

Mark 2:23-3:6

Date: Sunday, 31 January 2021

Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6

Sermon: Rest or Religion?

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Passage

Mark 2:23 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" 27 And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Mark 3:1 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." 4 And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5 And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Transcript

Rest or Religion?

Last week, we talked about religion or relationship. This week, we're looking at Sabbath, or to put it another way, we're talking about rest. In the Old Testament, when the LORD gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, commandment number four says this.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11 ESV)

They were to rest one day out of seven. What does rest look like? Rest versus religion. For many of us here, we would remember the days here in Australia where the only thing that was open on Sundays was church. For some of us, you know, the word "rest" brings all sorts of things to mind. For example, I'm reminded of a story that Rachel told me some time ago. We were sharing about what sort of holidays we enjoy. We enjoy the type of holidays where we go out during the morning, come back after lunch and then have a nap in the afternoon. When we were in Taiwan in 2019, we did that. Every day. Out in the morning, nap in the afternoon and then out at night. For some of our friends, rest, it's not a holiday, it's not rest unless you're out at 6am in the morning, back by 10pm and then you do the whole thing again the next day.

But we're talking about Scripture's concept of rest today. And I wonder whether we take rest seriously? In this passage that Bev read out to us, we're really looking at what Jesus says about rest, what he says is the purpose of the Sabbath. What does rest look like? So we're going to look at three points today. Firstly, the burden of rest. Secondly, the call to rest. Thirdly, why we can rest.

The Burden of Rest

Let's talk about the burden of rest because the concept of Sabbath to the Pharisees in this passage is one of burden isn't it? And I want to explain that a little now. Let's remind ourselves of the story and see what the Pharisees understand the Sabbath, how they understand rest.

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (Mark 2:23-24 ESV)

In order for us to understand what's going on here with the Pharisees, we need to understand a little bit about the fourth commandment. The one that I read out earlier about Sabbath. It was given by the LORD through Moses to the people of Israel after they left Egypt. But what happened over time is that the Pharisees, a group of Jews, they take seriously what God says. And they begin to ask questions about this commandment, specifically, What constitutes Work? If I'm not supposed to work on the Sabbath, what is work?

It's kind of like if I said, "Don't step on the lawn." And you said, "Okay, what lawn are you talking about?" Then you start stepping on all sorts of lawns, or you discuss what you think I meant when I said "lawn." That's what the Pharisees were doing. They were earnest in their attempt to obey this commandment. "If I'm to rest on the Sabbath, how do we define work?" They would discuss it, and in fact you can find some of that discussion in this thing called the Mishnah. The Mishnah is a collection of interpretations made by Rabbis over many years. And there's one section in the Mishnah, called the "39 forms of work." It's basically thirty nine different activities that would be defined as work. I'll give you some examples. According to the Mishnah, these activities would be considered work on the sabbath. Planting, Plowing, Reaping, Gathering, Threshing/extraction, Winnowing, Sorting/purification, Grinding, Sifting, Kneading/amalgamation, Cooking/baking. This question is still being asked in modern Israel. Some of you have actually been to Israel and you know what it is like after Friday sundown. Apparently, it becomes a ghost town. There's no traffic. Phones are not picked up. Some elevators are Sabbath elevators which means that they open at every single floor so a person does no "work" as they use the elevator.

So when we come here to Jesus and his disciples, the Pharisees look to see whether they are breaking the laws of the Sabbath, whether they are breaking the

laws of rest. And it appears that they do, don't they? As they pluck the heads of grain, it's considered work. You can see that it's really a burden for them, isn't it? But for most people it's really a burden. The day of rest really doesn't become a day of rest. It becomes a day of burden.

Let me ask you. What's Sunday like for you? The resurrection day of our Lord Jesus? Is it a day of rest where you celebrate what Jesus has done? Or are there all these rules you try to abide by like the Pharisees. Do you burden others with things that Jesus doesn't ask us to do? When Rachel and I started to do ministry here at Caringbah, there was a day off we had, as you know we have Mondays off. And as we were walking to Miranda, there were two dogs that had been lost. Rachel being the caring compassionate person that she is, decided that she would take them back to the manse and contact the owner. Me on the other hand. I was upset that I had to spend my day off looking after some strangers dogs (we managed to get them back to the owners by the way).

But as I reflect on that, I realise that I've completely missed the point of taking a day off a week. I was being like the Pharisees who grumbled about the man with the withered hand in this passage. They're more concerned about the law, than they are about doing good. I wonder whether we're like the Pharisees and we're too concerned about the external than our hearts? We want to tick boxes rather than love Jesus more deeply. When we are so concerned about people's actions, we force them to conform to Christian values, but we're not concerned about whether they love Jesus or not. When we're worried about our actions but have not a concern about our hearts.

Jesus warns against that doesn't he? He looks at the Pharisees who are concerned about what they eat, but doesn't he say it's not what you eat that makes you unclean since you expel it anyway. It's what comes out of our hearts that should really concern us. *"evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."* (Mark 7:21-23). Here in this passage, they see the man with the withered hand and they're absurd in thinking that it's more important that this man not be healed on the Sabbath. They're concerned about the external. That they don't marvel or praise God for the fact that the man has been healed. Just like I grumbled even though Rachel was showing mercy to another person.

For some of us, the burden of rest is great which we need to repent of. We need to focus less on the external and more on our hearts.

The Call to Rest

But for many of us, I suspect that we don't feel burdened with rest. We don't take rest seriously. I know that for some of us here, we serve 7 days a week. We need to talk about the call to rest. In fact, J.C Ryle says this

There is little danger of the day being kept too strictly in the present age. There is far more danger of its being profaned and forgotten entirely.

Today, it's so easy for us to be busy. It's so easy for us to work 7 days a week without any rest. When I survey my minister friends, it's easy for us to work 7 days a week because there's so much to be done. So the major risk for us today is not to rest. The challenge for many of us is to rest because we're so busy. We're overtired, we're overworked, we're overstressed with life, we're over busy. And Jesus speaks to us in that.

So let's talk about the call to rest. Have a look with me.

And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" (Mark 2:25-26 ESV)

Jesus here is recounting a story in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Jesus makes the point that David didn't do what was lawful because he ate the priests bread but it was permitted because of who David was. And Jesus' point here is that, even if his disciples were wrong to pluck the grain, there is someone greater than David. Himself.

And here's the point. I want us to see the point. Have a look.

And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28 ESV)

Jesus has greater authority than David. In fact he is master over the Sabbath. He is the one who has the final say about rest. And he says that the real purpose of rest,

the ultimate purpose of rest is to help us, to serve us. We don't serve the day off, the day off serves us! I hope we see that there.

The true purpose of rest is a gift from God to each of us.

Let me lay this challenge down again. But I know that for some of us, taking a day off is a terrifying ordeal. We're like sharks. It feels like if we don't stop going forwards, we'll die. If we take one day off a week to rest and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus then we're going to die. If we don't pack our days full of activity, we're going to suffocate. But I want to lay down a challenge and suggest that the fact that you don't want to take a day off to rest is perhaps a sign that you don't fully trust God. You don't trust God to take care of things. In fact, I would suggest that you are holding onto control too much. May I encourage you to repent of that and trust that God can carry on his mission in the world without you. The reason why you don't want to slow down is because it's too painful. I once heard a pastor years ago say that ministers should take holidays and remember that the church will continue on without them. I think that's very wise. That it is actually a good thing for you to take a day off from work and rest, to spend time with Jesus, your family and reset and rejuvenate.

I pray that we would really hear Jesus' words here, that rest is made for man. And I pray that we would take Jesus' heart seriously. That he wants us to rest. I mean, do you feel overburdened with life? Do you feel tired and exhausted? Rest. He calls you to rest. Some of you here look like you're taking the whole world upon your shoulders and Jesus doesn't call you to do that.

Here's some suggestions for Sabbath rest.

1. Worship - we gather together to worship Jesus, but there's also time during the day to worship Jesus in prayer and solitude
2. Relationships - Sabbath in the Old Testament included spending time with other people, family and friends. As we're made in the image of God, we are relational beings that need other people. Personally, I would suggest getting off the screens.
3. Enjoying Creation - one of the things that God did after he rested on the 7th day was to enjoy what he made as we're told it was good (test this)

Why We Can Rest

I want to end it here but talking about the final point, why we can rest. Why we rest from our work? Why can we rest from the toils of the week? We can have our Sabbath rest each week because our rest points to Jesus. It points to Jesus.

It points to what Jesus has done for us. We can rest each and every week because we can rest in what Christ has done for us. We can rest in Christ's life, death and resurrection. When we look to Jesus, we realise that it is not up to us to save the world. He does that. He takes the burden of life off our shoulders because he is the one who accomplished eternal life for us. I'm reminded of Matthew 11:28-30,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV)

When he was on the cross, what were the last words he spoke before he died? He said, "It is finished." We are merely following him. When we look to Jesus, we realise that we don't need to work like headless chicken, because he is the one who is in control. When we look to Jesus, we realise that he is Lord of not only the Sabbath, but over all creation because of his life, death and resurrection.

But it also points us to what Jesus will do. Do you notice that Jesus calls himself the Son of Man in 2:28. The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. It's actually a reference to Daniel 7 where one like the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven. Who is given dominion, glory and the kingdom, where peoples, nations and languages serve him and his dominion will be everlasting, and his kingdom will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:14). In other words, our rest points to Jesus returning. Our rest points to Jesus returning where we will have eternal rest. And how good will that day be? Every week when we gather together, when we rest from our week's work, is a reminder that we will enter eternal rest. What a day that will be. It's why we can rest today.

Let's enter that rest.

Let's pray.