

## **Celebrate Sabbath Rest**

*Mark 2:23-3:12; February 21, 2021*

### **Introduction:**

Last week in Mark we were introduced to some of the controversies surrounding Jesus:

- He eats with tax collectors and sinners.
- His disciples don't fast.

Today we're going to see another controversy and this time it's about the Sabbath.

Most of us probably have at least a vague sense that the Sabbath is pretty important because it's one of the Ten Commandments but my guess is that many of us struggle with what the Sabbath means for us today.

I grew up in a household that practically observed Sundays as a Christian Sabbath. We went to church Sunday mornings and evenings but for the most part, didn't shop, go to the movies or play sports on Sundays. I say, "for the most part," because there were exceptions, especially as I grew older. As I grew in my understanding of the Bible and particularly, in seminary, I began to wrestle with my experience growing up and the teaching of the Sabbath in the Bible. This topic hit home to me so much that I ended up writing on my dissertation on this very issue. It's called *The Drama of the Sabbath: A Biblical and Theological Analysis of the Sabbath*. On one hand, this is any easy sermon for me (because I've spent so much time thinking about this issue), but one the other, it's really hard because there's so much I want to say in just one sermon.

Let's jump into the text and read about these Sabbath controversies:

### **Read Mark 2:23-3:12.**

These controversies centered over some key questions about the Sabbath:

- 2:24: Why are your disciples doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?
- 3:2, 4: Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

These questions are primarily aimed at understanding and applying the *rules* of the Sabbath. And these are the two questions that most of us probably approach the Sabbath with?

- What are the rules of the Sabbath? What are the commands?
- How should I apply these rules/commands to my life?

These aren't bad questions, but I want us to start by asking a different question.

- What is the story of the Sabbath?

Why is it important to start with this question?

- The Sabbath commands were given in the context of God's larger story of redemption and once we understand where and how they fit into this story, and especially how they

relate with Jesus, whom this story is all about, then we will better grasp how they apply to us today.

I'm going to give us a quick flyby of the story of the Sabbath starting all the way back in creation. It pains me to give just a brief overview, because I'd love to dig into the details, but for sake of time, those details will have to wait a future sermon series.

## **Context: The Story of the Sabbath**

### **Act I. Creation: Sabbath Inaugurated (Genesis 1-2).**

In Act One (creation), God *inaugurated* the Sabbath on the seventh day by resting from his work of creation, not because he was exhausted, but that he might take up residence and reign over his creation for the good of his people (cf. Gen. 2:1-3).

- By default, humans enter into day seven and enjoy the presence and rest of God.
- Now here's something cool: after God created on the previous six days, each day ends with the formula, "And there was evening and the was morning, the first day....the second day....the third day...etc (cf. Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).
- But the seventh day lacks such a formula. Why? This day wasn't supposed to end.
- What's implied is that Sabbath rest is the goal of creation and, you, like Adam and Eve, were made to enter into and enjoy God's unending Sabbath rest.
- But as you and I both know, that Sabbath rest was lost soon thereafter.

### **Act II. The Fall: Sabbath Lost (Genesis 3).**

- By Adam and Eve's rebellion, the blessing of God's Sabbath rest is *lost*. They are exiled out of the garden and face the curse of frustrated work, exhaustion and death.
- But God gives them a glimmer of hope even in the midst of such tragedy.
  - God makes a promise that an offspring of the woman would crush the serpent.
  - In other words, God is committed to making a way for us to get back into the garden to enjoy his Sabbath rest.

### **Act III. Israel: Sabbath Commanded and Promised (the rest of the OT).**

In Act Three (Israel), the Sabbath (along with the festivals, Sabbath year, and Jubilee) is commanded to Israel.

- Pause: but don't lose sight.
  - These Sabbath commands are a part of the larger story of God bringing about redemption and getting us back to the garden to enjoy his Sabbath rest.
  - God chose Israel because he's going to raise up an offspring from Israel who will bring salvation to the world (cf. Gen. 12:1-3).

The Sabbath wasn't just one to the Ten Commandments, it was the *sign* of the Mosaic Covenant:

*Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that*

*in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.*  
*Exodus 31:16-17*

Why did God command the Sabbath along with the Sabbath-like festivals?

1. The Sabbath was a sign *pointing back* to God's creation rest.
  - These were frequent reminders throughout the year that they were made to enter into and enjoy God's Sabbath.
2. The Sabbath was also sign implicitly *pointing forward* to the promise that God would provide a way to once again enjoy into and enjoy his presence and Sabbath rest.
  - Don't miss what the sign of the Sabbath is pointing towards. There are dangers in missing this.
  - Potentially include the story of Calynn missing the sign and heading into the black diamond area (picture).

Summary: In other words, the Sabbath points back to the goal of all creation, divine Sabbath rest, and it also looks forward with great expectancy to God's provision of Sabbath rest.

### **Interlude: The Second Temple Period: Sabbath Reversed**

This period refers to the "silent years, a span of roughly 400 years between Malachi and John the Baptist.

- One of the key developments during this period was that the Sabbath was *reversed*.
- It's a no brainer on *why* the Sabbath was reversed. Since Israel's disobedience of the Sabbath was one of the reasons for the exile (cf. Lev. 26:37-35; 2 Chron. 36:20-21; Jer. 25:11), they wanted to make sure they did everything they could so that the exile didn't happen again.
- They even spelled out 39 different kinds of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath (see the Mishnah). These were prohibitions that went above and beyond what Scripture gave.
- Thus, at the time of Jesus, the Sabbath was not only revered, it had become one of the central characteristics of Judaism.
  - This helps us to understand why the Pharisees were so watchful and critical of Jesus and disciples' actions on the Sabbath.
  - You can already see the problem: with the growing number of regulations, people were more focused on *how* they should keep it vs. *why* it was given in the first place.

Let's now look back at our passage in Mark in light of the story of the Sabbath. What do these stories teach us about Jesus and what he's doing in Act 4 related to the Sabbath.

### **I. Jesus Fulfilled Sabbath Rest (2:23-28).**

Our passage last week has already prepared us to be thinking this way:

- Jesus is the new wine and new wine is for new wineskins (cf. Mk. 2:21-22).

*Note the parallel passages: Matt 12:1–8; Luke 6:1–5.*

### **Were the disciples guilty of breaking the Sabbath?**

- According to the OT, they don't seem to be guilty (they weren't farmers trying to work).
- According to the Mishnah and the 39 rules, they were probably guilty of reaping, threshing, winnowing, and preparing food on the Sabbath. A “quadruple whammy.”

### **How does Jesus respond and what does his response teach us?**

- On the surface, Jesus' response is confusing because it isn't explicitly about the Sabbath.
- Jesus does not immediately defend his disciples' actions but rather responds to their warning with an implicit rebuke of his own:
  - “Surely you have read, have you not?”
    - Jesus is implying that they should've learned from David's example in the OT.
  - David's example (cf. 1 Sam. 21:1-7).
    - He and those who were with him were hungry.
    - They entered the temple and ate the bread of the presence (he and those who were with him).
      - Only the priests were allowed to eat the break of the presence (cf. Lev. 24:5-9).
  - What's Jesus' point? There are at least two significant ones:
    - Note that the Sabbath isn't mentioned at all in this example.
      - While David's actions could've happened the Sabbath, the text doesn't say which day it happened.
    - David and those with him ate the bread and broke the law, not just some pharisaic tradition.
      - Yet, the very Scriptures the Pharisees rely on never rebuked David for these “unlawful” actions. Why?
        - Point #1: It seems to be that there were situations (ie. “in times of need”) in which the law could've been waived or transcended.
      - But why should David's example apply here.
- There is an even greater comparison Jesus is intending to draw.
  - Jesus is implying a similar situation faces him and his disciples.
  - But this comparison only works, as D. A. Carson notes, if “Jesus is at least as special as David.”
    - Point #2: Jesus is using an argument from the lesser to the greater.
      - If David, the great king, had the authority to reinterpret the law...
      - Then Jesus, the greater king, has the same authority to a higher degree.
  - Thus, Jesus' primary concern is not to demonstrate the disciples did not violate

the Sabbath, but rather to imply that something greater than David is here (Matthew's additional comment confirms this: see Matt. 12:5-6).

- The problem with the Pharisees is not so much the Sabbath but Jesus. They refuse to accept Jesus' authority by virtue of his nature.
- The next two statements confirm this interpretation.

### **What does Jesus mean when he says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"?**

- Jesus is simply arguing the original purpose of the Sabbath commandment was to benefit human beings rather than being an obstacle and legal end in itself.
- But the next phrase brings even greater clarity.

### **What does Jesus mean when he says, "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath"?**

- The main point: the answer to the Pharisees' initial question lies in the person and ministry of Jesus.
- Just as David's position allowed him to supersede the Sabbath, so now Jesus, as the new David, possesses the authority to supersede the Sabbath. One needs now to pay attention to what God was doing and saying through Jesus.
- Summary: therefore, Jesus' OT references are not so much about defending the disciples' behavior, as they are Christological claims concerning Jesus' person and work.
  - The Sabbath has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and the Pharisees were faced with a choice about who Jesus is and whether they would accept his claims.
  - The disciples are guiltless because they have acknowledged and are now participating in Jesus' fulfillment of the Sabbath.
- Jesus sets the trajectory by which the later church would justify its departure from Sabbath observance (so Douglas Moo).

*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).*

Jesus has fulfilled Sabbath rest. But he also...

## **II. Jesus Gives Sabbath Rest (3:1-12).**

*Note the parallel passages: Matt 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11.*

- The narrator notes that in the synagogue...
  - There was a man with a withered hand
  - The Pharisees were watching Jesus, "lying in wait" to see if he would heal on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him.
- Jesus tells the man to come to him.
- Jesus then asks the Pharisees the main question that frames this narrative: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

- The customary Jewish practice was that healing was permitted on the Sabbath when life was in danger (cf. *m. Yoma* 8:6) but that exception did not apply here.
  - There is no indication this man’s life was in danger if he was not healed and therefore, the prevailing view of the time was that this healing could have waited a day (cf. Luke 13:14).
  - Though there is nothing in the OT that would have forbidden this healing.
- Underlying this question is another implicit question: Who, Jesus or the Pharisees, is doing a better job of honoring the Sabbath?
  - What’s their answer? Silence. Crickets!
- Jesus, angered at their silence and grieved over their hardness of heart, tells the man to stretch out his hand and when he does it is completely healed.
  - Side note: it is difficult to see how Jesus was guilty of labor on the Sabbath, since he only spoke to the man.
- The religious leaders, instead of submitting to the Lord of the Sabbath, were immediately filled with fury (Luke 6:11) and held counsel with the Herodians, conspiring how to destroy him.
- The irony of this narrative is that while Jesus seeks to do good through healing, as Robert Gundry notes, “[T]he Pharisees have hearts callous enough to harm, to kill, even on the Sabbath....Not only would they fail to do the good of saving life on the Sabbath. They would actually use the Sabbath to kill Jesus (v. 6).
  - This next section shows how Jesus continued to heal many, evidence that he was ushering in a return to the garden where we would enjoy the rest of God with no pain, sickness or death.
  - This next section also further highlights the ignorance and hardness of the religious leaders.
    - Mark begins his gospel this way, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1).
    - So far, only the demons have confessed Jesus as the “Son of God” but no human has yet.

#### Summary thoughts:

- Jesus healed on the Sabbath because the Sabbath is a day when healings should occur. Jesus was granting the rest that the Sabbath pointed to (so Schreiner).
- The only explanation that seems to do justice to the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels and the analysis found in the rest of the NT is that Jesus, along with the church, believed that “[Jesus] was inaugurating the new age *toward which the entire sabbath institution had been pointing*. He had come to announce and enact the Jubilee of Jubilees, the sabbath of sabbaths, the time when God’s purposes and human life would come together at last” (N. T. Wright).

#### **How does the story of the Sabbath end?**

#### **Act IV. Jesus: Sabbath Fulfilled**

## **Act V. The Church: Sabbath Celebrated**

We live in Act Five (the church) and the Sabbath is for us *an already and a not-yet reality*.

- The Sabbath is an already reality experienced through our union with Jesus and through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit.
  - But God's perfect Sabbath rest has yet to arrive in its fulness. Exhaustion, weariness, sin, sickness and death still permeate this creation, even among believers. Therefore...
- The Sabbath is a not-yet reality as we await the resurrection of our bodies and the new heaven and new earth which will fully usher in God's Sabbath Rest (no pain, sickness or death).
  - Those who endure with faith in Jesus will be returned, not to the garden, but to a new creation in the presence of God, enjoying complete and eternal Sabbath rest (Rev 14:12–13).
  - Thus, the story has come to an end in one sense, it goes on and on forever and ever.

## **Act VI: New Creation: Sabbath Consummated**

Both of these realities, the already and the not-yet, should lead us to celebration.

- We should first look back and celebrate the provision of Sabbath rest in Jesus.
- We should look forward and celebrate the hope of Sabbath rest that is surely to come.

**The Point: Celebrate in all of life the provision of Sabbath rest in Jesus.**

How do we celebrate?

### **1. Enter Sabbath Rest.**

- Sabbath rest is made available now to everyone who believes in and identifies with Christ. Thus, to celebrate is to embrace the invitation of rest by Christ (Matt 11:28–30) and through faith enter into his rest (Heb 4:1–3).
- When you enter into this rest by faith, this is a rest that is available every hour and day of the week.
- Your entire Christian life is to be a resting in God through Jesus, so that your fears, worries, and burdens are quieted by the peace and power of God's presence (cf. Phil 4:4–8; 1 Pet 5:7).
- Thus Augustine notes, “[Y]ou have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”
- **Where do you need Jesus to bring “peace” and “rest” to your “restless” heart this week?**

### **2. Proclaim Sabbath Rest.**

- The message of rest is a message the world is hungry to hear.

- **Who around you needs to hear that Jesus came to bring them rest?**

### 3. Display Sabbath Rest.

- Embedded in the OT Sabbath commands, specifically concerning the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee, was a humanitarian and social concern for justice
  - The release of slaves (Exod 21:2–6; Deut 15:12–18)
  - The remission of all debts (Deut 15:1–11)
  - The land was to lie fallow (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:1–7) so the poor may have food to eat.
  - The cancellation of debts (Lev. 25:8-55).
- Thus, the Sabbath was not just a personal rest, it was a communal rest, and meant to be shared.
- In view of this, Wright suggests that the gospel turns the Sabbath inside out, giving humans back responsibility. He asks, “What are *you* going to do . . . that brings justice and mercy, that offers healing and hope?”
- Thus, one way the church celebrates the Sabbath is through displaying Sabbath rest in acts of justice and mercy, which is nothing less than true neighborly love.
- Additionally, since one’s entire life is to be a celebration of the Sabbath, these acts of mercy and justice should not be confined to one day of the week, though one specific day may be more conducive to such acts than others. These acts should permeate every day of the week.
- Care for widows, the fatherless, the poor, the needy, the and sick.
- **How will you live this week in such a way that displays Sabbath rest in tangible ways to the broken and needy around you?**

### 4. Persevere in the Hope of Sabbath Rest.

- Knowing that complete and consummated Sabbath rest is found in the new creation encourages believers not to fall away (Heb 3:12; 4:11) but to persevere in faith (Heb 3:14; cf. Rev 14:12–13).
- We need to constantly stoke the fires of faith and obedience so that our hearts do not become hardened and we need to do this together, not in isolation.
- Because of sin, we are inclined toward either...
  - Excessive rest displayed in slothfulness, laziness and idleness or...
  - Excessive work resulting in a lack of rest, exhaustion and even sickness.
  - A celebration of the hope to come is a constant reminder that we need Jesus to help us rightly order our lives
- **How is the Spirit prompting you to stoke the fires of faith and obedience this week so that your heart doesn’t become hardened to God and deceived by sin?**

You were made to enter into and enjoy the rest of God and this rest is available to you now in Jesus. Jesus says, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).