



MINISTRIES

A Ministry of the Athens Universal Life Church
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TITLE: The Sabbath as Blessing

SERMON IN A SENTENCE: God gave the Sabbath to bless people, and Jesus blessed people on the Sabbath.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Today's scripture lesson comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2 verse 23 to chapter 3 verse 6.

Starting at Chapter 2 verse 23:

On the Sabbath He was going through the grainfields, and His disciples began to make their way picking some heads of grain.

The Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

He said to them, "Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry—

how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the sacred bread—which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests—and also gave some to his companions?"

Then He told them, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.

Therefore, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Then we go to chapter 3:

Now He entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a paralyzed hand.

In order to accuse Him, they were watching Him closely to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath.

He told the man with the paralyzed hand, "Stand before us."

Then He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do what is good or to do what is evil, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent.

After looking around at them with anger and sorrow at the hardness of their hearts, He told the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

Immediately the Pharisees went out and started plotting with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him.

-- May the Lord add His Blessing to the reading of His Word!

-- I am Doctor Rob White with the A U L C Ministries with our message this week.

-- I am happy that you can take a few minutes out of your busy week to be with us today!

This past spring, in a large city, a mother duck built a nest and laid ten eggs in that nest. The problem was that she built the nest on a wide cement ledge of an office building, ten feet off the ground.

The office workers looked down from the windows above and saw that all the eggs had hatched. They wondered how the mother duck would get the babies down from the ledge so they could go to the river which was about three blocks away. Ducks must have water within two days after they are hatched.

While the office workers watched, the mother duck flew down to the sidewalk and started quacking. One little duck wobbled to the edge of the ledge and jumped off. It did not know how to fly so it crashed to the sidewalk. It was not seriously hurt, but was stunned and couldn't get up right away.

One of the office workers knew something had to be done so he raced down the stairs to the sidewalk just as the second baby duck was about to jump. He caught the little duck in his hands and put it on the sidewalk near the mother. He caught all of the other eight ducks as they jumped off the ledge.

He then got a cardboard box, loaded the little ducks inside and carried them down the sidewalk and through traffic to the river, the mother duck following behind.

What a story – the man was a duck hero! Now, do you think it mattered which day of the week this happened? No, the man had compassion for the ducks and wanted to help.

Jesus teaches us to be compassionate – to care about others. When the Pharisees, who paid great attention to the laws, criticized others for doing good works on the Sabbath (Sunday, God's day) Jesus said to them, when a man with a withered arm came to him to be healed, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath"

They did not answer him. Jesus had compassion for the man and healed him, even though it was the Sabbath, because it was the right thing to do.

There are some odd laws on the books:

- Alabama law prohibits drivers being blindfolded while operating a vehicle. That makes a certain amount of sense, doesn't it!
- In Juneau, Alaska, owners of flamingos may not let their pet into barber shops. I suppose that makes sense too!
- In Prescott, Arizona, no one is permitted to ride their horse up the stairs of the county courthouse.

Odd laws often have their roots in something that took place many years ago—but the laws are still on the books.

Take Prescott's law against riding your horse onto the steps of the county courthouse. I suspect that, at some time in the distant past, someone did just that. The city fathers looked for something in the law that would prohibit future incidents. Not finding anything, they created a law. I don't know that to be true, but that's often how laws are made. And once a law is on the books, it tends to stay there—forever.

Of course, it makes sense to have a law like Prescott's. A horse on the courthouse steps would block entry by pedestrians. A horse on the courthouse steps might stumble and fall.

And then there's the delicate fact that a horse produces 20 pounds of manure daily—as well as a gallon of urine—and produces those whenever and wherever the mood strikes. I can say with certainty that a horse is no respecter of courthouse steps.

So a law prohibiting people from riding their horses up the courthouse steps makes quite a lot of sense—once you think about it.

In our Gospel lesson today, we find a law with which we are quite familiar—but which nearly no one today obeys. It's the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath. One of the Ten Commandments says:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

You shall labor six days, and do all your work,
but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God.

You shall not do any work in it, you,
nor your son, nor your daughter,
your male servant, nor your female servant,
nor your livestock,
nor your stranger who is within your gates;

for in six days (God) made heaven and earth, the sea,
and all that is in them,
and rested the seventh day;

therefore (God) blessed the Sabbath day,
and made it holy" (as we see in Exodus chapter 20 verses 8 to 11).

If I were to ask for a show of hands by those who keep that Sabbath law, I wouldn't expect to see many hands. The fact is that few Christians observe the Sabbath, which falls on Saturdays. Nor do most Christians feel constrained to observe Sabbath law on Sundays—or any other day. For the most part, we do what we want to do—or what we are required to do—on weekends as well as on weekdays.

But, like most laws, the Sabbath law makes good sense if you think about it. It makes sense in two ways:

- For one thing, Exodus says that God created the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath to honor the fact that God rested on the seventh day. Therefore, God called the Israelites to honor God by keeping the Sabbath holy—by resting on the seventh day.
- But there's another reason as well. Even though Christians are no longer subject to Old Testament laws, we want to honor God—and we do need rest.

In times past, when people observed the Sabbath law, they spent the day at home with their families. They could read—or play games. Hopefully, someone in the family could play a fiddle or guitar or piano, and the family would gather round and sing songs. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it! We've lost something by ignoring the Sabbath law.

Of course, people couldn't refuse to do all work on the Sabbath—especially in a rural economy. Cows need milking on the Sabbath, just as on every other day. Sheep require a shepherd's protection every day of the week.

- Jesus noted that people were allowed to rescue a sheep that had fallen into a ditch on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:11).
- The same would be true if a child or an ox fell into a well on the Sabbath (Luke 14:5).

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus bumps up against his enemies, the Pharisees, on two counts of violating Sabbath law.

- On the first count, Jesus' disciples had plucked some grain to eat. Plucking grain from someone else's field might sound larcenous, but Torah law (seen in Deuteronomy 23:25) specifically allowed it—as long as you didn't use a sickle to harvest too much.

The Pharisees held Jesus responsible for the actions of his disciples. They said, "Look, why are (your disciples) doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

So Jesus reminded them of a story with which they would have been quite familiar. To understand the impact of that story, you must understand that King David was not only Israel's greatest king, but David had also become an iconic figure like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Pharisees could criticize Jesus, but they didn't dare criticize David.

In the story of David, he wasn't yet king. David and his companions were fleeing from King Saul, who was jealous of David—and seeking to kill him. David and his companions were hungry, so they asked

a priest for bread. The priest protested that the only available bread was the holy bread—which we might liken to the bread that we eat when we partake of the Lord's Supper. But the priest relented a bit, and said that he would give them the holy bread if David's young men had kept themselves from women. Assured that this was the case, the priest gave them the holy bread, and David and his companions ate it.

Jesus concluded the telling of that story by saying, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**". The Pharisees couldn't think of a response. Jesus one! Pharisees nothing!

That's an interesting take on the Sabbath, isn't it! "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**" God intended the Sabbath as a blessing for people. God intended the Sabbath to give people a restful day.

We need some restful time, don't we! A few years ago *Newsweek* ran a cover on which there was only one word in large bold letters—EXHAUSTED! The article inside told the stories of people—from the president of Harvard to single moms to a father trying to juggle two jobs. All those people were EXHAUSTED! Everyone was EXHAUSTED! Can you identify with that?

Is it better today? I don't think so. While email has blessed us in many ways, it has also broken down the barrier between the workplace and home. For many people, it's as if they never left work. They keep getting emails at all hours—emails that demand their attention—require their response—identify problems that have to be solved. We're surrounded by labor-saving appliances, but we are still EXHAUSTED!

So Jesus says, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**" God intended the Sabbath to bless us. The God who created us knows that we need rest—and intended the Sabbath to address that need. God knows that we need time with our families, and intended the Sabbath to meet that need.

While we are no longer required to observe Jewish law, we will do well to set limits—to enforce restful time and family time. Doing that can reduce the number of heart attacks—and divorces. Jesus says, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**"

Then Jesus went to the synagogue, where he encountered a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees, who had been embarrassed in their first encounter with Jesus, were eager to give it another "go". They watched to see if Jesus would heal the man's hand on the Sabbath, so they could accuse him of violating Sabbath law.

Jesus gave them another chance. First, he told the man to stand up. Then he asked the Pharisees:

**"Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm?
To save a life, or to kill?"**

That was well established in Sabbath law. People were permitted to help when life was in danger. They were permitted to help in emergencies.

But as far as the Pharisees were concerned, this man's withered hand was no emergency. He had been like that for years, and he could wait another day—until the Sabbath had ended.

But Jesus felt differently—and presumably the man with the withered hand felt differently too. When Jesus told the man to stretch out his hand, he did so. I'm sure that wasn't easy for a man who had tried for years to hide his disability. He was in a public place. Everyone was watching. The man, for once, was the center of attention—something he had always avoided. But he had heard about Jesus, and was willing to take a bit of a risk so that he might have a chance to be healed—so he stretched out his hand.

The Bible says, "And his hand was restored as healthy as the other".

And then it tells us that the Pharisees, having been trumped twice, huddled together with the Herodians to figure out a way to destroy Jesus—to kill him.

What do these two stories mean for us today?

- For one thing, these stories tell us that God created the Sabbath for us—to give us a restful day—a family day. God knew that we needed rest—and that our families need us to be present with them. That's a pretty good takeaway from these stories.
- For another thing, we need to pay attention when Jesus asks, "**Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? To save a life, or to kill?**" In God's economy, it's always lawful to do good—to help someone in need—to rescue someone in danger. It's always lawful to save a life. It's always lawful to help.
- But there's a third takeaway also—that Jesus is Lord, and will bless those who trust him—as the man with the withered hand trusted Jesus when he stretched out his hand. That doesn't mean that Jesus will always do what we want. It does mean that Jesus is in command, and will bless those who trust him.

Jesus is Lord. He is Lord of those who trust him—and Lord over those who don't. The Pharisees didn't trust him, but he demonstrated his mastery—his Lordship—to them anyway.

But the one who trusted was the one who received a blessing. Let us trust him. Let us allow him to bless us.

Some years ago, during a tour of the grounds of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, a tour guide was standing at the Academy cemetery on the high bank of the Hudson River—a place of great beauty. The guide pointed to an island on the other side of the river—Constitution Island—and told the group of Anna Warner, who wrote "Jesus Loves Me." He said that Anna and her sister, Susan, had lived on that island. Their uncle, the Rev. Thomas Warner, had been the Academy Chaplain, and the sisters had taught Sunday school classes for cadets for a number of years. It is thought that Dwight D. Eisenhower was one of the last cadets to attend their classes. We don't know that that is true, but we know that it is possible. Eisenhower graduated in 1915, and Anna died in that same year.

When the sisters died, the Academy honored them by providing for them to be buried at the Academy cemetery—an unusual exception to the rules—high honor, indeed!

When I read that story, I thought of the sister's ministry to those cadets, and wondered if the officer who made possible their burial in that cemetery might at one time have been cadets in their Sunday school classes. I also found myself wondering whether the sister's humble ministry might have affected world history at some point through the influence they had on the lives of those cadets.

The words to this popular song were written originally as a poem in Anna's novel, *Say and Seal*. In the book, the words were spoken to comfort a dying child. In 1861, William Bradbury set the words to music and added the chorus, "Yes, Jesus loves me!" The joyful tune and simple words soon became favorites around the world.

Stories have grown up around this song. One is that someone asked Karl Barth, the great theologian, to summarize the essence of the Christian faith in a few words, and he responded, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Another is that, at the height of persecution in Communist China, a Christian sent a message to a friend. The message escaped the attention of the censors, because it said simply: "The *this I know* people are well"—but that phrase, the "*this I know* people" clearly identified the Christian community in China. It assured the friend that the church in China was alive and well.

We, too, are "This I Know" people.

-- That's our Lord's message for this Lord's Day and I hope you got a blessing out of it!

-- Go out this week and be a blessing and be blessed! -- For the more you are a blessing, the more you will be blessed!

-- Thank you all for watching and listening and we will see you all next week!

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