

Sunday May 21  
Lesson 12: Keeping Sabbath  
Scripture: Matthew 12: 1-14

**Context:**

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “The Life of Faith.” In this third lesson of our third unit, “Sabbath,” we continue to focus on how God has created humans to rest and be replenished with the practice of sabbath. Today we will recover a scriptural understanding of keeping the Sabbath.

Our lesson today comes from the New Testament in the gospel of Matthew. The passage contains two different incidents where there are questions around the Sabbath. The chapter before stresses how there is already a tension in Jesus’ teaching and the understanding of the Pharisees. Before we divide teams though, it is important to remember how conversing about scripture in Jesus’ day was often celebrated as this helped the practicing adherents understand their beliefs better. In this case, the understanding of Sabbath is more than a conversation about a day of rest; it is also about the identity of those who come to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate Sabbath of the kingdom gives a new promise of life.

The initial incident comes as Jesus is traveling with his disciples and they begin plucking grains of wheat to consume. The presenting issue is whether taking these few heads of grain to satisfy personal hunger constitutes harvesting, one of the many forms of work prohibited on the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> Yet the greater question focuses around who has the authority to determine such a question.

An important note is how this conversation was not representative of all Pharisees. Much like Christianity has various sects who read scriptures differently like Protestants, the Pharisees and other Jewish sects also had various beliefs and interpretations of scripture. The Jewish Mishnah, a collection of received opinions published about 200 C.E. does not list “plucking” among the thirty-nine varieties of prohibited labor.<sup>3</sup> Thus, this little group might have been an extremist group, much like in churches where you may have extreme opinions even within a Sunday school class.

Jesus employs an allusion to a story of David and then escalates the situation to a conversation around the Temple. The priests still serve in the Temple on the Sabbath, and thus there is to be new understandings to the rules. And then Jesus stresses his own identity by asking for them to consider mercy and sacrifice and then pointing to himself as the Lord of the Sabbath.

The second incident parallels the first. Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath and specific individuals once again cry out of how a violation has occurred. Jesus pushes back. Would you condemn someone who sought to save a life, like a shepherd of a lamb? The tension mounts and this group of Pharisees seeks to destroy Jesus.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Application**

When I was in high school, I will never forget the focus we placed on studying the Puritans. For the first two years in history and literature, we dove into this early group who formed so much of even the culture we have today in the United States. One thing to continually strike me was their focus on the Sabbath. Like Jesus' opponents, they too strove for a day of "frozen activity" where all were focused on worship and nothing else, even certain types of reading or social interactions.<sup>4</sup> The passages today helped to swing the culture the other way a little bit as the Sabbath became a day of freedom and leisure.

Yet today, we have seen the pendulum swing to the other direction. For many, Sunday has become another weekday, a time to rush ahead for the following week. It is now commonplace for schools to have mandatory athletic practices, even in conservative Christian small towns. Or you find people who use Sunday as a catch-up day for errands as Saturdays are filled to the brim with other activities.

Yet the ideologue in me wonders if we could somehow find more of a balance to Sabbath in our modern-day culture, much like we find Jesus doing here in scripture. Although we cannot necessarily construe Sunday as "the Sabbath" for everyone, there is a communal and individual benefit to seeing this day as something special or set apart.<sup>5</sup> There is something to be said for a day where we have corporate worship and also intentionality when it comes to family activities or doing something we would not get to do during the week like a long walk or a fun activity with people we love or even visiting those in the nursing home or those who are homebound. You might still have one or two things you can only do to get ready for the week, and yet there is something to intentionally centering oneself before the Lord.

The reality for Christians in an increasingly secularized society is we must advocate for the ways in which we honor the Sabbath. No one else will do it for us and especially in a country founded on the separation of church and state, we are the ones who must maintain our practices and seek our ways of resting and worshipping the Lord. The beauty of this country is we do have the choice to make our priorities and the freedom to be where we want to be on Sundays, whether it is in a place of worship or somewhere else.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus helps us understand a few things about the Sabbath which should give us encouragement for today. We see firstly how he is the one over the Sabbath, not a small group of religious leaders or the leading government officials of the day. God is the one who has made time and space and God is the one who claims what should happen on that day.

Secondly, we hear how the Sabbath is ultimately about growing in the strength of the Lord. Whether it is being fed and nourished, or it is seeking to do good amidst a busy society, the Sabbath helps us to think about what God is doing in our life and the abundance of God's goodness. God replenishes us in worship and then in doing things like taking our family to the lake after church to fish and delight in God's creation.

I pray you find these ways to say no to the busyness of the world and to go back to the scripture where God tells us the Sabbath is to be a part of our life and our identity. As those who believe in the Almighty God who created all things and rested on the seventh day, may we too learn to reclaim the scriptural understanding of keeping the Sabbath. May we say yes to Jesus

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,

and yes to the Sabbath.

How can you actively reclaim the Sabbath in your community? What practices or rituals do you have for the Lord's Day? What witness can observing the Sabbath do for those in our communities? Why do you think Jesus wants us to keep the Sabbath? How have you seen the keeping the Sabbath heal an individual or yourself?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh  
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge  
PO Box 71  
Brantley, AL 36009