



## *“Sabbath 101”*

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The church I served as student pastor was located near to a Jewish synagogue. That synagogue was served by a rabbi who quite typically walked to the synagogue on the Sabbath, though his house was some distance away. It was not that he didn't have a car, but that for him it was improper to drive on the Sabbath, for that constituted work. Sometimes my supervising pastor would see him riding a bicycle to synagogue. Pastor O'Brien suggested to him that that was a lot more work than simply turning on the ignition in an automobile. He said that when a person is riding a bicycle on the Sabbath, the person is not tempted to go shopping or run errands, or to pick up something at the cleaners. However, when one is driving a car, it is easy to do many more things than one intended to do, and thus, the special nature of the day is lost. He was, of course, attempting to live up to the requirements of the third commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Some people will honor his attempt to live by the requirements of this commandment. Others will see it as an unnecessary concern for an outdated concept.

While Jesus was often at odds with the religious authorities over how this commandment was to be observed, He never discounted its spiritual value. We can see in today's passage that Jesus attempts to balance the validity of sacred scripture with human necessity. In that balance there are lessons for us.

The first thing this passage says to me is that religious people can get focused on regulations. Consider the Hebrew people of Jesus' day. The Sabbath was sacred to them. One reason for this is that according to the teachings of Israel, the day was ordained by God to provide for the rest and refreshment of humans. It is interesting to note that the prohibition against killing takes only four words, but the commandment about the Sabbath takes 94 words. The requirement to observe the Sabbath is so contrary to human activity that it required an extensive explanation. One explanation given is that

God created the idea of rest on the seventh day of creation. Therefore, a Sabbath rest is built into the very structure of the universe; there is a basic rhythm of activity and rest in all of life.

Missionary André Gide wrote about an incident that took place some years ago when he made a journey into the interior of the Belgian Congo. His party had been pushing ahead at a fast pace for many days, and one morning when the Europeans were ready to set out, their African crew, who carried the food and equipment, were found sitting, making no preparation for the new day's trek. Upon being questioned, they said quite simply that they had been traveling so fast in the last few days that they had gotten ahead of their souls and were going to stay quietly in camp for the day in order that their souls could catch up with them. They were describing the need for a rhythm in life between activity and rest.

For Israel, the rhythm between activity and rest was a sign of their unique relationship with God. The Sabbath became a weekly reminder of the time when God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Slaves are denied the freedom to rest. Rabbi Moshe Wolfson says, "When people labor, not for a livelihood, but to accumulate wealth, they become slaves. For this reason, God granted the Sabbath. For it is by the Sabbath that we are taught that we are not working animals, born to eat and to labor. We are humans. It is the Sabbath which is our goal, not labor...."

Unfortunately, as with everything in which people are involved, the Sabbath had the possibility of excess within it. The sincere dread of offending God on a day called "holy" began to haunt the Israelites. All kinds of regulations were then set up to safeguard the Sabbath.

By the time of Jesus, strict rules for Sabbath-keeping regulated everything. Some of these rules appear to us as ridiculous. For example, it was taught that there could be no work on the Sabbath, so a person must be still; a man must not shave; if a person's ox fell in a ditch, the ox could be pulled out; if the ox fell in a ravine, the ox had to stay there. Chicken eggs laid on the Sabbath could not be eaten; the hens had been "working". If a flea bit a person on the Sabbath, the flea should be left to bite in peace, for to try to catch the flea would be "hunting" on the Sabbath.

Christians, too, have been tempted to focus on regulations. Requirements about the observation of the Sabbath were eventually attached to Sundays. The early Christians were responsible for some of the change. They had no special day of worship at first so they observed the Sabbath along with the Jews. But as the resurrection of Jesus assumed increasing significance among them, it seemed appropriate to have a day to

remember that distinctly Christian happening. Therefore, the disciples chose the first day of the week rather than the seventh day, so that they might have a weekly reminder of the resurrection. In 321 A.D., Roman Emperor Constantine made Sunday an official day of rest for the Empire, and with that there began to develop an increasing series of rules to regulate that rest.

Subsequently, Sunday observance followed the pattern of the Jewish Sabbath before it. Strict laws were set up for its observance. In England, in 1653, a law was passed saying that any person above the age of seven caught walking in the streets on Sunday would be whipped and fined. That same year, a sea captain returned to his home in the Massachusetts Bay Colony after many months at sea. His wife met him at the gate and he kissed her. But it was Sunday, and it was illegal to kiss one's wife on Sunday, so the captain was jailed.

Some of us can remember "blue laws" which governed Sunday activities as we were growing up. The culturally enforced piety which made Sundays so long and dull was enough to turn any healthy child from the faith. Moreover, the implication was that being a Christian was equated with keeping the rules. It was that kind of legalism that Jesus was challenging in this passage.

The second thing this passage says to me is that human beings are more important than regulations. In the first situation, the religious leaders fault Jesus' disciples for pulling off handfuls of grain as they walked through a field on the Sabbath and popping the grain into their mouths. They contended that this amounted to working on the Sabbath. Jesus justified His disciples' actions by reminding His hearers that when King David was fleeing for his life, he and his men went to the tabernacle and asked for food. They were told that there was no food except for bread which had been offered as a sacrifice to God, and which was to be eaten only by the priests. Nevertheless, David, who was looked upon as Israel's great hero, took the bread, ate it, and shared it with his men. The implication is clear that in time of need, human necessity takes precedence over the requirements of law.

In the other situation described in this passage, Jesus is in a synagogue on the Sabbath. A man comes in who has a paralyzed hand. Jesus takes the initiative and invites the man to step forward. He then asks the religious leaders whether it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. When they refuse to answer Him, He heals the man. The religious leaders interpret this as work, are convinced that Jesus has willingly broken the commandment, and seek to kill Him. Again, the implication is clear: human life is more important than rules. They've lost sight of this because, for them, religion was keeping the rules.

Having said all of this, the third thing lesson for me is that there are, nevertheless, principles involved in Sabbath-keeping that are important for us. One of those principles is rest. Genesis 1 teaches us that on the seventh day, God looked at everything created and rested. Too many people act as though a day of rest will lessen their return from life. I read an epitaph in the graveyard adjacent to that same church where I was student pastor. It said, "Born a man, he died a grocer." The recurrent Sabbath reminds us that the rhythm of activity and rest are built into the abundant life God offers us.

A second principle involved in Sabbath-keeping is the reminder that we are free. Slaves don't get a "day off". The Hebrews had been slaves to Egypt for over 300 years prior to the Exodus wilderness. And it was in the wilderness that God gave the command to keep the Sabbath. There are many ways to express our freedom. Bobby Fischer and Samuel Reshevsky had one of the fiercest chess rivalries known in the international scene, but neither would play on Friday night or Saturday. Fischer was a member of a strict Christian sect and Reshevsky was an orthodox Jew. Both observed the Sabbath. Here were two people involved in an international competition, who were saying to the rest of the world, "Time out, while I observe the Sabbath." They were demonstrating their freedom to choose how they would conduct their lives. They were free to choose activity, but instead they sought stillness. They were free to keep right on competing, but they chose to take an upward look. The Sabbath principle involves remembering that we are free. Sabbath-keeping is an act of rebellion. It says to the dominant culture, "You don't own me!"

A third Sabbath principle is reverence. Six days a week we sit at the loom. On the seventh day God calls us to come look at the design. The Sabbath principle is that when people get quiet, we begin to think seriously about God, life, and about God's purpose for our life. Wherever that takes place, it is an act of worship. My prayer is that our days and nights are filled to overflowing with these kinds of moments.

In review, what are the 3-R's of Sabbath-keeping? Tending to our souls on the Sabbath is for **rest**, is an act of **rebellion**, and leads to **reverence**.

May the Lord of the Sabbath walk with you today.