Jesus and the Sabbath
Luke 6:1-11

Last week we saw how people tried to attack Jesus, by criticizing his disciples fasting habits. Instead of fasting, they were eating and drinking, and going to tax-collectors' parties, and given the importance of fasting, that criticism was a thinly veiled attack on Jesus' piety and commitment to God and His purposes.

But if fasting was important to the religious Jews, how much more important was the Sabbath.

A few weeks ago Kevin Anselmo told me a story about their recent trip to Israel. Their plane was due to land in Israel on Friday afternoon, before the start of the Sabbath, but there was a technical hitch before take-off this end and with a plane full of orthodox Jews, the pilot announced that the plane would be late taking off and the arrival time would now be after the start of the Sabbath. And Kevin describes how the plane just erupted with high-octane emotion.

Well it's that kind of emotion, that passionate commitment to the Sabbath, that we encounter here, as Luke follows up on Jesus statement that he has come to pour new wine into new wine skins, with two accounts that show what that might mean for Sabbath observance, the very cornerstone of Jewish religious practice.

Don't Rule Out Jesus
The teacher in Ecclesiastes (Eccles 1:9) wrote that 'there is nothing new under the sun', and that is certainly true when it comes to work and this feeling that it is never done, whether you're a mum at home, or at college, or in the workplace, there is always something more to do: 'If I just stay up a bit later, or go into the office a bit earlier, or work a bit harder, I'll get this bit more done.' Well, you're not the first person to feel that, and to the people of Israel, and to us, God throws the life-line of a Sabbath's rest, a pause, a break from the seemingly endless cycle of work. And this wasn't some quirk of Jewish culture. It's embedded in the Ten Commandments, at number four: Exodus 20:8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

The problem was that to this blessing of rest the Pharisees had added 39 additional rules to make sure no one broke it. Thirty-nine categories of activities forbidden on a Sabbath – and one of those was no harvesting, or threshing, or winnowing or preparing food.

And Jesus and His disciples are out for a Sabbath day's walk by the side of a field, and, v1, 'his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands.'

And to the Pharisees this was just the kind of evidence that proved the kind of man Jesus was - v2 'why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?' Because to them picking the heads of wheat, well, that was harvesting; and rubbing them in your hands is threshing, and throwing the husks away, that's winnowing, and then eating it – is preparing food.

And the disciples have managed to break the Sabbath four times in just a single mouthful! But of course it wasn't God's law they had broken: it was the Pharisees'.

And what were the Pharisees doing there anyway? It's almost comical to imagine them tip-toing along behind the hedgerow, spying on Jesus, following him at a safe distance, waiting to pounce on the smallest misdemeanor. Or maybe they were told about this by a bystander, who ran back to them with the juicy bit of secret intelligence, and they challenged Him on it later.

Whichever, here are men ready to catch Jesus out, should He fail to meet their self-made rules.

And Luke follows that incident up with another when Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on a different Sabbath. And Luke tells us in v7 that 'the Pharisees watched him' – he uses a word for watching closely, watching out of the corner of one's eye, spying on him, 'to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath.'

The fact that a man was there who's hand was withered, who likely struggled to provide for himself and his family, if he had one, wasn't sufficient to move them to compassion. No, they only wanted to know 'would Jesus heal on the Sabbath, because if He does, we've got Him.' You see whilst the Rabbis were wise enough to know that when life was in danger doctors could break the Sabbath, no one could claim that this man's life was in danger.

And Jesus, seeing the man with the withered hand, invites him to come to the front of the synagogue, v8: 'Come and stand here' he says. And having asked them in v9 'is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?' He tells the man to stretch out his hand. Jesus doesn't do anything that the Pharisees could interpret as work, doesn't touch him, or do some physio or anything active, just tells him to stretch out his hand. And the man does so and is instantaneously healed.

And the Pharisees go ballistic. Luke says in v 11 'they were filled with rage', literally, they were out of their minds with anger, they were incandescent with rage. A man has been healed, a life has been made whole again, and they are seething with anger.

And these were religious people. And yet they had so constructed their religion that when the Son of God appeared on the scene, they couldn't recognize Him, they ruled Him out of their thinking, because He didn't fit within their preconceived ideas about God. They wanted God like this, between these rigid lines of their making, within this box of their constructing, and when God appeared and wasn't like that, they refused to accept Him. They had managed to legislate Jesus out of their picture.

Now you're unlikely to have the same preconceived ideas as the Pharisees – especially when it comes to the Sabbath, in our work-aholic culture! But is it possible that as a western, liberal, free-thinker you could have certain ideas about God, preconceived notions about what He might be like, what He might

approve or disapprove of, that when you come face-to-face with God as He really is, for example in the Bible, that you reject Him and think, 'ah God's not like that!' and vote instead for a god of your making, just as these Pharisees prefered a god of their making?

Or what if you've been brought up in a religious culture, and you're coming to Christianity - grace-filled, Christ-filled Christianity - with all this baggage. Is it possible that this other stuff, like tradition, or religious rules or practices that have little to do with the Bible or with Jesus are in danger of screening Jesus out, and you end up choosing tradition over Jesus, as these Pharisees did?

It's always a danger: of preferring the old to Jesus; of preferring our ideas to His. That was the mistake these Pharisees made. Don't follow them. Don't rule Jesus out.

But in answering them, Jesus doesn't dismiss the Sabbath. He doesn't say, 'ah that's old hat, that's old wineskins'. Instead He restates what the Sabbath has always been about, and not what their old wine has made it.

Rest and Restoration

Firstly, the Sabbath was for rest.

Listen again to the 4th Commandment, Exodus 20:8-11: [8] "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. [9] Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, [10] but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. [11] 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."

The Sabbath was made to meet our need for rest, to stop people being exploited. Now, when you're caught up in the treadmill of work you might think you can't afford rest, but God says you can't afford not to rest, and by laying this down as a law He forces us to get real with ourselves one day a week and realize our need for down time.

Now, why does God lay this down as a law and not as a matter of choice – take a day off if you want to? Because He sees that the problem is our inner drive to keep working, to keep trying to improve or get ahead or justify ourselves by our work. Listen to what Moses says to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 5:15 "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

In other words, these Israelites have been released from slavery, when they were forced to work without rest, but without the provision, even the enforced provision, of the Sabbath, God knows they will revert back into a self-imposed slavery of work, work, work. And through Moses God says: 'I've delivered you from that, and to keep you from going back to that, I give you the Sabbath.' And if there was ever a generation that needed to hear that it's us.

And when the Pharisees criticize Jesus for allowing His disciples to pick and eat the grain Jesus doesn't revoke the Sabbath, instead He reminds them of a story about David. David is fleeing from King Saul, who's after his life. He comes to the Tabernacle, the House of God, seeking food for him and his men. The Priest says he doesn't have any except the Bread of the Presence, the holy bread, that was placed in the Holy Place of the tabernacle and changed once a week on the Sabbath. And despite the fact that only the Priests were allowed to eat the bread, the Priest gave it to David so he and his men, could eat it.

And Jesus is saying: look, the ceremonial law regarding the Bread of the Presence – which was from God - was set aside because David's men were in need, they were hungry. The Ceremonial Law gave way in the face of genuine human need. And that was one of God's laws, not just one of you Pharisees' laws. And you're criticizing my disciples for taking some grain because they were hungry? – well, their need is greater than your man-made rules. Because don't you know the Sabbath was made to meet man's legitimate need not prevent it?'

The Sabbath is a blessing, to meet our genuine needs, not a burden. And high up on that list of needs is proper rest.

Secondly, Jesus tells us that the Sabbath is for restoration.
When Jesus is in the synagogue, He knows they're trying to trap Him, yet He deliberately goes for the confrontation to drive home His point.

And His point is that the Sabbath is to do good, not harm, to save life not destroy it. And to demonstrate what it means to do good and save life, He restores this man's hand, He restores this man's life to full health. And that, Jesus says, is what the Sabbath is all about: Restoring lives. It's why in ancient Israel even the land was given 1 year off in seven, the Sabbath year, when it wasn't cultivated, so it could replenish its resources and be restored, so it could go on bearing crops for years to come. And putting down our tools, one day in seven, is for our restoration, to do us good and help us, restoring our lives, but also so we can use it for doing good and seeing restoration in others.

But the chief way the Sabbath helps rest and restore us is the third and greatest reason for the Sabbath, which is worship.

You see whilst a Sabbath rest – making yourself stop and rest, and take stock and take a breath, one day a week, is great for your own emotional and physical wellbeing, there's much more to it than that. You could hear that from a personal coach! The Sabbath was holy to the Lord, that means it's set apart to Him. We spend the week running around and God calls us back every week to ground ourselves back in Him, to fix our minds, our hearts on Him, to get His perspective on life, to see the things that really matter as He sees them.

If you spent every day in work working, you'd quickly think that what mattered was profit and performance and getting ahead. But the Sabbath grounds us back into God's reality, that in eternity it's Him who matters.

And putting your work down is a very tangible way of saying 'God, I trust you for this'. If you were a farmer taking a Sabbath it would mean you'd be saying 'God I trust you for my crops, I trust you that there's going to be enough food to feed the family' for us it's 'I trust you for my job security, I trust you for my career advancement, I trust you for our company's success.' And when we don't take a Sabbath rest we're effectively saying, 'God I don't trust you, I need to do this, I need to keep working, my life isn't safe in your hands, I don't trust your life-manual is right on this.' And students, that can be true for you too. When Su and I were at college we had a great thing going with the Christian Union. And we encouraged one another as a group– let's do this God's way. Let's work hard Monday to Saturday, but let's together take a Sabbath rest every Sunday - and doing it together kept us accountable. So, even in exam times, even in finals, even in Cambridge, where the pressure goes through the roof, come Sunday we'd be out sitting in the college gardens, punting on the river, taking picnics down to the meadows around Granchester, enjoying ourselves, getting restored, trusting God that He would sort the rest, that our lives were safe in His hands.

And the Sabbath is this practical expression: God, this is your day, to worship you, to hear from you, to reboot my life on you, to ground myself in you, and to trust you for the rest. Because it's not just our physical bodies or our minds that need to find rest and restoration. Our souls, our hearts need that too.

And here is what is so interesting about Jesus' response in the grain-picking episode. To vindicate his disciples Jesus uses the example of David taking the Bread of the Presence. And in doing that, David violated the ceremonial law. Yet there's no evidence that God or anyone else disapproved of that, and that's the whole point Jesus is making. But there is never any parallel to that with regard to God's moral law. There are no examples of a moral law being waved like 'o, you were hungry, well it's ok that you stole.' Or 'sure you had the urge so it's ok you committed adultery.' No, God's moral law is never relativized like that.

Why is that? Well, one answer to that is that there is this recognition that the ceremonial law was temporary, that something else was going to take it's place. That something better was coming. And having used David as an example, Jesus said to them in v5 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.' I'm the one who interprets the Sabbath, I'm the one who fulfills the Sabbath, the better thing that was coming has arrived. Because we need more than physical rest.

Inner turmoil, inner rest

You see we don't just need body rest, we need soul rest. In Hebrews 4 the writer to the Hebrews says in v9-10: 'So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His.' And the writer isn't talking there about physical labour, he's talking about entering God's rest, soul rest.

But what's God's rest? Well, we've got to go right back to the beginning of creation, and the first Sabbath rest: Genesis 1:31-2:3, God has finished the 6 days of creation, and Moses says, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

And on the seventh day God finished all his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."

Now why did God rest on the seventh day? It wasn't because He was tired, was it? It wasn't that He needed restoring in some way. God rested because He could look at creation and say 'it's good, it's very good', because there was nothing more to do.

And the reason our souls can be in such turmoil and we can be striving to improve and be such hard task-masters on ourselves is because we can't look at ourselves and say 'it's good, it's very good.' There's always something more to do, always something to prove and improve, and our hearts and souls, our lives are restless.

And that is why we need to enter God's rest, where we cease from our soul work, when we stop striving to prove ourselves to others, or to ourselves, when we stop trying to make ourselves acceptable to God by religious activity, rather we find rest by entering God's rest. And Jesus says, 'I'm the Lord of the Sabbath, come to me' – he says in Matthew 11:28 – 'come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' It's in me that you'll find rest, Jesus says, I'm the Sabbath for your souls.

But how does that work? If our inner turmoil comes from trying to find significance, from trying to prove ourselves, from trying to make ourselves right in the sight of God and others, how can we enter that rest if we can't work for it? If it's impossible to make ourselves right and get ourselves sorted?

Well, the response of the Pharisees in the synagogue gives us a clue to how God is going to make this possible. Jesus heals the man with the withered hand and the Pharisees are furious and then Luke tells us, v11, that they 'discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.' These men who were so keen no-one got healed on a Sabbath, start plotting Jesus' murder. And their plots come to fruition and Jesus' is crucified on a Friday, the day before the Sabbath. And the Bible tells us that it's in dying for us, in Jesus becoming sin for us, that we can become the righteousness of God in Him. That because He bore the punishment for our sin, we can be declared not guilty. So that when God looks at us, who put our trust in Jesus, He can say, and we can join Him, 'it's good, it's very good', and enter His rest. The rest of ceasing to prove ourselves, the rest of ceasing to try and earn our way to God, the rest of finding forgiveness and mercy and grace and health and wholeness of soul in Jesus. When Jesus cried out from the cross 'It is finished', He wasn't just meaning His work, He was also meaning our inner turmoil – 'it's finished, come, find your rest in me, the Lord of the Sabbath.'