

Michael McGowan

Mark 2:23-28 – *Sabbath: a Gift*

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Mark 2:23-28

²³ One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

²⁵ He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ 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.”

²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

You can picture the scene:

It’s early summer...

So, it’s warm...

Probably in the high 20s and sunny.

Jesus and his band of misfits—

Peter and Andrew;

James and John;

Levi the tax collector—

They’re walking through a grainfield...

Probably a field of wheat much like the picture Pastor Hilary showed.

You can imagine that they’re hungry—

Not starving as they recently had dinner at Levi’s house (2:15)—

But hungry like you'd be hungry between meals after a long walk...

Wanting to snack on something.

The disciples see that the wheat looks ready for the taking...

So, they begin picking the heads.

As if out of nowhere, a Pharisee stands blocking their path...

Arms folded across his chest...

With the look of a disapproving parent on his face:

“What are your students doing?”

“Don't you realize that they're picking the grain?”

“You do know what day it is, right?”

“It's Sabbath...”

“And the law prohibits one from reaping on Sabbath.”

“Teacher, your students are violating the law.”

Pharisees were zealous about keeping the law.

In a positive sense...

The law was to honor the Sabbath Day as holy...

To rest on Sabbath and make the necessary sacrifices...

The “dos” of Sabbath.

But the negative sense is where the Pharisees got hung up...

The prohibitions...

What you cannot do on Sabbath.

The Mishnah—

The “Oral Torah” that would have guided the Pharisees—

Had a list of 39 categories of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath Day...

That are still recognized by some sects of Judaism.

For example:

One category of prohibited work is *burning*...

You cannot make a fire or cause anything to burn on Sabbath.

Today that would mean:

No smoking;

No driving a car with a combustible engine;

Some are as serious as to say no using appliances or electricity...

As electricity extracts energy from nature.

Another category of prohibited work is *finishing*...

You cannot complete anything...

Or do anything that requires repairs or adjustments.

Today that would mean:

Working on your car;

Sculpting;

Tuning a musical instrument;

Milling or wood work;

The example I found included not blowing up water wings.

Other categories of prohibition are plowing, planting, reaping, and harvesting...

With obvious implications for our time in the garden.

39 categories—

Categories with sub-categories—

Of work that is prohibited on Sabbath.

The Pharisees were passionate about keeping God's law...

But they were so focused on the negative aspect—

What you couldn't do—

That they missed the point of the Sabbath...

What it was intended for.

When you think about your experience of Sabbath...

What comes to mind?

Is it times of rest?

Refreshing times of connecting with the Lord?

Lounging in the hammock or taking a leisurely afternoon stroll?

Or do you remember more of the prohibitions...

Maybe a day of burden more than a day of blessing:

No playing ball;

No bike riding;

No swimming;

No dating;

No shopping;

No going to the movies;

No yard work.

Until 1985 the Lord's Day Act in Canada prohibited business transactions on Sundays.

One article subtitle about it reads:

"The Lord's Day Act of 1906 guaranteed one day a week off..."

"But it didn't say you could have fun." (canadashistory.ca)

Maybe this captures your experience of the Sabbath...

A day off...

But a day lacking enjoyment.

We think about the Sabbath today—

Maybe we try putting it into practice—

And some of the first questions that come to mind are:

Am I allowed to do this—

Am I *allowed* to work in the yard?

Am I *allowed* to exercise?

Am I *allowed* to play in a rec league on Sunday afternoons?

Does my Sabbath *have to be* on Sunday—

We start from a place of law...

Asking what's permissible...

What's allowable, and what's prohibited.

Maybe it's the way we were brought up...

Maybe it's a distorted relationship with God's commands...

Maybe it's just because we don't know how to think about it properly...

But for many of us...

Sabbath carries with it more of a burden feeling—

A day of prohibitions...

Looking over our shoulder for the Pharisees keeping an eye on what we're doing...

That legalistic, internal voice of condemnation—

Rather than a day to enjoy and delight in.

Jesus' words get to the true intention of Sabbath:

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

In other words, the Sabbath is a gift to us.

The Sabbath Day was never intended to be a burden to humanity...

It was never meant to be a long list of dos and don'ts.

The *Sabbath* was given in order to serve *us*...

Not the other way around.

When we view it through the lens of legalism—

“I can't do this, I can't do that...”—

Sabbath becomes our master.

We live in bondage to Sabbath...

We start to serve Sabbath...

Instead of Sabbath serving us.

God gives us Sabbath as a gift.

Something that we are to receive with gratitude and thanksgiving...

Not with apprehension...

Waiting for the extra weight to be added to are already overburdened lives.

In his wisdom...

God gifted us with Sabbath rest.

God created us knowing that we have limits.

God created us knowing that we cannot work long stretches of time without stopping.

God created us knowing that we need space to breath...

To free our minds from the anxieties of going, going, going.

God created us to be in relationship with him...

Knowing that we need time to come away from our work to be with God...

To have him refresh us and restore us to life.

So, God gives us Sabbath.

God gives us the gift of Sabbath to serve us.

For God's people in the old covenant (Mosaic Law)...

Sabbath *was* a requirement.

It was legally binding on God's people...

The 4th commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

But there too...

The intention was to bless the people.

Remember, this law is given right after Israel is delivered from slavery in Egypt...

Where they were working 7 days a week...

Back-breaking labor without any rest.

God makes a law protecting their day off:

"You need this rest so badly..."

"You need my presence in your life so desperately..."

“That I’m going to make a law around it.”

“I’m going to protect this day for you.”

Then, in their humanity—

In their desire to keep people from even coming close to breaking God’s law—

The Pharisees and teachers of the law add regulation after regulation...

Telling people exactly what they can and cannot do...

To the point where the whole system becomes one, big, confusing burden.

It was never intended to be that way.

God gave Sabbath as a gift...

The gift of rest with him.

Now you may ask: “How does the Law apply to us today?”

Aren’t we required to keep all of the 10 commandments?

Are we no less obligated not to kill...

Then we are to keep the Sabbath holy?

Or are some commandments more important than the others?

Let’s be clear on this:

We are no longer under the law.

We are no longer judged on if we keep the law or not.

And this is good, because we don’t keep the law.

We do worship false gods of money, reputation, and status;

We do commit adultery with our eyes and hearts;

We do covet our neighbor’s property;

And we fail to honor our mothers and fathers;

We do gossip and slander people.

We break each and every one of the 10 commandments.

Thankfully our salvation and standing with God does not hinge on them.

Our salvation and life rest on Christ alone.

We were supposed to keep the law...

But we didn't.

So God the Father sent God the Son (Jesus) to live among us...

And he kept the law.

He lived a perfect life and was crucified for it...

Taking the punishment that we were supposed to take for breaking God's laws.

Now in Christ, God has set us free from the requirements of the law.

Our relationship to the law changes because of our relationship with Christ:

We no longer keep the law out of obligation...

We keep it out of gratitude for what God has done for us.

Now the law helps us know how to live lives that are pleasing to God...

It guides our lives.

We're not judged on how well we keep the law...

We're judged on Christ's merits...

What Christ did on our behalf.

And *this grace* motivates us to live for God...

It compels us to follow the Lord's commands.

What does that mean for us today then—

If we're not under obligation to keep the 4th commandment;

If we see it not as a burden, but as a way to live God's blueprint for our lives;

If there's more freedom in Sabbath-keeping than we've realized;

If Sabbath is meant to serve us...

If it is a gift to be received in gratitude—

What does that look like today?

Instead of giving you a list of do and don'ts...

Let's use the language of "postures."

What postures can we take to receive this gift from God?

Picture yourself walking up to God...

Ready to receive his gift of Sabbath.

What does this posture look like?

First, we look at the giver.

In our culture, it is rude to receive a gift without looking at the person giving it.

We look the giver in the eye...

Meaning, our focus is on God.

The intention of Sabbath is that we would reconnect with our Maker...

That we would be reminded of God's love for us;

That we would delight in the One who created us...

That our gaze would remain on God.

How do *you* connect with God?

(remember, we're not going to put any legalistic regulations around this)

Spending time in prayer as you go for a run?

Lighting candles at the table and reading a Scripture passage before eating as a family?

Lay down on the couch with a book God has placed in your life right now? (Ruth Haley Barton)

What are some of the ways that you enjoy connecting with God...

Keeping your focus on the Creator?

Our second posture when we approach God to receive this gift...

What do our arms look like?

Our arms are open and extended.

Our posture is one open to receive the gift.

We are open to the gift of Sabbath however it looks to us.

No one can prescribe what I have to do on my Sabbath Day. (Eugene Peterson)

There are no rules and regulations that we are bound to keep.

This is a gift that asks us to be creative...

It asks us to pay attention to practices we enjoy and delight in...

Practices that connect us to God and practices that refresh us.

There is no one looking over our shoulder...

Making sure we practice the Sabbath properly.

(So, if you're playing the role of the Pharisee in someone else's life...stop it!)

No, we are open to creative ways of receiving the gift.

Eugene Peterson distinguishes 2 Sabbath-keeping practices: Pray and Play.

But these are not mutually exclusive.

The art of Sabbath-keeping is the integration of the 2...

Pray and Play.

Being attentive and focused on God...

Being attentive and focused on our humanity...

Enjoying the way God created us.

The Puritans strict Sabbath-keeping only focused on the pray...

To the exclusion of enjoyment;

On the other side, our contemporary society tends to leave God out...

Only focusing on those things that entertain us.

But this gift from God invites us into creativity...

Being open to the integration of playing and praying...

Things that refresh and restore our bodies, minds, and spirits.

So, what are things that delight you?

What are the ways you enjoy resting?

What replenishes your spirit?

Where is the intersection of praying and playing for you?

Our third posture...

We open the gift.

Sometimes it's awkward when you give a gift to someone...

You've put a lot of thought into the gift—

Something you know they really want or need—

And you're so excited to give it to them...

To see their eyes light up when they open it.

But, maybe they're too bashful...

And they don't open it in front of you.

Or maybe they take the paper off but don't open the box.

Kids are really instructive here.

They tear the wrapping off and—

If it's something they like—

They immediately go to tearing open the box.

They want to play with the gift right away!

God is offering us a gift that he wants us to open and enjoy.

As we said last week...

Receive the gift of Sabbath...

Make it a part of your rhythm and routine.

It doesn't do you any good if you don't practice it.

That new Instant Pot looks great in the box in the closet...

But it's not really benefitting you at all.

Take it out of the package and try it out.

God gives us the perfect gift—

He knows we're tired;

He knows we're depleted;

He knows we're anxious;

He knows we're struggling—

So God gives us this perfect gift of Sabbath rest...

Time to enjoy him and enjoy our being human.

Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.

In God's grace and in God's love...

He gives us this gift.

Amen.