

Mark 2:23-3:6

6/2/2024

In 2012, the Atlantic put out a survey asking their readers, “do you prefer “stay-cations” or “vacations?” Surprisingly, “stay-cations” won by a 2.1 ratio. If you think about it, you can see why. The purpose of a vacation is to rest, recuperate, and regain energy- and traveling vacations often do the opposite- especially with children. First, you have to do all the extra work at your job to prepare for your absence, you have to buy the flights, pack your bags, plan your excursions, and then you get to the airport, go through security, fly, get to your place, and now you need a few hours to recover. And the only thing more exhausting than that is driving, hours on the road, pulling all-nighters, and then you get there and you need a day to recover just from the travel. Of course, your few days are filled with fun activities, but then you get back and sit on your couch and realize- you’re more tired than when you left- and you could use a few days to recover from your vacation- which was the whole point of vacation in the first place!

Rest- true rest that actually refreshes you- is something the Bible talks about rather often. In fact, there’s an entire command dedicated to rest. The Third Commandment- Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it Holy. God actually told his people that they weren’t allowed to work for an entire day. They, their animals, their workers, everyone had to take a day off- it was mandatory- it was called the “Sabbath” day- and it was sacred. Today, we see a fascinating exchange between Jesus and the religious teachers of his Day, the Pharisees, where Jesus makes a radical claim that sends the Pharisees over the edge- they now start plotting to kill him- that statement? “**Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.**” And that means two things- **1. Legalism ≠ Obedience, and 2. Religion ≠ Rest.**

1. Legalism ≠ Obedience. The first thing that jumps at me from this text is that the disciples are plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath- that was absolutely prohibited and would have been a major social taboo- which means that if they were doing it, they were likely doing it because Jesus himself did it or told them it was okay. Why is this a big deal? It’s not taking heads of grain that wasn’t theirs- this practice was allowed by the Old Testament- but that they were doing it on the Sabbath. Over the years, the Jewish religious authorities added to the Sabbath rules and came up with 39 activities that constitute “work” that no one is allowed to do. For example, killing a fly is prohibited on Sabbath, because that is technically hunting, which is work. Tying a knot on a rope was prohibited because that’s work, and so would untying a knot. The Rabbis determined that you could only walk 1999 paces before you were officially “working,” about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile- and if you were caught more than that distance from your house, you’d be punished. If someone cut their finger, they could bind up the wound to stop the bleeding, but they couldn’t put ointment on it- because healing is work. They weren’t allowed to carry anything with their hands, but people found ways to get around that- they carried things with their elbows and feet. As time went on, more and more rules were added- here’s the modern Jewish rules of Sabbath taken directly from a Jewish website:
Cooking- One may not kindle a fire on Shabbat (no cooking, baking, boiling, roasting, or frying) nor perform many other activities related to cooking, such as peeling, mashing, grinding, shredding, or creating a dough. All cooked food must be prepared in advance, and since warming up food is also forbidden, the food must be placed on a warming tray (called a hotplate or blech) before Shabbat.

Hot water- One may not operate a kettle or warm up water using the stove. Instead, one can put a kettle of preboiled hot water on the blech before Shabbat or use a special electric urn that is Rabbbinically approved for Shabbat.

Electricity- It is forbidden to turn on or off the lights in the home. For this reason, one should ensure that all the lights in the kitchen, dining room, living room, and bathrooms are on before Shabbat and that the lights in the bedrooms are switched off. Although the heating may be turned down, it may not be switched on, so make sure that the heating is prepared before Shabbat comes in.

Toilet paper- It is forbidden to tear the perforated line to separate toilet paper or paper towels. You can either prepare some toilet paper and paper towels before Shabbat or just use tissues and napkins instead.

Plants- Watering or picking plants on Shabbat is forbidden, which includes placing already cut flowers into a vase of water. Make sure that your plants are watered, and cut flowers have their leaves removed and placed in water before Shabbat begins.

Why would anyone do this to themselves? This is what we call “legalism.” Legalism is attempting to gain or earn God’s acceptance, forgiveness, salvation, or blessing through following laws or rules- the idea that if I say the right prayers, follow the right rules, and practice the right religious rituals I can earn God’s favor. The problem with that is this: How do I know I’ve done enough, performed enough, sacrificed enough? You don’t, so what happens is in order to feel *extra* confident, people will add more and more rules, or more details to those rules, so they can feel extra confident that they’ve done enough. Here’s the problem- when you go above and beyond, adding to God’s rules, you actually fall short of them. We see this twice in this account with the pharisees: First, Jesus proves to the pharisees that their own national hero, King David, technically broke the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament- the bread of the presence that was meant only for the priests were given to David’s men because they were about to pass out from hunger- if those priests would have acted like the pharisees and said, “nope, this bread only belongs to us,” they would have broken God’s rule- feed and take care of your neighbor when they are in need. The point is that all the extra rules added onto the Sabbath was like all the extra excursions and travel plans added onto the vacation- they were robbing the Sabbath of its purpose- to provide God’s people with the gift of needed rest. By adding to God’s Sabbath Law, they were disobeying the Law and making it impossible for everyone else to actually obey the Sabbath- they were too busy thinking about all the little things they weren’t allowed to do instead of enjoying rest and remembering God’s love for them.

But that’s not all! Their obsessive legalism was disabling them from actually obeying God’s ultimate law-loving God and their neighbor. They didn’t love their neighbor with the shriveled hand- this man would have been deeply impoverished- he wasn’t able to work- and they used him as bait for Jesus, hoping he would heal him so they could have something on him. Instead of rejoicing that their fellow man was healed, they were angry- they didn’t care about him- as Jesus pointed out. But ultimately, they hated God. There before their very eyes was the Lord of the Sabbath- when Jesus claimed that title for himself, he was declaring that he wasn’t just really good at keeping the Sabbath, but that he instituted it himself- when He created the Heavens and Earth along with the Father and Spirit and rested on the seventh day because it was so good- and he was the one who gave it as a gift to his people Israel through Moses- and has come down and proven that this is who he is through his miracles- which the Pharisees saw- and instead of loving and trusting and worshiping the God they claimed as their own, they plotted to kill him. Legalism isn’t obedience.

2. Religion ≠ Rest. You may have been surprised at the description of Jewish Sabbath regulations and thought, “those people just don’t get it.” And you’d be right, but we need to realize: *neither do we*. Christians have been doing the same thing for centuries. Baptism is pure grace- God comes to you through

Water and the Word and declares you to be his own, writes your name in the book of life, brings you into his family, and yet there are Christians that would say, “well, Baptism can’t be *that* free. You need to be old enough to accept it, you need to be able to declare your faith before you can enjoy that even though there’s NOTHING in the Bible that says this! Repentance is a beautiful thing- where we take our sins to a holy God and he forgives us, but there are Christians who say that if you want to truly be forgiven, you have to first say 10 Lord’s prayers, some Hail Maries, and you might need to pray to a saint or angel and their good works can be put in your account- even though the Bible says NOTHING about that. And I’ll be honest about Lutherans too. It’s one thing to say “I prefer organs, hymns, and liturgy.” It’s another thing to say “God prefers organs, hymns, and liturgy.” He never says that. God doesn’t care whether it’s an organ or guitar, praise band or pianist, drums and guitar or trumpet and trombone. He cares about the hearts of his people- are they worshiping him in spirit and truth- that’s what’s important. We take doctrine seriously, and the reason I’m Lutheran is because I believe that the Lutheran confessions accurately teach the Scriptures- our doctrine is correct. But God have mercy on us if we begin to think *that’s* how we can earn God’s favor. That’s legalism! But this isn’t just a Christian, or religious problem- it’s a human problem.

In 1968, there was a prediction that as technology progressed, people in 1st world countries would have to work less and less- down to about 26 hours a week by 2020. Instead, Americans on average work more than any other industrialized nation in the world. For many places, the advances in technology have made it so people work less, but for us, it’s enabled us to work more! Why is that? Because all people are legalistic in their very core, and they are all religious, and they are desperately trying to earn for themselves the satisfaction that could make them finally able to rest. We think if we just obey enough religious rules, we’ll finally be okay. If we make enough money, have nice enough cars, have enough people respect us, have enough experiences and travels, if we do enough, we’ll be enough- but that doesn’t work, and that leaves us, quite frankly, exhausted. If you think about it- isn’t that all a religion is- if I do enough, I’ll be accepted by this God or entity because I’ll be enough. Jesus comes and says, “*I’m not here to reform religion. I’m here to replace religion. I’m the Lord of the Sabbath, because I am the true Sabbath- I am your rest.*” Do you remember what Jesus said, “Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke- it’s light, and my burden is easy to bear.” How can a holy God say that to sinners- that’s scandalous- that a Holy God that demands perfection comes to sinners and says, “take it easy! Relax! I can give you rest!” How can that be? Because true rest comes when the work is finished, and on the cross, Jesus cried out, “It is finished.” Jesus was everything, did everything, accomplished everything, obeyed every command that God had- was perfect, and yet he suffered the agony and humiliation and exhaustion that we deserved so that we can have rest, perfect rest. Why? Because I am enough, and so are you. You don’t need to do more religious practices in order for God to love you more. You don’t need your boss or your friends to approve of you. You don’t need more money. You don’t need a nicer body. You are complete and whole and enough because of Jesus. He is your rest. He is the Lord of the Sabbath- and what he offers to you is not another worldview, another set of rules, another set of advice, but true rest from all labors. You are enough. Rest in him.