



March 23-14, 2019
Pastor Ellis White

Sick of Religion?: Rule Breaking: Part 2

Mark 2:23-3:6

Let me add my welcome to the others—I'm so glad you're with us this weekend. My name is Ellis and I am the Pastor of Weekend Services here at Chapel Hill. I'm going to share with you for the next 30 minutes, and then we're going to sing again before we finish our service.

I grew up in the UK, and, I'm obviously biased, but the UK has better sports than the US. And one of those is rugby. I played a lot of it growing up. And in the summer of 2006 it took me to South America.

We toured through Chile and Argentina for two weeks, stopping and playing rugby matches against local clubs and schools. It was the experience of a lifetime. As we traveled we didn't always stay in hotels; often, we stayed in the home of a player from the local team.

When I was in Santiago, the capital city of Chile, I ended up staying with a practicing Jewish family from Thursday through Sunday. And Friday night was a night that we were to spend with our hosts. And Friday night for a Jewish family is a very special night. Why? It's the beginning of the Sabbath.

I got to be there as they got everything ready and prepared on Friday afternoon. All the food cooked, all the table prepared, as they finished off work and set it aside, and then as the sun set on Friday, the 24-hour Sabbath day began. And it began with a meal. They prayed in Jewish: "Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech haolam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz." And then we feasted. And from that point onwards, for 24 hours, they ceased from work. No more cooking, no more cleaning, no more running errands, no more emails, no more work, just rest, worship, and time together as a family.

The last few weeks we've been in a series entitled "Sick of Religion?"

There are many in this world who are sick of religion. The late Christopher Hitchens said religion is

"Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience."

But what's fascinating, is that over the last few weeks, we have found Jesus felt exactly the same way about the first century Jewish expression of religion. Jesus found it to be: violent—he was killed by it; irrational—they ignored his arguments against it; intolerant—they were unwilling to understand a different viewpoint; allied to racism, tribalism and bigotry—they hated Gentiles and Samaritans; contemptuous of women—their testimony was rejected; and coercive toward children—Jesus had to rebuke those who turned the children away from him. Certainly, Jesus would agree with Hitchens' assessment of religion as applied to first century Judaism.

And yet, I stand here in a church, under a cross, preaching from a Bible—all symbols of religion. Why does the same criticism not apply to what we are doing here? Well, I believe that we are attempting not to

practice a religion, but to follow a person who overturned a religion—Jesus. Jesus was sick of religion, and instead he called us to a relationship with him, and that is what we are all about here. This weekend, I hope you're going to see that as we look at Jesus' critique of the way first century Jews practiced the Sabbath.

The Jewish practice of Sabbath was based upon the law given to Moses up on the mountain—the 10 commandments. Commandment number 4:

“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.” (Exodus 20:8-10)

Sabbath literally means “to cease.” The Sabbath was a day to cease work, commanded by God. And where did it come from? Well it was an example set by God himself...

“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.” (Exodus 20:11)

God set a rhythm: Six days of work; one day of rest. And he commanded his people to follow suit.

And the people tried. But they found it was hard. So they decided to make up some extra rules themselves regarding the Sabbath to make sure they didn't get on the wrong side of God. And it became a little bit ridiculous.

All in all there were 39 things prohibited on the Sabbath, including sowing, plowing, reaping, threshing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, spinning, weaving, tying, untying, tearing, writing two or more letters, erasing two or more letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire, putting finishing touches to an object, transporting an object more than 6'.

Okay! Now go and rest. Oh, but don't take the backpack off! Tomorrow you can take it off. But not today! Today is the Sabbath! A day of rest! Do you see how ridiculous it had become?

It was into this context of Jewish religion that Jesus came proclaiming a new way. He was sick of the Jewish religious practices, especially those surrounding the Sabbath. Let me read to you the passage we're going to look at today:

“One Sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”” (Mark 2:23-24)

Reaping was one of those 39 things you couldn't do on a Sabbath. And, technically, Jesus' disciples weren't reaping, they were just grabbing a little snack en route. But the Pharisees—they were kind of like those people on social media who comment or retweet and let you know how outraged they are about something—they saw the disciples doing it and told everyone how outraged they were! “Look everyone!” “Gasp!”

And frankly, Jesus was sick of this, so he confronted them. And he confronted them by telling them a story from the Scriptures. A story they should have known. It was about the most famous Jewish king—David—and his men. One day, David and his men were famished and there was literally nothing to eat in the town they were in, except for the holy bread, only to be eaten by the priests. David and his men weren't priests. But the high priest at the time gave David and his men the holy bread to eat. Now this was breaking the rules, for sure. But... Jesus is telling us to illustrate a point. The point of the rules isn't that they are kept so we look good, the point of the rules is to direct our attention towards God. Let me explain with the Sabbath

Jesus is trying to tell us that point of the Sabbath wasn't to follow the rules; to carry around 40 extra pounds on your back. That wasn't why God had taken the very first Sabbath after his six days of work. It wasn't why God commanded his people to take a Sabbath. The point was to rest. And the rules were only important, so long as they enabled a person to rest.

And on this day, as Jesus and his disciples were walking through the grain fields, picking a few ears of corn was actually how they were resting; they weren't reaping for a harvest, they were restoring their body with food that took little to no preparation. Here's how Jesus puts it in our passage today:

"And [Jesus] said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."" (Mark 2:27)

Jesus is saying to the Pharisees: the whole point of the Sabbath is for your own benefit. The Sabbath, ultimately, is not about convincing God that you're a good person and you will do what he says. It's not about trying to be better at Sabbath keeping than your neighbor. The Sabbath is about giving you the rest that you need, so that you can be the person God has created you to be.

The Sabbath is about reminding us that God can take care of us, and we don't need to strive all day long. The Sabbath reminds us that God cares more about who we are than about what we do. The Sabbath is a gift, not a burden. And the Pharisees just don't get it. Let me keep reading the next story.

"Again [Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him." (Mark 3:1-2)

The Pharisees are watching him again. Healing was work, and you couldn't do work on the Sabbath, so they were watching to see if Jesus would break the Sabbath again.

""And [Jesus] said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." (Mark 3:3-5)

Jesus reiterates his previous point. The Sabbath is not about keeping rules to satisfy God; if someone is sick on the Sabbath, and you have the power to heal them: heal them. Jesus was sick of their rule-keeping getting in the way of the true purpose of the Sabbath: it was God's gift of rest to human beings.

Now, that's all well and good for the first century, right. But what about today? I mean, let's be honest, if the Jews made a whole bunch of rules about the Sabbath and tied themselves up to try and keep it, and Jesus said that was a bad idea... We have pretty much swung the pendulum entirely in the opposite direction, right?

Well, kind of. Actually, I wonder if our modern-day expectations of Sundays are just as loaded. Let me show you.

Think through all the expectations that we have, or our culture has placed upon us when it comes to Sundays. First: got to go to church. Then what do we do after church? That's right, Costco. Before we go home and unpack the shopping. Then we have to make lunch. Then tidy up lunch. Then, if it's the fall, watch the football, because, God-forbid we should miss the Seahawks. Then need to do that odd job around the house. Then I need to wash my car. Oh, and 5 loads of laundry. Then I need to check in on my emails. Oh, and don't forget I must spend at least 30 minutes today on Facebook. And if you have kids, well... there's

sports, and parties, and friends, and homework. Honestly, the expectations we have of what we want to achieve on a Sunday as just as bad as the first century!

Think back to last Sunday. How did you feel at the end of the day? Like you'd rested? Like you were refreshed and ready for the week? Or were you even more exhausted than when you started?

Ask yourself the honest question: when was the last time I experienced true rest? Not being pampered in a spa kind of rest. But the sort of rest you feel when you are truly content with who you are, where you have ceased from striving, where you know you are deeply and truly loved, and where it doesn't matter what is coming next, or what has been, because you are in the care of your heavenly Father. The sort of rest I imagine my three-year-old Ezra feels when he snuggles into my arms on the couch. He knows he's loved. He knows he's safe. He's provided for. That it doesn't matter what he does next. That it doesn't matter what he just did. He's with his dad, and all is right with the world.

When was the last time you experienced that? Or do your weekends feel more like lugging around a backpack with water bottles in it? Because I think that for many of us, we are just like first-century Jews when it comes to our practice of the Sabbath—we've got ourselves all burdened up by rules or expectations, when in fact, the Sabbath is a day to remove those expectations, remove the need to perform, or achieve, and simply rest in who we are.

I remember when I was a freshman at Oxford, I began to practice the Sabbath. For most people, Oxford is a 24-7 kind of thing. It's work, work, work, all term long. It's intense. In fact, Oxford only has three, 8-week terms in one year because any longer than that and I think people would give up. And it was in this environment, where the norm was to work 7 days a week that I decided to start practicing Sabbath. My friends thought I was crazy!

I decided that on Sundays, I would not work, and would simply enjoy the city I got to live, the friends I had around me, and the gifts that God had given me. So I started by doing something, which for a 19-year old is tantamount to cutting off your arm... First thing Sunday morning, I turned off my phone. And it stayed off until Monday morning. Radical, right? What if there was an emergency? What if someone needed to get a hold of me? Well, I know that for thousands of years humans have survived without cell-phones, so I was pretty sure I could go 24-hours without one. Turns out I was right.

Then I would have breakfast with some friends in my college and go to church. After church, I'd meet some people there and we would figure out lunch together. Then maybe an afternoon walk before ending up in a nice pub for a drink. Or maybe I'd go home for a nap. And after dinner, I'd often return to church for an evening service, or perhaps settle in and watch a movie with some friends.

And let me tell you what. It changed my life. I would start waking up on Mondays ready to go for the week. I would start having something to look forward to all week long, to keep me working hard. I'd repeat it to myself: "Don't worry. Sunday's coming!" And at the end of the day on Sunday I would be reminded of how grateful I was for my Father in heaven who takes care of me, for delicious food and drink, for friendships and relationships, for the city I lived in, and for life itself.

I think for us all, at the heart of the Sabbath, is an issue of trust. Because when we have as much to do as we are expected to do in this world, giving up 14% of our time to rest and worship seems crazy. My friends thought it was crazy. I was asked all the time: how do you get all your work done? And I said: I just do.

For all of us, it's an issue of trust. Do we trust that if we do what God has said is best for us, he will actually be faithful to his promise? Do we trust that if we give up 1/7 of our time for Him, that we will still achieve the same, if not more as we would have done working 7 days a week?

I remember hearing a story several years ago, and I'm going to be honest with you, I cannot find a source, but it illustrates this issue of trust so well. I was told that during the 2nd world war, the munitions factories in the UK were working 6 days a week turning out munitions to be sent to the battle field. And someone began to ask: why are we giving people one day off? We're in a war! We don't have time for people to rest. And so they moved everyone to working 7 days a week. And do you know what I was told happened? When they moved from working 6 days a week to working 7 days a week, their overall production decreased.

Do we trust that God can do in 6 days more than we can do in 7 days? That's what we're talking about here. When we say to God: "Here is one of my seven days, I'm giving it to you," do we believe that he will take the work we do on those other 6 days and multiply it so that it actually becomes more than what we could have achieved by ourselves in 7 days?

I believe we serve a faithful God. I believe that when he says: "take one day off a week," he is telling us that for our benefit. And that he will be faithful to provide what we need in six days, so that we can rest on the seventh day. Do you believe it? And if you do, will you try it?

A month ago I got up here and offered a 30 day challenge. Get up and read the Bible every day for 30 days. Well, I don't want you to stop that, but I want to offer you another challenge, for the next 30 days, try taking a Sabbath every week. Trust that God can do in 6 days what you can do in 7.

For some of you, that's easy, you're retired. I'm joking. I know you all have work that fills your time. But seriously, many of you already practice Sabbath, and this is an encouragement to you to keep going. For the rest of us, I want to invite you to try it for the next four weeks.

And let me tell you, Sabbath requires some planning. You can't just roll around to Sunday and do nothing. You actually have to make some preparations and plans. You're gonna need to get some things done in advance of your Sabbath in order to take a Sabbath; especially if you have kids at home! But I want to invite you to pick one day in your week. It doesn't have to be Sunday; I know some of you might challenge me on that, but frankly, it's more important that you take one day out of seven than that you make sure it is Sunday. Sunday doesn't work for me to take a Sabbath; I take Monday. So for you, maybe it's Sunday, maybe it's Saturday, maybe it's Monday. It doesn't matter. What matters is to plan to do only things that bring you rest.

I would suggest that spending some time with God in worship and prayer should be on that list. I always find that after coming to worship or after spending some time praying, I feel rested. So make that a priority. But beyond that, I believe it is up to you to determine what is it that is restful for you. I don't want to be another Pharisee and give you a bunch of rules. But I do want to give you ideas.

Maybe it's a hike? Maybe it's a family meal? Maybe it's playing a board game? Maybe it's playing with your kids? I don't know what it is for you, but if it feels like work, then don't do it. And if you aren't sure what resting looks like—try some new things! Try journaling, or painting, or a bike ride, or a new game with your family, or visiting a new place. Try something new!

But most importantly, avoid work. Try not to check emails. Try not to do odd-jobs around the house. Try not to do laundry. Try not to buy groceries. Try not to wash dishes; let them pile up! Try, and here's a challenging one, try not to do school work; and that doesn't mean you can tell your teacher, "My pastor said I don't have to do it!" Get it done in advance of taking time off!

Now, I'm not trying to create rules; I'm just trying to give you ideas. Try it out. I believe that if we are willing to give God one day a week, we will reap a harvest in the rest of our lives. I believe that he is faithful to his

promises. That when we says, "rest," if we are willing to do so, he will multiply our work to cover the gap. So, let's put our trust in him, and let go of the control we long to have over our lives.