

## Sabbath-Rescue

Let's pray.

Alright, let me ask you a simple question:

**What got Jesus killed?**

*What was it that sparked the plot to kill Jesus?*

Because it emerges surprisingly early in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life – in Mark chapter 3 actually.

**So, what was it?**

And it's not a trick question, but it is **a surprising answer**.

Although Jesus encountered opposition and questions about virtually everything he said and did – right from the start – what pushed people **over the edge**, what catalyzed the religious leaders of Jesus' day to begin to **plot his death** – was nothing other than **his teaching about the Sabbath!**

Which is amazing! Not what we'd expect, I'm sure!

I'm sure if we went out on the street today and asked random folks – or even walked around the average church and asked most Christians – most of us would not say that Jesus got killed over his teaching about the Sabbath.

*But that's what Mark's gospel tells us.*

In **Mark 3:6**, on the heels of Jesus’ teaching about and actions on **the Sabbath**, we read these words, *“Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”*

Because of what he said about and did on the Sabbath!

So, let’s turn to the text right away together – **Mark 2:23-3:6**. And I’ll read it for us – from the NRSV (the New Revised Standard Version).

*One sabbath he [that is, Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”*

*And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.”*

*Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath; so the Son for Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”*

*Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come forward.”*

*Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent.*

*He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.”*

**They began to plot** with the Herodians how to kill Jesus!

It’s amazing.

And *begs the question* – **What is the BIG DEAL** about the SABBATH – and what Jesus did and said about it?

Because, obviously, if it triggered people to plot his death – it has to matter more than we think... And it does!

It matters so much. As many students of ancient and contemporary Judaism will tell us, “Two observances **above all** defined Jews and set them apart from the nations: circumcision and **the Sabbath**” (Edwards).

Last Sunday we talked about the three core practices of Jewish piety (charity, prayer and fasting) – which are all core, but not **distinct** to Judaism.

But with Sabbath (and circumcision) we venture into the realm of **Jewish distinctives**. And this is one of the reasons why the Sabbath meant **so much** to the religious leaders in Jesus’ day, and especially to the Pharisees.

First and foremost, the Sabbath was something instituted by God, right?

This is not some odd practice developed over the centuries by the Jews themselves. This was the **very command of God**. The Fourth Commandment, to be exact. **Exodus 20:8-11**. God said,

*“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor you male or female servants, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 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.”*

Which tells us that, not only is the Sabbath the very command of God, but it's rooted in God Himself, in the very order of creation, because God Himself rested on the seventh day (according to Genesis 2).

In truth, in Genesis, the Sabbath is the first thing **that God declares holy**.

Does that surprise you? The first thing, in the Bible, declared by God to be holy is not a place, or a person, but a **time – the seventh day**. The **Sabbath**.

And because of this, the Jews took the Sabbath command very seriously – and rightly so. It was God's command to them – a command that **set them apart** – and **reminded them** that they were God's people.

And over the years and centuries, the importance of the Sabbath only grew for the Jews. **Especially** when they were taken into captivity and found themselves **without a Temple**. Because it was there, in exile, displaced from their homeland and temple, the Sabbath became for them, what one Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, referred to as “**A temple in Time**”.

What a beautiful description – and gift!

They'd lost their Temple, but they still had the Sabbath – and like the Temple in Jerusalem they had built and loved, they could **find refuge** – in exile – within God's **Temple in Time** – within the safe harbour of **the Sabbath**.

Understandably then, over the years since, the Sabbath became one of **THE most central identity-markers** of Jewishness.

Which again helps us understand why the Sabbath mattered so much in Jesus’ day. As N.T. Wright explains,

“For a Jew in Jesus’ world, the sabbath had [a] mixture of social pressure and legal sanction, but it meant much more as well. It was a badge of Jewishness for people who’d been persecuted and killed simply for being Jewish. It was a national flag that spoke of freedom to come, of hope for the great Day of Rest when God would finally liberate Israel from pagan oppression. It looked back to the creation of the world, and to the Exodus from Egypt, and it marked out those who kept it as God’s special people, God’s faithful people, God’s hoping people. It was, after all, a commandment deeply embedded in the Jewish scriptures.” (Wright)

And because of this, over the years, Israel’s teachers had increasing and meticulously developed a vast collection of **Sabbath guidelines** and **Sabbath rules**, all with the intention of **guarding the Sabbath** – and to guard the Jews from breaking and dishonouring the Sabbath.

Right? The commandment says to “*Remember/Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy*” – and so Israel’s teachers labored hard to clarify what it meant to keep it holy – and specifically, what actions should be deemed to be “**work**” – which the commandment explicitly **prohibits**.

And so over the years, as many are aware, Israel’s teachers ultimately distilled, “**39 classes of work that profane the Sabbath**”, including those we might expect, such as plowing, hunting and butchering, and those we would not, such as tying or loosening knots, sewing more than one stitch, or writing more than one letter.

“The general rule of observance was not to begin a work that might extend over to the Sabbath, and not to do any work on the Sabbath that was not **absolutely necessary** – by ‘necessary’ meaning life endangering...”

I’m drawing from the work of Edwards here (though many have written on this). He continues...

“Such scrupulousness inevitably resulted in novel rulings. For example, it was forbidden to set a dislocated foot or hand on the Sabbath..., or to repair a fallen roof (though it might be temporarily propped up). The rabbis endeavoured to offer a rule, or at least a precedent, for every conceivable Sabbath question.

“The comprehensiveness of the tradition is revealed in **the following ruling**: if a building fell down on the Sabbath, enough rubble could be removed to discover if any victims were dead or alive. If alive, they could be rescued, but if dead, the corpses must be left until sunset [which is the end of the Sabbath].” (Edwards)

**It seems ridiculous**, but remember it grew out of a heart to “*honor the Sabbath day by keeping it holy*” – to do all that one could to not knowingly or unknowingly dishonor the Sabbath.

And it is into this rigorously Sabbath-honoring environment that Jesus disciple’s find themselves accused of transgression. They are “**caught**” **having plucked some** heads of grain as they walk through a field on the Sabbath day!

According to Sabbath rules, one was not to **reap, winnow, thresh** or **prepare** a meal – and in this simple act, the disciples are accused of doing **all four**... reaped, winnowed, threshed and prepared a meal!

As William Barclay, an expert on biblical context, **comments**, “This seems fantastic to us; but to the Jewish rabbis it was a matter of deadly sin... [even] life and death.”

Can you believe it? ***The nerve of Jesus and his disciples!***

You have to wonder how they learned of this? Are we to imagine a bit of *Pharisaical espionage* – hiding behind a tree, a bush or a sabbath-approved umbrella – watching and waiting in hopes of catching Jesus and his disciples playing *fast and loose* with the law? Or were they simply walking through the field with Jesus and his disciples? We don't know.

However it happened, upon witnessing or learning of the disciples' actions, the Pharisees said to Jesus, “*Look, why are they doing* what is *unlawful* on the Sabbath?”

To which Jesus responds, “*Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for anyone but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.*”

And with this, he said to them, “*The Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath; so the Son for Man is lord even of the Sabbath.*”

Whatever we make of this, we need to recognize that in this moment, with these words, the religious leaders of Jesus' day decided *that Jesus must die*.

Why? Because, as far as they were concerned, Jesus was turning the Sabbath – their **most sacred identity-marker**, the very thing that set them apart as God's holy people... **Jesus was turning the Sabbath on its head; if not throwing it out!**

As far as they were concerned, Jesus was **utterly at odds** with the system of faith that they **existed** to *protect, sustain and maintain*.

As crass as it may sound, the Pharisees regarded themselves, **with great pride**, as the **guardians** of the Sabbath – responsible, under God, to **protect** the Sabbath, to **keep** the Sabbath, to **restore** the Sabbath.

And let it be said, ***they were right about Jesus!***

He was utterly at odds with the system of faith that they existed to protect and maintain.

Because, according to Jesus, it was **they** who had completely turned the Sabbath on its head. What God had intended as a gift to ***liberate people***, they had turned into a religious weapon that ***oppressed and enslaved people***.

As Jesus says so simply – “*The Sabbath was made **for humanity**, and not humanity for the Sabbath.*”

Just as David and his companions were offered the Bread of the Presence in their moment of need, the Sabbath was and is ***God’s gift for our need***.

It’s not the thing that needs to be **guarded, protected and kept**, but the means ***by which God, in grace, wants and intends to guard and protect and keep US...***

Let me say that again: According to Jesus, the **SABBATH** is not something to be guarded, protected and kept, but **the means by which** God, in grace, wants and intends ***to guard and protect and keep US...***

It’s not a holy prohibition meant to **preserve God’s holiness**, but a holy gift meant to **preserve our humanity...**



Again, to quote Jesus, “*The Sabbath was made **FOR** humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath.*”

This is why God **commanded Sabbath** in the first place!

**Think back with me to the world of the Exodus:**

The Israelites lived under the oppressive reign of the Egyptians for **400 years**.

**400 years** of slavery.

**400 years** of making bricks for Egyptian building projects.

**400 years...**

Generation after generation born into this **never-ending cycle** of slave labor, harsh taskmasters, unending demands, relentless work, day after day... after day... after day... after day...

**7 days a week. 365 days a year. For 400 years...** No vacation time. No stat holidays. No Pro-D days. No maternity leave. No sick days. And definitely, **no weekends**. (the idea of a weekend has, literally, not yet been invented!)

**7 days a week. 365 days a year. For 400 years...**

Each and every night going to bed exhausted, utterly spent, knowing that tomorrow means more of the same, with no end in sight...

In their collective memory, they know stories of the God of their Fathers. Stories of a God who made the world and called it good. Stories of a God who made humanity in His image and blessed them. Who sought out Abram, chose Abram, called Abram to follow Him that through Abram, God would extend His blessing to the world...

**But the gods of the Egyptians were not like this.** They *used* and *abused* people – with no care for them except for what they could produce...

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, Yahweh, the God of their Fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, shows up on the scene, and **rescues them through** Moses – from Egypt and their slavery... And in gratitude and shock, they march out of Egypt, walk through the Red Sea that has parted before them, and saunter up the other side **into the wilderness... free.**

After 400 years of slavery, *they are **free at last.***

And let's not romanticize their new situation. They are now an incredible population of people, roaming the **barren wilderness**, following a God who is present to them through a Cloud by day and a Pillar of Fire at night. They're not yet in the land of milk and honey. Yes, they are out of Egypt, but they are now ***in the wild. In the wilderness.***

And so now, as they follow their Rescuing God through the wilderness, their days are **still filled with work** – to find food and water for themselves, their families and their cattle... Not a simple endeavor. [*You wonder how many of them felt that they had just traded in one source of anxiety for another...*]

And in this new place and season of life, Yahweh, their rescuing God, speaks this **unheard-of, unexpected command** to them,

**“Remember** the Sabbath day by keeping 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**, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor you male or female servants, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 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.”

**“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work!”**

Can you imagine how this commandment would have seemed to them in that moment – after all they have been through...?

***“What kind of God is this?” – they must have thought.***

Right? This commandment is **far more** than a commandment, isn’t it? **It’s a revelation!** It’s a revelation about the very nature and heart of God! The gospel – the good news – of God!

***This God***, Yahweh, the God who had rescued them from the enslaving power of Egypt – this God isn’t a God who **needs** their labor to sustain Him, nor is their only value **to Him** in what they produce for Him.

**No, this God** values them simply because He created them. He loves them – and in His love, He invites **them** to rest and experience **His provision...** to rest and experience the fruit ***of His Sovereign work – for them.***

***Oh, the grace of the Sabbath!***

The grace of ***being commanded to Sabbath!***

But even better, the grace of ***a God who commands Sabbath!***

Think about it – this is a God ***who commands the Israelites and us to receive a gift!*** ***A gift*** God ***wants*** to give us – again and again – **every week** – that He might continually **rescue and liberate** us from the powers that oppress and dehumanize us, that we would discover again and again that we are God’s people, not just cogs in a wheel, and that we would **find rest** – again and again – **in the sovereignty** of God’s all-sufficient provision and work. ***That we would KNOW*** – through

the rhythms of grace embedded into the fabric of our weeks – that the

God who saves is also the One who *sustains us*...

And not just us, but all... Through the gracious gift of the Sabbath...

*A gift that the devout in Jesus' day had **distorted** into something that, rather than being the means of God's continual rescue and restoration of His people, was something that only oppressed and enslaved them... wearied them all the more...*

*A day of restrictions and prohibitions – in honor of God (or so they said).*

**So what does Jesus do?**

***What does He do with the Sabbath?***

That's the question for us – and it's a question we need to ask!

Because somehow it feels like most of us have encountered and experienced the Sabbath in **one of two ways** – neither of which seem to come from Jesus. Both of which are more a reflection of **our take** on the Sabbath, rather than that of Jesus.

And in my 40-something years, I've seen a major swing from one response to another (at least in the environments I've been a part of)...

In many places the Sabbath is taught and practiced as just a **Christianized-version** of what the Pharisees believed and taught in Jesus' day – a day primarily of **restrictions and prohibitions** – in honor of God. Right? Some of us grew up in this...

No movies or tv (except maybe the Magical World of Disney), no sport games,  
no work (except yard work), no video games...

Or what as I described it as a kid: **No fun...**

I think I’ve mentioned before, there’s a popular hard apple cider these days  
called “**No Boats on Sunday!**” – as a reminder of a time and place when Christians  
frowned on driving boats on the Sabbath!

Or as my wife experienced in her youth at an Ontario summer camp. The  
Sabbath was the one day of the week that, no matter how ripping hot it was, no one  
was allowed to swim in the lake.

And at the stroke of midnight, the whole camp, led by the pastor, would rush  
into the water – **to celebrate that the Sabbath was over!** Right?! That’s what they did!

Clearly, this is not what Jesus intended! ***“The Sabbath was made for  
humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath!”***

And so, in response to this, many Christians have run the other way completely –  
embracing the conviction that **Jesus has rescued us from the Sabbath...** That  
the Sabbath is just a vestige of religious legalism – that Jesus ***came to put an end to.***  
Something to be left behind just like the ancient food laws.

From this perspective, the gospel frees us from the Sabbath.

But this is where we need to hear and take to heart what **Jesus** says in Mark 2:27-28 about the Sabbath. *Because, according to Jesus, **the Sabbath was made for** humanity. Which is to say, it was God’s gift to us. And, in Jesus, it still is!*

*Which should be no surprise to us – since the Law of God is not and has never been the enemy of the gospel!*

We talked about this at length last year. The 10 Commandments were not a new path to slavery for the Israelites, but **God’s gift to His people** – an invitation into the Liberating Ways of a Rescuing God... Ways that would **keep them free...**

So, let me say it again. **The Law of God – as revealed in the 10 Commandments – is not and has never been the enemy of the gospel!**

***But only by the gospel can it truly be fulfilled!***

And that is what Jesus came to do.... Not to **do away with the Sabbath**, but to *fulfill it, inviting and leading us into the beauty and gift of God’s original Sabbath vision and grace...*

**Rescuing us not from the Sabbath, but through the Sabbath** – and not the Sabbath according to the Pharisees, but *the Sabbath as God intended it...*

***A gift of grace** through which our Rescuing God seeks to continually rescue and restore us...*

*A gift of grace – that **in Jesus** becomes again a means of life for us – and for all...*

***A gift of grace that we all so desperately need, do we not?***

## So, what does it look like to embrace the grace of Sabbath?

Well, we could spend a lot of time on this, and it would be worth it, but for the sake of time, let me distill Sabbath-grace to **three things** – which will lead us back briefly to the final story in our text today.

So, first and foremost, Sabbath-grace invites us to **remember**...

And I think this is important to say right from the start – because of how often we can talk about or practice the Sabbath, knowingly or unknowingly, as a day to **forget**. A day to just **dial out**. To **disengage** from God and life as we know it and distract ourselves.

But that’s not God’s invitation in the Sabbath. Because that’s not what ultimately renews us. No, in the Sabbath, we are invited to **remember**... and at the heart of this, to **remember God** – to remember that our God is a God who commands Sabbath! To remember the grace of who God is, and all that He has done and is doing and will do...

Which is why Jews and Christians have almost **always** included gathering together as a part of the sabbath day... **to remember God together** and to let this remembering **re-member** us (in the sense of ‘put us back together from our dis-membered state’).

Second, Sabbath-grace invites us to **lay aside our work and rest...**

The Hebrew word Sabbath literally means to **cease**. To take a real pause from the work that so often dominates our lives and threatens to define us...

In a very real sense, the Sabbath-command is God’s way of saying,

*“Just stop!!! You don’t have to work non-stop.*

***I will take care of you...***

*I’m the one that runs the universe. **Not you.***

*So stop.*

*Stop taking yourself so seriously.*

*And stop letting others take you so seriously.*

*You are not at the center of the universe.*

***I am.***

*I am the One that holds all things together.*

*I’m the one that’s saving the world. **Not you.***

*So just stop for a day, and rest in trust that I am God...*

*Today, I, your Saving God, want you—no, I’m **commanding** you—to rest... to rest in the knowledge that I am Your Sustainer and Provider...”*

The Sabbath is a day for **ceasing** from our work and in its place **savoring** the gifts and grace of God’s Work...

And lastly, as the second story in our text today highlights, Sabbath-grace invites us to **share God’s grace and blessing with others...**

Similar to treating the Sabbath as a day of forgetting, it is amazing how often we talk about and practice the sabbath as **a day for ourselves**: as **my** day, or **my** day off, as



a day that is all about meeting **my** needs – almost as a God-given day for self-indulgence. And in a very real sense, God **does** command us to keep the Sabbath **for our own sake** (to restore us) – *but not to the neglect of others*.

We see this in the command itself – in both Exodus 20 and Deut 5. The command isn’t just for **US** to rest, but for our kids, and those that work for us, and our animals, and the foreigners in our towns. God’s vision and intention for the Sabbath is that it would be a day of Restoration **for all** – the **flourishing** of all – not just us.

Which is what we see Jesus revealing in the second text in our reading today. We find Jesus *honoring the Sabbath* as a day to extend God’s blessing and grace to all... to serve, to heal, to bless, and to restore others. The Sabbath wasn’t Jesus’ day to withdraw and ignore everyone else’s needs. No, the Sabbath was a day of celebrating God’s generosity by **sharing it with others**.

Inviting others into the grace of a restoring and rescuing God...

Which is exactly what we see **in Jesus**.

**Lord of the Sabbath!**

**What a grace that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath!**

*A Lord who restores the Sabbath – that through it – He might restore and renew us!*

Let’s pray.

Benediction -----

Heard in this way, why would we ever neglect or reject this gracious Gift of God?

*But we do, don't we? I know I did for a long time.*

My response was always some version of,

*“Oh God I want to... I'd LOVE to take a Sabbath, but I can't afford to? I've got too much to do. You obviously don't understand the demands I'm facing. Life's just not that simple that I could stop working for a whole day. People are depending on me for things. And even if I did do it, I'd end up so far behind it would just make my life harder – and that can't be what you want for me. It would make the rest of my week so incredibly exhausting and it already feels exhausting. It's not like I'd have less work to do. I'd just now have once less day to do it all in.”*

And I consoled myself with the conclusion (**which is true**) that, “It's ok. **God understands... God understands** the craziness of my life and responsibilities.”

Until it hit me. It is because God understands the craziness of our lives and responsibilities, and how our work so easily can crush and enslave us, **that God calls and commands us to practice the Sabbath.**

**It's because of His Wise-Love**, that He calls us to live with the liberating rhythm of the Sabbath.

It's a gift that **God knows** we need.  
That we **desperately** need.  
That we **all** need.

**What are you waiting for?**  
**For things to slow down?**

Let me break it to you: They don't.

**That's why God gives us the Sabbath.**