

Whose Sabbath Is It, Anyway?
By Jason Huff
Exodus 20:8-11, Colossians 2:8-17, Luke 6:1-11

This week's Gospel reading comes from Luke 6:1-11. Over the last couple of weeks, we've seen Jesus reach out to sinners and outcasts while being criticized by the religious group known as the Pharisees. Their problems with Jesus' teaching hit a boiling point in this week's lesson. Here's what Luke writes...

"One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus."

During my time in seminary, we became good friends with William and Rebekah. William was a student in the counseling department, and he also was a lifelong deep-south Baptist. He was a great guy, but sometimes he was a little quirky. For example, he posted a copy of the Ten Commandments in his yard. Now keep in mind that the little seminary town of Wilmore, KY, most people were somehow related to the Christian college or seminary...and if they weren't, they had still been inundated with Christianity. That didn't matter to William; he still wanted to make sure that everybody knew where he stood. We had a few conversations about that sign and what it meant to him. To be honest with you, I never minded that sign. I think that having a copy of the Ten Commandments hanging in City Hall or on a school wall is perfectly fine. But the problem that we always ran into was the issue of the Sabbath. Some of the Ten Commandments we still hold to today, sure, but what about the Sabbath? What does it mean to keep it holy? Do we have to do it? Did Christ do away with it? And maybe more importantly, are Christians hypocritical when they don't keep it? We had lots of great discussions, and most of them were more about building friendship than figuring out every last bit of the Bible. But we never did resolve what we thought of the Sabbath.

And that's been true of the Christian church for a very long time. Many Christians nowadays have heard something about having a day of rest, they've heard the term Sabbath, but they really don't know what it means. We have this cultural understanding that maybe we should go to church on Sundays, but that's about it. Was this all that Jesus had in mind?

To understand today's Scripture lesson and to understand what the Sabbath is all about, we really need to get a little bit of history on the situation. The first time we hear about the Sabbath is in the book of Exodus. After the Israelites have fled from Egypt into the wilderness, God starts sending manna to them. Each night, God sends the Israelites a white, seedlike food that can be made into cakes. Any manna left over each day is thrown out, since it spoils immediately. They are told on the sixth day of the week to collect enough manna for two days so that the seventh day they can rest as a Sabbath. This pattern of resting on the seventh day becomes part of Israel's law in the book of Exodus soon thereafter, and the law says that no work is to be done that day. It's a blessed day that God has set apart for them. Forty years later, as the Israelites prepare to enter the Promised Land, the book of Deuteronomy reminds them of the laws of the nation and expands them. Deuteronomy adds that the Sabbath exists to remind them of their time in Egypt as slaves, and that the Sabbath exists to give the Hebrew servants a time of rest. Ultimately, God uses the Sabbath to set His people apart as unique from all the other nations because no other ancient civilization had any concept of a weekly day off. Days off were for the wealthy and not the working classes. Jewish authorities state that Greeks considered Jews lazy because they took every seventh day off. But God knew that having that time would be good for everyone. He gave the Sabbath to bring justice to those who are servants and to make sure His people had a chance to remember Him in their week. It proved that God would bless those who took time to remember Him, even if they didn't work every single day as all the other nations expected. The Sabbath was celebrated from sundown on Friday to nightfall on Saturday.

Eventually, many people forget the Sabbath and do their own thing. Passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah condemn the intentional breaking of the Sabbath. And eventually, Israel is conquered and goes into exile as punishment for hundreds of years of disobedience. A remnant returns in 517 BC after seventy years in Babylon, and they are determined that they are going to follow God's law and never face this kind of punishment again. One of the ways they do it is to make a Sabbath code. Now the Bible says, "Keep the Sabbath holy by doing no work." A couple of things are mentioned in the Bible as the kind of work being discussed...lighting a fire in one's house was one, which simply required preparation before the Sabbath day. This would have been a task often carried out by a servant, so it shows God's protection. Another listed work was carrying a load into a city, presumably to trade. The rabbis figured out all the tasks it took to bake bread, to make clothing, to make leather, and to build a house, and banned them all. By the time of Jesus, there was a list of 39 categories of work on the list. We're talking everything from planting seeds to writing two or more letters. Under these 39 categories were hundreds of different things someone could not do on the Sabbath. In fact, this list is still observed by Orthodox Jews today, who for example will not drive a car on the Sabbath because starting a vehicle requires lighting a fire.

This is the problem that Jesus is coming up against with the Pharisees. He is out with his disciples going through a field of grain. By Jewish law, it's perfectly fine for someone in need to take enough grain for them to eat right then. It wasn't stealing; in fact, it was God's way of providing for the poor and needy. Now it's not clear who the disciples are in this passage; Jesus hasn't yet called His inner circle, so it doesn't refer to them. It's probably the crowd that's been following Jesus to hear His teaching. It would make sense that the Pharisees are there observing. But once again, they see something appalling. Jesus' disciples are breaking at least four Sabbath rules. They're reaping, they're threshing, they're grinding, and they're selecting.

Now the Pharisees are sure they've got something this time. After all, the Sabbath is a time-honored tradition. It's the only ritual in the whole of the Ten Commandments. If Jesus doesn't honor it, then He couldn't possibly be the messiah. But He turns it around on them. He quotes to them about when King David got bread for his men that wasn't technically lawful for them to eat. David was aware of the law, but he was also aware of the need of his men. In David's case, the priest himself gave over the bread to David in full knowledge that it was consecrated for the other priests to eat. Nobody condemned David for his actions, not even God. Jesus' disciples are hungry and need food too. Unlike David's case, there's nothing against the Law of God at all in what the disciples are doing. As Jesus says, "The son of man is Lord of the Sabbath." Jesus is the one who determines what is right and wrong on the Sabbath, not the Pharisees and not anybody else. In fact, Jesus honors the Sabbath because His concern for others doesn't stop on that day. Some scholar's interpretation of a law isn't going to keep Him from doing what it right.

This gets proven in the second half of the story. Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Now this isn't really a surprise; just a few weeks ago, we read about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, and nobody thought anything of it. But now the Pharisees are here, and they are determined to bring Jesus down. The literal wording of the verse indicates that the scribes and Pharisees were spying on Jesus with the intent of bringing a legal charge against Him. They've gone from being casual observers to accusers. And it's as if Jesus is intentionally calling them out. He sees a man with a withered right hand. It means the man can't work and likely can't support himself. But by Jewish custom, because the man isn't in immediate danger, the Sabbath should not be broken to help him. Jesus heals him anyway. And as He does it, He asks a rhetorical question: "is it lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath, to save a life or destroy it?" He's making a specific point. The Pharisees, in their attempt to be perfect in their observance of the Sabbath, have forgotten the most important part of it. The Sabbath is a holy day set aside for remembering God, for giving rest to the weary, and for building the family. It wasn't meant to be a day where everyone was burdened with remembering what they could and could not do, and it certainly wasn't meant to keep people from doing good. As it was, the Jews could do virtually nothing on that day without facing the wrath of the Pharisees. In keeping the letter of the law, they broken the spirit of what was intended.

But this is the point where the Pharisees finally come apart at the seams. A man has been healed! This should be a wonderful moment! But instead of being happy for the man who has a chance at a real life again, they are furious. In fact, the closest translation is that they are insane with rage; they've gone mad. Their anger goes far beyond anything remotely merited by what Jesus did. But what's happened is tearing their whole world apart. The fact that Jesus can heal on the Sabbath means that God approves of what He is doing. They don't have any arguments left; they have been proven wrong. When all else fails, they get enraged. They want Jesus out of the way because He has the ear of the people, and their position at the top of their society is no longer secure. It's Jesus' teachings on the Sabbath that become the final straw. From this point out, the Pharisees are Jesus' continual adversaries.

It's an interesting story, filled with tension and drama. But it isn't really spelled out what we're supposed to do with it. And as the history of the Christian church shows, many believers don't know what to do with Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath either. We're told by Paul in the reading today from Colossians that no one should be judged by how they keep the Sabbath. He states that the Sabbath, along with certain festivals and dietary laws, were a shadow of Christ...they were given to the Jewish people to see what was going to be coming. But what does it mean? Did Christ get rid of the Sabbath?

Christians haven't kept the Jewish Sabbath for a very long time. Although they met in the synagogues in the earliest days of the church, soon they were forced out. These early Christians met together often. But Paul mentions to the Corinthian church that they should set aside a proportionate amount of their income to give on their meeting on the first day of the week, which would have been Sunday. In the book of Acts, Luke writes about the body of believers in Troas coming together on Sunday. And by the end of the first century, the universal church had settled on Sunday as a day of worship because it reminded them that Christ was resurrected from the dead on a Sunday. It also made a clean break between Christianity and Judaism. It made it clear that Christians aren't bound to the rigid requirements of Jewish law.

But Jesus also did not come to make Christians abandon the goodness of the old Law. Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Jesus made it clear that all the manmade rules that had been added to the Old Testament weren't useful, but He never did away with the Sabbath entirely. So the question we are left with is this: what was God's purpose in giving the Sabbath in the first place? What was the spirit behind the law that we are meant to keep as Christians? It's what I call the Sabbath principle. The Sabbath principle, as I read the Old Testament, was meant to give people a chance to be refreshed and to enjoy God's goodness to us, both in worshipping Him and enjoying His gifts to us in our family and friends and blessings.

For Christians, the first part of that – worship --isn't based around any specific day or time. Some churches now have services on Saturday nights. Others have services for "seekers," people who are just coming to church for the first time, on Sundays, and they have services for dedicated believers on Wednesday nights. There are lots of variations. It doesn't seem to matter to God when it happens. It is important, though, that worship happens, both in our congregation and on our own. As Hebrews 10:25a reminds us, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." Over and over again the Scriptures tell us how meeting together to honor God and learn more about Him is incredibly important. Most of Paul's letters were to churches, telling them how to stay strong *together* in the faith. Eight different psalms talk about how good it is to be in God's house and to praise together. To keep the spirit of the Sabbath, we have to be in church. We can't do it alone. If we claim to be Christians but won't go to some church, somewhere, one where we enjoy the music and teaching, there is a serious problem with our faith. The Sabbath principle includes spending time with God as His chosen people. It's also about making sure we honor God in our daily lives. We have the luxury of having the Bible anywhere, anytime...in print, on our computers, even on CD. We need to worship God on our own, whether singing with a praise CD in the car or listening to a few chapters or reading in a quiet time. The Sabbath principle isn't just for Sundays.

Time is the other key component of the Sabbath principle for Christians, and it's probably the one thing we need to learn from God more than anything else. We have 168 hours in a week. Assuming we each sleep 8 hours a night – big assumption, but we can use it today – we have 112 hours we can use. If we attend church one hour a week, that's less than 1% of our total time. Sometimes we get nervous if church goes an hour and fifteen or an hour and a half because it might cut into our plans...but it's still less than 1%. You could come to church, participate on a committee, and come to Bible Study every week and it would still be less than 5%!

Now that's not meant to give anybody a guilt trip about participating at the church. It's there to make us think. At first, it's easy to think that many of us have far more time off than those in Jesus' day who celebrated the Sabbath...most were farmers who worked from roughly sunup to sundown six days a week. But the problem is, we can't get away from our jobs. We're tied to a cell phone and our email. We're on call seven days a week. And if we're not, we're often busy scheduling things seven days a week. Our children have this practice and that practice and this concert and that game. We never slow down. Church becomes a burden rather than a blessing because it's one more thing to squeeze into an over-busy week. We live to *do*.

But God wants us to step back from *doing* and just *be*. Part of the reason that God gave us salvation as a free gift was because our fallen human nature tells us that we must earn it, that we must work hard, give it our best shot, make God accept us. God says, "You can't *do* anything to make me love you. But you can *be* like me and *become* like me." God Himself ceased working on the seventh day. He enjoyed the creation. He wants us to rest too and enjoy what He has given us.

Why is it we can't be like that? I think we fill our days with all sorts of things that keep us from having to deal with the deep issues in our lives. What would it be like to cancel the soccer tournaments and turn off the game systems and just talk? I think it scares us to communicate face to face rather than side to side. We are scared that we have nothing to say. We're scared that if someone really knew us, they wouldn't love us. But it's in those times when we carve out time for each other that we learn to love each other for who we are deep down. When we're young, that time molds us and shapes us into who we become.

I grew up the son of a wonderful man who happened to be a workaholic. He grew up in a family that prized work, where you were the most valued if you were the one who had the most successful job. My dad was a caterer, and he loved the work, but it didn't pay well. When I was young, he tried to make time for me, and I still remember him helping with Indian Guides and coaching my Little League team. Those are my best memories of my dad. But during most of my life, I saw him pretty rarely. He worked 7 days a week, often 16 hours a day. He died at the age of 49 while I was off at college. I resented him for a long time because he just wasn't around, and moreso when he died from an aneurism likely caused by overwork. I've gotten past much of that to see the kind man he was. But I can tell you this – I never think, "I wish Dad would have signed me up for football." I never think, "I wish Dad would have bought me a better car." I think, "I wish I could have spent more time with him." On one hand, I know my dad was a Christian; I'll spend eternity alongside him. But eternity is a long way away, and there is no time like the present to spend time with those we love.

That's what the Sabbath is for...to get closer to God and closer to one another by carving out that time on a regular, weekly basis. Work and sports and other stuff can wait. The Sabbath principle says take time for your family. If you miss that call and your client goes with someone else because you make time for the people you love, it's OK. God knows, and God is in control. God will honor you for honoring Him. Our kids might be wonderful at tennis or hockey or whatever, and that can be a good family thing...but if it's going to take up your family time and time for God and become a burden, get rid of it. And if your friends ask why you'd give that up, you can share with them the Sabbath principle, that God wants us to enjoy our families and enjoy resting in Him. You might have to step back from a committee at the church so that you honor the Sabbath principle. As long as the other parts of your life are in balance, that's OK too.

There's something called the Shorter Catechism that's been a key to the Presbyterian faith for a very long time. And the first question that's answered in the Shorter Catechism is this: "What is the chief end of man?" What is our central purpose? The answer is, "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We were made to enjoy God! And we can't do that if we are living our lives at lightspeed. Christ healed on the Sabbath and let His disciples pick grains on the Sabbath to show that He is Lord of the Sabbath, the one who has the right to say what does and does not happen on any given day. He showed that every day is a good day to help a neighbor, to call on a friend, to get closer to God. But He also showed that true rest comes from Him and is part of His plan for us. He wants us to break away from this world's rat race to catch a glimpse of what our eternal heavenly home is like.

One of my favorite passages in Scripture is one that I sometimes use near the end of communion. Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Are you willing to unclutter your schedule to make your God and your family the main priorities in your life? Are you willing to let God have control over your calendar so He can be your Lord every day? If you do, you will be honoring the Sabbath principle, and you will find the rest that Christ Jesus promises us. Let's pray.