

In Jesus time, the faith Jew observed sabbath in an extremely strict manner. In good Jewish fashion, there was a list of 39 categories of things the rabbis said one could not do on the sabbath. These included:

1. Carrying
2. Burning
3. Extinguishing
4. Finishing
5. Writing
6. Erasing
7. Cooking
8. Washing
9. Sewing
10. Tearing
11. Knotting
12. Untying
13. Shaping
14. Plowing
15. Planting
16. Reaping
17. Harvesting
18. Threshing
19. Winnowing
20. Selecting
21. Sifting
22. Grinding
23. Kneading
24. Combing
25. Spinning
26. Dyeing
27. Chain-stitching
28. Warping
29. Weaving
30. Unraveling

31. Building
32. Demolishing
33. Trapping
34. Shearing
35. Slaughtering
36. Skinning
37. Tanning
38. Smoothing
39. Marking

And this is not an exhaustive list, just the categories. For example, burning has since been expanded to using electricity as a kind of burning. So the rules were quite strict.

A long time ago, I attended a church that took the sabbath very, very seriously as well. You attended church twice on Sunday, once in the morning and once, thirty minutes away at a satellite location in the evening followed by dinner. I was in college at the time and it was literally an all-day affair by the time you added in drive time. That was rough as I had projects due on Monday.

In addition, you weren't to put your kids in sports because of games possibly falling on Sunday. You weren't to eat out because you were making someone work on that day. You were supposed to study the Bible all day. I was in Bible college but studying for classes didn't count somehow.

Anyway, if that's what you believe the sabbath should be, very well. But soon I noticed some discrepancies. For example, the pastor said no sports, but behind his office door was a full length poster of his son playing sports. The day was anything but restful, or even spiritual, and mostly seemed to consist of one upping everyone else on how righteous they were. We didn't eat out, but that left a team of women in the kitchen to cook for all of us to eat.

This church was closer to the pharisees Jesus was dealing with. Jews still to this day carefully observe the sabbath. In today's world, it is a day of rest and spiritual enrichment. There is no driving on the sabbath, no work, and it is a day to reconnect with God and the family.

But how are we to observe the sabbath. I think Jesus shows us some important answers to that very question in this passage. First, Jesus spend the sabbath connecting with his community of believers. This passage reads that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, but he was also taking note of who was around him. He is seeing the people around him, really seeing them, and connecting with them. Jesus was not standing behind a pulpit while the crowd pretended to be interested while planning their lunch orders which I'm sure has never happened here. He was with the crowd. He was connecting to the crowd. They were a family of believers. To this very day, Jewish people believe the sabbath is a day to reconnect with our community. In fact, I have been told that more babies are conceived on the sabbath by our Jewish friends.

On Sundays, our sabbath, we go to church, but are we really here? Are we connecting to those around us? Do we know if our neighbor one pew over is having a good day or a bad one? Do they have need we might fill, or something we might rejoice about? Are they more than just someone we go to church with? How might we use this sacred day to grow, to deepen our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ? If you need help, I invite you to find someone after service and ask them how you can pray for them today, and then do it. I don't mean go home and put it on your prayer list. I mean stop in the narthex and pray for that person right then and there. The sabbath is a day where everything we've planted in the week is given a chance to grow. Let's grow our relationships.

The other thing Jesus does is mission work. While he's connecting to those around him, he sees this woman, this outsider, this member of the blessed community and he drops everything and helps here. What better way to observe the sabbath than by caring for God's people, by feeding the hungry, seeing the captives go free. And Jesus does this often on the sabbath. Many times, the pharisees confront him on this point, but Jesus makes it clear that doing good, sharing the gospel, serving the people on the sabbath is right and good.

While I was recently away in Pittsburgh I was having really fascinating discussions with a church revitalizer. She was sharing some of her hard-earned wisdom and she told me that in her many years of ministry, she's never seen a church close that was actively doing mission in their immediate community. She was not referring to helping some organization down town, what she meant was quite literally being out in the community, making connections, seeing needs and meeting them. Imagine if one of the ways we observed the sabbath was to leave this place and meet the people around us, to listen and learn from them, to pray for them, to help them. Never underestimate the difference you make when you are just nice to someone. We used to have a person at the hospice who had an amazing ability to just turn around the whole room. He himself had such joy that it was contagious. Within minutes everyone would be smiling and laughing. And all he did was to state some of the joy he had. Give a kind word, be uplifting, make jokes. That's all.

Every church I've ever been in has wanted to change the world, to expand Christendom in some way. Every church has big dreams of making the world a better place. The secret to changing the world is that it doesn't have to be across the world. It starts in our very own neighbors. Want to change the world? Seriously? Change your neighborhood. There's an old poem about this.

“When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world.

I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation.

When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.”

Unknown monk, c. 12th century

Jesus had no social media, no private jets, but he changed the world, one beloved child of God at a time. We could do no better than to follow his example.

So, friends, this blessed sabbath I invite you to reframe how you observe this day. Consider using it to get to know your brothers and sisters better, strengthening those relationships, and serving God's people on our very own street.

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