

Keeping a Holy Day

Scriptures: Leviticus 19:1-2; Psalm 66:1-4; Luke 13:10-16

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A Sabbath, a day called Holy, a weekly day of rest had no parallel in any ancient civilization except among the Jews. In ancient times leisure was for the wealthy and the ruling classes only; never for the serving or laboring classes. The very idea of a day of rest each week was unimaginable for most people. The Greeks thought Jews were lazy because they insisted on having what the Greeks called a “holiday” every seventh day.

A day of holy rest had first been mentioned in the second chapter of Genesis. It is recorded that by the seventh day God had completed all of creation and on the seventh day God rested. Holy rest. Then God blessed the day, set it apart from all other days, and made that time that recurs every week a holy day. The biblical scholar Abraham Heschel described the holy day as a sanctuary or a palace in which we keep alive the memory of creation and redemption. Observance of the Sabbath was to be a joyous occasion. Rabbis encouraged the Jewish people to anticipate the coming of the Sabbath as a bridegroom would anticipate the coming of his bride. The day was also intended to provide opportunity for physical rest, both for humans and animals.

We know that Jesus and his disciples observed the holy day because there are a number of recorded references to Jesus being in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

But have you ever noticed that we, as God’s creation, seem to think that we need to organize God’s thinking? Over time, the priests and rabbis began to organize the Sabbath observance so that it would be, according to them observed correctly. How else would one know if one was keeping the day in a holy way?

There was put forth 39 categories of forbidden acts, all of which were identified as types of work. So careful were the laws that one was not even to come in contact with any tool that could be used for work.

The exaggerated views of the rabbis and their burdensome rules about the observance of the Sabbath

- had weighed down those who observed the Sabbath
- had changed it from a spiritual observance of rest and
- had made it a complicated code of external and burdensome rules.

For example:

- If something that weighed no more than half a fig were carried from one place to another that was an acceptable weight.
- However, if one carried such a weight at two different times on the Sabbath, it was debated whether these two actions were counted as one so as to constitute the sin of Sabbath desecration.

Another example:

- A donkey could be led into one’s own courtyard being covered with a blanket, and that was lawful, because it was considered necessary for warmth.
- A donkey could not be led into the street being covered with a blanket because that was considered the same as bearing a burden.

- Of course, the cattle had to be taken out to pasture but only what was worn for safety could be worn on the Sabbath.

There were a few exceptions:

- If human life was in danger the person could be helped.
- If an animal was in danger it could be rescued.

Of course, the rules could never be totally kept. There were ways of doing what needed to be done.

Amid these religious ritual constraints Jesus entered the synagogue to worship on the Sabbath. There is nothing to indicate that there was anything unusual about the day. There is nothing to indicate that the woman in the story sought Jesus out for any special attention. She simply came to worship. For eighteen years her body had been so infirm that she could not stand upright. The compassion of Jesus overcame the need to follow ritual and tradition. Jesus would remind those in charge of the synagogue that the Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath.

As shocking as it would have been for that ruler of the synagogue and as shocking as it might be to some of us, Jesus did not come to establish or maintain religious ritual or tradition. Human need was always more important than tradition.

Jesus came to make possible a restored relationship between God and that part of God's creation that we call human. Jesus demonstrated that grace, that compassion, by enabling that woman to stand up straight and, for the first time in eighteen years, look directly into the face of Jesus. No wonder she was praising God. She could not contain her joy.

The priests and the rabbis made rules that they thought were important for keeping the Sabbath Day. What they did not understand was that one can never legislate holiness. Holiness is a state of being, not of doing. What we *do* comes out of who we *are*. Holiness is remembering that we are made in the image of God and desiring to become more and more who God intends us to be. It is Jesus who shows us how to do that.

Jesus would say, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden (with the man-made rules and traditions), and I will give you rest. Take my yoke (of teaching) upon your life and learn of Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. My teaching is easy and my load of expectations is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Come to my grace, not my legalistic religion. Come and learn from Me how to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might, and how to love your neighbor as yourself. If we could learn those two things from Jesus, everything else would take care of itself.

Travel forward in time. The disciples and the Apostle Paul begin to travel outside of Israel to share the Gospel. At first, all of the Christians were Jewish Christians and many kept two holy days, both the Sabbath and the Resurrection Day. As the disciples traveled to countries outside of Israel and began to include Gentiles, at first both days were observed but eventually only the Resurrection Day, Sunday, was kept as the holy day. It was only one of the changes that occurred as Christianity spread. The Gentiles did not keep kosher households and the men refused to be circumcised.

There is any number of important, landmark times in the Christian era. One of them was the Jerusalem Council at which Peter stood to say, "If God gave them the same gift of the Holy Spirit as God gave us

after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I should stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:1-18) His argument was persuasive and it still has implications for our lifestyle today.

Our generation of keeping a holy day has its own challenges. We live in a complicated 24/7 world. Not long ago a newspaper in Israel printed an article that, with a little fine tuning could have been reprinted in any one of the American newspapers and it would have been true.

The article described the difficulty people have in observing the Sabbath. It quoted the commandment of God and then commented on the fact that some people were required to work on the Day of Rest. It continued, "There are those who have to keep the transportation system going; those who have to maintain the utility systems; those who have to maintain the security systems of the country, etc. If all refused to work on the Holy Day, all of these services on which we have come to depend would shut down." Welcome to the real world.

We have our challenges as well. Many things compete with our keeping a holy day of rest, both spiritual and physical. For example:

- Athletic events and competitions involve both children and adults,
- Commercial venues are open 7 days a week and require workers,
- The services that we require to maintain our lives never shut down.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. Americans work, on an average 350 hours, or the equivalent of nine weeks more per year than the average European.

Our culture teaches us that we are what we *do*, and that the more we do the better we are. Of course, if we are honest, we know that isn't true.

To keep a day for Sabbath, on whatever day that may be, is a gentle reminder that the world

- does not own us,
- does not own our time,
- does not own our hearts.

It reminds us that keeping busy cannot substitute for holiness.

The Holy Day calls us into a faith community where it is both a day for God and *me*, and also a day for God and *us*, a faith community where we worship God together.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and listen to the words of the Psalmist. Take a moment and breathe deeply and just listen.

The Psalmist wrote:

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know... Be still and know...
Be still... Be still...
Be... Be...

Gracious God, we are not good at stopping. Help us to remember that as we spend time in your presence, we are in the process of being re-created into your image. As we are changed to become more and more like You, help us to be a reflection of You in our world. We pray in the name of our Lord. Amen.