

Lesson 16 - Luke 6:1-11

"Re-thinking Sabbath"

March 15, 2009

Introduction

"The story is told of a pastor calling upon a member who had missed church services for several weeks. The pastor asked him, "What keeps you away, friend?" To this the member replied, "I'd rather be in bed on Sunday morning thinking about the church than in the church thinking about my bed. At least my mind is in the right place."

Today we come to a Scripture where Jesus is confronting some wrong thinking about Sabbath. It seems clear that the Pharisees had confused its originally intended purpose and its application to real life. And so we too have opportunity to ask questions this morning about Sabbath as it is presented in Scripture. Some of the questions we might ask this morning include:

- What was the original intent of Sabbath as it relates to the People of God?
- What was it that the Pharisees got so wrong here? Why does this issue become such a point of confrontation between them and Jesus?
- What was Jesus actually saying to them about the practice of Sabbath? Was He abolishing the whole idea of Sabbath?
- If not, then what part of the idea of Sabbath remains for us today in the New Testament church?
- How does the idea of Sabbath relate to what we do as we come together as the Body of Christ on Sunday mornings to worship, fellowship, learn and celebrate Communion together??

Let me say right from the start that we will not have time to exhaustively examine all of these concepts in the few minutes we have together, but I do pray that our time together looking into some of these questions will cause all of us to examine our own life practice in relation to the whole concept of Sabbath and I also hope that it may cause us corporately as a church to examine our own practice of worship and devotion, rest and remembrance.

If you're visiting us this morning, you need to know that we are in the midst of a journey through the Gospel of Luke. Our major goal in this journey is to look closely at Jesus whom we believe by faith to be the central character of salvation history. And so we are watching and listening intently as Dr. Luke, this amazingly skillful storyteller, unfolds some of the events in the life of Jesus.

As we approach this first part of chapter 6 then, we find Jesus in the middle of a growing debate with this group called the ‘Pharisees and the teachers of the law’. These religious leaders show up on the scene back in 5:17 where it says that they came ‘*from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem*’. Last week we called these people the guardians of the institution of faith. They were on the lookout for false teaching and already they have some very strong reservations about the claims and teachings of this new rabbi by the name of Jesus.

This masterful storyteller Luke stitches together **3 different events** between 5:17 and the end of chapter 5 where the focus is all about Jesus and His interaction with these guardians of the faith:

1. Story: paralyzed man lowered through roof who had his sins forgiven then he was healed
 - a. Claim by Jesus: “**I have authority to forgive sins (only God can forgive sins)**”
2. Story: calling of the tax collector, Levi (Matthew) followed by a great banquet filled with equally sinful people.
 - a. Claim by Jesus: “**I didn’t come to call the righteous (those who think they are righteous), but rather those who are sinners** (who know they are broken people).
3. Story: Pharisees complain that Jesus’ disciples don’t fast as often as they should
 - a. Claim by Jesus: “**I am the bridegroom (OT picture of God)** so let the party continue and besides I have come to bring something totally new (new wine must be put in new wineskins).

These 3 claims have certainly stirred up these Pharisees. Now, in the first 11 verses of chapter 6 Luke records 2 more closely related yet separate incidents which in fact tip the Pharisees and the teachers of the law over the edge. Look at their reaction in verse 11: “*they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.*” The writer Mark, as he records this same incident says more specially that from this point on they plotted to see how they might kill Him.

And so we must ask ourselves, what is it about the Sabbath controversy that causes such grief to the Pharisees? Many scholars who read through the Gospels agree that if there is one factor which contributes on a human level to the death of Jesus more than any other, it is in fact this controversy regarding the Sabbath.

Let us then read the passage together (both incidents) and then ask ourselves some questions to see if we can uncover why it is that this become such a big deal to the guardians of the institution of faith.

Luke 6:1-11 [Graham Olson to read – introduce]

“1 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. 2 Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

3 Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 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.” 5 Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

6 On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. 7 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. 8 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.

9 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?”

10 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. 11 But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

Let’s employ a few questions to try to get to the bottom of why this become such a big factor in the controversy.

1. What is the original purpose and intent of Sabbath?
2. What was the common practice of Sabbath at the time of Jesus?
3. Why is Jesus so passionate about this confrontation?
4. How does Jesus’ passion affect our view of Sabbath for today?

1. What is the original purpose and intent of Sabbath?

- a. We find Sabbath rooted in the story of creation so we need to go back and hear the words from Genesis 2:1-2
 - i. *“1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. 2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”*
 - ii. The operative word here is ‘rest’. God works the work of creation, then declares a rest from that work.

- b. We jump forward to the time when God gives the Decalogue (the 10 Words) to Moses to pass along to the people. Among these 10 Words is a reference to Sabbath. There are 2 instances where the Commands are given – originally in Exodus 20 and then re-stated as Moses preaches to the people at the end of his life as recorded in Deuteronomy. I would like to quote from an article in Christianity Today magazine from an article written by Lynne Baab (4/01/2007):
- i. *“The two sabbath commands give different reasons for keeping the sabbath. In the Exodus version, sabbath is commanded because “in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day” (Ex. 20:11). In the second version, God wants the Israelites to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and “the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deut. 5:15).”*
 - ii. In both instances, the operative word is once again ‘rest’; cease from your labour.
 1. In the first it is a remembrance that is tied back to Creation: even God ceased from His work seemingly to enjoy the work of His hands
 2. In the second, it is a remembrance that is tied to God’s work of Redemption: when God rescued the people from that awful period of slavery where there was no ceasing from labour; no end of work.
- c. And so we may conclude that the original intent of Sabbath was quite simple and straightforward – it was to be **a time when the usual pattern of work and productivity was to stop in order that there might be an enjoyment of the fruit of that labour and also an enjoyment of God Himself.**
- i. I was asking a brother this week whom I met with what his idea of Sabbath was. I was intrigued to hear him say that his idea of Sabbath is the whole idea of God walking with Adam & Eve in the Garden.
 - ii. I think that is a fair picture! We can perhaps imagine Adam & Eve in their perfect, unstained created beauty walking with God and enjoying the wonders of Creation – the grandeur of the mountains; the intricate beauty of the flowers and insects; the unimaginable number of stars on a cloudless night.
- d. So we might summarize the main purpose of Sabbath as a time to:
- i. Rest and enjoy the fruit of our own labour
 - ii. Rest and enjoy the wonder of God and His work through Creation and Redemption
 - iii. The whole idea is that it was to be a day of delight!

2. What was the common practice of Sabbath at the time of Jesus?

- a. Sadly, by the time Jesus came on the scene, what had begun as a simple injunction to take a day of rest had become very complicated indeed.
 - i. Last week we saw how the practice of fasting, commanded once per year in the OT law, has been embellished to the point where the very religious Pharisees were compelled to fast twice a week!
 - ii. So with Sabbath, the original simplicity had grown through the years to the point where it became a monstrosity.
- b. Imagine with me that the Sabbath law is like as **small, comfortable backpack**. Every 7 days, the people of God were to put down their work, and pick up this small backpack so that they could be reminded to take time off from their work, look back and enjoy what they had done and also enjoy God who made their work possible
 - i. Through the years, the various traditions began to pile up on top of each other to the point where instead of being a nice light backpack, Sabbath law had become a **huge and crushing burden**; instead of being a delight, it had become onerous and complicated!
- c. Glenn Holland helps us understand what the Sabbath has become and still is today in Orthodox circles:

The Jewish Talmud is an interpretation and application of the scriptures, and is viewed by most Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, as valuable instruction for daily living. Yet a careful reading of the hundreds of pages of instruction gives us what seems to be very curious advice regarding the keeping of the Sabbath. For example, knot-tying would be prohibited on the Sabbath day. Writing would also be seen as an inappropriate Sabbath activity.

Certainly lighting a fire would be wrong. Remember, in the Old Testament there were severe penalties for those who gathered sticks and rubbed them together on God's holy day. Today, however, this includes turning on light switches or starting a car, because both of these are examples of lighting a fire, of sorts.

A Sabbath day's journey has been interpreted as about 2/3 of a mile, so walking should not exceed this distance.

One curious law involves what to do with eggs that a Jewish hen might "work" to produce on the Sabbath. It is written that it would be unlawful for a Jew to eat the product of the hen's Sabbath work, but it would be acceptable to sell such a product to a Gentile!
- d. In our text today we find 2 further examples of how heavy and absurdly complicated and unnecessarily heavy the Sabbath restrictions had become

- i. The disciples' picking a few heads of grain from the field was technically considered to be the work of harvesting and processing food.
 - 1. Jesus responds to this by referencing David who as king of Israel goes against the established ceremonial laws in order to care for the needs of his men and then makes this straightforward claim: "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (v. 5).
- ii. The second example surrounds the whole idea of whether or not it was permissible to heal someone on the Sabbath...
 - 1. this leads us to our third question...

3. Why is Jesus so passionate about this confrontation?

- a. We notice in verse 6 that this incident happens on another Sabbath; Jesus is in the synagogue and He is teaching. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law are there for one purpose only – to see if they can find some means to accuse Him of wrongdoing (v. 7).
- b. Jesus is very provocative in His actions here
 - i. He calls the man with the shriveled hand up to the front in plain view and then, reading their thoughts, He confronts them with a question which no doubt caused a silence to fall upon the room such that you could hear a pin drop!
 - ii. *"I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it."*
 - 1. You can imagine this question hanging in the air...
 - iii. Mark, in his gospel, adds some colour to the picture. He records these words next: *"He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored."* (Mark 3:5)
- c. I believe Jesus acts with such passion here because He is incensed at how they had violated the Sabbath.
 - i. They had taken this command from God and had turned it right upside down so that what was intended to be a day for rest and for the enjoyment of life and relationship with God had now become a day of heavy burdens and legalistic nonsense which had nothing to do with the goodness of God and everything to do with the prideful arrogance of those refused to reach out to help a brother in need.

d. Jesus is passionate about this because **the holiness of the Sabbath had been desecrated by the legalistic pride of religion.**

- i. Later on He will show similar passion when He cleanses the temple and overturns that tables and drives out the merchants with a whip because of the way in which the place of worship had become a place of greed. The principle is that same. That which was intended to be holy has become desecrated and Jesus is passionate to restore the Sabbath to its original intent.

4. **How does Jesus' passion affect our view of Sabbath for today?** We need to pay attention to the fact here that Jesus does not abolish the Sabbath, rather He passionately defends its original purpose.

a. **People before protocol.**

- i. Like we see in the example of Jesus, we need to be very careful that our religious structures and traditions do not get in the way of our responsiveness to the needs of the people around us.
- ii. All of the confrontations Jesus has with the Pharisees about Sabbath concern Jesus desire to heal or do good for someone.
- iii. I believe we need to continually ask challenging questions of the way in which we do ministry here at Oaklands in order to make sure that we do not build some legalistic structure that we think is holy to God but actually is preventing us from responding with God's love to people in need who are around us.

b. **A Regular Rhythm of Rest, Reflection and Worship**

- i. I believe that this rhythm of life is key and in fact central to the whole concept of a healthy living and a healthy relationship with the Living God.
- ii. I want to recommend a book to you. **Marva Dawn has written a book called, "Keeping the Sabbath Wholly"**. If you want to read something that will help you picture exactly how to put the whole principle of Sabbath to work in your life, this volume will be very helpful.

1. She says, *"To 'keep the Sabbath holy' means to recognize that the rhythm of six days of work and one day of ceasing work is written into the very core of our beings. To observe that order week by week creates in us a wholeness that is only possible when we live in accordance with this pattern being graciously commanded by God."*¹

¹ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), xi.

2. Marva Dawn uses 4 key words to describe the kind of activities that ought to characterize our Sabbath:

a. Ceasing

b. Resting

c. Embracing

d. Feasting

c. Enemies of rest, reflection and worship

i. Commerce; drive to succeed

ii. Busy-ness

iii. Pursuit of leisure for leisure's sake

iv.

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Conclusion

In conclusion we return to our friend whom we met at the beginning of our time together – the one who would rather be in bed thinking about the church rather than at church thinking about his bed. What should we say to him??

There is a saying going around these days which says something like this: *Don't go to church... BE the Church*. In light of our conversation about Sabbath, I would not want to come back to him with a legalistic approach that says 'you must attend church every Sunday morning at 10am'. I would, however, want to challenge his thinking about what it means to **BE** the Church and how that relates to our weekly gathering of corporate worship. As we come together to Be the Church every Sunday morning, we put into practice a small part, I believe, of what the significance of Sabbath continues to be in our day. It is certainly not the whole of the celebration, but I trust that it is a start to our day that we set aside for rest, reflection and worship.

A moment of prayerful reflection: what is my practice of Sabbath? What changes in my habits of life do I need to change in order to more fully embrace the meaning and purpose of Sabbath as it was originally intended?