

The Bigger Picture

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Mark 2: 23-3:6

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Mark 2: 23-3:6

One sabbath he 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 not lawful 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 it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of 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 who had 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.

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What good is a hand once capable and strong now shriveled and gnarled, a hand with muscles and tendons atrophied from lack of use, a hand with thick fingers now bent and bony no longer used for work, for lifting, for creativity, for service, for bringing an offering to God, for taking care of the rest of the body, for affectionate touching? In a culture dependent on manual labor, and a religion whose rules prohibit the impurity of the lame from temple worship, a withered hand is of absolutely no use, no value, no purpose, to anyone, unless that someone is Jesus Christ inviting the man to stretch out his hand and be healed.

We can imagine this unnamed man being confused and startled by the request, as he cannot just simply stretch out his hand. Yet, this healer, prophet, and teacher, has gently encouraged him to do so. But this is also in front of the Pharisees of the synagogue, the leaders who demand and enforce the strict observance of both the traditional and written laws. And it is the Sabbath: the holy day of worship and rest, the day the Lord commanded no work to be done by anyone, even by any livestock, a day to remember freedom from Egyptian slavery, a day to

remember that God's good creation was not complete until the Holy One had the opportunity to rejoice and rest in it.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.ⁱ

Now Jesus asks the man to stretch out his withered hand on the Sabbath day. And incredibly, he does. What was withered and useless is transformed to health. What was useless, weak and crippled is useful, strong and whole. His hand is healed, his life is restored. The man is stunned, and overjoyed by this dream come true, by the impossible suddenly more than possible.

And for this, in the midst of the synagogue on the Sabbath, the Pharisees are furious enough to begin to plan to kill Jesus. How can Jesus, a Jew himself, not know and follow the rules of the Sabbath? He is betraying the Lord, Moses, and the rabbinical teachings in the Talmud that includes twenty-four chapters on Sabbath regulations, rules upon rules of what you can and cannot do on the Sabbath.ⁱⁱ Jesus is a danger, a threat.

And this was not his first Sabbath offense. They have also seen him permit his hungry followers to pluck heads of grain as they walked through the grainfields on a Sabbath. On the holy day of rest, he allowed them to do the work of the harvest, even if it were only a few small heads of barley or wheat. Surely he must know that food must be prepared before the Sabbath.

Now he has healed a man's withered hand in clear violation of the Sabbath regulation that only permits the treating of life-threatening injuries. Certainly this man's hand could have waited one more day.

In their passion and their zeal, the Pharisees had elevated the man-made laws to the word of the Lord that Moses had first spoken at Mt. Sinaiⁱⁱⁱ and then on the edge of the Promised Land.^{iv} For 1500 years the rabbis guarded the Sabbath by adding extensive prohibitions. Yet in doing so they suffocated the people, weighing them down with an impossible burden to carry.

Jesus came to make life easier for God's people by fulfilling those old laws so that they no longer proved a burden to the people of God. We are no longer under the law but under grace.

He challenged their hard-hearted fault-finding and infuriated them even more as he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."^v

Jesus is saying that he made the Sabbath and that he's in charge of it. He's claiming to be the Creator, to be God. This is blasphemy to the Pharisees, which further pushes them to pursue the death penalty. The Pharisees believed that the Sabbath belonged to them. They have been working out its rules for centuries.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see that the true meaning and holiness of Sabbath was buried beneath complicated human and legalistic interpretation of the laws of rest, purity and sacredness. What had begun as well-meaning and sincere devotion desiring to obey God's laws and help others to do as well, became a preoccupation with the fine points of the law that obscured the main point. The true meaning and grace of Sabbath withered under the regulations. Fear and worry about the wrong actions weakened relationships with God. Laws and rules are important for society, for safety. God's laws are to remind us what love looks like, acts like. But the rules by themselves won't give our lives purpose and love. The purpose of the sabbath is to remember that God gives life. And that we are to honor that life with actions that are also life-giving. Jesus is returning to the original purpose of the Sabbath law: to promote life, to promote healing, to remove those circumstances that do harm or evil. That is the bigger picture that Jesus saw and taught.

In our own time, how can we see that same bigger picture in our own society, in our own ways of letting go of rules and laws that burden instead of giving life, that bring Sabbath rest and grace to others?

For those who are food insecure, who do as they can to pick pieces of grain to feed their hunger, could we do as France has done since 2016? The large grocery stores have been banned from throwing away unsold food that could be donated to charities. Instead, they must have systems in place to donate this food to organizations that help feed the poor.^{vi} Or could we do as Hands for Hunger in The Bahamas does by collecting excess perishable and prepared foods from hospitality industry businesses, farms, and individuals, for soup kitchens, youth programs, rehabilitation centers, and shelters.^{vii}

For those whose bodies and minds are withered, could we follow the Dutch model of a dementia village, converting abandoned malls into apartments and buildings as a “self-contained” world of restaurants, cafes, a supermarket, gardens, a pedestrian boulevard, and other features?

For those whose safety and hopes in their homeland have withered, might we follow Sweden which prioritizes humanitarian values to provides support for refugees that includes language courses and integration programs?^{viii}

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

May this day bring Sabbath rest and grace to our hearts and our homes, Amen.

ⁱ Deut 5:15

ⁱⁱ John Sybert ~ <https://prestonhighlands.org/2019/03/24/the-lord-of-the-sabbath/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ex 20: 8-11

^{iv} Deut 5: 12-15

^v Mark 2: 27-28

^{vi} <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/is-frances-groundbreaking-food-waste-law-working>

^{vii} <https://foodtank.com/news/2020/12/organizations-diverting-food-waste-to-provide-meals-for-people-in-need/>

^{viii} <https://www.stilt.com/immigrants/best-countries-for-immigrants/>