

# Mark 2:18-28

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[ 0 : 00 ] So I'm just messing about with my screen there trying to get something to work for me. Now, I want to take time with you this morning to look at the passage I read with you from Mark chapter 2, and especially the closing verses there about Jesus as the Lord of the Sabbath.

It's not exactly a Pan Sunday sermon in some ways, but I think what I want to say is this, that as Jesus enters Jerusalem, as he's getting ready in these final days, preparing himself for the cross, what he's doing is completing his work, the work given to him to rescue his people, to secure their salvation.

And the fact that Jesus completes his work so perfectly, so fully, so obediently, is what allows us to take hold of this idea of Sabbath and of rest.

Now, most of you don't know me at all. Some of you have met me at some point in the past, probably. But one way that I could introduce myself is just to sit down with you and say, hello, my name's Neil, and I'm a workaholic.

For most of my adult life, I've worked as hard as I possibly can. And what's driven a lot of that is a sense that by working hard, I gain credibility with people.

[ 1 : 41 ] I want the respect of my peers, of my colleagues. I want people to see what I do and think Neil Macmillan is doing a great job. I want to justify my existence in this world.

Why is Neil Macmillan here? He's here to make a difference. And so I'm going to work as hard as I can to prove that my life is worth something, that my ministry is worth something, that I'm worthy of your respect and your esteem.

And that's the way that lots of people live, isn't it? There was a report in the papers this week about the investment bank Goldman Sachs, that their trainees are complaining that they want their work hours limited at 80 hours a week.

A culture in banking of chronic overworking. In 2017 to 2018, 15.4 million workdays were lost to work-related stress.

Over 600,000 people reported that work-related stress was making them feel physically ill. Lots of you at home today will have found that working from home has led to working more.

[ 3 : 01 ] And it's a really hard thing, isn't it, when you become addicted to work, when you feel like, if I'm not working, I don't quite know what to do with myself.

And yet we're not made this way. When I was 40, after years and years of chronic overworking, suddenly, when I was 40, my body just packed in.

I ended up in hospital one day with what turned out to be stress-related symptoms. And for the next six months, I was absolutely exhausted.

I would sleep deeply all night. I would get up in the morning, work for a few hours, sleep deeply all afternoon, do a little work in the evenings. And this went on month after month as my body tried to recover from all the weariness and exhaustion I'd inflicted on it.

And that was a really important turning point for me because it taught me to start to see the world differently. It taught me to start to see that busyness does not equal blessedness.

[ 4 : 10 ] Jesus didn't come and say to me, Neil Macmillan, come to me and work hard. Jesus said, come to me and rest.

And what I was learning through that season of my life was this, that we can't walk with Jesus in life if we're too busy to pay attention to him.

If all our focus is on to-do lists and completing the next tasks and having fun and making sure that we relax really well when we're not working.

If all our focus is on earning enough to make ourselves feel secure in life. Then often we are too busy to really pay attention to who Jesus is and what he's up to in our lives and what he's up to in

the world.

Church should be a place of rest. A place to come to rest and be refreshed. Not simply a place to come and have your burdens added to, to feel busier and more stressed.

[ 5 : 17 ] So God's invitation to us through this idea of Sabbath is to come and join in the rebellion against a busy world.

A world that says your worth is measured by how hard you work, by how busy you are, or by how much money you spend.

And in the face of that cultural pressure, we rebel simply by resting. And in the Bible, the idea of rest is bound up with the idea of the Sabbath day.

Of one day in seven where we don't work. Of one day in seven where we're not consuming. Of one day in seven where we're resting.

And trusting in God to do for us all that we cannot do for ourselves. So that's what I want to think about with you this morning is just this habit of resting.

[ 6 : 20 ] The way that the Sabbath day teaches us that rest is such an important habit and principle for life. Why? Because when we rest, when we really rest, and when we Sabbath, we're given time to step back, to reflect, and to pay attention to God.

To pay attention to the presence of God in our world and in our lives. Because it's the presence of God with us and near us that allows us to really flourish as human beings.

We think we'll flourish if we're really busy. If we do a lot, earn a lot, if we're successful. And the Bible gives us a totally different picture of the blessed life and says, no.

We flourish when our lives are planted in a river. In the word of God, in his presence, in his truth.

The poet Mary Oliver, I think in an interview once said, attention is the beginning of devotion.

The things that we pay attention to are the things that capture our hearts. And if you're too busy to pay attention to God, and if even Sunday is just another day of busyness, then God won't really have your devotion.

[ 7 : 41 ] So the Sabbath, I think, first of all, I'm going to say two things about the Sabbath largely. One is that the Sabbath speaks about our humanity. The Sabbath speaks about our humanity.

How we're creatures and we need rest. We need help. God designed us to be inadequate on our own. And then the second thing I'm going to say is that the Sabbath speaks of our salvation.

Of what God has done for us that we cannot do for ourselves. So two things then, the Sabbath speaks of our humanity. And secondly, the Sabbath speaks of our salvation.

So when the Sabbath speaks of our humanity, it's a reminder to us that we are creatures, not gods. It's not us who are lords. It's Jesus.

He says to the Pharisees in verse 27, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the son of man is Lord, even of the Sabbath. The son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.

[ 8 : 44 ] Now, life is often a struggle for lordship. Jesus was in dialogue, debate with the Pharisees here. They're critiquing his disciples. Look what they're doing.

It's unlawful on the Sabbath. Jesus answers to explain, well, actually, the Sabbath isn't here just as a set of rules to imprison and burden us and make us wearier.

But the Sabbath's got something much more important going on behind it. And so he points to David and his companions eating what was forbidden to them in the temple.

So Jesus is saying here, there's a struggle for lordship. The Pharisees wanted to be lords in their own culture. They thought if people followed them, did what they decided was good and righteous, then Israel as a nation would flourish again, that God would remove his displeasure.

If people kept the Sabbath the way they said they should keep the Sabbath, if people kept the law the way they said they should keep the law, then God's favor and blessing would return and Israel would flourish.

[ 9 : 52 ] If we're in charge, if we're in charge, if we're in charge, if we get to do what we want with our lives, if we get to spend our time the way we decide is important, then we will flourish as people.

Because we do have this deep-rooted conviction that our flourishing comes through productivity and consumption. That's our cultural story. Be busy.

Be productive. Productivity is a way to wealth and wealth is a way to happiness. The more you work, the more you consume, the more you're successful, the happier you'll be.

More money, more cars, more houses, more holidays, more clothes, more food, more happiness. But it doesn't really work, does it? I live in EH10 in Morningside.

It's one of the wealthiest postcodes in Edinburgh. If I walk around the corner, every house in the street would cost several million pounds. And the people who live there have Aston Martins and Lamborghinis and Porsches.

[ 11 : 01 ] And I walk past them most days driving in and out. And unsurprisingly, despite having everything that the world has to offer, they look miserable.

People with big houses and long faces. Smart cars, but inner sadness. And the Sabbath is given by the Lord Jesus Christ to sabotage the illusion that our happiness lies in what we achieve or what we have.

It's here to sabotage the illusion that you're Lord of your own life and destiny. The Sabbath is a reminder that Jesus is Lord of our lives and even of our time.

Here's a day you can't control. Here's a day when you don't get to decide what you do. Jesus says, this is my day. And the time and the way you spend time in that day, that's under my Lordship.

Our time is not really our own to manage, is it? I've been to plenty of time management seminars. Even ministers get sent to that kind of things.

[ 12 : 23 ] And Sabbath says, we can't manage time. We can't define its movement. We might try to flatten out our days to make them all the same, to have a world where no day is holy, where no day interrupts with our agenda, where no day slows down our productivity or our pleasure seeking.

Where every day belongs to me to do what I want with. And Sabbath dismantles and disrupts that notion and says, no, this day belongs to God and it's not yours.

It's his. It's holy. And he will tell us what we do with it. We think we decide what hours we will give to God in our week. What time we'll give to God.

But Sabbath is a reminder. No, every hour belongs to God. Every day belongs to God. We think that every hour is about pursuing our goals and our self-fulfillment.

But along comes another day that says, no, we are not the end of everything. We're not the point of everything. He is. It's the day that points us again to him.

[ 13 : 34 ] He is the Lord of the Sabbath. It's in him we flourish. It's in him we find rest, renewal, restoration, blessedness, happiness.

So I've got a little book here called The Common Rule. It's by a man called Justin Early. And it's about habits of purpose in an age of distraction. So this is the age of distraction, isn't it?

We're distracted by our phones all the time. You're probably distracted right now as you're sitting listening to this by all kinds of devices and things going on. But here's how do we form habits in a distracted age?

Habits that help us to focus on God. And Sabbath is one of those great habits. So Justin Early says in the book, the weekly pattern of Sabbath is to remind us that God is God and we are not.

It's to remind us that God is God and we are not. And it's great to be reminded that you're not God, that you're not Lord. Because suddenly there is the weight and responsibility of managing your life and managing your time and managing your own happiness and success and being your own saviour.

[ 14 : 47 ] All that weight is gone. So let's choose to Sabbath as an act of rebellion against a world of busyness.

A world that measures worth by how much you do. Often we don't want to stop. Often we don't want to rest. We've got that fear of missing out, don't we?

And in that formal world, let's choose to stop. To show that we value something different. It's an act of witness to others when we take the Sabbath.

I've got a friend who works for the mayor of New York. Very busy working culture. And every Lord's Day, every Sunday, she Sabbaths.

And she tells all her colleagues, much to her amazement, I am unavailable for this period of time, apart from in an emergency. I will not respond to phone messages.

[ 15 : 47 ] I will not respond to emails because I need to Sabbath. And that's a great witness of a different set of priorities in her life.

To take a Sabbath is to say that you follow another God. That work is not what defines you or justifies your existence. It says that an impactful life comes from living in Christ, in his word, and in his ways.

And not by doing more. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Sabbath is for our benefit. It fits as well.

Do you know what? Our bodies need rest. If we just keep going and going and going and going, our bodies pack in eventually. God rested from his work on the sixth day.

We told us six days of creation. God rested on the seventh. He stopped. He had a Sabbath. His work was finished. Now, work is good, isn't it?

[16:49] I love my work. I hope you like your work. And done well, our work glorifies God and it blesses our neighbor. But rest is good as well.

And the pandemic has changed habits, hasn't it? Locked down, working from home. It's changed the way we do life in many ways. Sometimes in good ways, sometimes in unhelpful ways.

Maybe you feel busier than ever. Maybe not. But as we maybe begin to emerge from lockdown, let's think about our habits.

What habits do we want to re-enter? What habits do we want to get back into? And what habits do we want to never adopt again? What are good habits that we can have that will sustain us into the future?

So let's rest on the Sabbath day. Let's not try and fit into the straitjacket of the world's rules of how busy we should be.

[17:52] But also, there's another kind of burden that can come. Not the busyness of the world, but the rules of the Pharisees. The Pharisees took away the rest of the Sabbath by giving a list of things that you had to do to make it a day of rest.

How ironic. The Sabbath was a torment to many a Scottish child growing up. It made them associate Sundays and God and religion with boredom and frustration and rules.

The Sabbath is about rest, not burdening people. The Sabbath is not another work to perform. It's a day to seek the face of God, to love God, to love neighbour.

How can you keep the Sabbath? Well, some of you will have to work on the Sabbath on Sunday because of your job, wouldn't you? That happens to a lot of us. So if you have to work on a Sunday, find another Sabbath day to rest during the week.

Another day to switch off, to focus on God, to rest physically, to rest spiritually. Because you need Sabbath. You need God in your life. When you're having your Sabbath, avoid the shop.

[19:10] Avoid work. Just to remind yourself, shopping, working, they're not the centre of my life. If you're having your Sabbath, don't pursue your side gig. Rest on the Sabbath from smartphones, screens and computers and their tyranny.

Rest physically. Have a long lie or a nap. Rest through worship. Gather with other believers to praise and learn from God's word and hear the gospel again. Rest in community with others. Be with your fellow Christians and with your non-Christian friends to connect. Share life. Build friendships. Bless others. Find time to reflect, to read, to pray, to walk, to wonder, to meditate. Find time to serve. To remind yourself, life is not all about me. I'm here for the good of others also. So Sabbath is a reminder of our humanity.

I also want to say for a few moments though, it's a reminder of our salvation. The Sabbath speaks of our humanity and it speaks of our salvation. Our souls need the Sabbath as much as our bodies.

[20:32] Justin Early says this, it's not just your body that needs rest and restoration. Your soul does as well. But your soul is not looking for a nap.

What our soul needs rest from is the idea that we've got something to prove. What our soul needs rest from is the work of covering our shame, of proving to others that we matter, or the work of atoning for our past, or pretending that we're better than we are.

So the Sabbath reminds us of the salvation rest that we have in Jesus Christ. Every Sunday when we stop working and we gather as church, either physically together or remotely like this, we gather to be renewed in the gospel, to be reminded of the great central truth of the Christian life, that salvation is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, which is a reminder that Jesus has done our work for us.

In Hebrews chapter 4, we're told that God entered his eternal rest. Because in Christ, his work was finished.

In Jesus, God has finished, completed and fulfilled the work of salvation. When Jesus died on the cross, he cried out in a loud voice, It is finished.

[22:15] In his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus has done every single thing that is needed to restore us to relationship with our Father in heaven.

So that means that we can rest from trying to save ourselves, from trying to clean ourselves up enough to appear before God.

Even those of us who have been Christians for a long time, start to fall into the trap of thinking, what is it I need to do to please God, to earn his favour, so that I can come near to him?

And the Bible is full of this great message, that Jesus, by his death, has done all that is needed for us to draw near to God and to his throne of grace.

All the work of salvation is done by Jesus. And so we rest in him and in what he has done for us.

[ 23 : 21 ] We can rest from trying to save ourselves and clean up ourselves and make ourselves presentable enough to God. We can rest in Jesus because he saves us by his death and he cleanses us by washing away our sin.

Sabbath, Justin Erlic says, is the very essence of our salvation. We can rest because Jesus has done all that needs to be done.

Don't know how that's going for you in your life. If you've really understood the central idea of the Christian faith, that the work of salvation is Jesus' work, not ours.

And that all we are asked to do is to accept it and enjoy it. We can rest from spiritual striving, from trying to prove ourselves to God and to others.

But it's because through Jesus and his death on the cross, we're accepted by God, adopted by God into his family.

[ 24 : 38 ] Nothing I do can make God love me more and nothing I do can make God love me less. Because God's love for me is not dependent on my performance, how hard I try, how hard I work or how much I do.

God's love for me, God's acceptance of me, doesn't change on how well I do. His love is simply what resides in his heart towards us as people.

And his acceptance of us into fellowship rests on the perfect work of Jesus on the cross. You may feel burdened by the weight of your sin today.

You may feel burdened by your many inadequacies and failings, by your own brokenness, by shame for the past, that's what you've done or what's been done to you.

And God says, rest from all of that. I love you. And I've done everything that needs to be done for all of that to be washed away.

[ 25 : 50 ] And for you to stand in my presence, clean, sparkling, righteous, loved, redeemed, set free.

That's what Jesus has done for us. And so the Sabbath is also a day of promises. It's a day of rest. I don't have to save myself.

And it's a day of promises. Because this Sabbath is pointing forward to the eternal Sabbath, to our eternal rest, to the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, when we will rest from every aspect of the curse, from all toil, from all struggle, from all sorrow, and from every burden.

That day of rest, when there will be no more tears. I want to finish just by reading a fairly long quote. So focus hard, pay attention, bear with me.

So here's this long quote again. If you've lived your life, believing that you can earn your worth, that you can earn your salvation by outweighing the bad with the good, that you can justify your place in this world through the money you can earn or status you achieve, come and rest.

[ 27 : 18 ] Come and Sabbath with Jesus. Here is peace that no amount of effort can buy. He came to you first. He lived the good life we're all trying to live.

He did it. He sacrificed everything. He always said the right thing. He always knew what to do and where to go. And where did it get him?

It got him killed. People hated him. They stripped him naked and killed him. He lived the life of light we're all trying to live, but he was answered with death.

But it was all for love. It was all for you. He stayed up in the garden of Gethsemane so you could sleep. He finished his work on the cross so that you could rest.

He let the world break him so that it doesn't have to break you. He rose from the grave so that all your aspirations won't end in the grave.

[ 28 : 23 ] The life of flourishing that we seek doesn't come from better habits. It comes from him. He is life. He brings life to us. And we respond by living in his presence, by finding those habits that allow us to draw nearer and nearer to him so that everything we do is done out of love, out of the joy of our salvation that we found in him.

Let me just say a short prayer, then we'll have our last singing. Father, we pray that those of us who are struggling with busyness, those of us who are struggling with self-worth, those of us who are struggling with the exhaustion of working from home and homeschooling and juggling so many things, those of us who feel we have to prove ourselves in a competitive world, those of us who feel that we have to work hard to cover our guilt and shame, we pray that together we would all find rest in you today, that we would see that this idea of Sabbath reminds us that we don't have to be gods or saviors, because Christ is Lord and he is saviour.

And so grant us that peace, that rest, that flourishing, that blessedness that comes from paying attention to him, from seeking him first, from trusting in him and from living in his presence.

In Jesus' name we ask these things. Amen. Amen.