

Weekly Reflection: Sabbath – Stop, Rest, Delight, and Contemplate

“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

I want to point us at three thoughts from this passage of scripture in Mark. First, Jesus was not eliminating the Sabbath Day but rather correcting the abuse of how the Sabbath Day was happening. The Pharisees had taken the Sabbath Day, a day meant for rest and enjoyment of God and turned it into a legalistic burden. Instead of a gift from God, it had become a burden of man-made religion. When Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” He is saying the Sabbath was meant as a gift to man from the very beginning. A day that was established from the beginning for man to rest in the finished work of God, to intentionally enjoy God in a special way. You notice that in Genesis chapter 2 where the Sabbath day is brought into existence we see nothing of a command. No mention of a command to Adam and Eve to observe a Sabbath Day law. Some take this to mean that we are not required to observe the Sabbath, it is strictly an Old Testament law that comes into place in Exodus and then Jesus fulfills and Sabbath is no longer relevant. My opinion is that it was intended to be a gift from the very beginning, that it was put in place as part of Creation, for the good of all of Creation, but especially a special, holy and blessed day for humanity, created in the image of God, to rest and enjoy God in a special way. Then because humans tend to forget, God, in His grace, commanded us to remember the Sabbath, to receive this gift. The Sabbath day is grace and man turned it into a burdensome law. The Sabbath was meant to bring restoration, and man turned it into a legalistic day that you got in trouble for doing good to others.

The second point I want us to notice is that it does not say that the Sabbath was made for Jews or for Christians, it says the Sabbath was made for man, for all of humanity. I think this helps show that the Sabbath day is something that we should continue to observe or practice. It points again to the Sabbath day having its roots in creation and not just an Old Testament law for the Jewish people.

The third point from this passage I want us to notice is that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus gets to decide what the Sabbath is about because He was the one who inaugurated the Sabbath. He has the right to correct humanity on the purpose of the Sabbath because Jesus was the One who rested on the seventh day back in Genesis chapter 2. Notice that Jesus does not say that He has come to take the Sabbath away; but rather, that He is the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus is telling the Pharisees, “I am the one to whom the Sabbath points. Everything that the Sabbath is designed to point you to for rest and restoration, I am. I am the Lord of the Sabbath.”

Jesus is not advocating lawlessness or abolishing the law. He is actually advocating for the true intent of the Sabbath law that the Pharisees have clearly misplaced. He is reframing the Pharisees’ (and our own) sense of law and of rest. He is saying that the Sabbath law is not merely for following the regulation itself, nor is deep rest the reward for having kept the law. The Sabbath is designed to lead us to where we can find true rest; in the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus.

A Framework for a Sabbath Day.

Stop

Sabbath is first a day of “stopping.” “To stop” is built into the literal meaning of the Hebrew word Sabbath. Yet most of us can’t stop until we are finished whatever it is we think we need to do. We need to complete our projects, answer our e-mails, return all phone messages, complete the balancing of our check books to pay our bills, finish cleaning the house. There’s always one more goal to be reached

before stopping. On Sabbath we embrace our limits. God is God. He is indispensable. I am His creature. The world continues working fine when I stop.

There is an intentionality with this stopping. Having a set 24-hour period, the same 24-hour period each week if possible that you are stopping. A helpful practice may be to mark that stopping with a specific action, to help set this day apart as holy to the Lord. In other words, not just stumbling into it half unaware or kind of stopped, “I slowed down a little;” but knowing at this specific time I’m entering into Sabbath. In the Jewish tradition they light 2 candles to start their Sabbath.

We stop on Sabbaths because God is on the throne, assuring us the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities. God is at work taking care of the universe. He manages quite well without us having to run things. He invites (and commands) us to stop, to enjoy the fact that we are not in charge of His world, that even when we die, the world will continue on nicely without us. Every Sabbath reminds us to “be still and know that He is God” (Psalm 46:10) and to stop worrying about tomorrow (Matthew 6:25-33).

The core spiritual issue in stopping revolves around trust. Will God take care of us and our concerns if we obey Him by stopping to keep the Sabbath? We can trust Him enough to stop.

Rest

Once we stop the Sabbath calls us to rest. God rested after His work. We are to do the same every seventh day (Genesis 2:1-4). Rest from work. This will likely look different for different people; depending on what you normally do for work and your personality. Try to eliminate hurriedness, multitasking, worry, catching up on tasks you didn’t get to on the other 6 days, making big decisions; and try to do things that bring joy, calm, peace, and help you notice God. Rest means you get to the end of the Sabbath, and you are not exhausted, but replenished. When we stop and rest, we respect our humanity and the image of God in us. We are not nonstop human beings. We don’t serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath serves us.

Delight

A third component to biblical Sabbath revolves around delighting in what we have been given. God, after finishing His work of creation, proclaimed that “It was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God delighted over His creation. The Hebrew phrase communicates a sense of joy, completion, wonder, and play. Because of the way pleasure and delight have been so distorted by our culture, many of us as Christians struggle with receiving joy and pleasure. On Sabbaths we are called to enjoy and delight in creation and its gifts. We are to slow down and pay attention to our food, smelling and tasting its riches. We are to take the time to see the beauty of a tree, a leaf, a flower, the sky that has been created with great care by our God. He has given us the ability to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, that we might delight with our senses on the miraculousness of life.

On Sabbaths God also invites us to slow down to pay attention and delight in people. We see Jesus repeatedly, intentionally doing this on the Sabbath, noticing people and loving them. Creation and life are, in a sense, God’s gift to us to enjoy.

Contemplate

The final quality of a biblical Sabbath is, of course, the contemplation of God. The Sabbath is always “holy to the Lord” (Exodus 31:15). Throughout Jewish and Christian history, Sabbath has included worship with God’s people where we spend time together in His presence, singing, praying, reading and study of Scripture, and silence. Coming together as the body of Christ to worship God through singing,

fellowship, prayer, and the Word of God is a wonderful part of a Sabbath Day. For this reason, Sundays remain the ideal time for Sabbath-keeping whenever possible.

Stopping, resting, and delighting are all meant to get our minds and hearts focused on God; with God. Pondering the character of God remains the central focus of our Sabbaths. Thinking about the promises of God can bring rest to your soul. Reflecting on what God has done for you, His faithfulness, His provision brings joy to our souls. Paying attention to God's creation, seeing His beauty and power.

Day of Preparation

For me, for a Sabbath day to happen, requires preparation, that I have another day of the week to do the tasks of life that consume my energy or fill me with worry. In the Bible we read a handful of places about the Day of Preparation. ***"And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath," (Mark 15:42 ESV)*** The Gospels underscore that on this day, final arrangements for the Sabbath took place. The concept of preparing before the Sabbath has its roots in the Old Testament. Exodus 16:22-23 describes how the Israelites would collect twice as much manna on the sixth day so that they could rest without gathering on the seventh day Sabbath. In historical Jewish practice, preparing meant more than just gathering food. Tasks included cooking, finishing chores, tidying the home, and any other work that would steal rest on the Sabbath.

What are ways you can prepare for a Sabbath day? What are tasks, chores, responsibilities that you can get done the day before Sabbath so that you can better rest and delight on the Sabbath? What will it mean to prepare yourself for worship, to receive the Word of God? What time do you need to go to bed the night before? When might you have times of silence and solitude or prayer during the day? What final items do you need to resolve so you can have an uncluttered Sabbath?

Experiment. Make a plan. Follow it for a couple of months, then reflect on what changes you would like to make. There is no one right way that works for every person. Ironically enough, a Sabbath day to stop, rest, delight, and contemplate God takes a lot of effort and intentionality.

We are planning to have Communion this Sunday, October 18th.