

Sermon Notes – 22-5-22 'Observe the Sabbath'

Title: Compassion, not Competition
Matthew 12:1-14

Each of us reaches a point in our lives when “rest” stops being just an activity that happens at the end of the day, but instead also becomes the highlight we look forward to in the middle of the day. Each of us has, or will, reach a point in our lives where “taking a seat” becomes a proper activity in its own right. We begin to make formal announcements to the rest of household, “right, I’m going to have a sit down now.” Once you have broadcast this message, everyone understands the code: “I am not to be interrupted for the next 10 minutes.” That next 10 minutes is sacred territory. Rest is an important part of being human, and we build it in to our routines and patterns of life.

This term, we have been thinking about the 10 Commandments. And we have thought about how these rules given in the era of the Old Testament surface in the life and teaching of Jesus. And today, we come to think about the fourth commandment. Keep the Sabbath day holy. So what did Jesus have to say about the Sabbath? – Well, quite a bit as it turns out.

Often, the first thing we think of when we hear the word “Sabbath,” is the problem of Sunday trading and a nostalgia for a time, when literally everything shut down for Sunday. More recently, we have been hearing an increasing amount about the mental health benefits of a digital sabbath, about taking time away from our devices and screens, and to commit that time, being face to face with people. And as important as these things are, the Sabbath goes beyond British Trading laws and time spent on social media. So before we look at Matthew chapter 12, and hear what Jesus has to say, let’s remind ourselves of one or two things about the Sabbath.

The word itself, comes from the Hebrew, Shabat which means “to rest.” And somewhere in the back of our minds we’ve always known the Sabbath is about resting. In the Bible, of course, Sabbath goes right back to the beginning. In the story of Creation, we are told, And on the seventh day God rested. And of course, God didn’t rest because he was tired or fatigued, or because he needed to have a sit down. God’s rest is different to our own. God’s rest brings together everything he has made in a united chorus of praise. God’s rest was about establishing a deeply-engrained rhythm for his world and people. God’s rest established a pattern of worship that just feels natural.

For our Jewish friends, we have to appreciate how deeply and profoundly the Sabbath is connected to their sense of identity. As we think about the terrible suffering that has been inflicted upon the Jewish peoples, one thing has remained – the Sabbath. In the Bible we hear about the destruction of their first temple in Jerusalem; what vestige remained of their religious identity? – the Sabbath. When the Romans tore down the second temple in the first century, so utterly that it would never be rebuilt again, what remained of their shared identity? – the Sabbath. When the sacrificial practices came to an end, what

continued? – the Sabbath. The Sabbath endures, because it is the heartbeat, the very rhythm which God placed in the heart of his world and his people.

But here is where things get complicated. Have you ever noticed that one of the peculiar things about human nature, is that we tend to take what is precious and place it out of reach? We want to be protective of what's precious, but we can get it so wrong. As an example, a couple of Christmases ago, we were given a family project. It was an enormous Lego set, a special anniversary edition Batmobile. But the problem was, it was so big, so expensive, and so fiddly, that the first thing we decided to do was to exclude the children. It was so special, we put it out of their reach. And because Anna thinks instruction manuals are optional, it was decided that I should become sole engineer. This model was so "special," that Anna was next to be excluded. Now that the model is finished, it sits gathering dust on a bookcase in the living room.

Now let's return to the Sabbath. This natural rhythm of the universe was so holy, that it was decided that certain rules should be put around it to safeguard it. It was placed out of reach, buried by rules and regulations to monitor correct observance. And in due course, 39 areas about right religious observance of the Sabbath were drawn up. Rules were drawn up which restricted what you could do on the Sabbath: rules about carrying, burning, extinguishing, finishing, writing, erasing, cooking, washing, sewing, tearing, knotting, untying, shaping, ploughing, planting, reaping, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, selecting, sifting, grinding, kneading, combing, spinning, dyeing, chain-stitching, warping, weaving, unravelling, building, demolishing, trapping, shearing, slaughtering, skinning, smoothing, marking. (pewh!)

What was precious was placed out of reach. So the Sabbath in the time of Jesus, certainly for the leading religious scholars at the time - the Pharisees - had become a matter of monitoring and policing. God's heartbeat for the world and his people had been muffled by layers and layers of red tape. The Sabbath had become a minefield for the everyday person who wished to honour God, and a competition for the religious.

And now we turn to Matthew's gospel.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

³ *He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.⁵ Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?⁶ I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.⁷ If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'^[a] you would not have condemned the innocent.⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."*

The first thing Jesus does is to move beyond the red tape and get back to Scripture, to get back to the Bible. Jesus tells a story, he reminds the Pharisees about their cultural hero, David. Before David was king, he was an exile who literally fled from king Saul's wrath. After he had managed rendezvous with a handful of his sympathisers, they sought the help of Ahimelek the priest. Now it was a Sabbath day, and the priest had literally nothing to offer, other than the sacred bread which had been specially set aside for the priests to eat. It was not lawful for others to take it from the holy place and eat. And yet, Ahimelek took the Bread of the Presence and gave it to David and his followers to eat. And do you know what ... the bible doesn't condemn him for it. And this is Jesus' point in verse 7 when he quotes the words, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

Jesus gets back to basics by reminding his opponents that the Sabbath is not a competition, but about compassion. The Sabbath is not a competition but about compassion. This is such a helpful reminder to those of us who have been Christians for some time and are in danger of getting comfortable from time to time. Who fall into the rut of going through the motions, of making the life a tick box exercise, or become competitive in a "holier than thou" sort of way. The Sabbath is not a competition but about compassion.

There is space to think creatively here. When we set aside time to rest, how can we draw God's compassion into our Sabbaths?

But Jesus' teaching continues:

⁹ Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" ¹¹ He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." ¹³ Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Having told us that the Sabbath is not a competition, but a matter of compassion, Jesus immediately demonstrates this with a miraculous healing. But what I want to focus on is the word *Restore*, Jesus is said to have *restored* the man's hand back to health.

We have become so obsessed with associating the Sabbath with not doing things, that we have forgotten it is meant to be restorative. If the Sabbath calls us to refrain from doing certain things, it is because it is meant to be restorative. This leads us to ask: How restful are your sabbaths? Do you prioritise those things which are restorative, or is the Sabbath merely a case of ceasing activity?

The Sabbath is not a competition, but about compassion. The Sabbath is not simply a matter of refraining, but restoring.