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Mark 2:23 – 3:6  
June 3, 2018

### **“Laying an Egg on the Sabbath”**

There was a great movie that come out years ago called, “Chariots of Fire.” The film is about Scotsman Eric Liddell, a celebrated sprinter, who was expected to win gold in the 100 meters during the Paris Olympics in 1924,

However, he discovered that the time trials for his event were going to fall on a Sunday.

Even though he had relentlessly trained and his country had invested in him, he refused to run.

This decision put him under immense pressure from politicians, teammates, and even some family.

“God will understand,” they said. “Your country is counting on you! Do it just this one time!”

But he said, “No. I can’t do it—not even once.”

Well, it turned out that Liddell could run in another event that did not conflict with his beliefs—the 400 meters. During the time trials, he performed just well enough to make the finals. Teammates wondered about his ability to secure a medal.

But Liddell believed the results were in God’s hands, and just prior to running the final, he was handed a slip of paper from an American with a profound message on it: “Those who honor me, I will honor.”

When the gun sounded, Liddell ran like he was possessed and broke the Olympic record to finish first!

Eric Liddell firmly believed in obeying God no matter the cost—and that meant following every one of His Ten Commandments, including the fourth.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

I tackle the subject of Sabbath this morning with some trepidation because of how easy it is to be misunderstood. And the fact that today I’m not preaching to the choir (they aren’t here!) but that I’m preaching to ... ME!

In Jesus’ brief ministry, he was repeatedly running into the requirements generated by this commandment.

While he was often at odds with the religious authorities over how this commandment was to be observed, he did not discount its religious value.

In the passage of scripture we just read, Jesus attempts to balance the validity of sacred scripture with human necessity. In that balance there are lessons for us.

The first thing we might mine from this passage is that religious people tend to get focused too much on regulations.

Consider the Jewish people of Jesus' day. The Sabbath was very special to them.

It is interesting to note that in the Ten Commandments, the prohibition against killing takes only four words, but the commandment about the Sabbath takes 94 words.

I think this is because the requirement to observe the Sabbath is so contrary to human activity that it required an extensive explanation.

By the time of Jesus, the Sabbath had become a burden, not a blessing. Strict rabbis had drawn up a lot of rules over the years, regulating everything.

Some were ridiculous. For example, it was taught that there could be no work on the Sabbath, so a person must be still; he must not shave or ride horseback.

If his ox fell in a ditch, he could pull the ox out; if he fell in a ditch, he had to stay there.

Eggs laid on the Sabbath could not be eaten; because those eggs were the byproduct of hens who had been working ... on the Sabbath!

If a flea bit a person on the Sabbath, he must not scratch it, but let it bite in peace, for to try to catch the flea would be hunting on the Sabbath.

Once, a fire broke out in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. The Jews, afraid to work on that day, let it burn, and three people were killed.

Unfortunately, the day became more important than the persons it was designed to serve.

But, when Jesus came, he reversed the idea, reminding people that human life was more important than rules or regulations or days. And for this, they sought to take his life.

Of course, Christians, too, have been tempted to focus on regulations. Requirements about the observation of the Sabbath were eventually attached to Sunday so that early Christians might have a weekly reminder of Easter.

In 321 A.D., Constantine made Sunday an official day of rest for the Empire, and with that there began to develop an increasing series of rules to regulate that rest.

Subsequently, Sunday observance followed the pattern of the Jewish Sabbath before it. Strict laws were set up for its observance.

In England, in 1653, a law was passed saying that any person above the age of seven caught walking in the streets on Sunday could be whipped and fined.

In one of our American colonies a law said that a woman could not wear a red dress on Sunday.

A sea captain returned to his home in Massachusetts after many months at sea. His wife met him at the gate and he kissed her. But it was Sunday, and it was illegal to kiss one's wife on Sunday, so the captain was jailed.

Some of us know the blue laws which governed Sunday activities as we were growing up.

The enforced piety which made Sundays so long and dull was enough to turn any healthy child from religion.

Moreover, the implication was that being a Christian was equated with keeping the rules. It was this kind of legalism that Jesus was challenging in this passage.

Jesus is saying that human beings are more important than regulations. (Good thing. I can't imagine not kissing my wife every Sunday. As a matter-of-fact, I kissed her this morning – TWICE!)

He is saying that human life is more important than rules. And regrettably, the religious leaders had lost sight of this because, for them, religion was keeping the rules.

Then to sum it all up he proclaims, "The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

We often forget that, don't we?

I recently read something by the Rev. Kara. K. Root, who quotes God, himself, who articulates the reason he gave the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment.

You are going to keep disconnecting from me— the source of your life— and from each other, your sisters and brothers in this life.

Instead of wholeness, you will keep choosing brokenness; instead of life, you'll keep choosing death.

You can't help it.

You are going to keep thinking this is all about what you can earn or prove or buy or win, so you'll keep seeing each other as competition and threat and burden and obstruction.

That is the way of fear. The way of sin. The way of slavery and death.

But the reality is, you are free. The reality is, you already belong to me.

The reality is, I have all you need; I am all you need. I am a God of abundance and joy, and hope and rest, and peace and enough.

And so, because you are going to keep on forgetting this, here's my big suggestion to help you remember. Ready? Every single week, I want you to stop.

Just stop. For one whole day every seven or so, step off the ride. Stop measuring and comparing and worrying and working.

Stop judging and competing and producing and buying and trying to win.

Just stop. All of you. Rest. Shut it down. Come back to real life.

It's enough. You are enough. I am enough for you. I am your God. You are my people.

This whole world belongs to me, and I am not letting go. Remember that.

And I know that if you stop, if you rest like I rest, if you celebrate like I celebrate, if you wake up from your angry and hectic stupor and raise your head and see the world, this beautiful world; and if you look at each other truly, without the screen between you and the to-do list in front of you and the wariness within you; and if, instead of the noise of the pressing world and all its violent, vying agendas pounding in your ears, you listen to the silence, and the pause, and the air, and birds and children and heartbeat and tears and laughter and dreams and sighing ...

... you will remember.

You won't be able to help but remember. You'll breathe again. You'll come back into the kingdom of God, back to your home in me.

You'll see again that I am right here. That life is a gift. That instead of living chronically fearful and anxious, there is so much to be thankful for, and so much to delight in.

You'll care for each other and share with each other and be again my people, and I will be your God, because it's how I've made it all to be in the first place, and how it will all be again in the last.

This, she writes, is the reason for Sabbath.

But, the Sabbath is also for worship.

Difficult as it is for me to say it, not all worship takes place in a church, and not all that takes place in a church contributes to worship.

A young boy, coming reluctantly into the sanctuary of his church, noticed a plaque on the church wall. "What's that?" he asked his father.

"That was put up in memory of all the brave people who died in the service," said the father.

"Which service," asked the boy, "8:30 or 10 o'clock?"

The Sabbath principle is that when people get quiet, they begin to think seriously about God, about life, and about God's purpose for that life.

Wherever that takes place, it becomes worship.

Marcus Bach, in his book *The Power of Perception*, tells about a Sunday when his father defied his strongly conservative mother and cut church to take young Marcus fishing.

It was a glorious spring day, but Marcus' joy in it was marred by thoughts of a wrathful God – certainly disappointed in him for skipping church.

As they bicycled past the cemetery, with its awesome reminders of mortality, his pleasure in the outing seemed to ebb completely.

But then, out in the country, it came back again.

"A flash of secret wisdom told me I knew things," he writes, "that even my preacher uncle did not know. I knew them because I felt them on this beautiful spring morning.

"God liked fishing. Jesus liked fishermen. God liked this Sunday morning world ... God's world was life and freedom.



“God’s world was the open road and the farmyards and the young corn coming up in clean, cultivated fields. God’s world was the man-sized bike and the legs that made the wheels go round.

“God’s world was Dad and me and Lodi’s Mill. God’s world included people going to church or going fishing, just as long as they really loved the Lord.”

Later, as the boy stood by the pond, watching the green flakes of algae, the shimmering lily pads, the beds of watercress, the silent mill wheel, and the other fishermen standing around the bank, an old hymn started ringing in his mind:

*Come, Thou Almighty King, Help us thy name to sing, Help us to praise!  
Father all glorious, O’er all victorious Come, and reign over us....*

Oh, that those gathering in church could have a worship experience half so authentic!

Now, as meaningful as such a private worship experience may be, I need to point out, it is in worship with others that most of us find our faith encouraged, challenged, and disciplined.

Someone has pointed out that private worship is like singing an aria in the shower; family worship is like the same selection sung together around the piano; public worship is like singing that aria in a choir at a concert.

All enrich, all supplement, all are needed.

I am aware that the experience of worshiping together may not always be stimulating.

A preacher was visiting one of his shut-ins, an elderly lady, who was bemoaning the fact that she could not come to church to hear his sermons.

The preacher, trying to console her, said “Mrs. Jones, you aren’t missing anything.”

“Yes,” she replied, “that’s what everybody tells me.” OUCH!

Well, even if the sermon sometimes misses the mark, somehow the fellowship of like-minded persons can provide us with strength for the long haul, inward reinforcement, clearer vision of duty, and restored faith and courage.

And part of what happens when we come here – when we worship - is that we get out of the weeds of our own lives and look up.

We see what God is up to in this world. We notice the ones standing next to us, the ones who are carrying burdens we might help lighten.

We remember what the world is supposed to be like, what God wants for creation. We remember who God is, and who we are.

And then – I hope - we go out a little differently. A little lighter, maybe, with our burdens lifted by prayer. And a little clearer about what the rest of the week is for.

I read recently about a strange custom in the British Navy. If there is a disaster aboard ship, “the still” is blown.

The particular “still” is not a place where whiskey is made, but rather, a whistle which calls the crew to a moment of silence in a time of crisis.

When the still is blown, every person knows that it means “Prepare to do the wise thing.”

That moment of calm, it is said, has helped to avert many catastrophes and kept people from foolish actions.

The principle of the Sabbath is the blowing of the still. It is a reminder that God said, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

May we each find that place of stillness, of rest, of worship, and of praise.

And all God’s people said:

*Amen!*