

Be Healed on the Sabbath Day
Luke 13:10-17, 14:1-6
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Read Luke 13:10-17, 14:1-6

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

Ligon Duncan, the Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, tells this story:

"When I went to Scotland, I was somewhat apprehensive about how the Lord's Day was going to be observed, because I had heard stories of how strict Scottish Presbyterians were. On the first Sunday night that I attended at St. Columba's Free Church of Scotland in Edinburgh, as I was walking... across the street (to) go back to my flat, I was whistling a Psalm tune. And this large highland hand came down on my shoulder, and a man said, "Son, the Lord's Day is not a day for whistling!" I was so excited about this that I immediately went back home and called my friend... "You'll never believe that I've just been rebuked for whistling on the Lord's Day! And it wasn't even a secular tune... it was a Psalm tune!" ... I was excited... because I grew up in a culture where nobody cared what you did on Sunday. You could do whatever you wanted to. And it was kind of nice to be in a place where they cared about what you did on Sunday... I found it a wonderfully refreshing occasion."¹

Have you ever been rebuked for not keeping the Sabbath correctly? Very few people in our culture will criticize you for working on a Sunday. More likely, if you try to observe the Sabbath by resting and refraining from all types of work, you might get criticized for being lazy. Unless the family you grew up in or a church that you were part of emphasized a particular way of keeping the Sabbath, you likely have never been told you're falling short in that area. But if you have, you are in good company: Jesus was rebuked no fewer than six times for the ways that He violated other people's standards of what keeping the Sabbath should look like. In today's text, we're going to read two of those incidents recorded in Luke chapters 13 and 14.

I. It Is Godly to Extend Mercy and Help on the Sabbath (13:10-17)

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

Remember that Luke, the author, was a doctor. So when he described the woman's condition – that "she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" – and attributed it to "a disabling spirit," he

¹ J. Ligon Duncan's sermon "Lord of the Sabbath" from May 31, 2009, found at fpcjackson.org

was giving his medical opinion. This is the only time that he describes someone having a disabling spirit, and we are not to assume that anyone who is crippled or has bone degeneration or muscular paralysis or anything like that, is possessed by a demon or afflicted by Satan.² But this woman was bound by Satan, though she was soon set free by Jesus. She didn't seek Him out; He saw her and called her over. He might have even called her up in the middle of His teaching; it's not clear, but that's a possibility. As soon as He put His hands on her, she straightened up; her body experienced immediate healing. She glorified God in that synagogue, which I think is what the whole goal of being in a place of worship is! But the ruler of the synagogue was very concerned, things were not being done properly or in good order. He proclaimed, "Don't come on the Sabbath day to be healed, people, that's what the rest of the week is for. Don't expect God's healing on God's day of rest." Apparently, he didn't realize the irony behind that command.

Now, we need to keep in mind that whenever Jesus challenged the Jewish religious leaders on the ways that they kept the law, He was never telling them to break an Old Testament law. He wasn't encouraging disobeying God's revealed Word; Jesus had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). No, He was criticizing their interpretation and their additions to the law of God. The commandment not to work on the Sabbath never prohibited acts of mercy and necessity. And here, he pointed out that they allowed themselves some leeway in their work on the Sabbath because they could make sure their animals had water. Jesus actually called them hypocrites for saying it was OK to lead a thirsty donkey to water but it was morally wrong to free a sick woman from her bondage. How much more should they have desired for a woman who was "bound by Satan" to be untied from her bondage? Do you really care more about your animal than about your fellow believer? And what better day to experience God's healing than on the day set aside to worship Him and experience His rest and rejuvenation.

And we all cheer along with verse 17 where the crowd rejoiced as the synagogue ruler and his friends felt shamed and humiliated; they could "come up with no argument, no cross-reference to refute Jesus' words."³ If only they could have had eyes to see what was happening in front of them, they could have rejoiced too. What a powerful reminder that Satan has us all bound, but spiritual freedom in Jesus is available! *"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

II. It Is Lawful to Bring Healing and Rescue on the Sabbath (14:1-6)

¹ One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ² And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. ³ And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" ⁴ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. ⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" ⁶ And they could not reply to these things.

Jesus has eaten at two other Pharisees' houses in the Gospel of Luke, in chapters 7 and 11. That's an interesting fact because we generally think of Jesus and the Pharisees as being constant enemies. But there was enough kindness or at least respect shown from the Pharisees to include Jesus in the very intimate act of sharing a meal inside their home. These dinners didn't always work out great for the hosts, however, as Jesus challenged them; they may have said it was more like He insulted them. Maybe Jesus had other dinners in Pharisees' homes that went great, they just didn't get recorded in any of the Gospels!

² Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 16.

³ Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 170.

This time Jesus was at a Pharisee's house on a Saturday, the Sabbath, for a meal sometime after the service at the synagogue. And it feels like a setup – there's a man with dropsy, which is a disease that causes the body to retain fluids, which in turn causes major organs to be inflamed; very painful apparently. Everybody was watching whether Jesus would heal him or not. Which, of course, Jesus sensed and just went ahead and grabbed the trunk of the elephant in the room in verse 3: "I know what we're all thinking, so let me just lay it out there: *Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?*" No one answered, so He essentially said, "Let's find out!" and healed the man and sent him away.

He followed up with a rhetorical question that is very similar to the question from the previous story – wouldn't you pull your son or your ox out of a well even if it was on the Sabbath? I'm sure everyone listening would have acknowledged that, yes, of course, we would pull them out of the well. We wouldn't wait until the next day. Again, though, the lawyers and Pharisees stayed silent. And Jesus didn't call them hypocrites or explain why this man's healing was important to Him, but He was certainly implying, "Why should I wait until it's not the Sabbath to pull this man out of his pain and misery? Isn't there something wrong with you if you'd rather preserve an extra-safe version of the Sabbath that goes beyond the bounds of God's law at the expense of a man continuing to suffer?" The Pharisees loved keeping their rules but found it very difficult to care about actual people. No wonder they couldn't answer. As Darrell Bock says, "Excuses for failing to show compassion, even those that might look pious, are not excuses at all."⁴ How about you? Do you love to follow some set of rules but find it very hard to love people and reach out to them with compassion? Again, Jesus never violated any of God's rules, He kept them perfectly; but His love and compassion overflows when it comes to people's lives.

Conclusion

Before we talk deeper about what the Sabbath means, does anyone wonder why we don't still celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday? You might know that the Seventh Day Adventist church keeps Saturday as their Sabbath because they see no direct Scripture passage that says that Christians should observe a different day; in fact, I've seen their literature that says that Sunday worship is the mark of the beast! It is true that there is no single passage of the New Testament that says, "Change the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day" or "Sunday works better for worship than Saturday." But after Jesus' death, all of the references to the early church coming together and taking up a collection and those kinds of things happened on the first day of the week. And this is because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. The church moved their worship to Sunday to underscore that Jesus' resurrection marked out the New Covenant people. The Westminster Confession of Faith explains clearly that, "God commanded His Old Testament people to keep holy the last day of the week, but He sanctified the first day as the Sabbath by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. For this reason the Church of the new dispensation has from the time of the apostles kept holy the first day of the week as the Lord's Day" (WCF, 48-2).

The fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-10a says, "*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.*" How well do you keep the Sabbath? I'm sure that some of us keep the Sabbath more strictly than others, so here's a pop quiz to test yourself by asking if you've ever done any of these things on the Sabbath. These are things that are prohibited by the code of Jewish law, what's called the Talmud-Mishnah:

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 375.

- Opening an umbrella
- Brushing your teeth
- Applying body lotion
- Tearing a piece of toilet paper
- Blowing air into a balloon or a ball
- Squeezing orange juice
- Gardening or mowing the lawn
- Turning on a light switch
- Starting a fire or cooking with heated metal
- Operating a car, a telephone or a television
- And basically anything that involves calculating, measuring, carrying, finishing, washing, selecting, unraveling, building, demolishing, or marking.⁵

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that none of us keeps the Sabbath that strictly. But that's OK, because those are man-made rules. Mark 2:27 sums up Jesus' attitude towards the Sabbath: "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" The Pharisees' problem was that they didn't really understand what the Sabbath was for - to enrich and prolong our lives; they just saw it as a list of rules to live by and enforce among everyone else.

And Jesus does not want us to do away with the Sabbath, but to approach it in a way that honors God and helps you. The Lord is looking for every believer to work out the particulars of how they keep the Sabbath, just as He wants you to decide all areas of Christian liberty. Romans 14 gives us some helpful thoughts: verses 4-6 say, "*Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand... Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord.*" Then verse 12: "*So then each of us will give an account of himself.*" I'm responsible for how my family and I keep the Sabbath, you're responsible for you and your family. I'm sure it would be easier for you if I just gave you a list of what you should and shouldn't do on the Sabbath. Then you wouldn't have to wonder whether you should go for a jog, take those returns back to the store, go out to eat, watch football, or cook a big meal. But you need to decide what restful refraining from work looks like for you and your family. Your first criteria should be: How can I please God with my Sabbath day and how can I enjoy Him best? Your second criteria should be: Is there anyone that I can show love to or help in some tangible way on this day? And your third criteria should be: What will rejuvenate me and refresh my body and mind so that I'm ready to work and serve again when it's time?

I saw a meme a while back: "European out-of-office message: I'm away camping for the summer, email again in September. American out-of-office message: I have left the office for two hours to undergo kidney surgery but you can reach me on my cell anytime." That's a bit of an exaggeration, obviously, but it's a reminder that with a mindset like that, we need rest and downtime badly. Our bodies and minds were not designed to be constantly on the go. And yet, we pride ourselves on that these days, don't we? We boast of being workaholics, of being busy and getting things done. With every so-called "labor saving device," they usually create more work than they solve. Is it more efficient to get email than have to wait for an actual letter to be mailed to you? Of course, but you end up answering way more mail and you're expecting to respond immediately. Is it more efficient to get email on your phone than having to wait until you're at a desktop or laptop? Of course it is, but then you end up checking your phone every ten minutes to see if there's a new email or FB

⁵ <https://kabbalahcenter.net/shabbat-jewish-rules/> and https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_thirty_nine_categories_of_sabbath_work_prohibited_by_law/

message or tweet or snapchat. And we become slaves to our phones. We should be taking digital Sabbaths. (Now I've gone from preaching to meddling!) Quarantine and lockdown because of COVID caused a lot of headaches and problems, but possibly one of the benefits was that people had to slow down. When you almost couldn't leave your house for 3 months, you might have had the first real slowdown in your adult life. We didn't all like it, but maybe some good habits of rest came out of it; maybe we realized how out of control our schedules have become and how we mistakenly equate busyness and activity with success and self-worth.

The Sabbath is a gift that most of us have a hard time accepting. We kick against it and resent having to live under such restrictions. But the Sabbath is for our spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health; it's for our good. The Sabbath is not optional, just as none of the Ten Commandments are optional. J.C. Ryle, a century and a half ago, said, "Our Sundays and how we use them is one of the most sure signs of our spiritual condition."⁶ We are actually making a theological statement when we keep the Sabbath, as Bruce Ray wrote,

"The Sabbath calls me to recognize that the world doesn't depend on me. The planet is not going to fall apart if I don't go to the office, make some phone calls, or get this or that done today. Somehow God seems to keep the universe going without my help. We can pause from our labors and rest in his, realizing that in the end it is God who holds it all together, 'sustaining all things by his powerful word.'"⁷

The Sabbath reminds us that we rest in Jesus' finished work on the cross. We are hard-wired and tempted to think that we have to work to earn our salvation. Every other religion says, "Do this and that and maybe you'll have done enough to make it into heaven." But Christianity emphasizes over and over that it is by grace alone and not by our works that we are saved. Stop trying to work your way into heaven! Jesus did all the work for us. He kept the law perfectly, did everything needed to please God the Father and become our substitute on the cross. He achieved it, we just accept it and rest in it. The Sabbath is a reminder of that and it is a foreshadowing of the eternal rest we will enjoy in heaven. One day we will enter His eternal kingdom, never to have to strive under the curse of this fallen world again.

→ Transition to Communion

Benediction

1 Peter 5:10-11 – *"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen."*

⁶ Duncan's "Lord of the Sabbath" sermon

⁷ Bruce A. Ray, *Celebrating the Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Restless World* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), p. 23.