

Seeking Sabbath: Liberating Our Lives Mark 2:23-28, Exodus 20:1-21

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Mark 2:23-29

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 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 ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests 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."

The idea of seeking Sabbath is so important that it is included in the summary of the law we call The Ten Commandments. What do the Ten Commandments bring to mind? A movie starring Charlton Heston? Ancient, arbitrary, idealistic, or irrelevant rules that have nothing to do with 21st century living? Restrictions on human freedom? It seems as though the Ten Commandments don't have much relevance for our time, judging by what we see in the media, they appear to have less impact on how people live now than ever.

Yet the Ten Commandments, including the command to observe a Sabbath day, are given by God as a gift to provide us with boundaries that encourage human relationships and community. Who wouldn't want to live in a community where family relationships are respected, where there is no murder, everyone is faithful to his or her spouse, there is no stealing, no one lies or gossips against one's neighbor, and people are content with what they have and don't covet anything or anybody belonging to someone else. That doesn't sound like restricting our freedom or constricting rules imposed arbitrarily from above. That sounds like heaven!

All the commandments which deal with relationships and community flow out of our relationship with God, which is what the first four commandments are about. The first two commandments are, you shall have no other gods before me and you shall not make for yourself an idol. The fourth commandment is, "*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*" (Exodus 20:8). The fourth commandment is how the first two are put into practical action. It is a call to make prime space and time for God, for self, for family, and for others. The world tends to snuff out space for God unless it is assertively and

specifically set aside. Sabbath means quit. Stop. Take a break. Cool it. The word itself has nothing devout or holy in it. It's a word about our nonuse of time, what we sometimes call; "wasting time." That's a subject you don't see a lot of self-help books on, *"How to effectively waste time by doing nothing and just being."*

I haven't seen that title climbing up The New York Times bestseller list.

In the passage from Mark 2, Jesus is passing through a grain field on the Sabbath with his hungry disciples. They are trailed by the ever vigilant Pharisees who seemingly never have anything better to do than to follow Jesus around for the purpose of criticizing him. Whether it is truer to the purpose of Sabbath to walk and eat with friends or to engage in a form of low level domestic spying for the purpose of accusing a brother or sister is certainly a debatable point. Jesus' view of the Sabbath is quite different from that of the Pharisees. They see the Sabbath as a day of "don'ts," it is a day of restrictions people must adhere to or else. Jesus sees the Sabbath as a day of "do's," a blessing given to liberate us from our slavish devotion to work, material things, and other idols so we *do* have time for worship, prayer, and relationships.

I was intrigued when I first learned the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy offer different explanations for remembering the Sabbath day and keeping it holy. The Exodus explanation is that we are to keep the Sabbath because God kept it on the seventh day after completing the work of creation. God knows we need rest and as God so often does, the Lord provides the example to follow. The Deuteronomic reason for Sabbath keeping is that our Jewish ancestors in Egypt went 400 years without a vacation or a day off. One thing you can definitely say about God, the Lord is not a workaholic. God doesn't want people created in the divine image reduced to tools used to make bricks without of straw or to endlessly sell items in a mall. A recent newspaper story brought up "the Blue laws" which used to keep stores closed on Sunday and the article was urging a further relaxation so that stores could be open on days like Thanksgiving and Christmas so if someone "dropped the cranberry on the floor," they could go to the store and get more. We have made such an idol out of convenience and shopping that we forget the impact it has on those must work and get no Sabbath rest as a result.

There is little that is more liberating than a regular Sabbath where we step off the always running, constantly accelerating treadmill of expectations and demands that has so many of us exhausted. God's people are told to remember that they were once slaves at the bottom of the economic heap. They knew what it was like to be exploited

in the name of greed and financial gain. God delivered them from suffering and commanded them not to inflict the same unrelenting labor on themselves or anyone else. So on the Sabbath day no one shall work and everyone, including children, slaves, and even animals may rest.

Did you know, by law, the Tokyo City Zoo in Japan must be closed for two days each month? The law became necessary when officials discovered that the animals were showing signs of extreme emotional distress from being constantly exposed to the public. If that is true of animals, how much more is it true of us? We are constantly under stress, especially as we face the complexity and busyness of life. We all need to take time to worship, praise and pray, time for important relationships with those we care about and who care about us, time to exercise or rest our bodies (depending on our work during the week), and time to let our minds slow down.

Inevitably our keeping the Sabbath or not involves others. When we choose to shop on Sunday we are preventing the employees who must staff the stores from having a Sabbath. While it might sound old fashioned or quaint, if there were no Christians shopping on Sunday, how many more people might enjoy a day of Sabbath rest?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes it clear human beings weren't made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for us because we need it and He is Lord of that aspect of our lives. All God's commands and instructions are given for our benefit. God's commands are a liberating gift including seeking regular Sabbath.

For multitudes today, both inside and outside the church, the Sabbath is largely a gift that is either unopened or lost, much like a Christmas gift that gets mistakenly put away in a closet and then gets covered up and forgotten. We've lost the gift of Sabbath simply by leaving it alone. All we have to do to lose a sense of Sabbath is to treat it like every other day. Our tendency is to work and push and strive and fret and worry. Even when commanded by God for our own good to rest, we often fail to do so. The Sabbath was made for us. If Jesus' words are true, then to use the Sabbath as any other day is to accuse Jesus of talking nonsense. If we neglect to use the Sabbath differently than other days, then we're refusing to accept God's good gift. This was the failure of the Pharisees, for them the Sabbath was simply another day to find fault with Jesus and his followers. Why weren't they home with their families resting or worshipping?

I am aware of the arguments against a Sabbath. Someone will say, "*Everyday ought to be holy unto the Lord,*" and this is true, but the person who observes a Sabbath and is liberated from a host of idolatries on a regular basis is far more likely to observe

other days as holy than the person who does not. I meet some people who use the same argument about going to worship at a church. *“Every place ought to be a holy place. Nature is where I worship.”* Every place ought to be holy, after all that’s why God appeared to Moses in a thorn bush, yet the person who makes a special time and place for worship is more likely to find a holy place or the Divine Presence anywhere.

The Sabbath command to rest, renew, and re-connect is perhaps even more relevant now than in Jesus’ time. The pace of change is the most rapid it has ever been in human history. Technology brings our work into our lives 24 hours a day wherever we are in the world. It is increasingly difficult for people in our production, achievement, and material possessions obsessed culture to pause, much less to reflect and rest. “Several years ago a group of computer salesmen from Milwaukee went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. They assured their wives that would be home in plenty of time for dinner. But with one thing or another, the meeting ran overtime so the men had to race to the station, tickets in hand. As they barged through the terminal, one man inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping they all reach the train and board with a sigh of relief, all but one. He paused and experienced a twinge of compunction for the boy whose apple stand had been overturned. He waved goodbye to his companions and returned to the terminal. He was glad he did. The ten-year-old boy was blind.

The salesman gathered up the apples and noticed that several of them were bruised. He reached into his wallet and said to the boy, *“Here, please take this ten dollars for the damage we did. I hope it didn’t spoil your day.”*

As he started to walk away the bewildered boy called after him, *“Are you Jesus?”* As he tells this story he rethinks his life and what is really of value. Somehow, although he doesn’t spell it out in religious language, he dimly perceives the incident as a summary of his life. He is running, running all the time until the incident with the blind boy and the apples has an impact on him. Somewhere, unarticulated, he wonders if the boy with two bad eyes sees more than he with two good ones (a favorite scripture metaphor). There is repentance, his feeling of regret on the train, and restitution and the blind boy sees him as Jesus. He retells the story because it bothers him. It is making a demand on him and he knows sooner or later he must respond to it. He wasn’t Jesus, of course, he was running too fast for that – but shouldn’t he be?”¹ While the salesman wasn’t working on the Sabbath, he embodies a lifestyle that is all too common when

¹ William Bausch, *Storytelling: Faith and Imagination*, pages 177-178.

people speak of being “crazy busy 24/7,” so that Sabbath, rest, renewal and worship are pushed to the margin of our lives or off the page completely.

When we refuse to take a single day a week for genuine refreshment and rest, we are trying to outdo even God and we bind ourselves more tightly in the process. In the light of God’s rest, our anxious, competitive, compulsive activity may be exposed as little more than efforts to stay in control, to acquire more, or to fabricate meaning out of constant activity. Perhaps the most common way of violating the second commandment about idols is to make an idol out of our work, even if that work is ministry.

When we fail to observe a Sabbath day during the week, we harm not only ourselves but those around us. There was a pastor for whom playing golf had become an addiction. He played 18 holes three or four times a week. One week he had only been able to play golf twice. Sunday came and he pretended to be sick, called for a substitute to take his place at church, and he slipped away to play golf by himself. He was played a magnificent round, the best of his life, and he teed off at the 18th hole with a miraculous drive – it was a hole in one!

St. Peter and Jesus were looking down at this pastor who was playing hooky and lying to his congregation. St. Peter couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Are you going to let him get away with that? Why didn’t you prevent him from making the hole in one?”

“Prevent him?” the Lord said, *“I made it for him!”*

“Why?” Peter exclaimed. *“Why in the world would you let him play the best round of golf in his life and make a hole in one? You should be punishing him!”*

The Lord replied, *“I am punishing him. Who can he tell?”*

God knows we all need a Sabbath day of rest to play appropriately, worship, renew, and reconnect with important people in our lives. God knows how anxious, worried, and driven so many of us are. Without the liberation that regularly seeking Sabbath brings our spirits dry up and our values become distorted. Like the animals in the Tokyo Zoo we need a break. Too often the Sabbath has been seen as one more task to be done, one more restrictive rule to be obeyed, a day of don’ts rather than a day of do’s. Instead of a day of what we can’t do, the Sabbath is a gift intended to be a time of refocusing on what is truly important and of lasting value. Going for a nice walk with Jesus through lovely fields of grain sounds very renewing and liberating to me and a great way to spend a Sabbath afternoon. The Sabbath is our ally, not our opponent. It is a blessing, not a burden.

Avery Brooke wrote, “O God of the Sabbath, I work too much. Work is good and necessary and I thank you for it, but I need to play more. I need to rest and relax, to walk and run, see friends and enjoy myself. Remind me, God, to take time off, and help me not feel guilty when I do.”

Don't forget in the busyness of life, to seek some Sabbath rest.

Additional Scripture

Exodus 20:1-21

“Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods beforea me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generationb of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 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. 11 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.

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

a Or *besides*

b Or *to thousands*

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, 19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." 20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."
