

LORD OF THE SABBATH

John 5:9-18

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Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed" (Jn. 5:9-10).

John 5 presents Jesus' healing of a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. To give a sense of how great a healing this was, consider Brian Sternberg, a world record-setting pole vaulter, who fell on his head while training and severed his spinal chord. Since 1963, Brian has been paralyzed from the neck down. In the forty-five years since then, he has longed to be healed. Sometimes he despairs: "I've had it," he once told a journalist. "I can't stand it lying tied up like this. I'm exhausted. I've tried too long to move, and I just can't..." then his voice broke up in sobs. Yet Brian and his family continue to hope. His mother wrote, "No one in Brian's condition has ever walked. *No one*. Yet we still believe. I have no idea when God will heal Brian. It's conceivable this particular battle will not be won here on earth... [But] we won't give up... We think it pleases God for us to persevere."¹ In 1996, Brian had experimental surgery that restored some feeling and movement, and greatly improved his speech. Even that modest gain was a cause for great rejoicing, and Brian continues to fight, hope, and live as best as he can.

Consider, then, what Jesus did for the invalid in John 5. For 38 years – 38 years ago for us was 1970 – he lay by a pool in the most wretched condition. He may have had dreams of marriage and a family that long since had dimmed; people he cared about must have

¹ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 154.

died or moved on with their lives. But up comes Jesus and with a word restores him to full health and vigor. John simply writes: “Jesus said to him, Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked” (Jn. 5:8-9). If something like that happened today it would be front page news and probably end up as a feature movie.

THE PHARISEES’ SABBATH

The response of the Jewish authorities to this healing tells us everything we need to know about their religion: “Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed’” (Jn. 5:9-10).

The first thing we notice is that “the Jews” – a term with which John indicates the Pharisees and other religious elites – cared more about the Sabbath than about this wonderful healing. Why would that be? The Sabbath day of rest was commanded in God’s law, and these Jews believed that obeying God’s law earned them God’s favor. In this way, their view of the Sabbath was a symbol of all works-religion. They were trying to be saved by keeping God’s law, and that did not leave any room for sentimentality about this man who had been healed. What really mattered was not this stupendous act of divine grace, but that by carrying his mat on Saturday the man was violating the rules. I can think of few instances that better illustrate how works-religion opposes the grace of God. So driven were these leaders by the whip of legalism that this wonderful sign of God’s grace was seen only as a threat.

It is important for us to realize, however, that by picking up the mat on which he had lain for thirty-eight miserable years, the man was *not* violating God’s law. The Fourth Commandment states: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work” (Ex. 20:8-10). The former paralytic was not working; he was simply carrying his mat away from the pool. He was violating not God’s law but rather the man-made rules of the religious leaders. When they said, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed” (Jn. 5:10), they were talking about

their law, not God's. Like all legalists, the Pharisees declared themselves righteous under the law only after they had replaced God's law with their own rules. An example of this today would be supposed Christians who think that by not drinking alcohol, dancing, or seeing a movie they are righteous. If they instead tried to be righteous by obeying the Bible's standards – the Sermon on the Mount, for instance – they would soon realize their sinfulness, despair of all works-righteousness, and turn to God for grace.

Christian salvation begins with the realization that we cannot achieve the righteousness of God's law. James 2:10 says that "whoever fails in one point [of the law] has become accountable for all of it." Realizing this, we can either replace God's law which we cannot keep with a man-made legalism that we can attain – as the Pharisees of Jesus' day did and as their counterparts do today – or we can acknowledge ourselves as hopeless sinners and flee to the cross of Christ to be forgiven by God's grace.

The Pharisees developed an elaborate set of rules designed to assure that they did not break the letter of the Sabbath law. Since the Fourth Commandment prohibits working, they defined thirty-nine categories of activities that constitute work, spelling out the details of each. One could not do repair work, so it was forbidden to wear your artificial teeth, lest they should fall out and you break the Sabbath by affixing them back into your mouth. One could not transact business, so it was forbidden to borrow anything from your neighbor. The result of these lists was inevitable: Bruce Milne explains, "In practice the letter of the law had come to dominate its spirit. Outward conformity replaced heart commitment."²

Since the rabbinic law forbade carrying anything on the Sabbath, the man Jesus had healed broke their law by carrying his mat. Imagine the fear of this vulnerable man when, right after his great healing, the Sabbath-police descended on him. It is understandable that he referred them to Jesus, though he did not know who Jesus was: "He answered them, 'The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk''" (Jn. 5:11).

² Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 95.

One inevitable result of legalistic religion is that it treats people without compassion. There may be no better example than the Pharisees's response to this man. They ought to have rejoiced, grabbing his mat for him and patting him on the back. When they learned that a healer had done this, they ought to have sought his name only for the sake of praise and support. Instead, they wanted to persecute and suppress him. This lack of concern for people shows that the Pharisees were not righteous as God counts it, for, as Jesus summarized, the whole point of the law is love for God and love for our fellow men (see Mt. 22:37-39). This shows us that unless we are acting in love for God and for others, it cannot be possible that we are keeping God's law. It was because they really hated God's law that the Pharisees were also hostile to true and saving religion, as their descendants are today. The idea of grace appalled them, because they believed that salvation could and should be earned by works.

Because the Bible so clearly condemns works-righteousness, some people wrongly conclude that we should therefore think little of God's commands. A pastor who insists on biblical obedience or a Christian who shows care towards the Ten Commandments is sure to be accused of Pharisaism. But zeal for obeying God's Word is what characterized Jesus' ministry, not the Pharisees! To be a Pharisee is to treat people without pity and to oppose the true gospel of God's grace for the sake of works-righteousness through the keeping of petty man-made rules.

Nonetheless, those of us with strong doctrinal convictions and zeal for biblical obedience are well warned by the attitude of "the Jews." Let me give some examples of ways in which Christians may imbibe of their legalistic spirit. For instance, how do we respond to new believers who are just beginning to reform their prior ways? Are we disgusted by their unrepented sin, or delighted with their salvation and patient in leading them into godliness? How do we respond when a Roman Catholic speaks of trusting the blood of Jesus? Do we badger him with complaints about praying to Mary, the mass, and other false practices, or do we at least send upward a silent prayer of thanks for this evidence of true, saving faith? And how do we treat a fellow Christian who simply disagrees with us about school choices for their children, politics, infant baptism, or Sabbath observance?

Even in the midst of vigorous debate is there a spirit of brotherhood and love? We have started to become Pharisees not merely when we embrace a doctrine of works-righteousness, but also whenever we lose our delight in the gift of God's amazing grace for all kinds of sinners.

THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH

This raises a question for us. What is the Sabbath really about? Is Sabbath-observance itself something that threatens us with Pharisaism? How are Christians to understand what God wants for us and from us on the Lord's Day?

The first place we find the Sabbath in the Bible is Genesis 2:2-3: "On the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." Just as God instituted in the Garden the ordinances of work and marriage (Gen. 2:15-25), he also instituted the practice of seventh-day resting. God made one day in seven holy – that is, he set it apart from the other six days. Just as God rested from his work of creation to take pleasure in it, so also is man to rest from work in order to glorify and enjoy God.

The next place we hear of the Sabbath is on Mt. Sinai, as the fourth of the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Ex. 20:8-11).

The Sabbath was given to Israel as a sign of its blessing as God's covenant people (cf. Ex. 31:12-17; Exek. 20:10-20). This Sabbath blessing was illustrated during the exodus when God provided Israel with manna in the wilderness. Every day the manna would fall and the people would gather it for their food, but on the sixth day a double portion would be given so that they did not have to gather food on the Sabbath (see Ex. 16) and could rest themselves in God.

From the Bible's teaching we can discern God's purpose in this. First, the Sabbath is a sign of God's eternal rest. While Genesis 1 speaks of the beginning and end of each of the first six days of creation, the seventh day begins but never ends. This indicates the eternal rest that God enjoys, of which the Sabbath is both a sign and a foretaste. In observing this day, God's people are to look ahead to the eternal rest that awaits us with God. This is why the Sabbath did not pass away with the coming of Christ, as did the ceremonial laws, because it is a sign not of Christ's first advent but of the eternal glory and rest that will arrive with his Second Coming. The Sabbath sign is still valid because the reality to which it points – God's eternal age of glory – has not yet come. In recognition of Christ's resurrection as the new source of our blessing, Christians observe the Sabbath on the first day of the week – Sunday – which we call the Lord's Day (cf. Acts 20:7).

Second, the Sabbath is given for our spiritual refreshment. As Jesus put it in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." This means that any approach to Sabbath observance that is more of a burden than a refreshment misses the point. Some people raised in strict Christian homes have come to hate the Lord's Day because it was so miserable; this is contrary to the Sabbath's God-given purpose. The Jews made Sabbath-keepers slaves to a list of rules, rather than freeing them to enjoy God. Joseph Pipa helpfully states, "The purpose of sabbatarianism was not to create a legalistic entanglement that stifles people, but to free the people of God for the wonderful privilege of worshipping God and enjoying Him."³

How does the Sabbath give us spiritual refreshment? God says that we are to "keep it holy" – that is, we are to make it different from other days by directing all our time and attention to God and his blessings. The clearest statement of how the Lord's Day is kept holy is found in Isaiah 58:13-14, in a portion of Isaiah's prophesy that looks to the new covenant age after the coming of Christ. Isaiah says:

If you... call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you

³ Joseph A. Pipa, *The Lord's Day* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1997), 11.

ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 58:13-14).

This tells us that on the Lord's Day our lives should be free from worldly pursuits so that we may engage wholly in the worship and enjoyment of God. This works out in three ways. First, we should not do our normal work: "not going your own ways," Isaiah says. This should not spur a Pharisaic list of rules. Rather, on the Lord's Day we should refrain from whatever work we normally do. Housewives should not do their laundry. Students should set aside their books. Businessmen should not make sales calls. People object to this, saying, I won't have time to get everything done if I take Sunday off! But that is how people think who do not have a God to provide for them. Those who trust in the Lord are freed to honor the Lord's Day.

Second, Isaiah says to refrain "from doing your pleasure on my holy day." This is probably the main occupation of most people on Sundays, even many Christians: doing our own pleasure rather than making God our pleasure. But Isaiah's teaching means that we should devote ourselves to spiritual pleasures and abstain from worldly ones. Surely, this includes things like watching television shows and going to sports events. We have six days to satiate ourselves with worldly pleasures. God wants us to set one day apart for spiritual recreation: worship morning and evening, spiritual fellowship, singing, devotional reading, and works of mercy.

Last, Isaiah says we should refrain from "talking idly." By this, he means that on one day a week we should talk about work or politics or sports as little as possible, devoting our speech to God and his spiritual kingdom.

Very few Christians today keep the Lord's Day holy as we are taught to do in Isaiah 58:13-14. This is likely one reason for our spiritual weakness. God says that his Sabbath brings great blessings to those who keep it: "You shall delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth." This speaks of spiritual power to conquer sin and darkness and gloom. Moreover, "I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father." In other words, we will fully enjoy the blessings of the covenant of grace. I often hear from mothers of small children or people with highly demanding jobs that their daily

obligations make it hard to spend time in Gods' Word. One way to compensate for this is to set aside the Lord's Day for devotional refreshment; indeed, Sabbath-keeping is God's primary devotional plan for his people. The Puritans – most of whom had little leisure time in that agrarian society – called it “the market day of the soul.” However heavy were the worldly demands of the other six days, they devoted the Lord's Day to God and he made them strong.

This may require a rearranging of our priorities – the very thing God wants! We are not to make the Sabbath a day of drudgery, but of spiritual joy as we devote ourselves wholly to God. Some will object, “This is Pharisaism!” But it is not! It is the very opposite of works-religion. We keep the Sabbath not in a vain attempt to earn God's favor but to enjoy fully the favor we already have in Christ by God's grace, and to give him the full glory of our grateful lives.

But let us, indeed, avoid the spirit of the Pharisees. Let our Sabbath not focus on lists of do's and don'ts, and let us not stand in judgment on one another for differences in maturity or understanding or opinion when it comes to the manner of Sabbath observance. Rather, let us lovingly help one another to do all things for the glory of God.

CHRIST'S SABBATH SALVATION

Most importantly, the Sabbath informs us about Jesus and his salvation. Notice how Jesus links this healing with a victory over sin and its curse: “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you’” (Jn. 5:14). This does not necessarily mean that the man's paralysis was God's punishment for some particular sin, though that is possible. Primarily, Jesus means that paralysis is one aspect of the curse that sin has brought into our world. Having been relieved from one curse, the man should avoid sin and its other curses – especially the great curse of God's coming judgment.

Just as the Sabbath provides a rest from the weariness of this fallen world, Jesus came to relieve us from all the burden of sin and its curse. Herman Ridderbos points out that the former paralytic's mat – which so enraged the Pharisees – was “a sign of victory over

suffering and death and thus of the glory of God.”⁴ This means we should look to Jesus to have our sin removed along with all of sin’s curse – entering into the Sabbath of his salvation – so that our lives can be made whole and holy and that we can be forgiven and restored to God. Have you trusted in Jesus? If not, the present effects of sin’s curse on our world – such as the kind of misery this invalid had endured – are a small matter compared to the wrath of God that awaits every sinner who does not come to Christ for forgiving grace.

Did Jesus break the Sabbath law, as the Pharisees said he did (Jn. 5:18)? Jesus answered, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (Jn. 5:17). This makes the point that Jesus, as God’s Son, is Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12:8). For him to labor for salvation does not violate the Sabbath; rather, it fulfills it. Jesus points out that while God rested from *creation*, his work of *redemption* has gone on in this world. Thus it is worldly work that is to cease on the Lord’s Day, not the work of Christ’s kingdom. And just as Jesus elsewhere permits works of mercy and basic provision on the Sabbath (see Mt. 12:1-8), it is hardly a sin to heal, provide food and table fellowship, encourage the downcast, or perform other acts of mercy on the Lord’s Day – especially when in so doing we tell others about Jesus and his salvation. On the Lord’s Day we rest from our worldly labor, but God continues his work of salvation through us and for his own glory.

Let us never pretend that we can be righteous under God’s law, since the law condemns us for our sins. But having been saved by grace, let us no longer fear or resent God’s commands, which guide us into fullness of life. God gave the Sabbath not to make our lives difficult, but to make us richly blessed. Indeed, it was on another Sabbath day that Jesus gave one of his most beloved invitations to a life of believing, obedient rest: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-29).

⁴ Herman Ridderbos, John: *A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 188.