

The Sabbath - a love gift

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[0 : 00] I think for most people, the issue to the fore in the passage that we've read would seem very alien. The Sabbath and observance, that is what is being considered. The two incidents recorded here both relate to this matter. How are we to observe the Sabbath?

How is the Sabbath to be observed? And I say that for many that would seem a very alien matter to even give thought to. What has that got to do with the real world in which we live?

In fact, I would wager that for most Christians around the globe, there would be only very modest interest in the subject of the Sabbath and its observance, something that so preoccupied those who were interrogating Jesus and a matter that Jesus himself clearly had very important and clear views on. It's a reality in world Christianity that Sabbatarians, however you wish to understand that term or that description, are pretty thin on the ground. I'm not making a judgment on that, but simply observing that to be the case. I think for many of us gathered here this evening, the matter is somewhat different. Many of us, not all of us by any means, but many of us were brought up in homes where the Sabbath or Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, and that in itself is a theological declaration, was strictly observed. There were, for many of us, a long list of prohibitions in place, those things that we could not do or certainly ought not to do on Sundays. We lived in a world, many of us, where there was such a thing as Sunday books, books that were allowed to be read on Sunday, and then, of course, the majority did not come into that category. Now, for maybe some of you hearing this, it sounds all a bit strange, but for many, it doesn't sound strange at all. You know exactly what I'm talking about.

Again, I'm not making a judgment on that. I'm not saying if that was good or bad. I'm simply observing that, for many, that is our background, that is our upbringing.

As I was thinking about this matter, I was reminded of an occasion that relates to Bon Accord, and indeed to the Bon Accord Mass, but before we occupied the Mass. And I'm not sure if this is an anecdote that I've told before. I've certainly done so in conversation, but I don't think I've had occasion to do so in the course of a sermon. But if I have, well, you may recognize it, and if not, well, so be it. When I was a student in Aberdeen 30 years ago, there was a rota in place to babysit the youngest child of the manse on a Sunday evening. Now, we have in the congregation one child of that manse, but that wasn't the child that was being babysat. You can work out who it was if you want, those of you who know the family concern. Well, part of the duty of those babysitting, and I was on that rota, although I think I only did it once. I must have done it so badly that I wasn't placed in the rota again. I don't know. I certainly only remember the one occasion. But part of my duty was to read a couple of chapters of a book for the young boy in question. In the lounge there in the manse in Forest Avenue, it's funny how you have some memories that are quite vivid. And I was presented with a book that I was to read. And as I was presented with the book, I think really with the intention of avoiding any potential crisis of conscience, perhaps for me, I was assured this might not look like a Sunday book, but it is. And as it turns out, it was one of the Narnia

[4 : 49] Chronicle. Again, not a surprise in that particular manse. So I had to read, I don't know, a chapter or more of this book. And I was actually given feedback on how well I had done it. But anyway, that's another matter that doesn't really bade on the matter to hand. Now we can smile at the anecdote, but where do we stand on the issue? If it is the case, and I'm not stating that this was the case, but if it was the case that as a denomination we have been guilty in the past of legalism in this matter, is it the case that the pendulum has swung dramatically in the opposite direction? What is beyond dispute is that Sabbath observance, however you might define that, isn't what it used to be.

Is that good? Have we been liberated from legalism? Is it bad? Are we simply disobeying commandments of God? Or is this a matter indifferent? For the moment I simply pose the question.

In our passage, Jesus finds himself challenged on the matter of Sabbath observance, a practice that served as the principle badge and distinctive of Jewish identity. And in the two confrontations with the Pharisees recorded by Mark, fundamental principles concerning the Sabbath are identified and addressed by Jesus. If we are confused or uncertain on the issue, then I imagine, and indeed I'm sure, that it is a good idea to listen to what Jesus has to say. Now I should say at the outset that if you're hoping or imagining that in the course of the sermon I'll provide you with a list of do's and don'ts, well you'll be disappointed. But I hope that we will be able to identify principles that we can all, with God's help, seek to apply in our own lives and circumstances. And I want to notice and consider three Sabbath truths or principles that we find in this passage. First of all, concerning the maker of the Sabbath. The reference is made to the Sabbath as something that has been made. And I want to think about that, that very fundamental principle, the maker of the Sabbath. But then also the matter of the Lord of the Sabbath. And that's really a question of authority, authority over the Sabbath. Who is the

Lord of the Sabbath? What can we say concerning this matter of authority? And then finally consider what I'm describing as the heart of the Sabbath as presented by Jesus in His actions as well as in His words. Let's think of these three principles. First of all then, the maker of the Sabbath. The question here relates to the matter of original design. Notice there in verse 27, we read, Then He said to them, Jesus said to the Pharisees, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Now, I readily recognize that Jesus' principal concern here isn't about the question of who made the Sabbath or when the Sabbath was made. It's about its purpose. And we'll come on to that. But in stating what He states, He does, in the passing as it were, remind His hearers and remind us of the very origin of the Sabbath. And this is a very fundamental reality that we need to be very clear on. The Sabbath is not a human construct, not something that the Jews invented and, oh, well, that's a Jewish thing. No, it's not even a law that God instituted at some point in the history of God's people. It's true that we find the Sabbath as part of the Ten Commandments, but its origin goes beyond and back before the codification, if you wish, of the Mosaic law. The Sabbath was made. The Sabbath was made for man. The Sabbath is part and parcel of God's creation. It is embedded in creation itself. God made the Sabbath. The Sabbath is part of what God declared to be very good. You remember in the account of creation before the fall when God had completed

[9 : 45] His work of creation and He looked at what He had done and He declared that it was very good. Well, part of what was very good, embedded in what was very good, was the Sabbath. This day of rest that God established established and integrated into the very fabric of creation. The Sabbath predates the fall. It's part of God's perfect arrangement for human well-being. To understand this is to see the folly of imagining that Jesus would abrogate the Sabbath, and He doesn't. He doesn't do it here. He doesn't do it elsewhere. The Sabbath is a gift of God to be enjoyed by man, and God is not in the habit of withdrawing good gifts from His creatures. But of course, that statement that Jesus makes, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, though it makes reference to the origin of the Sabbath. What Jesus is principally concerned with is declaring, reminding, if you wish, of its purpose. The Sabbath was made for man. This is

Jesus' principal concern. The Sabbath was made for our well-being. God, as our Creator, knows how we function best, and to function best we need a day of rest. The one day in seven rest, that principle that is at the heart of the Sabbath is for our good. It's for your good. It's not to be a burden. It's not to limit us. It's not to place a heavy weight upon us. It is for our good. It is a day for rest and refreshment and renewal. It is a day for fellowship with God and one another. It is a day that we are to look forward to and to cherish and to celebrate. Even the prohibition of work that is indeed embedded in the Ten Commandments and in all the Mosaic law that accompanies it is consequential to the primary purpose. What do I mean by that? What I mean by that is the primary purpose is that we should rest.

But in order to rest, then we need to abstain from work. The heart of the matter isn't abstaining from work, but if we are to rest, then we need to abstain from work. Not working is to allow us to enjoy and profit from rest. It's God's way of protecting the day for our good. And we function better with a day of rest. And that's something that's recognized by folk of no religious persuasion, no acts to bear in terms of the Sabbath. Indeed, increasingly it's interesting to see how in medical science and others who are examining these matters acknowledge and recognize that we need a day of rest. It is good for us. We function better with a day of rest. Society is happier with a day of rest. It's for our

good. It's for the good of man.

This, of course, reminds us of the privileged position we enjoy in God's creation. And again, this is simply drawing an inference from what Jesus is saying. It's not His primary purpose. But we can legitimately draw this inference. You see, the very manner in which God orders the passage of time, the very manner in which God has established His creation revolves around our good as men and women, as those He has created in His image and likeness. The purpose of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. But there's also in that expression, or we can draw from it, what I'm calling its message. The message of the Sabbath and the message of the Sabbath about its maker. And the point I'm making here is simply that what God creates reveals truth about God. We know that to be true in terms of the creation generally. The Bible itself makes that point. The heavens declare the glory of God. The physical creation reveals something of the power and wisdom and majesty of God. Indeed, we speak of general revelation as a theological category, that we can know something about God by observing what He has created. And that is true. It's also true with the

Sabbath. That God has instituted a weekly day of rest reveals to us what kind of God He is. It reveals to us His paternal love and care for us, His wisdom in ordering our lives and the passage of time as it is to be experienced by us. God wants the very best for us. That's why He made the Sabbath for us.

[15:22] That's hugely important. I don't know everybody here tonight, I don't know what your very conception of God is, but here this seemingly, you might say, impractical matter of thinking about the Sabbath allows us to discover something about God, that God wants the very best for you. And the Sabbath is one illustration, one evidence of that. That's the first big principle, that the Sabbath is made. God made the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man. But there's also a second big principle concerning the matter of authority. And that is what Jesus immediately goes on to say in verse 28. The conclusion He draws from what He had said previously, so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. Yeah, clearly that the matter He's raising is one of authority. He's declaring that this character that He describes as the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Let's think about this question of authority. And let's think of it, noticing three ways in which the issue of authority comes up in these two incidents. First of all, it comes up in a negative way, when we see authority usurped by the Pharisees. Then we'll also see authority exercised by David. And then we'll see, and this is where we have to lead to, and that's where Jesus' declaration is so clear, authority embodied in Jesus Himself. But think of all, first of all, of the Pharisees and how they usurp God's authority. Now, the Pharisees would have been horrified to have been accused of such a thing. They prided themselves on being the guardians of the

Sabbath. They acknowledged that God made the Sabbath. They knew their Old Testament, and they saw themselves as protecting, as guarding. They saw themselves as God's right-hand men, protecting the Sabbath from lightweights, like Jesus, who would eat away at this great gift that God had given His own people. And yet, though that is how they saw themselves, what they were actually doing is usurping God's authority. And they did that by adding to what God had said. Now, I won't bore you with the details, but over the years and decades, the Pharisees and others had multiplied the prohibitions in place concerning Sabbath work or Sabbath activity, and they codified it to a quite minute way and minute detail.

They began, of course, with the law of God given through Moses. But then, in some cases, they twisted it. In other cases, they simply added to it in a multiplicity of ways. So, if we think of the two incidents before us in the passage that we've read, the crime of the disciples as they walked through the cornfields is that they were harvesting corn, possibly also threshing the corn as they would rub it between the palms of their hands. And this, for the Pharisees, was a great crime. It was to break the Sabbath. It's possible, though we can't know for sure, that the Pharisees are suspicious or imagine that the disciples may be guilty of breaking the Sabbath in another way, by walking for a distance that was beyond the distance allowed. The Pharisees had determined that a legitimate walk on the Sabbath could be of 1,999 paces.

That gives you some idea of their mindset. Not 2,000, but 1,999. What does that mean? Well, it equates to something like 800 meters. We don't know, but might it be that they suspected that the disciples were going beyond what was allowable. But these were things that they had made up. These were things that they had added to God's law. And in so doing, of course, they were usurping or attempting to usurp God's authority, though they themselves, of course, would have denied and

been horrified at the suggestion.

In the case of Jesus healing the man with the shriveled hand, the issue for the Pharisees would have been that his condition was not life-threatening. Medical help could only be offered if it was required to save life. If anything could be postponed, then it needed to be postponed only if a person's life was in danger. Was it legitimate, according to the Pharisees, to provide help? Now, the man with the shriveled hand, though that condition was not a mild condition, it was a serious condition, clearly it was not a life-threatening condition. He could have been healed the following day, and it wouldn't have been a huge deal for him if there had been a day's delay. However, Jesus very deliberately and in a very public and deliberately public way heals the man on the Sabbath, and according to their view of the world, was breaking the Sabbath by so doing. So, authority usurped by the Pharisees. But moving on to the question of what

[20 : 59] I'm describing as authority delegated to and foreshadowed by David. We'll call him King David, though at the time of the incident recorded, of course, he wasn't King David.

Jesus, in responding to his critics, tells of this occasion of when David ate the showbread or the consecrated bread that, as it happens, would have been put out on the Sabbath. So, it wasn't simply that he broke the law, but seemingly he broke this particular law. Indeed, he broke at least a couple of laws in doing what he did. And Jesus gives this example. Now, why does he do that? What's the point of the story? It seems to me that the point of the story is not so much to provide some justification for breaking the law in certain circumstances, along the lines of, well, David did it, so my disciples can too. You know, don't criticize my disciples because, hey, David, he did the same, or something similar.

That would be quite a poor argument to justify his disciples. I think rather the issue to hand is one of authority. David, in doing what he did, exercised an element of delegated authority to override the law in a given circumstance. And that it was David who did this is very critical. David was not only a highly regarded national hero for the Jews, the greatest of their kings. He was, very importantly, the precursor of Messiah. We think of the words of God through the prophet Jeremiah, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.

One would rise up, one would appear from the line of David, from the branch of David.

David's delegated authority over the Sabbath pointed forward to David's greater son, which brings us really to the principal matter regarding authority is this authority embodied in Jesus. Jesus identifies in whom whom rests ultimate authority over the Sabbath, the Son of Man. Now we know that this was Jesus' favorite self-designation. And this is a quite astonishing claim that Jesus is making. Jesus claims authority over that which is rooted in the very order of creation. He claims authority that can belong to God alone in declaring as He does. The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

[23 : 54] But then that brings us to the final principle we want to consider, or the final matter. I don't know if you'd call it a principle. It's what I'm calling the heart of the Sabbath. Having recognized the authority of Jesus, then what He says and how He acts carries huge authority for us. If He's Lord of the Sabbath and this is what He believes and this is how He acts and behaves, then we have sound instruction and example for ourselves. The heart of the Sabbath, the question of its abiding place is very important to stress that Jesus does not exercise His authority by abrogating the Sabbath.

Jesus doesn't say, well, I created the Sabbath and I have authority over the Sabbath, and now I declare that it's passed its cell by date. He doesn't do that. Why would He do that? Why abrogate that which is very good? To use the very words of God as He observed what He had created. What Jesus does do is recover or point to its original purpose. What does He say following, or in the midst of this dialogue with the Pharisees in the second incident, verse 4 of chapter 3, then Jesus asked them, which is lawful in the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?

But they remained silent. The heart of the Sabbath is to do good, is to save life, and this is evident in both incidents, but especially in the healing of the man with the man with the shriveled hand.

Jesus, by His action, is both attacking the blasphemous usurpation of the Pharisees and declaring to all this is what the Sabbath is all about.

It's about doing good for man. It's about bringing life and renewal. And that big principle that Jesus is presenting to us is one that we need to bear in mind as we consider our own use of this day that God has given us for our own good and for the good of others.

But there's one final matter that I want to comment on under this heading of the heart of the Sabbath. I want to suggest this, that the heart of the Sabbath is a matter of the heart.

[26 : 19] And what I want to do is simply draw your attention to this really very stark contrast between the heart of Jesus and the heart of the Pharisees. The Pharisees are keeping the Sabbath in a way that is not pleasing to God.

Jesus is keeping the Sabbath, the Lord of the Sabbath, in a way that is pleasing to God in accord with God's purposes. And why is that? Well, it boils down to their respective hearts that are revealed to us in one verse.

In verse 5, notice what we read there. Jesus looked round at them, at his accusers, the Pharisees. He looked round at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.

And then he said to the man, stretch out your hand. But in these words at the beginning of verse 5, we see the heart of Jesus and we're told about the heart of the Pharisees. And what do we find in the heart of Jesus?

Well, he was angry and deeply distressed. Why? Why was he so angry? Why was he so deeply distressed? Because of his great love for people and that great love for people was looking to see their good.

[27 : 31] And what the Pharisees were doing was denying people the opportunity to be blessed, to be healed, to enjoy the good gift of God.

The good gift of God had been distorted and twisted to become a burden that was damaging rather than invigorating. And Jesus is angry about that because he loves people and he wants people to know this good and to enjoy this good.

He loved this man. The Pharisees would have denied the opportunity for healing. He loved this man and so he heals this man. He invites him to stretch out his hand and he was completely restored.

This is the heart of Jesus. But what are the heart of the Pharisees? Well, we're told what their hearts were like. He looked round at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.

Their hearts were hard. Their hearts were stubborn. Their hearts were proud. And hard hearts don't keep the Sabbath. Stubborn hearts don't keep the Sabbath in a manner pleasing to God.

[28 : 43] These men were incapable of keeping the Sabbath because of the hearts that they had. God-pleasing Sabbath observance is ultimately a matter of the heart as indeed all that we do as believers, as Christians.

It's a matter of the heart. Where's your heart? Where your heart is there will your Sabbath be also. If your heart is in the right place, then the Sabbath will be a delight.

If your heart is in the right place, then you will enjoy it and profit from it for your own good and for the good of others. For doing good, for saving life, for giving life, for offering life.

The heart of the Sabbath is a matter of the heart. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you are indeed a God.

Whoever seeks our good. In so many ways, we find evidence of this. We thank you that in the very order and in the very design of creation, your concern is for our good and for our well-being, for our happiness.

[29 : 55] We thank you for your paternal care and wisdom revealed in your creation and very particularly in providing for us a day of rest. We pray that we would share the convictions of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, regarding this day that you have given us.

That it would be for us a day of rest, of renewal, of refreshment, but also a day for doing good. For us, enjoying and knowing good in our own lives, but also in seeking to do good for others.

Heavenly Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.