

B Proper 17	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>An Interactive Message on Character and Conduct in the New Life</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sabbath Keeping and Public Worship</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Mark 7.1-23</p>	8/30/2009
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Thesis: Keeping Sabbath and Public Worship are two essential practices God uses to transform our hearts into hearts that beat like Jesus' heart.

Muddy water object lesson

In full view of the congregation, take a glass container of water and add some sand or dirt that. Then just set it off to the side and ignore it while you preach this sermon. By the time you finish the sermon, the contamination will settle to the bottom, and the water becomes clear again. The sermon circles back to this water glass at the end.

Reminder about Interactive Messages (Optional section)

Today's sermon is part of a distributed series of interactive messages on Character and Conduct in the New Life.

"Distributed" means I'm stretching about ten sermons over a 2-year period.

"Interactive" comes at the end of each sermon when I open the floor for ten minutes of questions and comments from you. Essentially, you will help me preach the last part of this sermon.

The content for this series comes from my experiences over many years of teaching the Membership Class.

Membership here has 2 essential covenants:

1. Covenant of Christian Character
 - a. Do what scripture teaches us to do (Sabbath-keeping and public worship are on the list).
 - b. Avoid what scripture teaches us to avoid.
 - c. Engage in life/ministry with other people in "doing church."
2. Covenant of Christian Conduct.
 - a. This is our collective conscience on some social issues.

Think of playing guitar as a virtue that you'd like to have.

Maybe you participate in worship thinking about how much joy you would find from playing the guitar as part of the worship band.

People don't start by joining the worship team next Sunday; they start by learning an instrument by signing up for a guitar class or private lessons. You learn some fingerings, strums, and soon a simple song. After a few months, you're ready to play one song along with the worship team on a Sunday morning. Eventually, you progress to where you can show up at practice, receive a new piece of music and play it well by the following Sunday. Many months later you are ready to start singing along as we play!

The series of guitar practices led you to the "virtue" of guitar playing.

Christians want the virtues of Christ-likeness to reside in our hearts.

We want to walk confidently through our days pouring out love, joy, peace, patience on the people around us.

But we can't achieve this alone. It takes practice AND the Spirit of Jesus to transform our hearts.

At first, the practice may not seem connected with the virtue of having a heart like Jesus - but they are.

Two essential practices are Keeping Sabbath & Public Worship.

Read Mk 7.1-8, 14-15

Around 450 BC, there emerged a class of legalists (Scribes). They divided the Old Testament Law into tiny rules and regulations – thousands of them. By New Testament time, these were the Oral Law. By 250AD, these were written: Mishnah.

Ritual washing of hands was one of these. It went far beyond hygiene. Before every meal hands needed a ceremonial washing in ceremonial water stored in ceremonial jars. First, a person held their hands with fingertips pointing up. Someone poured water over their hands until it ran down to their wrist. How much water? At least 1.5 egg shells of water. While their hands remained wet, they would cleanse them by grinding the fist of one into the other palm. Then the other. Then with fingertips pointing down someone would rinse them with more water.

Then between every course, salad - main course - dessert – coffee, you do this ceremonial washing again!

To fail at this was not bad manners; it was a serious sin for which a particular demon would attack and lead the person into poverty.

To Jesus, religion was far too focused on outward observances rather than a humble heart overflowing with love for God.

Scribes/Pharisees were lifting up “God and ceremonial performance.”

In New Testament churches, many Jewish Christians tried to “lift up Christ and circumcision/food laws/other Oral Laws of the Jews.”

Today sometimes Christians lift up “Jesus and <something>.”

Jesus and creationism. Jesus and the last days. Jesus and Scripture, Jesus and worship

music style, Jesus and some political position, Jesus and family traditions.

The New Testament teaches us to keep the priority, on Christ alone and keep a humble spirit.

Sabbath Keeping means setting 1 day each week apart from the other 6; living it available for God to touch and recreate our hearts.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. ¹³ You have 6 days each week for your ordinary work, ¹⁴ but the 7th day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your oxen and donkeys and other livestock, and any foreigners living among you. All your male and female servants must rest as you do. ¹⁵ Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out with his strong hand and powerful arm. That is why the Lord your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day.

Keeping Sabbath is a day to rest, to worship, and to remember what God has done.

Keeping Sabbath is not so much a constraint that God puts on us as a gift God gives us so that he can refresh us.

Exodus 23:10-12

Plant and harvest your crops for 6 years, ¹¹ but let the land be renewed and lie uncultivated during the 7th year. Then let the poor among you harvest whatever grows on its own. Leave the rest for wild animals to eat. The same applies to your vineyards and olive groves. ¹² You have 6 days each week for your ordinary work, but on the 7th day, you must stop working. This gives your ox and your donkey a chance to rest. It also allows your slaves and the foreigners living among you to be refreshed.

Some of us feel it's just too inefficient to observe a Sabbath.

Isn't the time better used to get some more things done?

The book of Ruth teaches us what God thinks about worshipping efficiency. Explain the concept of gleaning. To a farmer, gleaning seems inefficient. Any businessman would see it the same way. It seems irresponsible to not harvest the whole field. But God tells Old Testament farmers to leave some crops in the field so the poor can come and get some food. It's God's way to teach farmers not to worship efficiency and productivity as the highest good. And he wants today's business people to learn the same lesson.

Resting one day out of seven seems inefficient/unproductive to many busy people. We think we can't afford to take so much time off.

But keeping a Sabbath is as necessary as breathing if we are to do more than cling to the cliff of life by our fingertips.

Tennis illustration.

Loehr & Swartz are performance experts for athletes and corporate leaders. Loehr and Swartz wrote a book applying this to the “corporate athlete.” It’s The Power of Full Engagement. Loehr’s observation:

“Top <tennis> performers know when to work hard and when to rest. They create routines that allow them to recover between points. Their strength lies not in the perfection of their strokes or their level of effort but rather in their ability to recover. To get stronger, an athlete must push past his or her current limits, but then – and this is crucial – they must rest and allow their muscles to recover. During the time of rest after exertion, muscles regain size and strength. The same is true mentally. The top tennis players find rituals (the way they walk, breathing patterns, self-talk) that lower their heart rate. Between points, this calming provides both physical and mental rest. And the rest and recovery, even in 30 seconds between points in a tennis game, is what makes all the difference between players who win the most and those who don’t perform as well.” (For more on this see Rest, Living in Sabbath Simplicity by Keri Wyatt Kent, p 34-35)

Our work-world celebrates work and activity. And it ignores renewal and recovery, failing to recognize that both are necessary for sustained high performance.

Our capacity for full engagement depends on our periodic disengagement.

Ways to Keep Sabbath

Public worship

This one is essential unless God leads you to serve in the nursery or children's ministry and your church only has one worship a week. Even so, you must find some way to participate in public worship on some periodic basis.

For Christians, public worship is a time of GIVING praise and worship to God.

God is likely to feed us during worship, or inform us, and bless us w/ fellowship of others.

But these are not why Christians get out of bed to come to worship.

We worship primarily out of gratitude. We give our worship to the one who set us free from slavery to the kingdoms of this world, who died to offer us robust and eternal life, and who walks with us every day through whatever we face.

Public worship is most meaningful when it is focused on God, and not on our needs.

While public worship is essential for most of us, the rest of this list is more discretionary.

Recreation

Yes, this can be a part of keeping Sabbath.

Take a walk, do a puzzle, play some board games.

Maybe with a friend or two, or alone.

Play

If you find yourself booking your kids into swimming lessons, or competitive sports on the Sabbath it's a tip-off that these activities may not really be "play."

Sabbath play is something that is restful, not stressful.

Relationship building

Invite friends over for a Sunday evening game night.

Go visiting, invite someone out, or over to coffee, dessert.

Have a family meal, or join with friends to have a meal

Burn a special candle for Sabbath family meal as a way to "frame" the Sabbath.

Use the church campus after worship is over; it's a great place to hang out with friends.

Pray.

Done right prayer is an antidote for self-absorption.

Many prayers are selfish. Sabbath prayers begin, "Blessed are you, Lord God ..."

Prayer involves looking back on the week and confessing our shortcomings (not just our sin). It includes admitting to God that we wish we had been kinder to our kids/spouse/parents. We regret too much fast food, overspending, etc.

Pray for the poor on the Sabbath, or to serve the poor in some way.

Create a "tabernacle" to meet God; go there to read scripture/pray/reflect.

Maybe it's a corner of your apartment, or a coffee shop, or under a particular tree in a park.

Turn off the computer, ignore all emails, and give up web browsing.

Don't do homework or housework.

Go non-commercial for a day; make this part a part of your Sabbath.

Fast.

The point of fasting is not to get something from God but to identify with the poor.

You can fast things other than food.

***Isaiah 58:6-7** ⁶ "This is the kind of fasting I want: ...⁷ Share your food with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.*

Serve someone in need.

Create times with family, friends, and neighbors.

Gather family or friends and get a bowl of stones. Ask people something like "Where

have you noticed God this week?" As each shares, encourage them to take a stone from the bowl and put it on a little pile - a little memorial of God's working.

Or ask each person to bring something to share: an object, Bible verse, song, or story about how they've seen God that week.

Serve somewhere around the church

Returning to the Muddy Water illustration.

By now the water should be clear (not because we did anything, but because we gave it a Sabbath. During that Sabbath, God used physics to clear it up. All we did was give it time without agitation.

If we practice Keeping Sabbath, God will use it to bring clarity to our lives and to renew our strength, and grow our relationships.

Questions/comments?

Other resources:
Click on the link to get the Google Presentation file for this sermon.