

The Sabbath

As I read and as I study through these scriptures each day, I must confess to you that, for me, it is not always an easy task to clearly know the responses that God would desire for me to have to some of His instructions, His laws and His commandments.

And as we have observed the responses of the organized Christian church over these past many centuries, it seems that they also have had that same uncertainty even among the most earnest of believers.

In last week's message, we read and studied about the confused responses that the people had to the sacrament of fasting. And now, this week, we will examine the responses that the people had to God's instructions about how they should regard this special day, the Sabbath, and especially, the explanation that Jesus gave to them about it.

Turn with me and let's read those words. This is from Luke chapter 6, beginning in verse 1.

¹Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that He went through the grainfields. And His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate *them*, rubbing *them* in *their* hands. ²And some of the Pharisees said to them, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?"

³But Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?" ⁵And He said to them, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath."

⁶Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. ⁷So the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. ⁸But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?" ¹⁰And when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. ¹¹But they

were filled with rage and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:1-11)

The Sabbath was one of the first established observances that God put into place within His newly created world. And although, in those first moments in time, God did not give specific instructions regarding what man was to do on this special day, He did leave us with some strong indications as to how we are to respond to it. Listen to those words in Genesis chapter 2 just after God had finished all the matters of creation during the first six days. There, we're told,

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished.
² And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Genesis 2:1-3)

Here, though the word Sabbath is not used, it is being set into place. Later, when God gave the Laws and the Commandments to Moses, the Sabbath was then clearly established as an observance that God's people should follow. We are told in Exodus 20, in the third of the Ten Commandments to,

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:8-11)

The word "Sabbath" comes from the Hebrew word "Shabbat" and simply means "to rest". But because the word is so tied to being the seventh day of the week, people often think that it means "the seventh day".

The Jews have traditionally observed the Sabbath on Saturday, actually beginning at sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday. And as we know, we in the Christian Church observe the Sabbath on Sunday. Our celebration of the Sabbath on Sunday is said to be because Sunday is the day on which Jesus arose from the dead, and also that it was Sunday that the Holy Spirit was given to the Apostles.

Over time, from when those first observances of the Sabbath day were given, God expanded the meaning of the Sabbath. Not only are his people to

observe a “rest” on one day in seven, God also said that we are to observe that “rest” both for ourselves and for the “land” every seventh year. And then also, a “grand celebration” should be held at the end of seven times seven years, called the “Jubilee”. In that year, indentured servants would be freed from their obligations. And also, all the possessions of a person that had been sold, or mortgaged, or in some way “lost” along the way would be returned to their original owners. A “Grand Jubilee”!

Over the many years since those laws and commandments regarding the “Sabbath” were given, men have defined and redefined many times over exactly what God intended with those laws and commands. And sadly, in many ways, the real meaning and the observance of God’s intention for the Sabbath has gotten lost from our minds and from our behaviors.

But with that being said, both for the Jews and for the Christians, there does still remain at least some observance of the day of “rest”. The more faithful and orthodox Jews of today, especially the Hasidic Jews, make some valiant attempts to observe the “Shabbat”, incorporating many man-made rules into their observance of the Sabbath, including abstaining from 39 specific activities that are prohibited on the Sabbath Day, rules that we modern Americans might consider to be somewhat foolish. But though I myself do not understand their need to abstain from those 39 prohibited activities, I do understand their hearts desire to honor God.

We in the Christian Church really do very little to observe the Sabbath. Yes, we try to always go and worship at our church on Sunday, but other than that, we don’t do much.

Our Christian theologians have debated for centuries about the proper ways to observe the Sabbath. But they have not been able to develop a standard of observance that is suitable to all of the many denominations. And so then, and sadly so, each denominational group seems to simply do those things that are convenient to each of them.

In our modern age in this secular American culture, Sunday is much like any other day. With the exception of organizations such as Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby, most all of our stores, our restaurants, and even many of our industrial plants operate seven days a week, no “rest” days are worked into the schedule. Thankfully, our governmental instituted employment laws do prescribe time off for the workers to rest their weary souls, but those laws have little or nothing to do with God’s plan for His beloved creatures.

As we read about the objections the religious leaders of Jesus's day had to the things that Jesus and His disciples were doing, we marvel at the way those men were able to take the loving, caring and worshipful truths of God and remake them into something that made little or no sense at all.

Here in their arguments with Jesus concerning the observance of the Sabbath, we find that those Scribes and Pharisees had once again reduced God's simple and blessed truth down to very little more than an empty ritual, drained of all of its Spirit and then filled back up with useless, senseless and spiritless activities that dwelt more on the things that a person should not do than those things that they should do.

But while it is a curious thing to us as we look back at those learned men making their foolish interpretations, we must also not allow our skepticism to take us too far.

God's word has the power to accomplish many different purposes at the same time, one of which is to also warn you and me in our day and in our own circumstances that we too can drift off course in our personal understanding of the truths of God. . . . And perhaps we might have already drifted off course and just don't know it.

What is your understanding, what is my understanding about such matters as these? How should we observe the Sabbath? And in actual practice, how do we conduct ourselves and our behaviors on the Sabbath day? Are you, am I keeping God's intended purposes for this very special day? Do we keep this day holy, or does its value lie simply in the fact that it is a day off work?

Is the manner in which we observe the Sabbath properly dedicated to the Lord, or is our Sabbath dedicated to fun and family activity? Is fun and family activity the proper thing to do on the Sabbath?

Recently, as I was studying about God's intent for us, His children, regarding the Sabbath, I rediscovered some scriptures in the Book of Hebrews that I have studied on other occasions, but now have given me a new and better understanding about God's intention for this blessed day.

There, especially in Hebrews chapter 3 and chapter 4, God has focused our attention on the simple meaning of the "Sabbath", calling it, His "Rest". And equating the "Promised Land" to a kind of "Sabbath Rest". He tells us in chapter 3 of Hebrews, why the children of Israel were not able to enter into His "Rest". It was because of "unbelief", a severe lack of "faith".

Listen to these words, as God speaks about His beloved Children of Israel! Verse 15 of Hebrews chapter 3,

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter (His Rest) because of unbelief. (Hebrews 3:15-19)

Here, God is promising that just out ahead of His beloved children is a place and a condition of life where there is “Rest”, a kind of “Sabbath”, a “Rest” not only for their tired bodies, but “Rest” for their weary souls. But in order to enter into His “Rest”, there would be a requirement, only one, but it was of absolute necessity, else they could not enter in. That one requirement was “belief”, “faith”.

And then, in chapter 4 of Hebrews, God tells us that the requirement is the same for us, for you and me. Listen!

¹ Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it.

² For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. (Hebrews 4:1-2)

In these words, here in the Book of Hebrews, God is telling us that His meaning of the words “Sabbath Rest” is different from what we too often make of it. His intention for His “Sabbath Rest” is not limited to a list of “do’s and don’ts” that we should observe on Sundays, but rather His “Sabbath Rest” is a “state of being” that we enter into as we step on forward in our salvation and truly enjoy the intimate loving relationship that He wants us to have with Him.

Listen to these words as God tells us how we are to “step on forward” into the loving relationship He wants us to have with the Lord Jesus. Verse 6 of Hebrews chapter 4,

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter His Rest, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. (Hebrews 4: 6-11)

Here, God is telling you and me that there truly is a "condition of rest" that is available to us. It is a "condition of life" that is beyond anything we could ever imagine, and it is available to you and to me here and now "today". Listen again to these words in verse 7 of Hebrews 4.

⁷ . . . he (God) appoints a certain day, (calling it) "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts."

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. (Hebrews 4:7-10)

In these words, God tells us that just by Joshua and the children of Israel crossing over the Jordan into the Promised Land, the "Sabbath Rest" for all His people was not fully accomplished. It would take "another day" spoken about in verses 8 and 9. Listen!

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. (Hebrews 4:8-10)

In these words, the "another day", "Today" is speaking about the Lord Jesus, and that the Lord Jesus, through His death and resurrection, has provided for us the true and final "Sabbath Rest". And that "Rest" begins now, in our living years, and it will continue to be ours right on into our days of eternity with Him in heaven. Jesus calls to us,

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

And His “Rest” is a true “Rest”, the kind of “Rest” that will overcome all the anxieties, the fears, the troubled hearts, and even the wearied bodies, that this world puts upon us. Jesus will make sure of that because He is “the Lord of the Sabbath”. And all that you and I have to do is to join with Him in our efforts to “enter into His rest”. Listen again!

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:11)

Folks, our “striving to enter into His Rest” is an example of what God calls, “working out our salvation”. Listen, this is in Philippians 2!

¹² Therefore, my beloved . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

God wants you and me to enter into His Sabbath Rest. And if we will do our part in “working out” this salvation that He has “worked into” our souls, we will find “Rest” like we have never experienced before. And again, we don’t have to wait until we get to Heaven to enjoy that “Rest”. It begins now, in our living years.

So then, back to the questions about the “do’s and the don’ts” that we think we have to observe on this special day, the “Sabbath”? Were the Scribes and the Pharisees correct in establishing their many requirements? Are the Jews of today correct in having 39 prohibited activities that they must not do on the Sabbath? Were the Westminster theologians correct in the guidance that they gave to us in the “Westminster Confession of Faith”?

Perhaps all of those efforts have at least some value, some more than others. But God has given us other, more specific, instruction right here in the words that we read a few moments ago. Here, right after telling us to “make every effort to enter into His rest, God tells us how to find out what He really wants for us in His “Sabbath Rest”. Listen again!

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:6-13)

Here, God is telling us simply and plainly that most all that we really need to know about how to enter into His "Rest" is to be found within these blessed scriptures. That as we dedicate ourselves to the reading of these scriptures, and especially dedicate ourselves to doing a lot of "meditating" on their truths, then God will open up our minds and our hearts to all that we should do on the "Sabbath Day", and on every day, as we live out His "Rest" within us.

May I say that again? Folks, you and I who have Christ as our Savior and Lord are literally living within the "Sabbath Rest" of God every moment of every day. Yes, the "Sabbath" is a special day, one in seven, but in reality, the "Sabbath Rest of God" is every day, and every minute of every day. And Praise be to God for that indescribable free gift to us!

Listen again to these words as He calls to us,

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Pray with me!