

When the Sabbath Becomes a Burden

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6

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The ancient Hebrews had no word for “weekend.” Their world was not structured so that they worked Monday through Friday and then played on the weekend. The forty-hour workweek had not yet been invented, so they slaved seven days a week from sun up till sun down.

Until God gave them the gift of the Sabbath. It is the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

Observe the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work....

This gift applied to men and women, rich and poor, master and servant, human beings and animals. Even the foreigner passing through town was given this gift of rest on the Sabbath.

God intended life to be more than unrelenting work and backbreaking drudgery. The Sabbath was a day to celebrate, to enjoy family, to worship, as the theologian Karl Barth said, a day “to be free to the glory of God.” (*Interpretation, Deuteronomy*, p. 81)

Can you comprehend what a wonderful gift this was? One day per week to be free from work. One day to celebrate, worship, and be renewed. Oh, it was a wonderful gift! Until the Sabbath Police came along. You know how these things go. One day someone asked, “Well, what exactly is work? What exactly is rest? What does it *really* mean to observe the Sabbath?” Can you play football in the backyard? I couldn’t as a kid. Can you go to a movie? I couldn’t. We were admonished for making too much noise. *Shhhh, it’s Sunday!*

There were plenty of legalists ready to define down to the jot and tittle what it meant to rest on the Sabbath. The Sabbath Police developed 39 categories of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath. Let me tell you a little about one of them: burning. They could not build a fire on the Sabbath. That was deemed work and therefore prohibited. But what if they built the fire the day before? That was okay. But if the fire began to go out on the Sabbath, they could not add wood to it. That was work. They couldn't even flick a toothpick into the fire. Think of what this means for modern, orthodox Jews. They cannot drive a car on the Sabbath because a car's engine runs by burning gasoline. They cannot heat a piece of metal until it glows. That's burning. You know the little filament inside an electric light bulb? It gives off light by being heated until it glows. That's burning, so electric lights are prohibited. Candles are prohibited, unless they are lit the day before. Any appliance that uses electrical power, including telephones, is prohibited on the Sabbath.

That's one category. Remember, there are 39 categories.

The gift of rest, the invitation to be free to the glory of God, became a joyless burden.

The Sabbath Police had their eyes on Jesus and his disciples. The disciples were walking through a grain field one Sabbath and plucked some heads of grain. Category 16 is reaping, which prohibits plucking or cutting any growing thing. "Can't do that!" the Sabbath Police insisted. "It's a violation of the law of the Sabbath!"

So what could they do on the Sabbath? Could they do good on the Sabbath? Could Jesus heal someone on the Sabbath?

Mark says that Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and saw a man with a crippled hand. The Sabbath Police were watching. Another writing, the Gospel to the Hebrews, says that this man was a stonemason. He said to Jesus, "I was a mason seeking a livelihood with my hands; I pray thee, Jesus, to restore me mine health, that I may not beg meanly for my food." (*BBC*, vol. 8, p. 286)

But it was the Sabbath. Healing on the Sabbath was lawful only when life itself was in danger.

Mark says that Jesus looked at the Sabbath Police with anger, grieved at the hardness of their hearts. This must have been a very dramatic moment. Knowing they were watching, Jesus told the man, "Stretch out your hand."

Mark says: "He stretched it out, and his hand was restored."

That was the moment the Sabbath Police began to develop a plan to destroy Jesus.

Don't miss this. Here is one of the great teachings of our Lord. With his disciples charged with reaping on the Sabbath and Jesus himself charged with unnecessary healing on the Sabbath, Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

The Sabbath was God's gift, a day of rest, a day to celebrate, to enjoy family, to worship, to be free to the glory of God. It had become a day of unrelenting restrictions. Can't do this! Can't do that! No, you can't do that either! So Jesus reminded them that the Sabbath was made for the people. The people were not made to serve the Sabbath. Jesus put things back in their proper order, restored the spirit of the law, and as a result they were determined to destroy him.

The Sabbath Police are still around, you know. They are the legalists who turn God's good gifts into burdens. They cannot bear others being free to the glory of God. They try to define down to the jot and tittle what is appropriate for you and me. We must gently, graciously remind them that the Sabbath and God's other good gifts were made for us. We were not made to serve them. Then we must allow ourselves permission to be free to the glory of God.

How important is this? Jesus died for it.

A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. Join me as we confess our sins together.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in Your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Now hear our silent prayers.

Assurance of Pardon from Psalm 103

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Thanks be to God!