

Scripture: Mark 2:23-3:6

Message: Living By Grace

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(with thanks to Pastor Brian Bork, Campus Chaplain at the University of Waterloo, for ideas borrowed from his sermon on this passage.)

God's Grand Story is about God's relationship with his people. It's a relationship that was broken by disobedience. Throughout the story, God reveals his plan to restore the relationship, a plan fulfilled in Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus reveals elements of what that restoration looks like.

It impacts *with whom* we have fellowship, as Jesus eats with tax collectors and "sinners." It impacts *how often* we eat, as Jesus responds to a question about fasting with an emphasis on the joy and freedom of living daily in his presence. In today's reading, we have a story that looks at *when* to eat as Jesus is challenged about Sabbath observance.

"Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour 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 your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

From that one particular commandment has come a great number of various rules and interpretations. Of course there is the expectation to go to church. But what else a person is allowed to do or not varies. One family calls knitting work and so they won't allow it. Or going to a restaurant or buying groceries makes other people work, so for some people that's forbidden. For some, feeding cattle and milking cows is allowed, but not baling hay. Nurses, doctors, policemen and ministers may work on Sunday only because they do work of necessity. For one person mowing the lawn and weeding the garden is unnecessary work; for another it is a relaxing way to enjoy God's creation.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day also had many additions and interpretations to the stated law of God, tacking on all kinds of human traditions. But all of these many restrictions actually obscured the true meaning or intention of rest on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees had at least 39 “main tasks” that were prohibited on the Sabbath. They included reaping and threshing, which the disciples were doing by picking heads of grain and rubbing off the husks to eat the kernel. That was work and it was not allowed on the day of rest.

Jesus answered them with a story found in 1 Samuel 21. He reminded his listeners of the incident when David ate the consecrated bread. This was the “bread of the presence,” 12 loaves of bread displayed in two rows before the Lord in the temple. The 12 loaves represented the 12 tribes and symbolized the constant fellowship of the people with their God. It symbolized their dependence on God and dedication to him. Fresh loaves were placed out every Sabbath. The old loaves were still considered holy and reserved only for the priests to eat (according to Leviticus 24:5-9).

Along came hungry David with his hungry men. David had a right to ignore the divinely ordained ceremonial restriction when necessity demanded it. God’s anointed king had to maintain himself physically and that need came before the ceremonial law.

If David and his followers could break *God’s* law when necessity demanded it, could someone not set aside a *man-made* Sabbath regulation in a time of need?

Jesus implies the same principle in the healing of the man with a shriveled hand. The Pharisaic law said healing should only be done if the person’s life was in danger: a shriveled hand could wait a day.

Jesus challenges that with a question: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” The silence of his audience and his accusers was deafening.

Sabbath rest was intended to be a blessing to people, not a burden. Sabbath rest is an experience and an expression of God’s grace and provision for us. God did not intend the Sabbath to be a stressful day of legalistic do’s and don’ts for what is allowed or not. He calls us to a day of rest in his grace, a day to remember his goodness to us, a day to share that goodness with others.

Think of what people say when you ask them: “How’s it going?”

It’s a common question, that often gives a routine answer. How often do you hear people say, “Oh, I’m busy. Life is busy.” We’ve probably all said it.

Why is this the first thing that comes to mind? Are our schedules really so jam-packed that the best adjective we can come up with to describe ourselves is “busy”?

Or do we speak of our busyness so we can advertise something to the world? We're advertising our importance. Important folks are always busy. Always on to something. Always needed. We look good to others when we're busy. Besides, if we're not busy, doesn't that mean we're lazy?

We might also be busy because we're worried about what might happen if we're not. What if we don't do enough? What might happen if we slow down? We need to keep busy to stay ahead. We need to keep busy to take care of those around us. We have to work harder to hang on to our jobs. We have to pull those all nighters, so we can get the grades that'll help us find that career in the diminishing job pool.

So we become slaves to our busy schedules. Slaves to our phones that are always on. Slaves to our offices, our classrooms. We become slaves of ourselves. Slaves to our self-importance, and slaves to our anxieties.

Where does Sabbath fit in? We're too busy to take a whole day off. We can't be bothered to try to figure out all the rules of what's allowed on Sunday or not, so just forget the whole thing. Who needs a day of rest? I don't have time for that. I'm busy.

But the Sabbath that we learn about from Jesus is free of those self-determined expectations and legalistic restrictions. Instead, it comes with the commands like: take and eat. Be nourished and strengthened, like the disciples walking through the grainfield. It comes with commands like "be healed," like that man with the withered hand in the synagogue.

The Sabbath was made for the benefit of the people, not as a way to prove ourselves to God by following the right rules. On the Sabbath Jesus says: "be healed of your afflictions. Be healed of stress and anxiety and heart issues and other physical ailments because we go, go, go, and don't let our bodies rest. Be healed of the despair that says you'll never get it all accomplished." On the Sabbath, Jesus says: "hang back, I've got it covered. I've got it under control. Take a break. Rest." Of course, Jesus says that about every day of the week. But it's the Sabbath that allows us to cultivate the discipline of acknowledging this truth. It's our opportunity for us to actually live like it's the truth. To put things down in the knowledge that it will be ok, because things are out of our control.

For the Israelites, the Sabbath was the marker that God burst in, disrupted their lives of slavery, and freed them for fellowship with him.

For the Pharisees, the Sabbath was the opportunity for Jesus to burst in, and disrupt

their works righteousness. To disrupt the litany of obligations that the Sabbath had become.

For us, Sabbath rest is still a disruption. Every week God breaks in with his grace, freeing us from our busy schedules, from our self-importance, from our anxieties. The Sabbath is a weekly in-breaking, a tantalizing taste of grace: free of stress, free from anxiety, free from work without rest.

God's Grand Story is not a story of having to do more, or do things just right, in order to be a child of God. It's living in the freedom of God's grace, knowing the healing power of resting in his care.

This morning we hear the Lord inviting us to his table, to fellowship with him, to enjoy a taste of a heavenly meal in the bread and cup. Welcome to the table. It's not about how good you are or how busy you are, or how you have made yourself worthy. God, in his grace, welcomes you to eat and drink, to be reminded that Jesus paid for your sins and gives you life. Rest in his grace. Come and celebrate that Jesus gives you life. Come and be nourished in your trust in Jesus, affirmed in your faith in him. Be affirmed that you are part of the family of God and God's Spirit lives in you.

Listen to these words of Jesus: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*).

Amen.