

1 June 2024

### **The Sabbath Day (Mark 2.23-3.6)**

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This is the from the Law of ancient Israel. ‘Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day’ (Deut. 5.12-15).

A couple of things strike me in these words. The first is the connection between Sabbath rest and the creation or constitution of the people of Israel. ‘Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there ... therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day’. What’s the intrinsic connection here? Why not, ‘Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there ... therefore make sure you pay God back by maximising your effort at all times and extracting as much from yourself and others as you can’? Why does the commandment to rest follow from the injunction to remember what God has done for you? Could it be that Sabbath observance is designed to keep God’s people from the illusion of self-sufficiency, as if we could just take it from here without stopping regularly to receive or recognise the gift of our life?

The second thing that’s striking is that the command to rest on the Sabbath applies to everyone. It’s not a luxury afforded the elite while slaves and animals keep the wheels of productivity turning. Rather, householders are explicitly obligated to ensure that all life within their orbit – slaves, both male and female, livestock and

even resident aliens – ‘may rest as well as you’. So much for the gig economy. In the list of the ten commandments, the instruction to ‘observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy’ is number four. Walter Brueggemann suggests it forms a bridge between the first three commandments which are to do with honouring the truth of God, and the last six commandments which are to do with honouring your neighbour. The practice of rest is the lynchpin. It’s as if enacting our receptivity to gift enables us to see our fellowship with all those with whom we share life. It forms us to let go the compulsion to grasp at life which shows up as the tendency to exploit those around us and be greedy for more. Says Brueggemann, ‘Sabbath is a break with our idolatries and a break with our greed. It catches the main accents of all the Ten Commandments’.<sup>1</sup>

As you know, in July – the seventh month of this year – we at Benedictus are planning to observe a Sabbath month in our community. We’re committing to resting from some of our work and activity in order to practise remembering that our lives – separately and together – are constituted first by the gift of God and not by our own efforts. We’re allowing each other space and time simply to be and so to be more present to this truth. Our common prayer will continue – our weekly service, our daily meditation. And our Sabbath cannot be total – your day jobs will go on, your care for family, your obligations in many spheres. Given that, a question might be – will a ‘Sabbath-lite’ really make a difference for us, bring us to the rest and fuller remembrance to which the commandment points? Well – I’m not sure – but it’s worth having a go.

This is particularly because, as Brueggemann notes, in our culture the practice of Sabbath keeping is a kind of prophetic act. ‘In our contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety’, he writes, ‘the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods’, by general

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Sabbath as Resistance: An Interview with Walter Brueggemann’, by John Pattison, 2 February 2015, <https://slowchurch.com/sabbath-resistance-interview-walter-brueggemann/>

busyness and a feeling of usefulness. Furthermore, he goes on: 'Sabbath is not only resistance. It is alternative...The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God'. This is the awareness I'd like to us to bring to this time. And it may be that as part of it, you might be able to set aside some intentional time each week to rest from all your work – a day, half a day, an hour or two when you intentionally do nothing, rest in the Lord – and see what you notice.

But if this is what we're looking forward to, our reading today seems slightly awkward. For Jesus is depicted here, as elsewhere in the gospels, as not particularly committed to the practice of Sabbath observance. He allows his disciples to pluck grain when they're hungry, thus doing (as the Pharisees put it) 'what is not lawful on the sabbath'. He heals the withered hand of a man in the synagogue. In some other stories of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus is said to respond to a spontaneous request for help. But here, he's the one who initiates the encounter. It's an act which appears deliberately and wilfully transgressive. In fact, the whole scene has the feel of a kind of stand-off at high noon.

Jesus comes into town, enters the synagogue. He's looking at the Pharisees who are looking at him. 'They watched him to see whether he would cure ... on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him'. Jesus causes the tension to build by inviting the man with the withered hand to 'come forward'. Everyone knows something's up. He turns to the Pharisees, as if goading them with their scruples, their care for keeping the Sabbath holy. Should I, shouldn't I? Will I, won't I? 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' They're silent and he (so the text says) is angry, grieved at their hardness of heart. 'Stretch out your hand', he says to the man, and restores it. The Pharisees' prior judgement of him is confirmed, their desire to destroy him justified; they go out of the synagogue and immediately conspire in an unholy alliance with the Herodians, a political group with whom they are usually at odds, but with whom they now share in common cause against Jesus.

What is it about the Sabbath and the practice of Sabbath-keeping that, for Jesus, seems to have been so problematic? So in need of challenge and even deliberate subversion? I think it's that though it was originally given to enable and serve the cause of life, by Jesus' day the practice of Sabbath-keeping (together with other aspects of the Law) had come to function primarily for another purpose. Correct observance had become an end in itself, an identity marker for defining who belongs and who doesn't, who's righteous and who isn't. A practice designed to draw people into shared remembrance of the source of their life, shared fellowship as recipients of gift, had become a means of asserting the superiority of some over others and policing the limits of belonging.

James Alison says this is the kind of logic which defines what he calls 'systems of goodness'. And the thing about a 'system of goodness' is that, no matter how admirable its professed values, it's always incipiently violent – functioning to condemn those beyond it and control those within it. Here we might think of some of the systems of goodness that define and control us – whether in church, in progressive or conservative political circles, in family and workplace value systems. Think of how different communities enforce what they deem to be authorised behaviours, language, associations – all in the name of the good. I think that when Jesus acts to subvert the Pharisees' policing of Sabbath observance in his day, it's not because he's rejecting its deepest meaning and gift; rather he's contesting its use to enforce a system of goodness. He's drawing attention to the way a law, any law, given for our good may come to block the exercise of love and mercy rather than to enable it, as in the case of the man with the withered hand.

We know whose side we're on, in the gospel narrative. But at the time, Jesus' appearance in the religious landscape of first century Palestine demanded discernment. Was he just a narcissist or zealot who thought the rules didn't apply to him? Or was he really tuned in to the deeper goodness that the law was supposed to express and make available at the human level? In turn, he demands we discern our own practices and commitments, the nature of our engagement with the truths we

cherish and believe in. Where are our disciplines and practices functioning truly to serve the good we profess? Where are they functioning to divide us from one another, by fortifying our righteousness and justifying our hardness of heart towards those we find unacceptable? In a world deeply divided about where our real good lies, these aren't easy questions.

Perhaps it's why it's more than ever important to remember the sourcing of our lives in love and to take time to rest in grace; more than ever important to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.