

## ***“You Deserve a Break Today”***

*Matthew 12:1-21*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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We live in a busy world. Everything today moves at very rapidly and everyone's in a hurry. One of the reasons is because we live in a global economy and so to be competitive we must maximize our productivity. And that becomes a lifestyle for many of us. It doesn't matter what we're doing, we want to do the most in the least amount of time.

We also live in a very technologically driven world, which helps us to maximize our time. We can now communicate with just about anyone in the world instantly. We have become accustomed to getting what we want when we want it. When I used to work in the printing industry, it normally took ten days to get something printed. If you wanted to pay a rush charge, we could get it done in three to five days. Did you know that now you can place a printing order through the internet, they will print it the same day and have it delivered by the next day?

Amidst all of our hurrying, though, I think we have lost something. We have lost the idea that it's important to rest. We've come to think of rest as wasted time. The truth is, however, that God has designed us to *need* rest. For example, sleep deprivation - not getting enough sleep over a period of time - can have serious effects, such as muscle aches, decreased brain function, depression, hallucinations, even increased stress and an increased risk of diabetes. Rest is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. It's also commanded by God.

At the end of chapter 11 Jesus offers rest to those who are weary and heavy laden and now in chapter 12 Matthew tells us what that rest looks like, and what it doesn't look like. In Exodus 20 we read about God giving Moses the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment He gives is this: “Remember the Sabbath day, to 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. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

But that's not when God instituted the Sabbath. He is merely reminding them to observe it. We find the Sabbath instituted by God near the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 1 and 2 is the story of God creating. Then in Genesis 2 we read, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

Sabbath literally means to cease or to rest. It involves stopping what you normally do, to rest from your work, just as God did. In Jesus' day, this command was taken very seriously, especially by the Pharisees, who were most interested in religious purity. They were right to take Sabbath observance seriously because God takes it seriously. For instance, through the prophet Jeremiah God had warned the people that if they continued to work on the Sabbath, carrying their burdens through the gates of Jerusalem, that He would “kindle a fire in it's gates,” and consume the city. That's what happened when they were conquered by the Babylonians and carried off into exile. 2 Chronicles explains that they were taken into exile because they didn't keep the Sabbath.

So the Pharisees were determined that everyone would keep the Sabbath. But the Old Testament doesn't give a lot of details on *how* they are to keep it. So they came up with rules to make sure. For example, the law prohibited travel on the Sabbath. But it doesn't say what constitutes traveling. So they came up with the concept of a "Sabbath day's journey," which was the farthest anyone was permitted to walk, approximately a thousand yards. Any farther was a sin. "However, if a rope was tied across the end of a street, the whole street technically became one dwelling place. So a person would be permitted to walk a thousand yards beyond the rope.

The law also prohibited doing work on the Sabbath. But how is work defined? Well, if a man spit on the ground and it makes an indentation in the dirt, it was considered plowing, which was work. They had rules about writing. More than three words was considered work. You can still find similar thinking in Israel today. For example, it's considered "work" on the Sabbath to press the buttons on an elevator, so they have controls that make elevators stop on every floor automatically on Saturdays. The Pharisees eventually came up with 39 categories of work that was prohibited on the Sabbath.

That's where we find their disagreement with Jesus and his disciples in today's reading. Matthew tells us that they were walking through the grainfields on the Sabbath and that his disciples were hungry, so they began to pluck heads of grain, rub them in their hands to break off the husk and then eat them. Apparently there were some Pharisees who were walking along with them and they became very upset.

They weren't upset about the disciples plucking the grain, as if they were stealing. In fact, Jewish law required the farmers not to harvest all the way to the edge of the field but to leave some for travelers and the poor to

pick and eat. What the Pharisees are upset about is that they did this on the Sabbath.

Notice that Jesus doesn't respond by arguing about their narrow interpretation about work. Instead he goes to the larger issue by pointing them to two different passages from the Scriptures. First, he points them to the story of David. Samuel had anointed David as king of Israel but Saul was angry and wanted to kill David. So David and his men had fled. They arrived in the city of Nob without anything to eat so they went to the synagogue. But the only thing Ahimelech the priest had to offer was the twelve loaves of bread which were placed in the tabernacle, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. When the bread was replaced each week the priests were permitted to eat it. Jesus is pointing out that David's need superceded the normal religious rules.

The second example Jesus uses is of the priests in the Temple who work especially hard every Sabbath. His point is that their service in the Temple is more important than their keeping of the Sabbath rules. However, in both cases Jesus goes on to point out that He is more important than either David, the Temple, or the Sabbath. The Pharisees certainly didn't miss this and it's why they went out trying to find a way to get rid of Jesus.

As we have found throughout Matthew, Jesus follows up his words with actions. We're told that he goes into the synagogue, with the Pharisees still following, and there's a man with a "withered hand." Immediately the Pharisees try to trap Jesus by asking if it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Again Jesus outsmarts them. He points out that any one of them would rescue their sheep from a pit on the Sabbath and that people are more important than sheep.

So what about us? What does Sabbath rest mean to us today? We've seen that it's not about keeping up with a strict set of rules. The Pharisees imposed that on people, but

instead of being the blessing of rest it was a burden on the people. Even in recent history people have imposed rules to force people to observe the Sabbath. Many of us remember when it was against the law for most stores to be open for business on Sundays. But that missed the point of the Sabbath. Tim Keller writes that “the whole point of the Sabbath is joy in what God has done.” The Sabbath is not about rules, it’s about freedom.

In Deuteronomy 5, God ties the Sabbath to freedom from slavery. The people are to take a day off from work each week as a way of remembering that they are no longer forced to work. Keller says, “Anyone who overworks is really a slave. Sabbath is a declaration of freedom.” So how do we exercise that freedom in our modern, fast-paced world? Here are a few suggestions:

First, do everything you possibly can to make sure that you have one day per week that you rest from your normal work. That doesn’t necessarily mean you have to sit inside the whole day and do nothing. It means that you stop doing whatever it is that you normally do with your time the rest of the week. Maybe “unplug” from electronics like the TV, computer, or cell phone. It’s a “different” day, it should look different from your other days. I understand that it’s not always possible. But if it’s in your power, make it happen. Even if it costs you something. Especially if it costs you something. Make that cost an offering to God.

Second, make sure that your Sabbath includes time with God in worship, reading and studying the Bible, praying, and spending time with family and with other Christians. This is critical to developing a godly perspective on life. Invite a church member to go to lunch with you after worship. Third, do things that are enjoyable and refreshing to you. Sometimes those will be planned activities. They should include “recreational rest,” as well as what Keller calls “aesthetic rest,” which is appreciating beauty in the arts, music and in God’s creation. Finally, allow some time that is unplanned and unstructured so you can do whatever comes along or maybe even nothing at all.

God has designed you to need rest. He has designed the world to need rest. Farmers know that their fields need to rest every few years in order to be more productive. In the same way, our bodies and our souls need rest and refreshment. Declare your freedom from slavery to your schedule. Make Sabbath a priority in your life. It’s not easy. It may even seem like a waste of time. But you will soon discover that in your rest you come closer to the One who is the Lord of the Sabbath – the Lord of rest! So go ahead. You deserve a break today.

*Amen*