

Sabbath Goodness in a Messed-Up World

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I CONCLUDED MY PREVIOUS article with the following caveat:

Some people may hear the word “Sabbath” and the words “the work is done” and conclude that there is nothing left for them to do, so they can fold their hands together and do nothing. Nothing could be further from the truth. God’s idea of Sabbath does not mean inactivity or laziness, but I will have to leave the biblical explanation for this to a follow-up article.

Why does the Sabbath require that we lead a life of actively doing good rather than a life of inactivity?

One of the many areas where the church has followed the spirit of law rather than the spirit of grace is in the area of the Sabbath. Similar to the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, Christians primarily have treated the Sabbath as one day of the week during which we go to church but otherwise practice inactivity. However, the New Testament teaches us that the Sabbath means spiritual rest, not inactivity. What also might surprise people is that spiritual rest is a life filled with doing good deeds. It is not simply that we are permitted to do good, but Sabbath rest means we must do good. The Sabbath is a life filled with the highest activity of doing good and blessing the world.

In all four gospels, we see Jesus deliberately doing miracles on the Sabbath in order to confront the Pharisees and their misunderstanding of God’s holy day, thus showing them, and us, what its true meaning is. In this article, I will concentrate on the account in Mark 2:23-3:6.

The story begins with Jesus’ hungry disciples plucking grain as they made their way through a grainfield on a Sabbath.

One Sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.

The Pharisees, as self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath, call this to Jesus’ attention, believing it to be an infraction of the Law. Jesus responds by recalling to them the story in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 where hungry David and his men entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which only the priests could eat, an actual violation of the Law of Moses.

Jesus tells this story, because just as David was not condemned for eating the holy bread, so also Jesus' disciples should not be condemned for plucking heads of grain. His reason is given in v. 27,

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

If the inactivity of the Sabbath was harmful for people, as in a case of hunger, then the day meant picking grain to meet their needs. The Sabbath is not a hoop to jump through. It is not a hardship. It is not something that we serve, which would mean that we would observe the Sabbath in order to obtain some other benefit. Instead, Sabbath is the core principle at the root of human wellbeing. It is God's plan to bring divine rest into every nook and cranny of our being.

Continuing on to Mark 3.1-6, we read the story of Jesus healing the man with a withered hand. It is not just a miracle of physical restoration; like all of his miracles, it is also a teaching, because Jesus deliberately did it on the Sabbath, knowing that the Pharisees were watching for his action:

And they watched Jesus to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. (v. 2)

Jesus sets up the miracle with a question to the Pharisees (and to us!):

Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? (v. 4)

Notice in v. 4 the options that Jesus gives for the Sabbath. He does not give three: to do good, to do harm, or to do nothing. I think Christians implicitly read that third option into the verse, because they think of the Sabbath as one day of inactivity during the week. Instead, Jesus treats the Sabbath as having two possibilities—to do good or to do harm. Sabbath is not first and foremost doing nothing but rather doing good.

Presumably, the Pharisees wanted to answer Jesus' question with that hypothetical third option: "It is lawful on the Sabbath to do nothing." However, the Pharisees kept silent, and v. 5 tells us that Jesus "looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart." The Pharisees were content to have a Sabbath which was a day of inactivity. They were not prepared to embrace the life of utter and complete goodness that Jesus brought them.

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath to teach us that it is intrinsically filled with doing good, he also taught us that the Sabbath is not only my individual rest. It is also rest we bring to other people. Jesus brought Sabbath to the man with the withered hand. Before the healing, he was a man with a handicap on a day of inactivity. Afterwards he had a wholeness and rest he could only experience because Jesus did good to him. We are to live the Sabbath in the same way Jesus did; it is to permeate our entire lives and spill out to bring rest to everyone around us. Blessed are the peacemakers!

In this miracle, Jesus is teaching us something crucial about the nature of goodness: it is inherently connected to rest because true goodness is based on grace. If my good deeds are not done from a heart of rest, then the deeds are not truly good. They are transactions, things I do because I want something in return. True goodness gives without seeking anything in return, which means the giver is at rest. This is how an active life of goodness and a restful life are one and the same, when all my actions are done in grace, free gifts of love to everyone around me, because God has already given me everything in Jesus Christ. Likewise, just as goodness requires rest, rest requires good deeds. I cannot be at rest without being good, and I cannot be good without doing good to those around me.

Let me raise two implications of Sabbath for the spiritual life of preterism. First, this is the kind of issue where preterists should start their conversations with futurists. Preterists tend to start with dates, which can be an unfortunate starting point for anyone to consider preterism. The second return of Jesus Christ in the first century can seem so outlandish to many believers that sometimes an open conversation cannot even get started. The date can also seem to be of minor importance to people compared to the pressing needs they face. I meet Christians today who are besieged by living in a society that increasingly is moving away from the righteousness of Jesus Christ in its public life, and to them arguing about the date of Christ's return seems rather irrelevant to their more pressing concerns. A better starting point is to ask your fellow futurist brother or sister, "Are you living in complete rest today?" with a focus on passages like Mark 2:23-3:6 and Hebrews 4-5.

Second, what is God doing on the earth after the second coming of Christ? What is his goal? According to futurists, God's goal for the earth is to use force to usher in a (kingdom) government, and then Christians will be able to live lives of rest as they ought. Until the second coming happens, we struggle because God has unfinished work to do. There is an implicit message woven through futurist teaching about the Christian life today, and it goes like this. Yes, our salvation is really great, but the world is so hostile to our faith that we are limited in how far we can go spiritually. However, once Jesus returns and sets up a perfect government and a set of external circumstances that are friendly to Christians, then we will be able to be at rest. I hope you see that this sort of rest is based on external circumstances, the exact opposite of what God is doing. The world believes that rest is based on favorable circumstances, and at this point futurists are really no different from the rest of the world.

In contrast, I commend to you a radically different goal. God's intention is for his children to live in Sabbath rest in the midst of the world we have today. Sabbath rest is made possible not because God uses force to take away all the bad people, but because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, God's purpose is not for you and me to live in Sabbath 24/7 in order to achieve some

other goal—world peace, governments with no faults, universal perfection. In that case, rest cannot be rest, because I am trying to achieve something, which is contrary to the Sabbath as the last day of creation. If I am trying to live in rest and constantly looking at the world to see if peace has increased between nations, then I am not really at rest and cannot be at rest.

God is doing the impossible thing that is so hard for us to believe. He is demonstrating to the universe that his children can live lives of grace and love that result from hearts of Sabbath rest based on our salvation alone, even in the midst of a perverse and crooked world around us. The world is terrible. Therefore, how good can we be? The world is terrible. Therefore, how at rest can we be? Answer: the death and resurrection of Jesus is so powerful that it can enable us to lead restful lives overflowing with good works in the face of the lostness and sinfulness of the world around us. It is a supernatural life, what Paul describes in Philippians 4:7 as the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, because it is not based on our circumstances. The world understands rest that comes from having plenty of money, good health, loving family and friends, protection from crime. God's peace surpasses the world's understanding because God's rest is not based on external circumstances.

What should we say about observing a Sabbath day on Sunday as most Christians do? It is a good thing to rest from the demands and cares of the world, but this is only one manifestation of the Sabbath God has given us. A person who doesn't know Sabbath rest could easily be compelled to work at their job seven days a week, but at the same time, a believer could observe a Sunday Sabbath but not really be at rest because they were worrying about money or politics on that day. Sunday is not really a Sabbath for the person whose heart is not resting in God throughout their entire week.

Let me say for the record that if the body of Christ actually started living individually and corporately in Sabbath rest, I do believe this would change the world, but it is very important that we treat the Sabbath not as an achievement to be won but as the realization of God's precious salvation to us. As I look back at two thousand years of church history, I don't really see where she lived in Sabbath rest, and I think the primary reason is because she got her eschatology wrong. It is very hard to live in Sabbath rest when you think God's work is not completed and you are waiting for imminent judgment that will ravage the world. †