

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 16, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
LORD OF THE SABBATH (2)**

Mark 3:1-6

As we continue to think about the Sabbath or Lord's Day, I want to begin where I ended last Sunday, with these bullet points about how we are to view the Sabbath as followers of Jesus in the world today.

- The Sabbath, with the principles undergirding it and the myriad rules and regulations that have so often governed it throughout history, is not the Lord of your life; Jesus is.
- You were not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for you. You have Jesus' own word on it (Mark 2:28). It was made for your benefit and mine, and, as all things, for God's glory.
- You are not Lord of the Sabbath; Jesus is.
- You are not Lord *on* the Sabbath; Jesus is.
- There are two equal and opposite errors to avoid: You can have too many rules for observing the Sabbath, like the Pharisees. Or, like many secular, irreligious people, you can have no rules at all. Legalism is not the answer. Nor is "anything goes."
- "Whatever you do" or don't do on the Lord's Day, as with all things at all times, you are to "do it all," the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "for the glory of God."
- Again, as the Bible 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."

Don Colley told me the story of a young Presbyterian pastor in Scotland in a previous generation, when Sabbath laws were much stricter than today, who loved to ice skate when the ice got thick on Scottish rivers and streams. He preached at several congregations every Sunday. One time, after a long cold spell and lots of snow, he decided to skate from kirk to kirk. When his Session got wind of a possible Sabbath scandal (ice skating on the Sabbath!), the elders met to decide if he had flagrantly sinned by engaging in a recreational activity on the Lord's Day. After much discussion, one of the more seasoned elders proposed a way to settle the question. He said: "We need only ask him if he enjoyed it a wee bit. If he answers 'Yes,' then surely it was sinful."

Hmmm. That encapsulates one of the problems with the "traditional" view of the Sabbath: Anything that is enjoyable, anything that is fun, if it brings you pleasure, even just a wee bit,

it *must* be wrong to do on the Sabbath. That, I'm afraid, is the perspective toward the Sabbath that dominated far too many lives for far too many generations.

Throughout our history, one way our country has dealt with Sabbath observances is through the adoption and enforcement of what are called "blue laws," laws based on the biblical injunction against working on the Sabbath. The first blue law in America was enacted here in Virginia in the 1600s, requiring every citizen in the colony to attend church on Sunday. In 1675, the colonial government in Massachusetts passed a law requiring church doors to be locked during worship services. Why? It was not to keep latecomers out, but because so many people were leaving services early, before the sermon was over. (Can you believe anyone would do that?) Blue laws have been used for generations to regulate or prohibit different kinds of business activity and leisure or recreational pursuits. Some of these laws are still on the books in some states. For the most part, though, with regard to what Americans may or may not do on the Lord's Day, just about anything goes.

The question for us, of course, is not so much: How have Americans (and American Christians) observed the Sabbath or Lord's Day in the past? The question is: How does *God* want *us* to observe the Lord's Day? How does *the Lord* want *us* to "Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy"? (Exodus 20:8; cf. Deuteronomy 5:12)

The healing of the man with a withered hand by Jesus on the Sabbath day gives us a glimpse of the Lord's desires and purpose for the Sabbath. Jesus had gone to church, as He was in the habit of doing on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). Some of His critics were there, too, along with this man with a crippled hand. Luke adds the detail that it was the man's right hand that was shriveled. At a time when most people worked with their hands, and since most people are right-handed, it would have been especially difficult for this man to make a living without the use of his hand.

Jesus takes the initiative here. It wasn't like the time when the four friends of the paraplegic cut a hole in the roof in order to get their needy friend to Jesus. In this case Jesus speaks first and asks the man to stand up right there in the synagogue. Then, knowing the Pharisees are looking for an opening to criticize or condemn Him, Jesus asks them this provocative question: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4)

The Message expresses it this way: "What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?"

Did you notice how His critics answer Him? They *don't*. Mark says: "They remained silent" (3:4). Crickets.

The silence was deafening. If they had answered, they would probably have tried to argue that the correct answer was to do nothing. As they saw it, one should do neither good nor evil on the Sabbath, but wait until the Sabbath was over to do good deeds.

This was just totally unacceptable to Jesus, who was incensed and “deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts” (3:5). So He told the man to stretch out his hand, which he did, and his hand was completely healed (3:5).

It is ironic that the critics of Jesus were so upset by this, accusing Jesus of working on the Sabbath, when the only thing Jesus did that was observable to the naked eye was to speak a few words to the man. That He did a miraculous “work” of healing is self-evident, but no one actually saw Him “do” anything that would be a violation of the Sabbath rules.

Nevertheless, what we see is that the religious leaders of the day had elevated their devotion to the observance of the Sabbath, with all 39 categories of activities that were forbidden on the Sabbath, to the level of an essential of the faith. And they insisted that everyone adopt their view of what was OK and what was not OK to do on the Sabbath. What they saw as an essential of the faith, we view as a non-essential in which we have liberty under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

You might ask why Jesus, in this case, insisted on healing this crippled hand on the Sabbath, when He knew it would add to the conflict between Him and the Pharisees. Couldn't Jesus have just waited until the Sabbath was over? Couldn't He have waited until tomorrow to heal this man's hand? Why did He feel the need to do it right then and there, knowing it would increase the tension between Him and the Pharisees?

Jesus could have waited. This was not a life-or-death situation. We can presume that this man had been living with a crippled hand for some time. What's one more day?

Jesus would answer, I think, by saying: Why wait until tomorrow to do the good I can do today? Why should this man suffer for another day when right now is the *kairos* moment, the moment of opportunity to heal him? The attitude of Jesus gives us a window into one of God's purposes for the Sabbath, which I will come back to in a few minutes.

WHAT THE SABBATH IS FOR

If the Sabbath or Lord's Day is for our good; if it is intended for our benefit; if it is a gift from God and not a burden or a straitjacket; how can we receive the rich benefits God has in store for us in it? What *is* lawful on the Sabbath, according to the Lord of the Sabbath, and what is not?

I don't presume to have the last word on it, and, as I said last Sunday, I will not give you a detailed list of do's and don'ts for the Lord's Day. But I want to propose five positive purposes for God's provision of the Sabbath.

1. REST FROM OUR SIX DAYS A WEEK LABOR

It is given, first of all, for rest from the labors and routines of our daily lives. It is intended to give us a break from the daily grind that can, and in too many cases does, wear us down.

A photographer was taking pictures of 1st-graders at an elementary school. He asked one little girl: “What are you going to be when you grow up?” You know what she said? “Tired.”

Tired is probably what she observed in the lives of her mom and dad, and maybe other adults in her life. And you know what? Tired is what many of us have grown up to be.

The word Sabbath – *shabat* in Hebrew – means to cease or rest, as I said last Sunday. God did not establish the Sabbath because *He* needed it. The Bible reminds us that the Lord “will not grow tired or weary” (Isaiah 40:28). He, our Guardian, will never doze or fall asleep (Psalm 121:3-4, *MSG*). It is not the Lord who needs a Sabbath rest. We are the ones who need it. We need it because, though we are made in the image of God, we are *not* God. We are human, not superhuman. We need proper care and maintenance, just like a car, if we are going to last without having a breakdown of some kind – physical, emotional, spiritual, or relational – that could be avoided.

Long, long ago, in the summer before my last year in seminary, I worked in the Office of Undergraduate Housing at Princeton University. One of the projects I worked on was making housing arrangements and room assignments for the incoming freshman class at the university. It was a busy summer, which got busier near the end of the summer as crunch time approached. At one point I worked 19 consecutive days without a day off, and I can tell you I felt drained both physically and emotionally. I could really have used a time-out, a day off each week to catch my breath, to be refreshed in body, mind, and soul.

Some of you know what that’s like far better than I do, because you’ve been there and done that. Probably for way more than 19 days. Maybe, because of the demands of your job, or your particular financial situation, you’re doing it right now.

Maybe you wear your busyness and the unceasing demands of your job as a badge of honor. Maybe you’re proud of how busy you are and how you are in such demand that it is impossible (you think) to take a day off. There is going to be a price to pay. You may be paying it already.

In his classic book *Ordering Your Private World*, Gordon MacDonald says that we’re in trouble if we think we can rest only when our work is done, because many of us have jobs where the work is never done. There is always unfinished business. There is always more to do. And that, he says, is why some of us rarely, if ever, rest (MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, 187).

It is true that some people have to work on the Sabbath. Some people have to work on the Lord’s Day. Thank God for police officers, for doctors and nurses and EMTs and firefighters, for hospice workers and care givers, for men and women on duty to protect and defend our country from enemies foreign and domestic, for the people we count on to be there for us in the event of an emergency or a catastrophe. It is also true that some of us may have employers who ask – or require – us to work on Sundays. In some cases, there may be something you can do about it; you may be able to persuade your employer to give you Sundays off. Or it

may be something you have to live with until you can find a different job in which you don't have to work on Sundays.

If you have to work on Sundays, it is wise to choose another day of the week as your Sabbath, so that you include a day of rest from your regular labors each week. The important thing is to detach yourself from your work, because you are more than your work. As cheesy as it sounds, "you are a human *being* not a human *doing*." Or, at the risk of more cheesiness, "seven days of work make one weak." W-E-A-K.

God has made us in such a way that we need rest. You need it. I need it. Too many of us have grown up to be tired, not because of an iron deficiency or another physical ailment, but because we have not learned to rest. God has provided a day of rest for us by giving us the Sabbath. Don't neglect it. Don't waste it. Embrace it.

2. THE REFRESHMENT AND RENEWAL OF WORSHIP

The Sabbath is not only a day for rest from our labors. It is also given to us for the refreshment and renewal of our hearts through soul-stirring, God-honoring, Christ-exalting worship. The Sabbath is not only a call to stop working. It is an invitation, an opportunity, to start worshipping.

The Sabbath, or Lord's Day, is a day to focus in a special way on the "worth-ship" of God – His unique, supreme, perfect worthiness to be worshiped. It is a day to replenish your soul by gathering with other believers, whenever possible, for worship.

The pandemic, of course, has impacted our ability to meet together in person as a church family in the last year and more. It has not tested or hindered our ability to worship God. By God's grace, we have been able to continue to worship together virtually, through the miracle of modern technology. But the pandemic has tested our ability and perhaps, in some cases, our desire and commitment to worship God together in person. I want to encourage you, to the extent it is possible for you, to make both worship and worshipping together in person high priorities in your life. One downside of our technological capabilities is that some of us may become too comfortable with virtual worship and end up devaluing the importance and blessings of in-person, gathered worship. If that may be true in the life of anyone listening to this message on your computer or TV, I urge you to make a decision today to come back to church in person next Sunday or as soon as it is feasible for you.

The Bible urges us in Hebrews 10:25 not to give up meeting together, as some even in the 1st-century church were in the habit of doing, but to keep on encouraging one another in our worship, faith, and life together in Christ. There is enormous encouragement, isn't there, in meeting together (like we used to in the old days, before COVID!) each week, in raising our voices together in hymns and worship songs, in knowing, after a week living in a world where many people and institutions don't share our beliefs and values, that we are not alone?

The Sabbath has been given for the refreshment and renewal of worship that honors God and stirs our souls.

It is not just work that can get in the way of making worship our priority. Sometimes it is sports activities like soccer or baseball, lacrosse or basketball, where games or practices are scheduled on Sunday mornings. You have to decide how to handle these situations. My plea to you is to not allow “non-essentials” to get in the way and keep you from making Worship a priority in your life and the life of your family.

3. RELATIONSHIPS

Third, and closely related, the Sabbath was given for the strengthening and renewing of relationships. The pressures and demands of our jobs and the pursuit of pleasure can all contribute to neglect in the realm of relationships both in the family and in the family of God.

The Lord’s Day is a priceless gift of time – time for togetherness, time for laughing and crying and playing and praying and sharing life with our families, friends, and neighbors. If we’re not too busy, that is.

4. RE-CREATION

- Rest from our ordinary labors.
- The refreshment and renewal of worship.
- The cultivation of relationships.

Fourth, the Sabbath was given for our re-creation. By re-creation I don’t just mean any kind of recreation, but those pursuits that contribute to the renewal of our spirits and minds and bodies and emotions. For you, this might mean spending time in your garden. It might mean going to a concert. It might mean going on a hike or a bike ride. Or playing tennis. Or corn hole. If cooking brings you delight, it might be making a meal to share with others. It might mean playing ball with your kids. It might mean going to the neighborhood pool and chilling out with a good book. Or even going to a Sunday afternoon baseball game.

I said last Sunday that I find the Westminster Confession’s admonition to refrain from all worldly activities and recreations on the Lord’s Day (21.8) to be too rigid, too restrictive. Ice-skating on the Sabbath is not sinful, even if you enjoy it a wee bit. ☺

This is, at least to some degree, a matter of conscience. The Westminster Confession, in Chapter 20, declares that “God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to or different from His Word in matters of faith or worship” (WCF 20.2). The key here is to remember that *God* and *God alone* is Lord of the conscience. I am not the Lord of my conscience. You are not the Lord of your conscience. Nor is your conscience the final authority. *God alone* is Lord of the conscience, and we are responsible to Him for the choices we make and the activities we engage in on the Lord’s Day. And every day.

5. MERCY

Fifth, the Sabbath is an opportunity for ministry. It is a day for showing mercy, for reaching out to others in love, for doing good where we can, for meeting needs in the name of Jesus. Just like Jesus did in the case of the man in the synagogue with a useless hand.

Jesus leaves no doubt about it: The Lord's Day is a day to do good. It is always the right time to do good. The right time to do good, the right time to show mercy, the right time to meet someone's needs is whenever you have the opportunity, regardless of what day of the week it is. In Matthew's account of these Sabbath controversies (Matthew 12:1-14), Jesus quotes a famous verse from the Old Testament, Hosea 6:6, where the Lord says: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." The point is that mercy is more important than ritual. People in need take priority over religious observances. The Lord's Day, when you are free from the obligations of other days, is a prime day for acts of mercy.

CONCLUSION

So, where does all this leave us in our understanding of God's purposes for the Sabbath?

It is not a day for selfish indulgence. It is not a day for just doing whatever you want. It is a day for rest. For worship. For relationships. For re-creation. And for reaching out in acts of mercy and kindness.

We must say NO! to the errors of both rigid legalism (with all its Do's and Don'ts) and "anything goes" antinomianism. The Sabbath was made for us, but that doesn't make us the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. The Lord's Day belongs to Him. Every day belongs to Him. Everything belongs to Him. We belong to Him. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him. Today. Every day. Forever.

So, whatever you do today, do it all for the glory of God. And enjoy Him always. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.