

# The Sabbath

Isaiah 58:13, 14

Sometimes, I get myself in over my head. I felt strongly about preaching one message on Isaiah 58, but when I dug into the text, I felt that verses 13, 14 adequately stood alone to justify a second message. So, I preached a message called “The Fast” last week and would do something on “The Sabbath” this morning. I didn’t give it another thought until I began to develop this message. It turned out to be a difficult message. because it is fraught with all sorts of potential dangers.

If I take a posture that is too dogmatic as to how the Sabbath should be observed among today’s Christians, I run the risk of playing the Pharisee by adding the “traditions of me” to God’s Word. If I take a posture that is too loose, I may present Sabbath-keeping as superfluous in our age, something that was of the Law of Moses from which we have been liberated. That would simply dismiss a thing that has been of great importance from antiquity. And, no matter what I say, I risk exposing myself as a phony for I have never been an outstanding observer of Sabbath rest.

Last Sunday, we explored how Isaiah’s audience thought that skipping a couple of meals and doing some “sackcloth and ashes” ritual was what God wanted of them. They needed to repair the disconnect between their fasting and how they lived their lives. Their fasting needed to be “spiritualized.” Their Sabbath practices, however, needed to be wholly revamped. Whatever they were doing was producing the exact opposite of what proper Sabbath-keeping was supposed to produce. They seemed to resent having to observe what was intended to be a day of utter delight. In the days of Amos, they were quite blunt in revealing their attitude on the matter, asking:

“When will the New Moon be over  
that we may sell grain,  
and the Sabbath be ended  
that we may market wheat?” – Amos 8:5

The first dimension of Sabbath-keeping to break down was the Sabbath of the land. Through Moses, God commanded that the land be sowed and worked for six years, but that it be allowed to rest for the seventh year. 2 Chronicles says of the time that the Jews were exiled in Babylon:

“The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.” - 2 Chronicles 36:21

The idea seems to be that the seventy years in exile compensated for seventy missed Sabbath years. In other words, the Sabbath on the land had not been observed for at least 490 years. Of course, it was easier to observe a Sabbath day than an entire year. Every week, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, the people were to rest from their labor to observe one day as holy to the Lord, but even that proved too costly for them to do it properly. Time is money, after all.

In the New Testament, the day of Christian corporate worship settled on Sunday, honoring the day of Christ’s Resurrection. But, we run into problems when of Sunday, we simplistically say, “That’s the Sabbath nowadays.” It was easy to treat Sunday as though it were the Sabbath in the good ol’ days when blue laws kept businesses closed and children’s sports organizations would never have dreamed of playing games on Sundays, but now, Christian businessmen, Christian employees and Christian families have to make choices about how restful they are determined to keep their Sundays. That’s one of those areas where individual Christian liberty is difficult. It would be much easier if some high church authority would just tell us what’s expected of us.

God wove into our fabric a need for a regular rhythm of labor and rest from labor. I can explain away the legal demands of the Sabbath by saying, "I am not under the Law." I can justify going and going on Saturdays AND Sundays and nobody can biblically corner me for dishonoring a holy day. I can hold my own with any Sabbath day legalist who might try to impose his will on me, but that does not satisfy my need for that regular season of rest and delight in the Lord.

Do you guard any regular day or any regular part of any day to step away from your routine, to leave your work and its attending demands, to deny yourself of trivial amusements and to delight yourself in God? That was God's intent for the Sabbath, but His people were too preoccupied with other concerns to benefit from it. Isaiah's words were intended to call them back to something that was good for them, but His words speak to us as well. The Sabbath rest was ...

## **I. A Holy Day (13a)**

<sup>13</sup>*If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath  
and from doing as you please on my holy day,*

### **A. That Which Is Holy Is First of All, Different**

Different, distinct, other ... these describe the essence of holiness. God is "Holy, Holy, Holy!" because as that great hymn declares, "Only Thou art holy, There is none beside Thee, Perfect in pow'r in love and purity." When this holy God declared certain aspects of the Jewish religious system to be holy, He meant that they were to be guarded from common purposes. A priest served in a holy capacity. Other men could not step in to perform priestly functions. The temple was filled with holy furniture and holy vessels that were never to be used for common purposes.

The fourth commandment said: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Whatever else it meant to keep the Sabbath holy, it clearly meant to guard it from becoming like every other day. When Isaiah said, "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath ..." he may have been thinking of Moses and the burning bush, when a voice in the bush commanded, "Do not come any closer ... Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). It could allude to just going about one's daily routine. Either way, what is conveyed is an attitude that treated the Sabbath as if it were nothing special.

In this age of technology, we have the greatest potential of any people in the history of the world to truly observe Sabbath rest. We can work faster and produce more in less time. We can take time to rest in the Lord. But, this is also a consumerist age, a capitalistic age and a competitive age, so we dare not be found not tending to business. We have the greatest opportunity for observing Sabbath rest, but we also have the most excuses for failing to do so.

### **B. It Was Perilously Easy to Distort the Holiness of the Sabbath**

On many occasions, the Jews fell into a pattern of keeping the Sabbath in a very mechanical and unthinking fashion. There were certain duties of worship that needed to be observed. On certain Sabbaths, there were particular sacrifices that needed to be offered. But once that handful of obligations was satisfied, a man would claim the remainder of the Sabbath for himself. He would immediately resume buying and selling. He would return to his winepress or his olive press. He would be back in his fields or in the market, dealing in all sorts of commodities.

That is, of course, the trap into which we most easily fall. We give God our worship to which we readily acknowledge He is entitled. We sacrifice of our resources, perhaps, even cheerfully so that the work of the Kingdom of God will be advanced. But, we think that those things alone satisfy our need for rest. They do not. Worship is worship. Sacrifice is sacrifice. Rest is rest. We need time that we will set apart and guard as time to restore our joy and delight in God.

In the years to come, the Sabbath would become distorted to the other extreme. Various rabbis worked to precisely define terms like “work” and “rest.” They defined how far a man could walk on the Sabbath or how much of a load constituted a burden. They defined healing in such a way that one could treat an open wound with bandages on the Sabbath, but not apply medication. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day picked up on these things and made the lives of those around them miserable, for they were constantly pronouncing condemnation on those individuals who refused to or who simply could not stay ahead of all the legalistic minutiae. The Pharisees made the Sabbath hard work for others - an interesting twist on a day intended to be a holy day of rest.

Most of us do not observe Sabbath rest very well, so it would be easy to suggest all sorts of Sabbath day rules and regulations in a well-intended effort to restore it. It would be easy, if not popular to condemn innocent recreations – no football, no NASCAR, no golfing, *i.e.*, no fun. Now, if you are so obsessed with any of those things that nothing and nobody ever gets in their way, then you probably need to reassess. But, who is to say that such amusements, when shared with others are not a restful enjoyable way to spend time with family and friends or to forge new relationships? There is little value in becoming rigid about the particulars of Sabbath-keeping.

### **C. What Really Lies Behind a Holy Sabbath Observance?**

<sup>8</sup>Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. – Exodus 20:8-11

God rested from His work of creating the world. I doubt that was because he was tired. I suspect it was to establish the principle for the rest of us. The Sabbath Day observed by the ancient Hebrews was rooted in what God did at the outset of creation. So, while we might excuse ourselves from observing the Sabbath precisely as they did because we are not under the Law of Moses, it is impossible to dismiss the notion of something that God modeled for us at creation.

I would never suggest that Sabbath-keeping ought to be 24 hours of Bible reading, prayer and meditation though some time spent in those disciplines would be a nice touch. God may have spent some of that first Sabbath enjoying what He had made. That cannot be a bad way for us to spend Sabbath rest. Beyond devotional and worship moments, God wired us for enjoyment.

## **II. An Honorable Day (13b)**

if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and the LORD's holy day honorable,  
and if you honor it by not going your own way  
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,

What does God look for that would enable us to receive the most from our Sabbath rest?

### **A. Sabbath Rest Requires an Essential Element of Self-forgetfulness**

"... if you honor it by not going your own way ..." Whenever you observe Sabbath rest, it should be a time when you sever yourself from your vocational routine. Spend some of it alone with God. Spend some of it in corporate worship. Spend some of it enjoying your family. Spend some of it strengthening the bonds of Christian friendship. Spend some of it caring for others. Clear your head, but not so that it can be filled up with trivial amusements, but rather, so that it can be filled up with God's presence, God's Word, God's works and God's people.

We have jobs. We have businesses. We have responsibilities. Can you come away from those on some regular occasion so as just to delight in the Lord, in what He has made and in the blessings with which He has filled your life? Again, I am not suggesting that Sabbath-keeping needs to be twenty-four unbroken hours of Bible reading, prayer and meditation. But beyond moments for devotion and worship, God wired us for refreshing, moments of joy, alone and with God's people.

### **B. Sabbath Rest Requires an Essential Elevation above the Trivial**

"... and not doing as you please ..." While I am desperately trying to not overstep my pay grade by wagging my finger and declaring what is and what is not allowed on the Sabbath, I trust that no one is hearing me say, "Anything goes!" You know that some pursuits are more worthy than others. The Holy Spirit can help you ferret out which are which. Suffice it to say, "Sabbath rest is more than a mere play day." Can you picture Jesus stuffing Himself with potato chips and zoning people out as He plays some video game? J.I. Packer recommends that we "choose the leisure activities that bring us closest to God, to people, to beauty, and to all that ennobles."

"... or speaking idle words ..." If there was ever a time to guard one's words, it would be when one is attempting to enjoy Sabbath rest. I am not talking about a vow of silence. I am not talking about guarding that you don't say words that you probably should not be saying anytime. I am only acknowledging that too much wordiness is risky. Sabbath rest is a good time to measure that your words are truly the kinds of things that edify or praise or encourage or foster love and affection. To delight in a day is not quite the same as an opportunity to be silly or mindless.

### **C. Sabbath Rest Requires an Essential Edification of Others**

We step beyond our text here, but we in no way step out of bounds, for we should consider the words of Him Who claimed to be "Lord of the Sabbath." Jesus' enemies were routinely on His case because of His Sabbath day activities. He drove a demon from one man on a Sabbath day. He healed a man with a shriveled hand on another. He healed a blind man on another. He healed a man that had been an invalid for 38 years on still another. Incredibly, these amazing miracles passed over the heads of His critics. All they could see was how Jesus had allegedly broken the Sabbath.

But, Jesus constantly taught that it is just fine to do nice things for people on the Sabbath day. When He healed a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years, someone suggested that she should have come on any one of six other days. That particular crack seemed to get under Jesus' skin:

<sup>15</sup>The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? <sup>16</sup>Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" – Luke 13:15, 16

On another occasion, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). He was reminding us that the Sabbath was not created to drive man absolutely nuts trying to keep it. It was a gift from our Creator Who understands how we are made and how our lives need to be balanced with labor, worship and rest. It was not intended as a behavioral straightjacket, but that we might enjoy the glorious freedom of life as the children of God.

### **III. A Happy Day (14)**

<sup>14</sup>then you will find your joy in the LORD,  
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land  
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob."  
The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

These specific promises were couched in the Jews' hopes of being restored as a nation in their homeland; rebuilt, blessed and prospered by JEHOVAH. Our rewards for Sabbath-keeping are every bit as precious. We are not ancient Israel. The Sabbath is not legislated into our lives. In fact, we have so much freedom to make choices about how to observe Sabbath rest that the responsibility can seem ominous if we really think about it. So let me tie all this together by saying this:

Without being overly detailed, your Sabbath rest should be a delight, not a discipline, because it draws you into the things of God. It is wonderful if you can observe the whole Lord's Day as a Sabbath. But, even if your circumstances prevent you from being able to do that, you would benefit greatly from setting apart some significant increment of time and keeping it holy. Think of it as a foretaste of something eternal for which every child of God should hunger.

"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; <sup>10</sup> for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. <sup>11</sup>Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience." – Hebrews 4:9-11

One day we will experience this rest in its perfect fullness. How wise and how helpful it would prove were we to guard some specific increment of time in our lives to seek it now.

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