

Isaiah 58:13-14 (NRSV)

¹³ If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Well today we are talking about that age old institution --- the one that sets
Judaism and Christianity apart ... the institution of the Sabbath.

Now, we have lost the idea of Sabbath's in our society. Jews, as mentioned honour
the Sabbath from Fri – Sat. We, as Christians, follow Paul's advice to the
Corinthians and celebrate the "Lord's Day" on the first day of the week – Sunday -
the day Jesus rose. But our society no longer seems to value or support a specific

day of rest ... with Malls being open all week ... and ice-time for hockey in such high demand ... life just seems to go on pretty much the same 7 days a week.

But when, as Christians have we ever relied on society to accommodate our beliefs? Most of our beliefs run counter-culturally --- the opposite of what our society values or teaches. So why should the Sabbath be any different? But also, keep in mind that Jesus said his followers were not of this world ... but nonetheless had to live in it. So how do we as Christians find a way to honour a Sabbath while living in this world? Well first of all let's go back to the basis ... what is a Sabbath?

The concept of the Sabbath is found in the oldest Old Testament writings ... the book of Genesis. In the opening passages of the book we find the beautiful stories of our creation. And one familiar aspect of those stories ... one that we are taught from our earliest days of Sunday School ... is that God created the heavens and earth in 6 days ... and on the 7th God rested. That does not mean that God stopped creating on that day ... but what he created was the Sabbath ... a day of rest – a day of peace – a day of quiet.

Now as we travel through the Bible we find the Sabbath became more clearly defined under the laws of Moses. In Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Exodus and Numbers we find rules and regulations about the Sabbath. Prohibitions against carrying things, cooking, working etc. In fact we are even told that the very land itself is to have a Sabbath ... for Jewish farmers were commanded to leave their fields fallow after 6 years of harvest. In Leviticus we even read that the punishment for violating the Sabbath was death. The rules and regulations for the honouring of the Sabbath were onerous ... and still are as practiced by modern orthodox Jews. If you were ever to visit an Orthodox home between sunset Friday and Sunset Saturday ... you would find many of these regulations and rules lived out in their modern context.

Well our understanding of Sabbath seems far distant from that legalistic, regulated Old Testament understanding of the Sabbath. And this is in large part to Jesus' teaching. It is precisely because the idea of Sabbath was so sacred to the Jews that Jesus' perceived violation of it caused the greatest conflict between himself and the Pharisees. We often have a perception that the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders was due to his claims to be Son of God ... the Messiah. But he rarely ... if ever ... made such claims. The greatest conflicts recorded in the

Gospels seem to be over his reinterpretation of the laws ... especially this law about the Sabbath. All 4 Gospels present episodes where Jesus heals on the Sabbath ... and then is criticized by the scribes or Pharisees for working on the Sabbath. And the 3 synoptic Gospels ... Matthew Mark and Luke ... all present a similar episode as a catalyst for the forces that opposed Jesus. The passages describe that Jesus' disciples are seen picking wheat on the Sabbath ... Jesus, as their leader is criticized ... he responds by saying "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" or some similar statement ... then on another Sabbath he is seen healing a man with a withered hand in the Synagogue. All three Gospel writers say that at this point Jesus' critics started to conspire against him.

Now, do you think for a moment that Jesus is saying ignore the Sabbath rules? No ... as always he is saying honour the law ... but honour its spirit. For the spirit of the law comes from God ... but often its rules and regulations are created by humanity. So what is the spirit of this law? And that is where I think this passage from Isaiah is helpful. In this passage Isaiah is not speaking about the rules or regulations but rather why we have a Sabbath. Listen again to the prophet's words:

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What the prophet is talking about here ... is not a list of do's and don'ts but rather a focus. The Sabbath is a time in which we step out of the busyness of our lives ... when we put aside our preoccupations and concerns and focus ourselves on God. The Sabbath is that time the psalmist wrote of ... the time 'to be still and know that I am God.' The Sabbath is that time when we remove ourselves from the hurly-burly ... like Elijah standing at the face of the cave ... not finding God in the wind or the fire or the earthquake ... but in the silence. That is what the Sabbath is meant to be ... a time of reflection ... contemplation ... and peace. I read a book recently written by an orthodox Jew and it said ... the Sabbath makes scholars and

philosophers of us all. That was why God created it ... ordained it ... because God knew we need that time. We need that time to refocus our lives. We need that time to enjoy some peace.

And we as Christians ... we do not need our society to validate our beliefs or accommodate our needs ... It would be rather naive to expect it ... rather we have to take responsibility ... to ourselves and to our God ... to find a way to honour the Sabbath --- whether it is one day a week ... one hour each day ... 10 minutes each hour? We need to find that time in our lives ... set it aside ... be intentional about it. For we need that sacred, still moment where we can encounter God.

But I also think, if we take Jesus' model, the Sabbath is also a time to reach out and live his commandment to love one another. Recently, I took a day of solitude after the busyness of Christmas ... I told a friend of my intention. She, who is well versed in Jewish tradition, responded but you know the Sabbath is also a time to be with family and friends. I know she is right --- for when we do take the time to focus our attention on God ... on Jesus ... we inevitably come to that Great Commandment ... to love one another. So the Sabbath, by definition, is also a time set aside to love. To love others ... to love ourselves ... and to love God.