some time. But the coming of Jesus Christ does not negate nor does it set aside the moral law. His coming finally frees us to live it.
- You can see then that grace and law are not in conflict. Grace and legalism are in conflict, but not grace and law.
- Legalism is the attempt to obligate God to bless us by obeying a lot of rules and regulations. That is anti-grace. But law is not anti-grace, and grace is not anti-law.
- Grace frees us to live the good law of a gracious God. Grace empowers us to live the good law of a gracious God. The Sabbath command, therefore, is not anti-grace.
- The Sabbath command comes out of grace to teach us how to live by grace. It is as relevant to life under grace as is the commandment, you shall not murder, and as is the commandment, you shall have no other gods before me.
- [9 : 19] In fact, obedience to the fourth commandment can help us obey the first commandment. Now, the question for today is, how can we obey this six-plus-one rhythm of life in our time?
- Is it really possible in a technological, secularized, post-modern world, is it really possible when the demands of modern living are much greater than they were when Moses received the law on Mount Sinai?
- How can we obey and therefore experience more of the benefits of the Sabbath? Well, it's real tricky. It's tricky because we have to learn to live between two powerful tendencies.
- We have to walk a line between these two powerful tendencies. On the one hand, there is the tendency to try to regulate obedience. And on the other hand, there is the tendency to try to accommodate to the prevailing culture.
- On the one hand, developing a wholist of regulations which end up squelching the spirit of the Sabbath. On the other hand, just ignoring the pressure, ignoring guidelines altogether, and slowly finding ourselves simply accommodating ourselves to the culture.
- [10 : 37] I think, therefore, that the best place for us to begin on the how question is to look at how the Lord Jesus Himself lived on the Sabbath during His earthly sojourn.
- He calls Himself in our text the Lord of the Sabbath. Now, that's a hugely audacious claim for anyone to make in any era. In calling Himself the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is taking to Himself the final authority to interpret what the Sabbath is about.
- In fact, He is implicitly saying, explicitly saying, that He is the one who initiated the Sabbath. How does the Lord of the Sabbath live on His Sabbath?
- Well, for one thing, He keeps the Sabbath. He obeys His own command. Mark 1.21, And immediately on the Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach.
- Mark 6.2, And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue. And Luke 6.14, And as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath.
- [11 : 44] As was His custom. The Gospels are clear about this. Jesus faithfully kept this six plus one rhythm of life. But the Gospels are also clear that Jesus regularly got Himself in trouble on the Sabbath.
- In fact, this is a fact of history. A fact of history. No matter what people believe about the rest of the Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth got Himself crucified because of the way He lived on the Sabbath.
- The Gospels record six examples. Five in which Jesus Himself is the problem and one in which His disciples are the problem. And in each of those instances, Jesus comes under immediate and intense attack by the religious establishment, especially by the group called the Pharisees.

His crime? He acted on the Sabbath to make people whole. In five of the cases, He healed someone. And in one of the cases, He allowed people to get something to eat.

So deep was the anger of the Pharisees that they joined forces with their most hated enemies, the Herodians. The Herodians supported the Roman occupation of Palestine and they propped up Herod.

[13 : 03] That's thus the Herodians. The Pharisees, however, hated Rome and they hated Herod because he was only part Jewish. The Pharisees and the Herodians were on the opposite side of nearly every issue until Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, did what He did on the Sabbath.

Then the Pharisees joined hands with their hated enemies to destroy Jesus. Why? And what does this have to do with us keeping the Sabbath in our time?

A little history here. Although the Pharisees get rather bad press in the Gospels, I think we should at least recognize that they were well-motivated people.

The Pharisees were concerned about the theological and moral integrity of Israel. They were particularly concerned about a drift they detected, a drift toward faithlessness and disloyalty and impurity.

Now this drift actually happened about 300 years before that time. Under Caesar Augustus, Jewish traditions and convictions were slowly being assimilated into Hellenism, into the ways and thoughts of Greece.

[14 : 16] Jewishness was losing its distinctiveness. Being swallowed up and mixed in the Hellenistic way. And so a movement toward purity began. The separated ones, that's what Pharisees mean, the separated ones began to form.

What they wanted to do was to maintain the integrity of God's election of Israel. Not a bad motive. And they felt that the best way to do this was to call for strict obedience to the Ten Commandments.

And they felt that the best way that they could ensure this obedience for themselves and for the people of their time was to build what they called a hedge around those Ten Commandments.

To come up with a whole bunch of concrete, tangible, little rules and regulations, which if people kept, they would somehow end up keeping the basic ten. Now, by the first century, this hedge was made up of 631 extra rules.

Can you imagine that? 631 extra rules. It was thought that if people paid attention to this hedge, they would end up being obedient to the Ten Commandments.

[15 : 27] A little more history. Of all the commandments, the fourth commandment received the most attention from the Pharisees and the scribes. Why? Because the Pharisees were convinced that all of Israel's problems were due to the fact she did not keep the Sabbath.

All of Israel's problems were due to the fact she did not keep the Sabbath. Now, although they may have overreacted, the Pharisees are on to something here.

This is the message of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel says over and over again that Israel is going into Babylon because Israel profaned the Sabbath.

Ezekiel 20, verse 16, God says, Because they rejected my ordinance, and as for my statutes, they did not walk in them, they even profaned my Sabbath for their heart continually went after their idols.

You see, the Sabbath was to be a sign, a badge of allegiance between God's people and Yahweh. It was to be a signal that the people of God knew whose they were and who they were.

[16 : 36] And when Israel ceased keeping the Sabbath, Ezekiel saw in that a profound sign of no longer having allegiance and loyalty and warned that Israel would suffer the consequences.

So the Pharisees of Jesus' day were going to guarantee that they and their contemporaries would remain faithful. Are you with me? Now, in their minds, the key phrase in the fourth commandment is no work.

Six days you shall do your work and labor, but on the seventh you shall do no work. Thus, the crucial, burning question for the Pharisees became, what is it that constitutes work on the Sabbath?

More specifically, the question became, what is the work God prohibits on the Sabbath? So afraid were they of disobeying this command that they focused the issue negatively.

What is the work prohibited by God on the Sabbath? Ready for the answer? The Pharisees concluded that there were 1,521 things God prohibited on the Sabbath.

[17 : 50] Can you imagine living with the burden of that? 1,521. My grandmother only had three prohibitions. No baseball, no comics, and no listening to the Lone Ranger on the radio.

These folks live under the burden of 1,521. Now, listen, for example, to this list. It comes from the Mishnah book, Shabbat. The main tasks prohibited are 40 save one.

He who sows and plows and reaps and binds, he who threshes and winnows and fans, he who sifts and kneads and bakes, he who shears wool and bleaches it and combs and dyes and spins, he who weaves and draws and twists and separates two threads, he who ties and unties a knot, who sews two stitches and tears apart to sew two stitches, he who hunts and kills and skins a gazelle, he who salts it and dresses its skin and scrapes and cuts it, he who writes two letters and rubs out again to write two letters, he who bills and pulls down, he who lights a fire, which is why an Orthodox Jew will not drive his car on Sabbath.

In order to drive the car, you have to light a fire. He who lights a fire or who puts it out, he who strikes with a hammer, he who carries from one place to another, these are the main tasks for it to save one.

There's more. Listen to this list. It comes from the Mishnah book Beza. On account of the Sabbath, one incurs guilt for the following activities. One is not to climb a tree, nor ride on an animal, nor swim in water, nor clap the hands, nor slap the hips, nor dance.

[19 : 26] On account of the following activities, one occurs guilt even though they are legitimate as such. One is not to administer justice, nor become engaged to a woman, nor go through the ceremony of casting off the shoe and refusing leverite marriage, nor contract leverite marriage.

Some rabbis even spelled out the quantities of liquid that were allowed to be carried on the Sabbath. He is guilty who carries enough wine for the mixing of a cup, milk enough for a sip, honey sufficient to put on a wound, enough ink to write two letters.

Furthermore, one was not to heal on the Sabbath, unless the person was clearly going to die, unless you acted. Otherwise, the sick person was just to wait until the Sabbath was over.

Why no healing? Because if you were going to act in healing, you were probably going to have to lift something up, and you were probably going to have to carry something. Both thought to be prohibited by God.

A man who regularly took a certain liquid medicine consulted a rabbi about whether or not he could carry this liquid medicine on the Sabbath. The rabbi answered, If it is for pleasure, it's lawful, but if it's for healing, it's forbidden.

[20 : 39] Gargling for a sore throat was legal as long as you swallowed everything. Now, I think you can see why Jesus got in trouble.

Jesus broke all the rules. He didn't break the Sabbath. Be clear about that. But He did break all of these rules that were thought to guarantee Sabbath keeping.

He healed people, and He allowed people to meet their needs. Mark says Jesus was angry, grieved at them because of their hardness of heart, for they missed the point.

The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath, says Jesus. For Jesus, the Sabbath means wholeness, what is good for us. He heals because He wants to make us whole.

And He heals on the Sabbath because the Sabbath is all about wholeness. The Pharisees missed the whole point. They were well motivated, but they missed the whole point.

[21 : 42] The emphasis of the fourth commandment is not no work. The emphasis is keep it holy. The no work is a means to the great end of keep it holy.

And the Pharisees so focused on the means, they missed the end. Holy. It simply means being set apart by God for God.

That's all. And no work is unto the end of being set apart for God that day. Jesus' action on the Sabbath says that holiness, therefore, is not anti-necessity.

Holiness is not anti-healing. In fact, I should put it positively. Holiness involves God meeting our needs. Holiness involves God healing us in every way.

The no work of the Sabbath was simply the means by which we can enter into God's holy rest. In other places in the gospel, in John 5, Jesus points out that God resting doesn't mean God being inactive.

[22 : 48] When God ceased from creating the world on the seventh day, it didn't mean that God went into neutral. God rested means that God enters now into the very reason for His creative work.

God enters into the delight that He has in His work of creation. Have you ever noticed in Genesis 1 that the seventh day does not have a time marker on it?

The other six days do, but the seventh does not. It was evening and morning day one. It was evening and morning day two. It was evening and morning day three, day four, day five. It was evening and morning day six.

But there is no phrase, it was evening and morning day seven. The reason there is no phrase is that we were originally created for a forever seventh.

We were created to join God in His rest, that is, in entering into the joy that God has in His creation, and especially the joy that God has in the creature made in His image.

[23 : 52] Keep it holy, therefore, means to be about whatever makes this day set apart for God. It means being about whatever helps us enter into God's own delight in His creative and redemptive work.

The Pharisees missed the point. So did my grandma. The question is not, what does no work mean? The question is, what is it that makes for intentionally being God-preoccupied, God-directed, and God-delighting on this day?

Back to the practical question. How? How do we obey, then, in our time, without falling into the Pharisee's trap? I've been most helped by a woman named Marva Dawn.

Miss Dawn has written a book entitled Keeping the Sabbath Holy, W-H-O-L-L-Y. And Miss Dawn gathers up all the ins and outs of Sabbath keeping around four verbs.

The four verbs are ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting. Ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting.

[25 : 07] I think those verbs capture the spirit of the Sabbath that we see in Jesus. Ceasing. It's what the Hebrew word for Sabbath literally means. Ceasing.

Not only from our work routine, but from the need to accomplish, the need to succeed, from this drivenness and anxiety that comes with our emphasis on productivity and creativity.

But most of all, it means ceasing from the need to be in control as though we were God. Why do we feel that we have to stay busy all the time?

Isn't it because we feel that it's all going to come apart if we don't stay busy? We don't stop because it's all up to us, and if we stop, it's all going to fall apart. And the fourth commandment says, no, come to your senses.

It's not all up to you at all. It will not come apart because you are not holding it together the other six days anyway. Ceasing.

[26 : 10] The ceasing requires a decision deep within the soul. I have to take myself in hand, and I have to say to myself, okay, not today, Daryl.

You're not in control today. I'm not in control the other six days either, but at least I say it on Sunday. And when I do that, it seems as though I can hear from all around me the words of Psalm 46, be still and know that I am God.

It's literally translated, cease striving and know that I am God. I will be exalted in the earth. I'm going to be exalted among the nations.

ceasing. It says to me this means repentance at a profoundly deep level, repenting of the sin of trying to be my own Savior.

The Sabbath involves this deep turning in the road, making a U-turn away from myself and all the weight that I carry as my own Savior to the true Savior.

[27 : 20] This ceasing may require, notice how I put that, may require ceasing from television on the Sabbath for a little while anyway, ceasing the barrage of words and images that keep us anxious.

All those images and words that tell us that we need to be possessive and that we need more. just for a day, switch off the pressure so that we can hear the beast still and know that I am God.

Resting. The second word is also inherent in this Hebrew word for Sabbath. It's the logical step after ceasing. Once we stop that madness of idolatry, we then turn and throw ourselves again on the living God.

Like little children, we climb up in the Father's lap and rest a while. Now, resting is a choice too. It requires a decision deep within the soul.

Martin Luther writes, the spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment is that we not only cease from our labor and trade but much more that we let God alone work in us.

[28 : 27] That's rest. The picture that comes to me is that of going to the doctor's office, climbing up on the table and saying to the doctor, Doc, I've tried everything I know how to do.

I'm here now and I'm going to rest in what you can do. Now, this resting is going to take different forms for different people. Sharon and I are very different people and if we were to design the ideal Sabbath for our family, we will come to different conclusions.

Although Sharon is quieter than I, she is by nature the extrovert. I'm an introvert. Sabbath rest for her is going to involve people. It's going to involve community.

Sabbath rest for me is going to involve ideas and solitude. The point is, whatever it is that causes us to once again lay in the arms of the Father, do.

You see why ceasing has to come before resting? We have to stop long enough to be able to hear the voice of the true Savior say, come unto me all who are weary and I will give you rest.

[29 : 35] Literally, come unto me all who are weary and I will rest you. Rest is not something Jesus can give us apart from Him. It's in relationship with Him that He takes us in His hands and rests us.

Ceasing, resting, embracing. This is the really unique contribution of Miss Dawn. She sees in the fourth commandment the call to imitate our Maker, Redeemer, and Lover.

Six days you shall work, one you shall rest, four, Yahweh your God. And she says that the Sabbath rest then is unto imitating God's agenda on this day.

To embracing God's purposes, embracing God's ways, embracing God's pleasures and desires and delights. Concretely, I think this means that somewhere along in this day we need to embrace the Word, to be alone in the Word.

Somewhere along in the day we need to embrace prayer. Marsha Roth was telling me the other day about a rabbi who speaks of the Sabbath as the cathedral of time.

[30 : 42] Isn't that a nice image? A cathedral of time. Embrace this cathedral where we can be alone, seeking the face of God. Again, that's going to look different for different people. And embracing friendships.

Embracing those who are also wanting to embrace God's purpose for us and enter into God's delight. Ceasing, resting, embracing, and finally feasting. It makes sense given our Lord's desire that we enter into His delight of creation and redemption.

Miss Dawn speaks of feasting on the eternal. Isn't that good? Somehow during this day we are to feast on God's past and on God's present and on God's future.

And we are to do so with feasting on music and beauty and food. Watch Jesus on the Sabbath. Always in trouble because He's always turning the Sabbath into a party.

Celebrating the scandalous love of the Father for sinners. It doesn't take much to feast. Just some friends, some food, some music, and some sense of the presence of the lover of our souls.

[31 : 55] Now, in order for us to live these four verbs, we need one other verb and that's the verb prepare. A day of ceasing, resting, embracing, feasting can't happen if at the beginning of the day we have to run around like the rat race to get ready for it.

We need to be prepared by trying to put all the chores into the other six days if possible, by trying to do all the shopping and as much of the cooking as we can on other days and by praying, Lord, you've got to slow me down.

You've got to slow me down. You've got to slow me down for me to spend the time with you today. Again, Jesus teaches us that the emphasis of the fourth commandment is not no work but keep it holy.

No work is simply the means to the greater end of keeping it holy, entering into the call of the divine lover who says, can't we just spend a little time together once in a while?

Sabbath keepers are rare birds in our time, aren't they? But you can spot them pretty quickly. They stand out in the midst of all the confusion and hype. In the words of Bill Hyles, they speak of feeling treasured and protected.

[33 : 20] Their character is deeper, their ideas are fresher, their spirits are softer, their courage is greater, their leadership stronger, their concerns broader, their compassion more genuine, their convictions more concrete.

They have joy in difficulties and wisdom beyond their age. We don't have time for questions this morning.

Come now to the table of the Lord of the Sabbath where we once again can cease our striving and rest in His grace, where once again we can embrace Him who is our life and rest and feast on what He alone can give us.

Come.