

INTRODUCTION

For the past year we've been studying the Parables and Miracles of Jesus in the Gospel According to Matthew. In this passage today, we are going to consider a Sabbath parable and in the next message we'll consider the Sabbath miracle. Many people are confused about the idea of the Sabbath. Are we to observe the Sabbath Day rules the Jews follow to this day? Or is Sunday the Sabbath for us? If so, is it wrong to work or play golf on Sunday? Hopefully, by the end of this message you'll have an answer to these and other questions about the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:1-14. "At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.' He answered, 'Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.' Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.' Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."

Years ago there was a crisis in Holland. As you know, much of the land in Holland lies below sea level but the Dutch have reclaimed the land by constructing an ingenious system of dikes and canals (maybe that's where my family name originated) to hold back the seawater. On one particular Sunday, storms raised the water level to a dangerous height and the water threatened to overflow the dikes and flood a particular city, ruining the crops. Many residents went to the dikes to add sandbags but there were too few workers to stop the rising tide.

The local constable appealed to the local Dutch Reform Church for help. He knew there were hundreds of able-bodied men who could make the difference. He went to the church to persuade the members to come and help. The elders quickly met and decided it would be sinful to break the Sabbath rules by working on Sunday. The constable appealed to the elders to change their minds and help with the work. He referred them to this very passage we just read in Matthew 12. He pointed out that Jesus broke the Sabbath rules of His day for the good of others. The reply of the chief elder is classic. He said, "Yes, and I have always had a hard time accepting what Jesus did on the Sabbath, too!" That would be comical if it wasn't so tragic. The town flooded and most of the crops were ruined, but many of the Christians felt pious because they hadn't desecrated the Sabbath Day. Let's learn something about this Sabbath Parable and Sabbath Miracle.

A SABBATH PARABLE: A LAMB IN A PIT

Jesus was baffled at the attitude of the Pharisees. He said, "If your lamb falls into a pit, you'll get it out, but you won't move a finger to help a suffering person." There are four truths we should learn about the Sabbath.

(1) The Jews had changed the Sabbath blessing into a Sabbath burden

The fourth of the Ten Commandments was pretty simple. Work six days and rest one day. But the Jews added so many regulations to Sabbath it became unbearable. They criticized Jesus' disciples because they casually picked some kernels of grain and rubbed it between their hands to remove the husks to snack on it. Their accusation caused Jesus to claim they had ruined God's original intention for the Sabbath.

The Jewish Talmud (not the Bible) devotes 24 full chapters to what Jews could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. They added thousands of picky regulations to God's simple command. For instance, you couldn't take a bath on the Sabbath because you might accidentally splash water on the floor—and that would be washing the floor—a sin! You could write one Hebrew letter, but not two. If your house caught on fire, you couldn't extinguish it on the Sabbath. And you might freeze, but you couldn't ignite a fire either. Even to this day, the hotel doors with electric sensors that open automatically are disabled from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, because by activating that tiny circuit, it is considered "igniting a fire." But rather than talk about what the Jews can or can't do on the Sabbath, what about us?

(2) Christians are not required to obey the Sabbath laws

We're under grace, not law. There are some well meaning people, like Seventh Day Adventists who claim we should still worship on Saturday and obey the dietary laws of the Old Testament. But we know the Sabbath regulations were part of the group of regulations Jesus removed by nailing them to His cross. The Bible says, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath Day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." (Colossians 2:16-17)

We don't have to observe the Sabbath the way the Jews did. But there is another mistake some Christians make. They say, "Oh, well Sunday is our Sabbath." No, Sunday is NOT the Christian Sabbath. I invite you to find one verse in the New Testament that says Sunday has become the Sabbath. Then where did we get the idea that existed until about 40 years ago that stores shouldn't be open on Sundays?

During the first three centuries of Christianity, there is no record that Christians treated Sunday like the Jewish Sabbath. Then when Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 A.D., he really imposed more pagan influence on Christianity than Christian influence on paganism. For instance, in the year 321 A.D. Constantine issued an edict that said: "On the venerable day of the Sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed." The very name "Sun-day" is named after the worship of Sol Invictus, the Sun god! Through the

centuries, the lines of separation between paganism and the Roman Church were blurred, and thus a few centuries later it became part of the official catholic catechism that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath, but it is not in the Bible.

Then in the 16th century the Protestant Reformation shifted the emphasis to *sola scriptura* (scripture alone). But even the Reformers didn't reform the Sabbath mistake. Thus when the Westminster Confession was written in 1643, which is the official confession of the Presbyterian Church, it repeated the belief that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath, but again—it's not in the Bible.

So where did we get all these "blue laws" in America? The Pilgrims and Puritans who moved to these shores were from this same Westminster tradition. Not only did they outlaw work on the Sabbath, they also made laws forbidding other things such as dancing, recreation, and even the observance of Christmas. I love the Puritans for their emphasis on holiness, but they got the Sabbath idea wrong. All kinds of pleasant or pleasurable activities were forbidden in these blue laws. A man could not express affection to his wife on Sunday. One particular sea captain arrived home on a Sunday after being at sea for over a year. He made the mistake of kissing his wife in the presence of others and he was promptly jailed for two weeks. Insistence that we should act differently on Sunday is just another form of religious legalism.

These "blue laws" are named after the Puritans who were often called "blue noses." That may be because if their fire went out on Sunday, they couldn't light another one, so they'd have to bundle up and their noses would be blue from the cold! Remnants of these blue laws survived in the state laws of most American states. For instance, until 1985 in Texas, merchants couldn't sell any product that "worked" on Sunday. For instance, Sears could sell a shirt, but not a washing machine on Sunday. A shirt doesn't "work" but a washing machine does! A hardware store could sell a nail, but it couldn't sell a hammer on Sunday, because a hammer "works." These laws were valid until Handy Dan Hardware sued the state to repeal them!

Observance of Sunday as a holy day is just another form of religious legalism. A religious legalist is someone whose list of sins is longer than God's list.

Ron Richie is a popular pastor in California. Listen to his testimony about the kind of Sabbath legalism he grew up under. See if you can relate to this: "From my childhood, I was influenced by a kind of Christianity that majored on keeping the laws, rules, and traditions of man. This legalism required a great effort on my part and resulted in a bitter and joyless life because of the failures I suffered. For example you could square dance, but not slow dance; you could milk cows on Sunday, but not wash your car; you could watch TV, but couldn't go to movies. When I was 15 I 'sinned' by hitchhiking to a nearby town to watch my first movie, "The Yearling," starring Gregory Peck. I went into the theater with fear and trembling, looking around me as I walked in. I was so scared that I paid no attention to the plot and even to this day can't recall what it was about."

We called him Papa Jack. He was my grandmother's third husband. She outlived two husbands, and Papa Jack married her when they were in their seventies. Papa Jack was a Christian Adventist preacher. This is a group that had broken off from the Seventh Day Adventist Group

earlier. They didn't observe Saturday as the Sabbath, but they strongly believed Sunday was the Sabbath, so he wouldn't work on Sunday.

Papa Jack and Grandmother loved to hear me preach. They literally wore out several cassette tapes they had of me preaching. Papa Jack and Grandmother visited me when I was a pastor in Central Alabama to hear me preach in person. After church we went to my inlaws house for lunch. After lunch we walked out back and my father-in-law, J.R., showed Papa Jack his large vegetable garden. The tomato vines were full of ripe, red tomatoes. Papa Jack said, "Those are beautiful tomatoes!" J.R. said, "If you want some, you can pick all you want." Papa Jack shook his head and said, "Oh, no I couldn't pick tomatoes on the Sabbath!" J. R. said, "Well, can you point to them and let me pick them?" I could see the wheels of this moral question spinning in Papa Jack's head as he considered whether that would violate the Sabbath to point at ripe tomatoes. But he smiled and said, "I guess I can to that." He started pointing and said, "I'll take that one ... that one ... that one ... and that one." So to Papa Jack, he could POINT at tomatoes on the Sabbath, but not PICK them!

I love Papa Jack and he's in heaven now. I believe he has learned first-hand that Sunday isn't the Sabbath and he wouldn't have been sinning if he had picked tomatoes that Sunday! So, Sunday is the Lord's Day, and it's the primary day we gather to worship, but it's not the Christian Sabbath.

(3) By resting in Christ for salvation, we fulfill the Sabbath requirement

Jesus said He didn't come to eliminate the law of Moses, He came to FULFILL it. And the Sabbath law is fulfilled when I stop working for to earn my salvation and enter into the rest Jesus can give. The Bible says, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." (Hebrews 4:9-10)

There are millions of people who are still "working" to earn their salvation. They go to church, read the Bible, pray, help people and do good deeds all in the hope that one day God will look at them and declare them good enough to enter heaven. They haven't entered the Sabbath rest. The Bible says in Ephesians 2:8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith." Then it says, "Not of works, so that no one can boast." You are not saved by performing good deeds. You can only rest in the finished work of Jesus on the cross! That's the true Christian Sabbath. What day is the Christian Sabbath? Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday! Every day and in every way we are resting from our own work to save ourselves. Some may ask, "Well does that mean I don't ever have to work for Jesus?" Of course, we work like slaves for our Master! The difference is this: In the Old Covenant they worked first and then rested. That's why the Sabbath was the last day of the week. For Christians, it is just the opposite; we rest in Jesus first and then we work for Jesus. Although Sunday isn't any holier than Monday for us, it's a great parable of how being the first day of the week, we rest in Jesus and then work the rest of the week!

(4) We should follow a healthy cycle of work and rest

Many people don't "rightly divide the Word of truth." In other words, they don't really know the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Let me teach you an important distinction between the Old and New Testaments: The Old Testament is a book of many (613) laws and a few life principles. Of those 613 commandments, 248 of them are positive (thou shalt), and 365 of them are negative (thou shalt not). So the Old Testament is a Christian legalist's devotional calendar. I can just hear them saying, "Oh, goody, there's a "thou shalt not" for every day of the year! Look how good I am because of what I DON'T do!"

In contrast, the New Testament is a book of many life principles and only two laws. The two laws are: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your strength and your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

So, there isn't a Sabbath commandment for us to obey, but there is a very important Sabbath principle for us to follow. That principle is that we should maintain a healthy balance of work and rest.

Genesis 1 tells us God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then He rested on the seventh. By the way, God didn't need six days to create the universe. He could have created it in six nanoseconds or in one billionth of one nanosecond. He's God, after all. So the question is not how He did it, or how long it took Him to do it, but WHY did God do it in six days and rest the seventh? Was God tired? Do you think He sat down in a heavenly La-Z-Boy recliner and said, "Whew! I'm tired! I've got to rest?" Of course not! God doesn't get tired. He doesn't lose His energy. The reason He "rested" was to teach us by example that we all must set aside time for rest and for worship, to redirect our spirit. You have to teach children using object lessons and repetition. So, God showed us every week. Work six, rest one. Work six, rest one. And what God intended as something to help us live better lives, the Jews turning into a bunch of silly rules and regulations.

If you work your fingers to the bone, and never stop to rest and relax, you will miss God's best for your life. Once there was an African safari where some Americans were forging ahead into the jungle, using the natives to carry their burdens. They pressed on for ten straight days, never stopping to rest. After this hectic pace, they awoke one morning to find that the natives refused to carry their loads. The natives said, "We rest today. We must allow our souls to catch up with our bodies." That's the value of a day of rest, to let our souls catch up with our bodies.

There are two large companies in America that close on Sundays: Chick-fil-a, founded by Truett Cathey and Hobby Lobby, founded by David Green. Both of these men are Christians. On their websites they explain WHY they close on Sunday—it's not because they believe it is the Sabbath Day. But they both believe it is important to give their employees a day off so they can worship, rest, and spend time with their families. Both companies are losing hundreds of millions of dollars in business by closing on Sunday, but both Truett Cathey and David Green say it's worth it.

CONCLUSION

So what are our Sabbath lessons? God's commandments aren't to be a burden to us; they are principles help us enjoy life. And when we trust His Word, we experience His life-changing power.

Let me tell you a parable about resting in Jesus and trusting His Word. It was a dark and stormy night. A man was walking along a seaside cliff. He was unfamiliar with the path and didn't know that a part of it had crumbled away. He stepped onto the crumbled bank and found himself sliding down the edge of the cliff. He was frantically scratching and grabbing for anything to grasp to stop his fall, and finally he grabbed onto a small root protruding from the face of the cliff. He was hanging on for dear life. Because it was a dark night, he couldn't see the sky or the water below. But he could hear the sound of the crashing waves on the rocks below. Soon, his fingers grew tired and so he cried out, "God, please help me! Rescue me! Help me!"

In a few moments God said to the man, "Let go of the root and trust me."

"No, God! I can't do that. I've got to hang on for dear life!" Again, he heard the voice, "I am our life. Let go and trust me."

But the man continued to hang on with all of his might. His fingers were aching and his arms began to cramp. Finally, with sweat filling his eyes, he said, "Okay, God. I'll let go and trust you. Here goes."

He released the root and fell...four inches onto a wide, rock path that was right below his feet all along. He felt like such a fool. He had been holding on for dear life when safety was just below his feet. Only when he let go of his own efforts did he learn that God could be trusted.

Many people still try to experience salvation by holding on to their own efforts, but salvation only comes by resting in Christ and trusting God. So stop trying and start trusting!

OUTLINE

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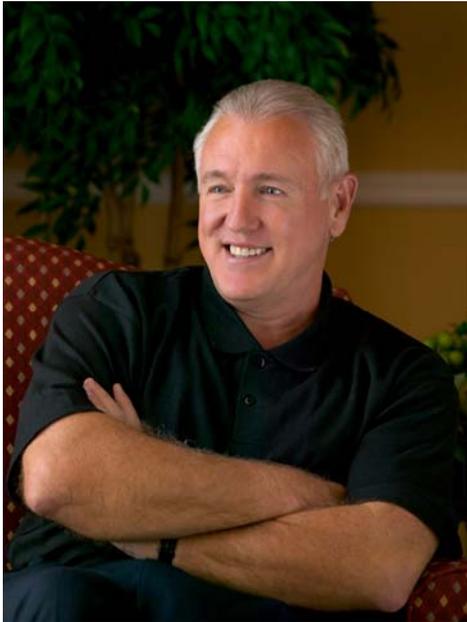
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes