

A Meditation on Sabbath

Mark 2, verses 23-28, continues to show the tension between the religion of the Pharisees and Jesus; this time it concerns the Sabbath. "One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Apparently, from Mark's account that we are reading from today, Jesus saw the Sabbath as a good day to go for a walk in the country. He found it totally acceptable for His disciples to take a snack from the grain field they were walking through. But in the strict sense of the law, as interpreted and enforced by the Pharisees, Jesus' disciples were breaking Sabbath. By picking a few heads of wheat, they were harvesting grain. And, by removing the hulls they were threshing, winnowing, and preparing a meal. The Pharisees had found grounds to bring charges against Jesus and His disciples; they were obviously Sabbath breakers.

Jesus does not argue the charge but he justifies their actions on three fronts, one by the citing of precedent: In verses 25 & 26 He says, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Compared with David's act of giving consecrated bread to unconsecrated men, Jesus' acceptance of His disciples' midday snack was of no consequence. Clearly, the Pharisees were being petty.

Second, Jesus appeals to a well-known saying among the rabbis: In verse 27, He says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In other words, the Sabbath was given for man's benefit, not as an added burden. In remembrance of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Sabbath is to be kept as a celebration of freedom not to be used to restrict and limit.

Third, Jesus asserts His own authority. In verse 28 He says, "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

The bottom line here is that the Sabbath was meant to bless and refresh man's spirit, not bind and wither it. Thus saith the Lord! "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**" What we learn in our Scripture passage from Mark 2:23-28 is that Sabbath-keeping should not be reduced to a legal obligation or used as an

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excuse to nitpick, criticize, or condemn others. Sabbath is to be kept as a blessing, not made into a curse.

As we turn our attention to Mark 3:1-6, we find further controversy and further teaching regarding the Sabbath. Verses 1-2 say, "Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath."

Two things are apparent in these verses: #1, Jesus kept the Jewish Sabbath by attending the synagogue. And, #2, the religionists had their minds not on the worship of God but on finding reasons to accuse and to condemn Jesus. Verses 3-5 tell us what happened: "Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.' Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored."

Can you imagine the stir this healing must have caused in the synagogue that day? The man who was healed would have been radiant--filled to overflowing with joy and gratitude. The disciples of Jesus would have been gleeful in the demonstration of their Master's power. The majority of the people in the synagogue would have been awe-struck, elbowing one another and asking, "did you see what I saw? How wonderful, how amazing!" The Pharisees, however were livid. They resented and feared this exhibition of Jesus' authority, and they were frustrated that they could not control Him. Their resentment, fear, and jealousy drove them into a murderous frenzy. Mark 3:6 says, "Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."

The key verse in this passage is verse 4: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" **The Sabbath is for good and for celebrating life.**

Now these passages bring up three questions for us: #1: Should we keep a Sabbath; and #2, if so, what Sabbath should we keep? And, #3, if we keep a Sabbath, how can we know that we have kept it well?

The evidence in favor of keeping Sabbath is pretty clear. I believe the fact that so many people in our modern world are so stressed out, freaked out, burned out, and/or spiritually bankrupt, has a direct link to the lack of Sabbath keeping. People can argue about the precise

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moment when American society lost God's blessing. Some would say it was when Bible reading and prayer were removed from the classroom. Some would say it was Prohibition or when Prohibition was over turned. Others would say it happened when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a woman's so-called "right" to have an abortion. Bill Engle, a long deceased member of our congregation, once told me that everything started to go down hill when the young people started to go to the roller skating rinks. You can pick your poison for there is a lot of poison to pick from. (Though roller skating wouldn't be on my list).

But, if I were to put my finger on the one thing that has done more to decimate church and family and to cause us to lose our grip on God, I would say it is the loss of Sabbath. The seven day work week, coupled with husbands and wives both working outside the home, has done real harm to our spiritual, mental, and relational health. As I look back to my own childhood I can see how vital Sabbath was to my spiritual and relational development. Our Sabbath was Sunday, and it often included attending Morning Worship and Sunday School. It always included a big delicious dinner at home or at grandmother's house--mashed potatoes, meat, and gravy. In good weather we played outside, or dad would take us for a drive in the country. At other times we would play board games inside the house. We weren't glued to the TV or to the computer. After spending time with God, we would spend time relating to and enjoying being with one another.

Of course even then, not everyone took advantage of the opportunities a Sabbath provides. Your memories may not be as positive as mine, but at least there was a chance that the day would be used well. Yes, I think we need a Sabbath. God gave Sabbath because we need Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man for a reason. It was a blessing given to keep us close to Him and to one another. It was a blessing meant to refresh, to heal, and to empower our souls. If we think we can be whole without a Sabbath, we are deluding ourselves. Yes, we need to keep Sabbath.

The second question is what Sabbath should we keep? Old Testament Law prescribed the 7th day to be kept holy. This would be Saturday. In the early Christian Church, and throughout most of Church history, the 1st day of the week was the most holy day and the favored day for worship because it was the day Jesus rose from the dead. This would be Sunday. Typically these Sabbaths were dedicated to the worship of the Lord, to religious instruction, to rest, and to family.

In today's culture the ideal of everyone keeping the same day together or of any family keeping the same day every week as the

Sabbath, becomes more and more difficult. Many businesses and industries see Saturdays and Sundays as ordinary work days, and crucial to their economic success. Public schools are increasingly taking advantage of Saturdays and Sundays to schedule athletic events, concerts, and rehearsals, which compete with religious activities or free time for families.

The big question for the morning is this: How do we keep Sabbath in the midst of a culture that has decided to phase it out or to ignore it. I believe there are three things we can do to reclaim Sabbath: #1: I believe that for our spiritual, mental, and physical health we need to recommit to the keeping of a weekly Sabbath. #2: I believe to be consistent with the chief practice of the Church throughout its 2000 year history, we ought to observe Sunday, Resurrection day, or the Lord's Day as our Sabbath whenever and as often as it is feasible for us to do so. #3: I believe that when our culture takes this day from us we ought to be flexible and intentional in keeping Sabbath on an alternative day.

In regards to this last item, we need to acknowledge that it will not be easy. We will have to be intentional and plan to make sacred space and time on a day not usually set aside for that purpose. It will also be difficult because the Devil will oppose it; even some well-meaning religious people may oppose it, but we must be willing to fight through the internal and external static to reclaim the gift of Sabbath. It's all about strengthening our relationship with the Lord, with our families, and allowing the Lord to bring His blessing and His Shalom into all facets of our lives.

So what would this look like in practice? Some of you know right now that you will not be able to attend services next Sunday. Your days off next week are Tuesday and Thursday. Before you heard this sermon this morning, your plan for Thursday was to do what you please and nothing that you don't please, but now you want to keep it as a Sabbath unto the Lord. How do you do that?

Well, you might extend your daily devotions to an hour or even two. Give that time to quieting yourself before the Lord, praying, reading Scripture, reading a Christian book or the sermon hand-outs we make available. You might go through the weekly bulletin, pray for the people to be prayed for, and pray for the weekly and special meetings and events that are listed there. Make your quiet time a worship experience. After that, some part of the day may be given to visiting the sick or helping to meet the relational needs of some of our shut-ins, either in person or on the phone.

I was visiting with Esther Chesney the other day and noticed that she was wiping her one eye a lot. She noticed that I was watching her and told me that she hadn't had her eye drops in for several days because she has had no one to help her and because she has great difficulty getting them in herself. I said, "I think I could do that for you today if you would like." So, I did. Given the example Jesus sets for us in the man with the withered hand, I think this would be a valid thing to do on our Sabbaths.

Another thing it would be well to do on our Sabbaths would be to participate in or to host a Bible Study or Prayer Group that would provide Christian fellowship and opportunities for spiritual growth for us and for others. Another part of our Sabbath observance might be to commune with God in nature, a walk in the woods, a relaxing spell of working in our gardens, or a visit to a state or community park might be in order. And, of course, our Sabbath ought to be used as an opportunity to spend quality time with family and friends. We need to make a commitment: **We will not surrender our Sabbaths to the world..**

Our final question is How can we know that we have kept Sabbath well? Here are some tests I would recommend: #1 has it made you more aware of the presence of the Lord? #2 has it brought you the peace of knowing that the Lord is your provider and that all your circumstances are in His hands? #3 have you heard His voice, sensed His direction? #4 has it blessed you and been a blessing to others within your sphere of influence? And #5 has it made you hungry to do it again?

Keeping of Sabbath is God's gift to all His children. Man was not made for the Sabbath but Sabbath for man. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. It is a day to do good and not evil, a day to bless and not curse, a day to give life not to take it away. Let us be intentional and creative in keeping Sabbath at least once a week. Let us be blessed.

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Mark 2:23-3:6

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