

Sermon: Observe the Sabbath and Keep It Holy

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, on June 2, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How did it ever get to the point that plucking heads of grain through grain fields is a violation of the Sabbath? How did it ever get to the point that observing the Sabbath became so contentious, whereby the religious authorities of Judaism came to conspire to destroy Jesus? The lectionary readings today is a case in point, a lesson for us all, on the need to understand and observe the spirit of the law, rather than rigorously and blindly follow the letters of the law.

Sabbath is the topic under scrutiny today. There are a number of motifs that surround the observance of the Sabbath rest. First and foremost, Sabbath is **rest**. It is patterned after the Creation account of Genesis 2, whereby God “rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done”. After six full days of work, after all that God had created, God rested. This divine rest was not born out of exhaustion, for God surely does not need rest per se. But it was a rest of repose, when after the divine work of creation is completed, God sits back, reclines on the divine throne, lets out a sigh as he looks over his handiwork of heavens and earth and all that in-between, and says ‘It is good!’

Rest is good, as it became codified in the Ten Commandments, fourth of ten actually, in Exodus 20:8, “*Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.*” The divine rest thus becomes God’s gift to the humankind, since God rested on the seventh day, the covenantal people ought to observe the same. It is a far cry from their days in Egypt as an enslaved people, pressed into doing ever increasing work with ever decreasing raw materials to work with. Sabbath becomes a day to cease from work, from our natural acquisitive urge; a day to be renewed, refreshed; a day of delight, and a day to honour the Lord.

The motif of **remembering** is critical. The very observance of one day in seven is something the Israelites were commanded to remember. This is not a rest to forget, to kick back and be lazy, but a rest to remember—remembering God’s own rest from work, and remembering the nation’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt. One can say the very act of observing

the Sabbath, is an act of remembering all that had transpired in the Book of Genesis and Exodus, to remember God's goodness towards creation and towards the covenantal people, and to give thanks. One does so, one day out of seven, repeatedly.

The motif of '**keeping it holy**' sets Sabbath apart—it is a day set apart from the ordinary. From the very beginning, at its very core, "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it". It is God who has given this seventh day an aura of sanctity, for six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. This seventh day doesn't belong to us, it belongs to the Lord God. As an extension, the people who observe the Sabbath, first the Israelites then the Church, are also set apart by God as the chosen people. Observing the Sabbath thus becomes a sign of the covenant, between God and the people of God, and as God instructs Moses in Exodus 31, it is a perpetual covenant, a sign forever throughout all generations.

So far, I have touched on the Old Testament's understanding of observing the Sabbath, mainly to rest, to remember and to set it apart as holy. There is one more motif which crosses both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that is **worship**. The link between Sabbath and worship first surfaced as special priestly sacrifices on the seventh day, as stipulated in Numbers 28:9-10. In that passage, "*two male lambs a year old without blemish and two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, and its drink offering*" were to be brought before the Lord on the Sabbath, to be sacrificed in an act of worship. In similar vein, Isaiah spoke of worshipping God "from sabbath to sabbath" in Isaiah 66:23. However, it wasn't until the time of the New Testament do we find a weekly gathering of worshippers in synagogues during the Sabbath, with an emphasis on reading, debating and expounding on the Scripture. Sabbath rest thus takes on an added motif of resting in the words of God, something which the Christian Church happily borrowed and obliged.

So rest, remember, set-apart and worship. These are the spirits behind the law of observing the Sabbath. They set a healthy boundary of a healthy relationship between God and the people of God. Understanding these spirits is to understand why God instituted Sabbath the first place—that is for the good of humankind. Forgetting them, or misunderstanding them results in a rigid and legalistic application of the law regarding the Sabbath.

That seems to be the case as we read in Mark 2 and 3, with first the Pharisees accusing the disciples of Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, then later Jesus questioning the religious authority whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. I won't get into the finer details of these exchanges, nor expounding on finer points of the Sabbatical rules. Suffice to say that Jesus knew them quite well, and could certainly hold his ground in any debate. I will say this is may be the first confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees over Sabbath observance, but certainly not the last.

In fact, in the Gospel accounts, there are fifty references of events that transpire on the Sabbath, and in the Book of Acts there are ten more. This concentration signals the obvious importance of Sabbath as a day on which decisive or controversial events happen in the lives of Jesus and his disciples.

Perhaps the most important verses in Mark 2 and 3, are verse 27-28, that "*The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.*" These two verses remind the first hearers of the Gospel and reminding us that Sabbath observance must be placed in the context of the recreative work of God's kingdom, in light of the ministry of Jesus, as he heals and brings wholeness to human brokenness.

Jesus is the lord even of the Sabbath; through him we worship, by him we are set-apart; with him we remember God's goodness, and in him we find rest.

Sometimes I am asked by others on how, as a faithful Christian, should one observe the Sabbath. As much as I am tempted to simply give a list of what to do (attend Sunday worship, serve the church, read the Bible, spend time in personal devotion etc.) or providing a list of what not to do (shopping, skipping worship, sleep in etc.), I refrain from doing so. For I do not want to re-create another legalistic mindset of Sabbath observance. But more importantly, I always come back to this idea of rest, of resting in God who creates us and sets us apart, of resting in Jesus whose yoke is easy and burden is light, and of resting in the Spirit, who continues to help us to worship, to remember and to give thanks.

To the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**