

Time For God

Luke 13:10-17

August 1, 2020

I.

We just heard how Jesus enabled a bent and crippled woman stand up straight. This could lead into a sermon about how Jesus can help us all stand up straight in our faith, so to speak, as we encounter the distractions and temptations of the world.

But there also is something else in this reading. Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath. And the leader of the synagogue where this happened said healing was "work," and was prohibited on the Sabbath. He said there were six days during the week on which she could have been healed, and Jesus should not have healed her on the Sabbath day.

Jesus, however, replied that the rules of the Sabbath did not prevent him from doing good things and helping other people. And this is just one of six examples in the Gospels where Jesus was criticized for doing work on the Sabbath (Lk. 6:1-5, 6:6-1, 14:1-6, Jn. 5:9, 9:14).

Doesn't this raise some questions about the Sabbath today? How do we understand it? Jesus did not accept the Jewish view of the Sabbath if it would prevent him from helping others. But it also seems that modern culture has an even more relaxed attitude toward this sacred day of rest.

Let's examine the origins of the Sabbath. We go back to creation, and the Bible tells us, "On the seventh day God finished the work he had done, and he rested. [And] God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work he had done." (Gen. 2:2-3).

Then we look at the fourth of the Ten Commandments. It says, "Remember the Sabbath day, and 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; you shall not do any work (Ex. 20:8-10).

What about this? Does it make us uneasy? Many of us just substitute one type of work for another on Sundays. We paint the living room, or mow the yard, or fix the house. Kids play soccer or baseball. Some of us go into the office, or work at home to get ready for Monday.

So, what does the Sabbath really mean for us? Is going to church enough? Must it be on Sunday? What about people who have jobs on Sunday morning? What is our obligation as Christians?

II.

Before I go any further with this sermon I'm going to give away the ending. In this way we can work backwards and hopefully understand why the ending comes out as it does.

During Old Testament times the Sabbath was the seventh day of the week, which is Saturday. Before Christ's birth, and during his life, the Sabbath applied only to Jews. Jesus and his disciples, who all were Jews, recognized the seventh day as the Sabbath.

But things changed after Jesus' death and resurrection. His followers, supported by the authority of the newly emerging Christian church, launched a tradition of worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, which we know occurred on Sunday.

And so the Christian tradition of Sunday Sabbath was born. But the Saturday Sabbath God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai also continued for the Jews. And nowhere in Scripture has that Sabbath been changed from Saturday to Sunday. We observe the Christian Lord's Day on Sunday rather than the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, and both days to exist together as traditions of two faiths.

As a result, our Christian “day of rest,” our Sabbath, is not simply the Jewish Sabbath observed one day later, but rather arises from early Christian practices that likely incorporated the principles of the fourth commandment as a model or standard to be followed in a Christian context.

Some theologians explain this by saying that Jesus Christ fulfilled, and therefore replaced, all Jewish law. They rely on St. Paul’s explanation in Galatians (3:23-26) when he said, “Now before faith came, we were confined under the law [but now] that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (cf Rom. 3:28).

This same idea was expressed in 2 Corinthians when Paul said that we are not governed by stone tablets, but by God’s Spirit writing on the tablets of our hearts (3:3).

And these theologians also point out that Jesus gave us two Great Commandments as a summary of all the law (Mt. 22:40). We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:37). They say these two new commandments encompass the Ten Commandments, and we observe all of the old commandments in the context of the new.

But, what about the creation story? Other theologians say the Sabbath came from creation, and merely was restated as part of the Ten Commandments for the Jews. They say God created the Sabbath for all humanity on the seventh day, after he created everything else during the first six days, and thus the Sabbath, like the rest of creation, is enduring and universal.

If that’s true; if the Sabbath exists because God rested on the seventh day as an instruction to all of humanity, do we have to rethink our own tradition? Even though Jesus Christ fulfilled Jewish law, it is an entirely different matter to say that he replaced God’s creation. Sin had not yet even entered the world on that first seventh day.

But perhaps we should understand that God rested on the last day of a seven day cycle, and the cycle can start for us on any day. Specific days of the week were not named in creation.

In any event, we see that scholars, churches, and theologians are not unanimous about the Sabbath. And since we as Christians are called to believe that our salvation is in Jesus Christ, it also would follow that we are called to look to his teachings, and to the church he left behind, for answers to our questions.

III.

And in doing that we address the Ten Commandments. We know that during Old Testament times those commandments, as the Word of God, applied only to the people of Israel. They were intended by God to preserve Jewish identity and distinguish the nation of Israel from others. They made the point in the larger pagan and Gentile society that Jews were unique and separate.

That does not mean, however, that because we are not Jews we are off the hook. The New Testament clearly reaffirms nine of the ten commandments for all of humanity. But the fourth commandment about the Sabbath seems to be treated differently.

For example, Jesus acknowledged commandments on adultery, murder, stealing, false testimony, and honoring father and mother in the story of the rich young man (Lk. 18:20). Taking the Lord’s name in vain is prohibited in the Sermon on the Mount (5:34-35). In Romans, the commandments on adultery, murder, stealing and coveting are inherent in the obligation to love our neighbor (13:9). Idolatry is proscribed in 1 Corinthians (10:14).

The New Testament, however, does not apply the Jewish Sabbath to Christians. New Testament references to the Sabbath are in the context of traditional Jewish observances and customs (i.e., Mt. 24:20, Lk. 4:16, Lk 23:56, Acts 13:14), not as Christian requirements for the future.

This idea is supported, for example, by the Articles of Religion in the Book of Common Prayer. While we no longer use them in liturgy, they were adopted by the Episcopal Church in 1801 from similar Articles used in the Church of England since 1571. They have not been repealed, and an attempt in 1928 to remove them from the Prayer Book failed. This is history; not modern theology.

And Article VII explains how the Old Testament still applies to us. It says, "Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites do not bind [Christians, yet no one] is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral."

This would mean that ritual parts of the Old Testament no longer apply, but moral parts still do. And according to Paul the Jewish Sabbath is ritual. He said, "Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the reality belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

IV.

But like other parts of the debate, this analysis is not universally accepted. Some say Paul was referring to ceremonial Sabbaths on Jewish feast days rather than the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. There simply are many different views. And as Episcopalians we can look to the history and tradition of our church, as well as to our Catechism, for guidance.

The early Christian church emerged shortly after the crucifixion, and the first day of the week, Sunday, rather than the seventh day, Saturday, became the day of worship. This was described by Luke as "the first day of the week, when we met to break bread" (Acts 20:7). And it was based on celebrating Jesus' resurrection, which occurred on the first day (Mt. 28:1, Mk 16:2, 9).

Then in 321 AD, Emperor Constantine formally declared Sunday as the day of rest for the Christian Roman Empire. This was not intended to place the Emperor above God, but rather to make official what already had been practiced among Christians for almost three centuries.

As a result the Christian Lord's Day has replaced the Jewish Sabbath day for us. And the Catechism of the Episcopal Church, at page 847 of the Book of Common Prayer, offers guidance on how our Lord's Day reflects the fourth commandment. It says that we "are to set aside regular times for worship, prayer, and the study of God's ways."

Traditionally we do this on Sunday, and that tradition has become the standard for Christian practice. But those who cannot attend worship on Sunday are encouraged to do so on a different day. That's why many churches have services in the middle of the week, or on Saturday evening.

But our Sabbath obligation goes beyond just attending church, and includes individual worship and prayer in private time with God. Study means reading the Bible during the week as well as hearing it read on Sunday. And we also should remember that our work in the world, and the examples we set, can be ways to witness and proclaim God's sovereignty in our lives.

V.

So the importance of the Lord's Day is not only as one day on the calendar, but also as a way of life every day. And we are called to observe this Christian practice in truth and spirit, not just when convenient. God is watching. God knows our hearts and if we are sincere in our efforts to take the time to honor him, and to give him first priority in our lives.

I pray that we seriously follow the Catechism and set aside regular times for worship, prayer, and study. Hopefully worship will be Sunday, but if not then it should be at other regular times. And we have many opportunities to pray and study Scripture. God has shown his love for us by giving us life and salvation. And since love works both ways, he awaits and anticipates our commitment to honor him in Jesus Christ through our Sabbath practice. *Amen.*