

INTRODUCTION

The wife of a man who died assumed they had plenty of money so she gave him a very nice funeral and a fancy tombstone that said, "Rest in Peace." However, when the estate was settled she learned he had wasted all their money on gambling and bad investments. This made her so angry she took the little money she had and added three words to the tombstone. The new tombstone said: "Rest in Peace ... Until I Come!"

You don't need a tombstone to rest in peace; you only need Jesus.

The Hebrew word for rest is Shabbat. There are no vowels in the Hebrew language, so the word Shabbat is comprised of three Hebrew letters: Shin, Beit, and Tav. In this message we're going to see what Jesus taught about the Sabbath Day.

Sabbath is one of the most misunderstood topics in the Bible. I average several emails a year from people who ask me one of two questions: (1) Why don't we obey the Fourth Commandment that says, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy?" The other question is: (2) When did we change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday?

In the last message I talked about the religious whiners who followed Jesus around criticizing everything He did and said. In this passage, they whine about how Jesus didn't observe the Sabbath the way they thought it ought to be observed.

Mark 2:23-28. "One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?' He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'"

How much rest are you getting? Do you ever tired and stressed out? If you do, you're like most Americans. Americans are burning the candle at both ends. Someone wrote: "This is the age of the half-read page; a quick hash and a mad dash; The bright nights with the nerves tight; the plane hop and the brief stop; the lamp tan in a short span; the big shot in a soft spot; the brain strain and the heart pain; the cat naps 'til the spring snaps; then the fun's done."

If that describes your life, then you need to discover the power of the Sabbath. When you do, you'll enjoy the REST of your life. In this message I want to offer three quick theological points in order to hurry to the final, practical point about how you and I should practice the Sabbath. So, I need you to listen quickly so we can get to the good stuff!

1. Christians are not required to follow the Jewish Sabbath rules

There are some groups who follow Jesus, but they meet on Saturday, and even follow the Old

Testament dietary rules. They don't eat pork or catfish. Some of them judge those of us who worship on Sunday. They say we're wrong, and that Sunday worship is actually the mark of the beast.

There is nothing in the New Testament that even suggests we should keep the Sabbath rules. This attitude isn't new. Remember, there were people in the early church called "Judaizers." They demanded that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians. The men had to be circumcised, they had to refrain from eating certain foods, and they had to obey the Sabbath and all the Jewish festivals.

If you're ever confronted by someone who says you should worship on Saturday and obey the dietary rules of the Old Testament, take out your Bible and show them this verse:

"Having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross...Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath Day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." (Colossians 2:14, 16-17)

The Old Testament regulations were only a shadow—the substance is Christ. Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. That means He's the expert about it. Jesus didn't come to cancel the Old Testament law; He came to fulfill it. Every single Old Testament law must now be examined under the Lordship of Jesus. People often struggle when they read passages from Leviticus prescribing very strict dietary and personal hygienic laws. I am regularly asked why we "don't obey the Bible" and follow those rules. Short answer: as New Testament Christians, we are no longer bound by the ceremonial and civil laws Israel lived under.

2. Sunday is not the Christian Sabbath

I grew up hearing that Sunday was the new Sabbath Day. One particular deacon in my home church used to pray on Sunday, "Lord, we thank you for this wonderful Sabbath Day." Where did we get that idea? We didn't get it from the Bible. Let me give you a quick church history lesson.

For the first 300 years of Christianity, Jesus-followers were arrested, persecuted, and executed by the Roman Empire. They threw Christians before wild animals in the Coliseum in Rome for blood sport.

But there was a Roman Emperor named Constantine who changed all that. His mother, Helena, or St. Helen, apparently became a follower of Jesus and influenced her son to legalize Christianity. Seven years into his reign Constantine issued an edict that Christianity was legal. He did more than legalize it; he made it the official religion of the Roman Empire. Some claim that Constantine "Christianized paganism" but what he actually did was paganize Christianity.

He named himself the Bishop of Rome (which would make him one of the Popes). In 321 A.D. he issued the following edict: "On the venerable day of the Sun, let the magistrates and people

residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed.” (*Codex Justinianus*, lib. 3, tit. 12, 3) So the idea of not working on Sunday became the official position of Roman Christians, and thus became the dogma of the Roman Catholic catechism.

By the way, please understand that whenever I point out the differences between evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholicism, I’m not condemning individual Catholic Christians. I know a lot of born-again Catholics who are going to heaven. I even know a few born-again Baptists, too. But it’s important for you to understand the differences between what we believe and the official position of the Roman Catholic Church.

So, Sunday was the Christian Sabbath to Christians for about twelve centuries. Then some Roman Catholics in Europe wanted to reform the Church, that’s why it was called the Reformation. They protested some of the Roman Catholic beliefs, so they were called Protestants. They had five new beliefs, called the five Solas:

Sola scriptura! Scripture alone!
Sola fide! Faith alone!
Sola gratia! Grace alone!
Sola Christus! Christ alone!
Sola Deo Gloria! To God alone be glory!

Those were awesome positions, but they didn’t go far enough. They should have had a couple of more solas. They didn’t correct the Catholic practice of infant baptism. And they didn’t correct the idea of a Sunday Sabbath.

So when the Church of England came together at Westminster in 1643 to state their beliefs, they restated that Sunday was the Christian Sabbath. The Westminster Confession states: “God hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him, which from the beginning of the world, to the resurrection of Christ was the last day of the week, and from the resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which in scripture is called the Lord’s day, and Sunday is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath.”

The Church of Scotland embraced this confession, and they are the forerunner of our modern Presbyterian church. This was also the position held by the Puritans who settled in New England. The Puritans were called “blue-noses” because of their strict rules. So, for much of America’s history we had “blue laws” that required businesses to be closed on Sunday.

So who said Sunday is the new Sabbath? Constantine did. The Roman Catholic Church did. The Church of England did, and the Puritans did. *But the Bible never did.*

What about the early church? They usually met on the first day of the week, the day of the discovery of the empty tomb. But they didn’t meet at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning. Sunday was a workday. They had Sunday night church. We see evidence of this from a verse from Acts 20. “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.” (Acts 20:7) Now, Paul

didn't preach from Sunday morning until midnight. He started after supper and was still pretty long-winded!

We called him Papa Jack. He was my grandmother's third husband. She outlived two husbands, and Papa Jack married her when they were in their seventies. Papa Jack was a Christian Adventist preacher. This is a group that had broken off from the Seventh Day Adventist Group earlier. They didn't observe Saturday as the Sabbath, but they strongly believed Sunday was the Sabbath, so he wouldn't work on Sunday.

Papa Jack and Grandmother loved to hear me preach. They visited me when I was a pastor in Central Alabama. After church we went to my in-laws house for lunch. After lunch we walked out back and my father-in-law, J.R., showed Papa Jack his vegetable garden. The tomato vines were full of ripe, red tomatoes. Papa Jack said, "Those are beautiful tomatoes!" J.R. said, "If you want some, you can pick all you want." Papa Jack shook his head and said, "Oh, no I couldn't pick tomatoes on the Sabbath!" J.R. said, "Well, can you point to them and let me pick them?"

I could see the wheels of this moral question spinning in Papa Jack's head as he considered whether that would violate the Sabbath to point at ripe tomatoes. But he smiled and said, "I guess I can do that." He started pointing and said, "I'll take that one...that one...that one...and that one." So to Papa Jack, he could POINT at tomatoes on the Sabbath, but not PICK them!

I love Papa Jack and he's in heaven now. I believe he has learned first-hand that Sunday isn't the Sabbath and he wouldn't have been sinning if he had picked tomatoes that Sunday! So, Sunday is the Lord's Day, and it's the primary day we gather to worship, but it's not the Christian Sabbath.

3. By resting in the finished work of Christ for salvation we fulfill God's Sabbath

So are we to keep the Sabbath? Absolutely. The Sabbath is mentioned in the New Testament in two ways. First, as in our passage today, it refers to the seventh day when the Jews observed it. Second, in the Book of Hebrews, God adds a deeper layer of truth to the Sabbath. There is a Christian Sabbath, but you may be surprised to learn what it really is.

The Bible says, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." (Hebrews 4:9-10)

So if "Shabbat" means rest, what would be the opposite? Work. There are millions of people who are still "working" to earn their salvation. They go to church, read the Bible, pray, help people and do good deeds all in the hope that one day God will look at them and declare them good enough to enter heaven. They haven't entered the Sabbath rest.

The Bible says in Ephesians 2:8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith." Then it says, "Not by works, so that no one can boast." You are not saved by performing good deeds. You can only rest in the finished work of Jesus on the cross!

There are two ways to spell salvation. Some spell salvation D-O. They think they get into heaven by the good things they do. The other way to spell salvation is D-O-N-E. When Jesus died on the cross He said, "It is finished!" He has done everything necessary for you to be saved. Will you rest in His work on the cross?

So, what day is the Sabbath Day? It's Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, because every day, we rest in the work of Jesus on the cross.

So, at this point you may be thinking, "Okay, I learned some truth today, so what?" Well, the truth about the Sabbath will set you free from legalism, which is always a good thing. But in spite of everything I've said there is something for all of us to DO. Here's your prescription from this message.

4. We should practice God's healthy rhythm of work and rest

The Sabbath is not a law we have to obey, but the idea of a healthy rhythm of work and rest is a gift from God we should not refuse. The Fourth Commandment has two simple parts. God says, "Six days you shall work. On the seventh day you should rest."

Work is good. The New Testament that if a man won't work, he shouldn't eat. But too much work without rest is bad. We should build into our lives a rhythm of working and resting.

Vincent van Gogh was a committed Christian. He felt called to be a preacher. He attended theological school and served as a missionary for three years among the poor miners of Belgium. But the Dutch Reformed Church rejected him as a pastor.

He struggled with his faith for the rest of his life. He abandoned the church, but he didn't abandon God. He turned to painting. Toward the end of his life, he suffered from epilepsy and there were long periods of time when he couldn't hold a brush. He was forced to rest. During this time, he was able to paint a picture called Noon Rest. It was actually a copy of similar painting by Millet. I've seen it several times in the Musée d'Orsay. To me it captures the biblical idea of work and rest. A husband and wife have been working hard to harvest the hay. But van Gogh captured the time when they are taking a nap in the shade of a haystack. The message I get from this painting is the point I'm making. Work is good, but so is rest. It takes both to be healthy.

When God created the world, He wasn't giving us a law to obey; He was offering us a healthy pattern to follow. The Bible says, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." (Genesis 2:2-3)

So after God created the heavens and the earth, do you think He was tired? Do you think He sat down in a heavenly La-Z-Boy recliner and said, "Whew! I'm tired! I've got to rest." Of course not! God doesn't get tired. He doesn't lose His energy. The reason He "rested" was to teach us by example that we all must set aside time for rest and for worship, to redirect our spirit. You have to teach children using object lessons and repetition. So, God showed us every week. Work

six, rest one. Work six, rest one. And what God intended as something to help us live better lives, the Jews turned into a bunch of tedious rules and regulations.

If you work your fingers to the bone, and never stop to rest and relax, you will miss God's best for your life. Once, some Americans were on an African safari, forging into the jungle, using the natives to carry their burdens. They pressed on for ten straight days, never stopping to rest. After this hectic pace, they awoke one morning to find that the natives refused to carry their loads. The natives said, "We rest today. We must allow our souls to catch up with our bodies." That's the value of a day of rest, to let our souls catch up with our bodies.

There are two large companies in America that close on Sundays: Chick-fil-a, founded by Truett Cathey and Hobby Lobby, founded by David Green. Both of these men are Christian leaders. On their websites they explain WHY they close on Sunday—it's not because they believe it is the Sabbath Day. But they both believe it is important to give their employees a day off so they can worship, rest, and spend time with their families. Both companies are losing hundreds of millions of dollars in business by closing on Sunday, but both Truett Cathey and David Green say it's worth it.

By the way, God didn't need six days to create the universe. He could have created it in six nanoseconds or in one billionth of one nanosecond. He's God, after all. So the question is not how He did it, or how long it took Him to do it, but WHY God created the universe. Why did He create this world? Why did He create man and woman? Because He is good. Six times He said, "It is good." But when man was alone, He said, "It's not good." Then He did a good thing. He took a rib from Adam and made a woman. That was okay because Adam had a spare rib and God made it into a prime rib. But why did God create them? He wanted to have fellowship with them. He would walk with them in the cool of the evening. Sin messed that up. That's why He created you. He wants to have a personal relationship with you. He sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross. He became sin for you so you don't have to work to know God. You can accept a loving relationship as a gift of grace from Him.

Sabbath isn't a day. It's a person. Jesus is our Sabbath. He said, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." Shabbat—rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28)

CONCLUSION

So, are you following a healthy pattern of work and rest? Are you resting in the finished work of Christ? Here's a Sabbath parable for you. It was a dark and stormy night. A man was walking along a seaside cliff. He was unfamiliar with the path and didn't know that a part of it had crumbled away. He stepped onto the crumbled bank and found himself sliding down the edge of the cliff. He was frantically scratching and grabbing for anything to grasp to stop his fall, and finally he grabbed onto a small root protruding from the face of the cliff. He was hanging on for dear life. Because it was a dark night, he couldn't see the sky or the water below. But he could hear the sound of the crashing waves on the rocks below. Soon, his fingers grew tired and so he cried out, "God, please help me! Rescue me! Help me!"

In a few moments God said to the man, "Let go of the root and trust me." "No, God! I can't do

that. I've got to hang on for dear life!" Again, he heard the voice, "I am our life. Let go and trust me." But the man continued to hang on with all of his might. His fingers were aching and his arms began to cramp. Finally, with sweat filling his eyes, he said, "Okay, God. I'll let go and trust you. Here goes." He released the root and fell...four inches onto a wide, rock path right below his feet all along. He felt like such a fool. He had been straining and holding on for dear life when safety was just below his feet. Only when he let go of his own efforts did he learn that God could be trusted.

Many people still try to experience salvation by holding on to their own efforts, but salvation only comes by resting in Christ and trusting God. So stop trying and start trusting!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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