

Sermon: Keep It Holy

New North Church

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

2 June 2024

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

On a regular basis, we are called to stop what we're doing, rest, and reflect on our life with God. We know this because God said so.

With that in mind, consider the conflict in our Gospel passage today, and not just the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, but also the underlying tension between what the Law requires versus the practical needs of people.

Moses said *observe* the sabbath day and *keep it holy*. That seems simple enough. The Pharisees thought so too. Their faith and lives centered around interpreting the Torah Law. They harmonized Torah teachings with their own ideas and interpreted the Law 'according to its spirit.' Over time, they gave laws new meanings according to changing conditions, but always with scriptural support. Their views were progressive, their interpretations continued to develop, and they remain a 'living force' in today's Judaism.¹

So, what's the problem? Why would someone like Nicodemus slip through to Jesus and start asking questions?

In Deuteronomy, God, through Moses, said you shall not do any work on the sabbath.

And that seems to be the main point of contention here: what constitutes work, and why did Jesus' response so infuriate the Pharisees?

Mark wrote that one sabbath, Jesus and his disciples were going through a grainfield, which was perfectly legal, also according to Deuteronomy, which says, 'If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain' (23:25).

Mark didn't explicitly state that the disciples were hungry and were thus gathering food for a meal, though the version in Luke's Gospel does (6:1). Mark just says they were walking through a field plucking grain with no obvious motivation other than perhaps they were bored. But even so, they're not farmers doing work.

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus on this, he replied that what is good for people takes precedence over the Torah, a belief the Pharisees shared with him on general principles, but these particular Pharisees seem rather inflexible on the point. It's almost as if they were testing Jesus, who was still the new kid doing things differently. Things like eating with tax collectors and sinners (2:15-17), and so they kept an eye on him.

When Jesus entered the synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand, the situation amplified. The Pharisees waited to see if he would heal the man on the sabbath so they could make their accusations, but when Jesus asked them if it was lawful to do good on the sabbath, they had no answer, which angered Jesus. So, he healed the man without even touching him. How about that, Pharisees? Did *that* qualify as work?

The fact that the man had a withered hand might be a clue.

In Psalm 137, which was written in Babylon during the Exile, the psalmist wrote, 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!'

Jerusalem – meaning the Temple – was, for Jews, the center of religious life and worship. But there was no Temple in Babylon, and the exiles were afraid that they might lose contact with God, and if they let that happen, then they would deserve and endure a physical affliction.

Fast-forward to Jesus in the synagogue, encountering a man with a withered hand who could not work on any day, sabbath or not. If *that* was his only problem, then Jesus could well have waited until sundown to heal him. So, why goad the Pharisees?

His physical affliction was a sign of his broken spiritual relationship with the LORD. The man was in the synagogue, so let's assume he was trying to reconnect. But Jesus knew. What he did was therefore an act of compassion, and it angered him that the Pharisees had closed themselves to God's word and will, which was all about God's compassion and love for people.

Thus, Jesus of Nazareth became a threat to the Pharisees, who immediately went out to conspire against him, to destroy him, which, if you think about it, is itself a sabbath violation.

What was so dangerous about Jesus? He's proclaiming the good news of God, right? He's offering acceptance and forgiveness to social and religious outcasts. Nothing wrong with that. But he did embody an unexpected but serious challenge to the Pharisees' concept of God and traditional practices, prompting even this deeply religious group to do evil.

Jesus, with his radical understanding of God and his alternative religious practices, was a problem that needed to go away.²

These days, it seems as if we have forgotten that we belong to God, and not to our labor and not to our traditions. More and more, we live in a world which seems to have no connection with God. A world without God seems mighty bleak, leaving a lot of us out there with spiritually withered hands.

We all experience this in different ways as we go along day to day. My question is, how are we threatened by God? By Jesus? Has he recalibrated our vision of life in such a way that it's disturbing to our society? Are we afraid to be transformed by God's steadfast love? Why do we prefer a distant God in heaven over an ever-present God who is active in our lives?

Jesus reminds us that life comes from God and that God has given each of us a purpose, one which might upend our quiet lives even as it helps improve the lives of those we serve.

God calls us to be all in but has also rigged the game to our advantage.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a book called *The Sabbath*, and in it, he wrote that 'Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.'³

The sabbath is not an interlude, he wrote, but the climax of living.

For Heschel, the Sabbath celebrates time rather than space. We and the world we live in occupy space; God occupies time. God is forever, the Eternal One. Heschel wrote that, "to [people] with God, time is eternity in disguise."⁴

He also noted that all religions through the ages have their holy stuff: certain persons and places, books, articles of clothing and other relics, holy songs and liturgies, and so on. Only Judaism has a holy time, once a week, every week.

The sabbath is both a command and a gift from God, made for people; if we are to benefit from it, we need to remember it and keep it holy.

And it is about redemption, to give us 'regular release from the things that enslave, oppress, and bind' us,⁵ even if that is not always possible for everyone.

It was said that during the American Civil War, success in battle came to those generals who refrained from fighting on the sabbath even as the war itself was seen as God's retribution for the sin of slavery. Despite the immensity of the struggle, there remained lines that some people just would not cross.

So, take a break from war. Take a break from your regular routine. Take a day off or even part of a day off, and it doesn't have to be a Sunday. Sleep in, but don't be late for church.

The idea of the sabbath is to dedicate time for God, in worship, in study (including some Bible study), in prayer, and in service to others.

God said, ‘Observe the sabbath day and *keep it holy*.’ It’s a holy time made for people to be present to God. While breaking bread with his disciples, Jesus said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ A meal hosted by Jesus is any meal in which Jesus is present to us. By focusing our attention on God and observing the sabbath and participating in the Supper, we keep it holy.

The sabbath is Time set aside for us, and it benefits all who observe it.

Amen.

* * * * *

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pharisee>

² Daniel J. Harrington and John R. Donahue, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 117-118.

³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 133.