

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 9, 2021

TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
LORD OF THE SABBATH

Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6

Since today is Mother's Day, I want to offer some unsolicited advice on what *not* to give your Mom. According to a British survey from a few years ago (2016), here are some of the worst Mother's Day gifts, according to Moms who actually received these gifts:

- Deodorant
- Cleaning supplies
- A fire extinguisher
- Hair coloring product
- Toilet paper
- A broom and dust pan
- Tools
- A calculator
- Auto parts

Trust me when I say that these sorts of gifts are not what most mothers, mothers-in-law, or grandmothers want for Mother's Day. There are exceptions, though. The other day, while driving home after my workout at the gym, I was listening to a talk show on the radio. Mothers were invited to call in to talk about what they really wanted for Mother's Day. One mother, from Harper's Ferry, WV, called in to say that what she really wanted for Mother's Day is a load of mulch. Mulch for Mother's Day! I'm pretty sure this mother is the exception and not the rule. Think long and hard before you give Mom any of these as Mother's Day gifts. Don't say I didn't warn you!

Looking at Mother's Day from a different angle, here is an example of the influence a mother can have. In August of 1920 – 101 years ago this year – lawmakers in Tennessee were debating the 19th Amendment, which, if approved, would give women the right to vote. The leader of the women's suffragist movement, Carrie Chapman Catt, had worked long and hard to win the right for women to vote. By this time, the Amendment had been approved by 35 of the 36 states required to make it part of the Constitution. (If you're wondering, there were 48 states in the US at the time; Hawaii and Alaska were not admitted to the Union until 1959.) Approval was needed by only one more state. With other states refusing to approve it, Tennessee was the suffragists' last hope to win the vote in 1920.

The debate in Tennessee went on for days. By midday on August 18, the outcome was still too close to call. Then, a young legislator named Harry Burn (only 24 years old and in his first term in the Tennessee General Assembly) changed his vote to yes, and the Amendment moved forward as a result of his vote.

While many of his constituents opposed giving women the right to vote, the one constituent who mattered most to Burn was his mother, who had sent him a note that morning urging him to “Be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt.” Burn said: “I knew that a mother’s advice is always safest for a boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification. I appreciated the fact that an opportunity such as seldom comes to a mortal man to free 17 million women [at the time] from political slavery was mine.”

A mother’s advice is *not always* safest or wisest or best to follow. No mother is infallible. Sometimes even Mom is wrong. But when a mother seeks to imbue her children with guidance from God and His Word, her counsel will influence her children for good.

Thank God for mothers (and fathers) who do train and have trained up their children in the way we should go (Proverbs 22:6). Where they have failed, or when they fail, forgive them. In most cases, they are trying to do the best they can.

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Now, let’s turn our attention to this passage of Scripture in the Gospel of Mark, relating two separate incidents with a common theme. In the first (Mark 2:23-28), Jesus and His disciples are walking through a field, somewhere in Galilee. None of the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell us exactly where. In the second (3:1-6), it is the Sabbath day and Jesus, as was His habit, went to church where He encounters a man with a crippled hand. Once again, the Gospel writers do not tell us where. It may have been in Capernaum. It may have been somewhere else. All we are told is that “He went into the synagogue” (3:1).

These two incidents are the fourth and fifth times Jesus collided with the religious leaders of His day in rapid succession. First, as we saw last week, they objected when Jesus claimed to have the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:1-12). Next, they were offended that Jesus hung out with sinners and even invited Matthew (aka Levi), a reprobate tax collector, to become one of His disciples (2:13-17). Third, they took offense because Jesus and His disciples didn’t fast the way the Pharisees and other devout Jews did (2:18-22). Now, in this passage, on two separate occasions, they take issue with Jesus because He does not observe the Sabbath the way they think He should (2:23-28; 3:1-6).

THE SABBATH

One of the stone tablets that Moses carried down from the mountain in the Book of Exodus contained a commandment that says: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six day 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.” (See Exodus 20:8-11; cf. Deuteronomy 5:12-15.)

It is a commandment from God, one of the original “Top Ten.” So it is important for us to take it seriously.

The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew word *shabat*, which means “to rest” or “to cease.” It was instituted by God and designed as a day of rest from the ordinary labors of our

lives. The Jewish people observed the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day of the week, and understood it to be a holy day, a day set aside and set apart to honor the Lord. Devout Jews still observe the Sabbath on the seventh day each week, from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

THE LORD'S DAY

For Christians, however, the Sabbath has been changed from the seventh day of the week to the first – from Saturday to Sunday – because Sunday, the first day of the week, was the day of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. From the time of the New Testament on, Sunday has been called "The Lord's Day."

Our Westminster Confession of Faith says that "In His Word the Lord has commanded all people in every age to keep one day in seven holy unto Him as a Sabbath. From the beginning of the world up to the resurrection of Christ, this Sabbath was the last day of the week. Since the resurrection of Christ it has been changed to the first day of the week, called the Lord's day in Scripture, and is to be continued until the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath" (WCF 21-7).

Whether Saturday, as in the Jewish tradition, or Sunday, as in the Christian tradition, the Sabbath principle, the principle of one day in seven set apart from the rest of the week, remains a part of God's good plan for His creation.

Why *did* God establish the Sabbath?

Why *did* God consider the Sabbath principle so important that He would include it in the Ten Commandments? Was it because, as some of His critics have suggested, God is a cosmic killjoy who wants to keep us from having fun? No! I think the truth is exactly the opposite. God is *not* a cosmic killjoy. He wants us to enjoy this life as part of our "chief end" or purpose in life: To glorify Him and enjoy Him forever (Westminster Shorter Catechism [WSC], Q.1).

Did God give us the Sabbath principle to complicate our lives and burden us with another list of "Do's and Don'ts" to follow? No. God is not like that.

The Sabbath – and how to observe it – was a major bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees, who were the guardians and enforcers of the Jewish law and all the traditions that had been added to it over the years. We see that conflict in these two incidents, both of which took place on the Sabbath. First, the disciples of Jesus were committing two violations of the Sabbath law, at least in the eyes of the Pharisees:

1. They were *traveling*, which was defined by the Pharisees as walking more than 2,000 steps, or about 1 kilometer (3/5 of a mile). They had a rule about how far you could walk on the Sabbath before walking became work.

2. The disciples, the Pharisees insisted, were *harvesting* on the Sabbath by pulling off heads of grain as they walked through a field. Harvesting, or reaping, was an act of labor that was expressly forbidden in the traditions of the Pharisees. It didn't matter that the disciples of Jesus were hungry and didn't have any food with them. It would be better, they thought, for the disciples of Jesus to go hungry than to break one of their Sabbath rules.

In the second incident (3:1-6), the Pharisees accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath by healing the man with the crippled hand. In their view, Jesus should have waited until after the Sabbath was over before doing this act of mercy.

Give the Pharisees some credit. They took the law, including the Sabbath law – perhaps especially the Sabbath law – very seriously. They were passionate in their zeal to be faithful in their Sabbath observance and enforcement of its prohibitions. Nobody was more committed to it than they were.

But their understanding of the Sabbath law was precisely the problem, and Jesus insisted that they had missed the whole point of it. By the time of Jesus, the general prohibition against work on the Sabbath had been expanded to include a list of 39 major activities that were forbidden on the Sabbath – including such things as sewing, weaving, washing, cooking, baking, writing, making a fire or putting one out, and, as we have observed, both traveling (beyond a prescribed maximum distance) and harvesting a crop.

Perhaps with the best of intentions, they had piled up so many rules and regulations defining how to keep the day holy, rules about what you could or couldn't do on the Sabbath, that the day itself and God's intended purpose for it got lost under the pile. What was intended by God to be a day of rest and refreshment, a day of physical and spiritual renewal, had become, under the weight of all their rules and traditions, a tiresome and heavy burden. The Sabbath had become a straight-jacket. Instead of being a breath of fresh air, it was sucking all the air out of life.

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

The Pharisees aren't the only ones in history who have misunderstood the Sabbath. They have had plenty of company. In our own tradition in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, we have adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as our doctrinal standards, subject to the teachings of the Bible (which we affirm as the supreme, final and only infallible rule for what we are to believe and how we are to live). The Westminster Confession and Catechisms were written in the 1600s and provide a rich biblical and theological foundation for us in the heritage of the Reformation. But it (unlike the Bible) is not infallible. At times, I believe, the Confession reflects the culture of its time in its pronouncements. Nowhere is this so clear as in Chapter 21, paragraph 8 of the Confession, where it says: "The Sabbath is kept holy to the Lord when men prepare their hearts for it; arrange for their daily affairs to be taken care of beforehand; rest the whole day from their own works and words, and from thoughts about their worldly activities and recreations; and take up the whole time in public and private worship and in the duties of necessity and mercy."

There is a whole lot of good in this statement, a whole lot that I affirm and that I believe the church should affirm. We *should* prepare our hearts ahead of time for the Lord's day – beginning on Saturday, if not earlier. How you spend Saturday evening, or how late you stay up on Saturday night, will affect your preparedness to honor the Lord with your best on Sunday. Preparing your mind and heart and body for worship ahead of time is key to keeping the Lord's day the *Lord's* day. Arranging for your daily affairs to be taken care of beforehand – for example, your grocery shopping or other errands that can just as easily be done on another day of the week, or cutting the grass – can be a healthy personal discipline that allows you more time for things the Lord has designed the Sabbath for. So, to the extent that we are able, we *should* arrange for our routine activities to be done on other days.

We *should* give priority, as the Confession says, to “public and private worship and ... duties of necessity and mercy.” The Lord's day as a day for worship and for ministries of mercy to others in need is unquestionably part of God's good purpose for it.

We *should*, I think, rest on the Lord's day from our 6-days-a-week labors and concerns. It is for our own good that the Lord has woven this pattern of labor and rest into the fabric of our lives. When we neglect it or reject it, we do so at our own peril.

TATTOO THE DOG

Do you know the story of Tattoo the basset hound? On evening Tattoo went for an unplanned run. What happened is that while his leash was attached to his collar, Tattoo's owner accidentally shut his leash in the car door and took off with Tattoo still outside the car.

A police officer noticed a passing vehicle with something dragging behind it. It turned out to be Tattoo, who was picking them up and putting them down as fast as he could. The officer chased the car to a stop and rescued Tattoo, but not before the dog had reached a speed of 20-to-25 miles per hour, rolling over several times. Tattoo was fine, but did ask not to go out for an evening walk for a long time. ☺

There is a lesson for us in this story, in addition to making sure you don't shut your dog's leash in your car door. The lesson is that if we're not careful, we can end up living like Tattoo, with our days marked by picking up our feet and putting them down as fast and for as long as we can, until we collapse from the stress and fatigue of it all.

Do you ever feel like Tattoo? For some of us, the more appropriate question may be: Do you ever *not* feel like Tattoo?

God does not want us to live like that. Which is, in part, why He gave us the Sabbath. It is meant to be a blessing and not a curse, not to weigh us down with more and more religious duties but to liberate us from the tyranny of always needing to do more.

Does God, as the Confession asserts, require His people to devote *the whole day*, from morning till night, to worship and ministries of mercy? I don't see that in the Bible.

Does God desire us to make worship and ministries of mercy *a priority* on the Lord's day? Absolutely. Honoring God on the Sabbath requires us to make choices and to set and keep boundaries on how best to serve God's purposes for us – not just on Sunday but seven days a week. Worship, both public and private, should be at the top of our list of priorities for the Lord's day.

Does God *mandate* that we rest the whole day from our own works and words, and from even thinking about worldly activities and recreations? I think the interpretation of Sabbath-keeping in the Westminster Confession is too strict and, if it were to be enforced, too legalistic. I know I'm not alone, because the vast majority of my fellow Teaching Elders (Pastors) in the Presbytery of the East, and of the Ruling Elders and Deacons I know here at Faith and in other churches of the EPC, when asked if they have any disagreements with the Westminster Confession, cite this paragraph from the Confession. As do I.

I believe recreation is a gift from God to be enjoyed. I feel re-charged, re-newed, re-invigorated, re-freshed both physically and emotionally when I take time for recreation, on the Lord's day or any other day of the week. It is a blessing from God for which I am tremendously grateful. When I'm on vacation – if, for example, we are at the Outer Banks – I think it is a gift from God to be able to go to the beach after Worship on Sunday, to enjoy the sun and sand and surf.

There is a positive, God-ordained purpose for the Sabbath. The Pharisees lost sight of it. They missed the point. So have many well-intentioned but misguided theologians, church leaders, and Christians through the centuries.

Jesus told the Pharisees they had it all wrong. They acted as though God had created man [humankind] for the purpose of keeping the Sabbath. They had made an idol, a god, out of the Sabbath. If we had a cell phone video of the entire conversation Jesus had with the Pharisees, I think we would find that Jesus said something like this:

“Don't you see that the Sabbath was made for you, and not the other way around? It is not a law meant to weigh you down or hold you back from really *living* life and *enjoying* it. It *is* a command, yes. But it is a command of *grace* that can set you free from the tyranny of work and the clutter of unending activity. It is a *gift* given for your health and wellbeing. The Sabbath was made for you, not you for the Sabbath. It is meant to be a *blessing*, not a curse. Not to hem you in, but to set you free from the demands of the other six days. It was given for your benefit.”

We're not finished with this text yet. So come back and join us again next Sunday. Here is what I want to leave you with today:

- The Sabbath, with the principles undergirding it and the rules that have so often governed it, is not the Lord of your life; Jesus is.
- You were not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for you.
- You are not the Lord of the Sabbath; Jesus is.

- You are not Lord *on* the Sabbath; Jesus is.
- Being legalistic (like the Pharisees) is not the way to observe the Lord's day. "Anything goes" is not the answer either.
- "Whatever you do" or don't do on the Lord's day, as in all things at all times, you are to "do it all," as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "for the glory of God." Again, as Paul says in Colossians 3:17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed," on the Lord's day or any other day, "do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

If you expect me to give you a definitive list of what to do and what not to do on the Lord's day, you will be disappointed. But I do plan to go into more detail next Sunday about God's gracious purposes for the Sabbath day He has established for our good and His glory. (Lord willing, I also get to baptize my grandson Henry here at Faith next Sunday!)

Whatever you do or don't do today and in the coming week, dear church, do it all to the glory of God. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.