

The Delightful Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-14

The invitation we studied last week was so warm and gracious, wasn't it?

Mat. 11:28 "28 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

That's Jesus' promise—rest for your souls. And what a delightful thing that is. Rest, in the sense of refreshment. In the sense of delight, and satisfaction. Relief, and release from the stress of life. Relief for those who "labor and are heavy laden."

That promise of "rest" embodies the whole of the gospel, for Jesus is not inviting people to enjoy an afternoon nap, but rather to know the pleasure of eternal life. It is the refreshment of knowing, even now, that your sins will not be held against you nor the curse and condemnation pronounced against you. It is a freedom from condemnation, and freedom from the curse which God imposed when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden. Ultimately, our rest is the eternal rest in which we are freed from death, freed from all the implications of death in terms of our mortality. So the idea of "rest" becomes virtually synonymous with the definition of "heaven."

And God, in his gracious goodness, gives us a foretaste of that eternal rest of heaven while we are living here on earth. It is called "sabbath," a Hebrew word that means "rest." More literally, "sabbath" means to "take a breath." And God gives us that opportunity every week. Every week, one day in seven, God gives us the opportunity to be freed from the labor and trouble of

this week. Every week, one day in seven, we get to live in heaven, so to speak. The Sabbath day.

And amazingly, God uses himself as the model, the example, for this pattern of work and rest.

Ex. 31:16 "Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 17 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."

God rested. God was refreshed. God took a break from his work, though, obviously, unlike us, it wasn't because he was so tired out! But he took a breath, and he embodied in his moral that very principle of sabbath rest. And I present that particular commandment in that context, as a blessing to be enjoyed.

The fourth commandment is that blessing, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." I put it in this context, because the problem that Jesus encountered is the same problem that we still encounter today, a distorted view of the sabbath commandment. All too often, sinful men turn the commandments of God into oppressive burdens, by adding to the requirements God has established or by emphasizing an outward appearance while neglecting the sincerity of the heart. In other words, the consistent problems are legalism and hypocrisy. Sadly, the reaction of many people to those two problems is to dismiss the validity of the law or commandment altogether, as if the problem were with the law. Never is that more obvious than with this commandment regarding the sabbath day.

If people approached the law forbidding adultery the same way, the idea would be something like this. It really is burdensome and troublesome to abstain from any and all

adulterous relationships. That prohibition is quite legalistic, and because we live under grace we are free from the law, so I don't have to follow that commandment. That is ridiculous, of course.

Or, in our sinful hypocrisy, we create ways to give the appearance of outward conformity to that law while retaining all sorts of inward impurity within your own heart. Jesus cut right to the chase when confronted with that issue,

Mat. 5:27 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."

That's godliness. And that's good; God's law is good. So it is with the sabbath. And I say all of that because as we come to our text this afternoon, as we try to apply the sabbath commandment to our own lives, it is absolutely necessary to have a right understanding of the sabbath.

I. UNDERSTANDING THE SABBATH.

Before we even look at the errors Jesus encountered, let me emphasize the positive. Not simply, what is forbidden. Not simply, what are the wrong ideas so often associated with the sabbath. But positively, a declaration of,

A. The abiding sabbath principle.

In other words, how is it that we should understand the application of the sabbath to our lives as Christians? And some professed Christians would say we have no abiding application of this commandment. Some would say, in essence, that we have only nine commandments. Amazingly, to me, they would affirm

the other nine commandments and then outright dismiss this one as relegated to the Old Testament shadows that have passed away in Christ.

But Jesus doesn't do that! And Matthew, in writing this gospel, doesn't do that. There is an affirmation of the sabbath day commandment in those familiar words of verse 8, "the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." There is nothing there of the sabbath being abrogated, or ended. There is nothing there to cancel the commandment, as God had given it, now that Jesus has come. Matthew doesn't give us any indication that Jesus as "lord of the Sabbath" actually abolishes the sabbath.

Quite to the contrary, we read,

Mat. 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. 19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

So there is an abiding application of God's moral law. There is an abiding obligation to keep the law, to observe the law. What we are freed from is the curse and condemnation of disobedience. That is the blessing of the gospel. But being freed from the penalty of the law doesn't mean that you are free to violate the law, does it? Paul answers that question so clearly!

Rom. 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died

to sin live any longer in it?”

Heb. 4:9 “There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. 10 For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.”

And in that context,

B. Jesus is lord of the sabbath.

Jesus rules the sabbath, for he is God. Jesus determines the meaning and application of this commandment, even as he himself embodies the very principle of sabbath rest. To me, it isn't a coincidence that immediately after saying so personally, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” he enters into a discussion of the sabbath day.

Jesus is lord of the sabbath. And we in Mark's parallel account,

Mark 2:27 “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

So Jesus, the lord of the Sabbath, emphasizes the blessings of this commandment. For what brings glory to God also brings good to man! That's what is so often missing in discussions of the sabbath day today. Obedience to God's laws brings good to the obedient! And obedience to this commandment is an outworking of the recognition of Jesus' lordship. If Jesus is lord of the sabbath, then who are we to disregard the sabbath? If Jesus is lord of the sabbath, how can we say that he has abolished the sabbath?

We can't, because he hasn't. But what he does do, what Jesus does explain, are the ways in which sinful men have abused the sabbath commandment to their own harm. He

explains how fallen men have missed the point, but adding their own additional, legalistic requirements to that which God has revealed. So he identifies,

II. FOOLISH RESTRICTIONS ON THE SABBATH.

He identifies three of them, all of them an attempt by men to go beyond what the lord of sabbath himself has determined. The first has to do with hunger, Jesus' disciples who were hungry.

v.1

Immediately came the self-righteous reaction of the hypocrites.

v.2

Jesus had an answer,

v.3-4

Ordinarily, the law was that no one but the priest could eat the showbread. Clearly spelled out in Exodus 29. But the law allows this exception, as Jesus does not suggest that David actually broke the law. There was no ordinary food available, so of necessity, David ate the showbread. It was either that or starve. Calvin explains the point this way, “If David's necessity excused him, the same argument ought to be admitted in the case of others. Hence it follows, that the ceremonies of the Law are not violated where there is no infringement of godliness. Now Christ takes for granted, that David was free from blame, because the Holy Spirit bestows commendation on the priest who allowed him to partake of the holy bread.”

So the necessity of eating was allowed, and the ordinary prescription of the law didn't, therefore, apply. So it is with the sabbath.

A. The goodness of satisfying your hunger is part of the delight of the sabbath.

You can eat. It's not prohibited work. Indeed, it is a perversion of the sabbath principle to demand harm and danger to your life in order to observe the outward prohibitions even as the law prescribed. The allowed extraordinary exceptions, in time of need, in time of necessity. And that's the problem of hypocrisy. Appearing to be righteous, but inflicting great evil and harm in the name of the law. Jesus would have none of it! That's the first foolish restriction he identifies, an outward prohibition that causes harm in time of necessity.

Second foolish restriction,

v.5-6

So,

B. The glory of sincere religious worship is part of the delight of the sabbath.

The argument is something like this, the priest has to work on the sabbath. Some things, of necessity for public worship, must be done. And that work, too, is not a violation or contradiction of the Sabbath Day.

So, according to Jesus' answer in our text today, the requirements of the temple require a certain measure of work, and it is ridiculous to promote the sabbath commandment as a prohibition of that work necessary for worship.

I find that easy to apply, simply with the reality of the work that I do on the sabbath. By the time the Sunday afternoon service is over, I am exhausted. Absolutely exhausted. But exhilarated as well, by the New Covenant equivalent of the work of the temple. What a delight and privilege it is to minister God's word, to join with you all to offer the sacrifices of our worship. And whatever necessary work is accomplished to bring that about does not violate the sabbath commandment.

And actually, to take it one step further, according to verse 6, it is not just the work of the temple that is permitted, but work to honor the one who is greater than the temple. Our worship is offered to Jesus himself. Our service is devoted to Jesus himself, and that is good! And lawful. So if you have to work a bit to get here, specifically, driving your car, then come. The sabbath commandment fully allows it.

Some of you work as well. That could be teaching in Sunday school. Or playing the piano. Preparing for communion. There is no foolish and ridiculous prohibition against those sorts of things that are necessary for our common delight in the worship of God.

Third foolish restriction, a prohibition against doing good! I guess these hardened hypocrites thought that healing was included in sabbath prohibitions, and they came to Jesus with a question intended to get him in trouble!

v.9-10

Again, Jesus has an answer.

v.11

That's pretty obvious! Then to make the point even more forcefully,

v.12

There's the point, stated positively. "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." And Jesus doesn't stop with the statement of the principle. He puts it into practice.

v.13

Not surprisingly, we read,

v.14

So enough of foolish restrictions. Enough of the hypocrisy of these sorts of questions. The law transcends all of that. The Sabbath commandment goes beyond those self-righteous, man-made applications. Jesus clearly points out,

III. TRUE SABBATH KEEPING.

The Pharisees had missed the point entirely.
v.7

They condemned the guiltless, the innocent. In their self-righteous legalism, those they accused were without sin! They had done nothing wrong. And what the Pharisees had done wrong was to make applications of the sabbath commandment that violated obvious opportunities for doing good! Thus it was the Pharisees who were guilty, guilty of missing the motive of the heart. “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

Jesus doesn’t put an end to the sabbath commandment, but he does provide,

A. An emphasis upon the motive of the heart.

Mercy. Compassion. The idea of the Greek word is a sense of good will extended to those in suffering or affliction.

The quote comes from the Old Testament, and the Hebrew word is even more profound. It comes from the prophet Hosea, and the context is of God’s troubles with his people Israel. The problem was an apparent concern for the outward expressions of religious duty, but not a concern for the motive and desire of the heart. Externalism, outward duties, but no sense of virtue or character coming from the heart. We read,

Hos. 6:4 “O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like a morning cloud,

And like the early dew it goes away. 5 Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of My mouth; And your judgments are like light that goes forth. 6 For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

Mercy. Sometimes translated steadfast love, or covenant faithfulness. It is the marvelous and rich Hebrew word, *chesed*. The word is more often used of God, his compassion, his covenant faithfulness, his compassion, his mercy. And Jesus says to the hypocrites who cared only out external appearances, that God cares about the character of your heart. Your motive. Your *chesed*. Your mercy and compassion, in the desire to do good to others.

Not just the outward sacrifices. It’s not that God cancelled the requirements for sacrifices in the OT, but that mere outward performance of duty is no where near enough! “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

David understood that when he confessed his sins in, Ps. 51:16 “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

And so it is with the Sabbath commandment, that mere outward, external rituals are insufficient. Thus, Jesus reveals,

B. An emphasis upon delight rather than self-serving hypocrisy.

That’s why he says so emphatically,
v.8

Enough of all those foolish objections. Enough of the self-serving Pharisees. Our text leaves no doubt about them,
v.14

Jesus will tell you what the sabbath is all about. He is lord of the sabbath. And he leaves us with the sense of delight, the sense of refreshment, the sense of goodness. There are still regulations regarding the sabbath day, but they are all in this context. Refreshment. Rest. And the point is not to get so focused upon those regulations as to miss their purpose, even the prohibitions. If you want to enjoy the refreshment and rest of the sabbath, then you have to stop working. You have to put it aside, just as much as possible. There is some necessary work. Some works of mercy and necessity, but otherwise, put it aside. It can wait for you on Monday.

If you want to enjoy one day living in heaven each week, you have to leave the worldly affairs of this earth behind. Not in legalistic self-righteousness, but in the desire to find your delight in Jesus himself. So let me end with this glorious description and definition of sabbath glory, from,

Is. 58:13 “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

May we ride on the high hills of the earth together today and each Sabbath Day until we go to heaven!