

## Chapter 11: The Sabbath Rest of Jesus

*John 5:1–18*

John 5–6 marks a significant shift in the narrative of the Gospel. Up to this point, the worst response Jesus has met with in his ministry is apathetic disbelief. Even where people do not honor Jesus as the Prophet or believe in him as the Christ or the Son of God, they still find him interesting and potentially useful for their agendas. So, when Jesus cleanses the temple, we do not read of any more significant response than that the Jews demand the authority by which he performs his signs (John 2:18), and when Jesus tells them that he will raise up the temple they destroy in three days (John 2:19), they merely scoff at his answer (John 2:20) without doing anything worse. With this narrative in John 5, Jesus' opponents begin to recognize the serious threat he poses to their position and power, and they escalate their opposition accordingly.

We saw the first hint that the tide might be turning against Jesus in John 4:1–3, where the Pharisees began to pay more attention to his increasing popularity among the people. When Jesus learned this, he left Judea for Galilee, and now in John 5, when Jesus returns to Jerusalem, the religious leaders (“the Jews”) begin to oppose Jesus directly for a variety of reasons (John 5:18). Then, when Jesus returns to Galilee in John 6, he will experience the intense support of a large crowd of Jews who at one point seek to make Jesus king by force (John 6:15), but who ultimately turn against him and abandon him (John 6:66). In John 5–6, we see the opposition against Jesus rising in both Judea and in Galilee—opposition that will culminate in our Lord's eventual condemnation and crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> The story of Jesus' healing at the pool of Bethesda, then, identifies the point where this opposition begins: with the healing of a lame man on the Sabbath. The Jews begin opposing Jesus because they believe that he breaks the Sabbath and that he blasphemously claims equality with God in the process (John 5:18). In reality, Jesus *keeps* the Sabbath by restoring restful work to those carrying the burden of inactivity and fruitlessness.

### **The Burden of Inactivity and Fruitlessness (John 5:1–9a)**

In John 2, after Jesus performed the first sign in Cana of turning the water into wine, John tells us that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover a feast of the Jews (John 2:13). Here again, after Jesus performs a second sign in Cana by healing the son of the Capernaum official by his word (John 4:54), John again tells us that Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for “a feast of the Jews” (John 5:1). This time, John does not specify which feast Jesus is attending, for the feast itself is not central in the narrative. John apparently only tells us about the feast to explain why Jesus is returning to Jerusalem, especially since he will be back in Galilee in John 6.<sup>2</sup> The worship calendar issue at the heart of this story revolves around the weekly observance of the Sabbath, not the annual celebration of any particular feast.<sup>3</sup>

John describes a pitiful setting, where a multitude of invalids—including people who are blind,

lame, and paralyzed—lie around the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate. The sick man suggests in John 5:7 that this multitude expects that the pool can heal when the water is stirred up, although the stirring of the water may have arisen from a spring feeding the pool or some other natural cause.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the stirring of the pool may have had a supernatural cause, and it is the supernatural explanation that seems to have found its way as a late addition into several ancient manuscripts that add some or all of these lines: “...waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had” (John 5:3b–4).<sup>5</sup> The best manuscripts, however, do not include this explanation, and textual scholars believe that this explanation was perhaps copied into later manuscripts from notes that some scribe wrote into the margins of a manuscript to reflect a popular belief of the story, but that were not actually part of John’s original manuscript.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we have little reason to engage with the idea of an angel stirring the water. Even if an angel were behind this stirring, John did not deem that factor important enough to mention explicitly in his Gospel, so we should direct our attention to what John *does* want us to read.

### “Do you want to be healed?”

Among this multitude of sick people, Jesus singles out one man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years (John 5:5). We do not know how Jesus comes to know this information about the man—whether by a supernatural insight, or by a conversation with someone who knows the man—but Jesus perceives that this man has suffered for an extremely long time. Jesus, then, asks the man, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 4:6). Although this question sounds as though Jesus is testing the man’s psychological willingness and readiness to be healed, the man’s psychology plays no further role in this passage, so it is unlikely that Jesus is seeking to probe this man’s desire.<sup>7</sup>

Notice, though, that the man does not directly answer Jesus’ question. Rather than responding to Jesus by telling him, “Yes, I want to be healed,” the man instead bemoans his inability to get into the water: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me” (John 5:7). Now, we should keep in mind that this man has suffered greatly for a very long time. It is perhaps not surprising that he does not respond to Jesus’ question with hope that he might be soon healed, for healing has eluded him for nearly four decades at this point. From our perspective it might seem obvious that Jesus’ question “contains a promise of help,” but it would be unreasonable to expect this man to discern that promise from Jesus’ question.

In the same way, when we attempt to serve and minister to people who have dealt with serious abuse, trauma, poverty, illness, and hardship, we should not expect too much from them initially. When people endure pain and suffering for as long as this man does, that misery shapes their outlook in significant, pitiable ways. Jesus does not show compassion to this man *on the basis* of his sufficiently optimistic outlook on life, but *in spite* of these “crotchety grumblings of an old and not very perceptive man who thinks he is answering a stupid question.” Jesus does not excuse the man’s behavior, but he seems to understand the man’s suffering in such a way that does not prevent him from showing the man mercy.

### “And at once the man was healed”

Rather than engaging in a debate to try to make the man improve his sour attitude, Jesus

commands him to “Get up, take up your bed, and walk” (John 5:8), and the man was healed “at once” (John 5:9). With this word for “at once,” John puts a “special stress” on the instantaneous character of the man’s healing.<sup>10</sup> Jesus does not desire any more conversation, debate, or dialogue with this man, but without further ado, he heals the man straightaway. Pay careful attention to what John records for us in this narrative. The man does not meet Jesus halfway. He does not start practicing the power of positive thinking. He does not name his healing in order to claim it. He speaks no word of faith. We see no sign of repentance or remorse starting to displace his bitter complaining. It does not even sound like the man is looking at Jesus, but that he still has his eyes fixed longingly on the pool, unwilling to risk missing the next stirring up of the pool to engage in a conversation with this stranger.

This man, then, offers a perfect picture of the state we are in when Jesus rescues us. We like to think of our salvation as a two party accomplishment, where we start to come to our senses enough to move back to Jesus, who rewards our good choice of repentance by forgiving us. Instead, what the Bible tells us is that we receive even our repentance, our faith, and our desire for Christ as a gift from God (Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 2:12–13), so that everything we have, we receive as a gift (1 Cor. 4:7). We are far more bitter, petty, and entitled than we like to think we are, and understanding this helps us to dispel entirely any notion that God loves us because we are in some way lovable. God loves us in spite of our unlovable, sinful attitudes, and he heals our souls even while our eyes are glued to our own pools of Bethesda that we believe to be our only hope. The Bible nowhere teaches that God helps those who help themselves; rather, the Bible teaches that God graciously helps those who have no interest whatsoever in God’s help because they are too busy making a miserable wreck of their lives by *trying* (and failing) to help themselves. God saves us in spite of our efforts, not because of them.

### The Burden of Fruitlessness

But more than this, pay careful attention to the nature of this man’s condition when Jesus heals him: he has been an *invalid*, unable to walk or to carry anything. In light of the Sabbath discussion that arises from this healing, this detail is crucial, since according to the legalistic, twisted view of the Sabbath, this man was formerly one of the best Sabbath keepers in the world! If we define Sabbath-keeping by what we do *not* do on the Sabbath, then it would be better to suffer from a coma than to worship God and to engage in acts of mercy.

In reality, this man carried a bigger burden—the burden of inactivity and fruitlessness—through thirty-eight years of Sabbaths than he does on this day that Jesus tells him to get up and to carry his mat. Through nearly *two thousand* Sabbath days, this man was unable to enjoy the goodness of God’s creation, which is what God himself did on the first Sabbath (Gen. 1:31–2:3). This man, an image bearer of God, was reduced to waiting helplessly for water in a pool to be stirred up so that he might be restored to wholeness in his health. He could not work during the week, and he could not even keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week, despite being unable to walk. Jesus discerned what should have been obvious to anyone: this man’s inactivity was not a result of the blessings of the Sabbath day, but of creation’s curse to languish under futility and fruitlessness, thorns and thistles, pain and plight (Gen. 3:17–19). True Sabbath-keeping demands not leaving this man in his suffering, but rather *healing* him (if possible), which is exactly what Jesus does.

## Keeping the Sabbath (John 5:9b–15)

John waits until this point to drop his bombshell: “Now that day was the Sabbath” (John 5:9b). Jesus could have picked any day whatsoever to heal this man, but he deliberately chooses to do this work on the Sabbath. Make no mistake about it—Jesus intentionally picks a fight. It is difficult, though, to judge which is the greater wonder in this passage: the fact that a lame man is healed instantaneously by the word of Jesus, or the fact that the Jewish religious leaders ignore this miracle to focus on the fact that the man is carrying his bed around. The same Jewish leaders who demanded that Jesus provide a miraculous sign in order to prove his authority to cleanse the temple (John 2:18) do not even mention in passing the fact that they have witnessed a great sign in the healing of this man. Rather than marveling at the mercy of Jesus to heal this man’s thirty-eight years of suffering, Jesus is nothing more than a man “who broke their traditions, who had to be punished.”<sup>11</sup> They are utterly blind to the sign that Jesus has performed in their midst.

### Healing on the Sabbath

How, then, do the Jews miss the point so badly? Why do they believe that this act of mercy constitutes Sabbath-breaking? Is it possible even that Jesus may have gotten a bit carried away so that he has perhaps violated some aspect of the Sabbath law? This is no small matter, for Jesus says that he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it in its entirety (Matt. 5:17–20). If Jesus is guilty of violating the Sabbath in this case, even by the smallest degree, then he cannot fulfill the law—and if he cannot fulfill the law, then he cannot set the law’s condemnation aside by going to the cross as a spotless sacrifice. If Jesus has broken the law, then his eventual crucifixion will be for the righteous condemnation of *him*, and he will not be able to bear upon his shoulders the punishment for *our* sin as a substitute. The accusations of the Jewish religious leaders, if true, would undercut and invalidate the message of the gospel.

According to the teaching and traditions of the Jewish rabbis, this is a clear-cut case of Sabbath violation. Rabbinical law “clarified” the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy by defining thirty-nine areas of work forbidden for the Sabbath, “including taking or carrying anything from one domain to another (except for cases of compassion, such as carrying a paralytic).”<sup>12</sup> By carrying his bed, this man is directly violating the definition of Sabbath-keeping defined by Jewish tradition. And indeed, there is some possible support for this idea from Jeremiah 17:19–27, where God sends Jeremiah to preach to the people of Jerusalem that they must keep the Sabbath—that is, they must *not* carry burdens:

“Thus says the LORD: Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.” (Jer. 17:21–22)

If his people did not obey this law, God warned: “But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched” (Jer. 17:27)

## Keeping the Sabbath

Nevertheless, what God commands through Jeremiah is a completely different kind of work than what Jesus instructs the healed man to do. The kinds of “burdens” that the people were bearing on the Sabbath—the burdens that they were bringing “in by the gates of Jerusalem”—were goods that they intended to sell for their businesses (cf. Neh. 13:15–22).<sup>13</sup> God commands that we should confine to six days our work, our burden bearing, and our profiting from work: “Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work...” (Ex. 20:9–10). In flagrant disregard of this commandment, God condemned his people for adding a seventh day of *work* where they could expand their profits just a little bit more instead of keeping the Sabbath holy by resting from their labor.

The Jewish leaders, however, fail to make a critical distinction between the greed of merchants and the response of the grateful man who carries his bed for the first time in thirty-eight years. This is a clear example of where a “hedge” of legalism built around the law by adding traditions and extra requirements does not help God’s people to keep the law, but the opposite. In this case, this buffer of legalism keeps God’s people from glorifying God for his great works in their midst. No matter what our intentions may be, legalism always works this way, because legalism thrives on the arrogance of believing that *we* can define the law better than God can. Rather than making us holier than God, legalism blinds us from seeing the true holiness of God. They are not keeping God’s Sabbath but only their own traditions.

## “Sin no more”

The man defends himself by explaining that Jesus had told him to carry his bed: “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk’” (John 5:11). There is some question here about whether this man is blaming Jesus to escape trouble, or whether he is trying to give the glory to Jesus for healing him, even though he does not know the name of Jesus at this point in his interrogation (John 5:13). What does this man believe about Jesus? Is he grateful? Does this miracle lead him to believe in Jesus?

The only clue we get about the spiritual condition of this man comes when Jesus finds the man later in the temple and says, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). Nothing else in this passage makes any reference to a connection between the sin of this man and his illness, but Jesus seems to suggest that some connection exists. Not every affliction arises as a result of sin, as Jesus will later explain (John 9:3), but what about this man’s sickness? Has he suffered for thirty-eight years because of some sin, and if so, is Jesus warning him not to return to his sin, lest he suffer even more in the future?<sup>14</sup>

This is, in fact, a real possibility. We read at many points in Scripture that some sicknesses do arise as a result of sin (e.g., 2 Chron. 16:12, 26:19–21; Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 11:30; James 5:14–15), even though we are also told that not every sickness comes as a result of sin (Job 2:3–10; John 9:3; 2 Cor. 12:7–10). Furthermore, modern medical knowledge confirms this fact in some cases, so that we know that some diseases are transmitted through sexual sins, and that certain kinds of lung, heart, and liver damage can arise from abusing substances like tobacco and alcohol. Still, while we cannot exclude the possibility that some instances of suffering, disease, and death do arise from specific sins, neither can we definitively say that everything and anything bad can be traced directly back to the

victim's own sin. We live in a broken world because of the sin of *Adam* (Rom. 5:12) so that the effects of the curse touch us, the descendants of Adam, even without a direct connection back to something that *we personally* have done.

While Jesus does not comment about whether or not this man's sin in the past contributed to his sickness, Jesus does imply that there will be a clear connection between whether this man continues to sin and whether he will suffer something worse *in the future*. This is not an empty threat. Jesus is warning him that further sinning will lead to something worse than what he has suffered for the last thirty-eight years. It is important to recognize that Jesus is telling the man not to *continue* sinning, which is clear from the grammar as a present tense imperative. Hendriksen writes:

In our interpretation of this passage we disagree with those commentators—and there are many!—who draw the conclusion that the Lord meant to say, “More than thirty-eight years ago you committed a sin. As a result, you became physically deformed and paralyzed. Now I warn you not to sin again, or something worse may happen to you.” On the contrary, the present tense of the verb...so that we translate, “No longer continue in sin,” rather shows that Jesus is referring not to what supposedly happened more than thirty-eight years ago but to *the present* condition of the man. Right now he was in the state of being unreconciled with God. Jesus knew this. Hence, he warns him not to continue in this condition. Otherwise there is in store for him something worse than the physical illness from which so recently he had been delivered. Is it not probably that by “something worse” Jesus meant to indicate eternal punishment? From this it is clear that the account does not contain a single word with reference to the cause of the man's physical illness.<sup>15</sup>

But why should Jesus *need* to warn the man not to continue sinning? Shouldn't this man be so overwhelmed with gratitude that he will now seek to follow Jesus all the remaining days of his life?

Apparently not. The text does not give us many details, but the tone this conversation is altogether different from the very similar healing story we read in John 9, where the man born blind explicitly comes to faith in Jesus (John 9:35–38). Tragically, Jesus has performed a remarkable miracle for the benefit of this man, but the man still does not believe. Unlike the Samaritan woman who believed when Jesus exposed her sin, and unlike the official from Capernaum who believed the word of Jesus to heal his son, this man apparently does not come to a belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Instead, he sides with the religious leaders by telling “the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him” (John 5:15), prefiguring one of Jesus' own disciples who will ignore all that he has witnessed regarding Jesus by betraying his master to the religious leaders (John 13:21–30).<sup>16</sup> Just like the Galileans who eat Jesus' bread (John 6:1–14) but refuse to believe in him as the bread of life (John 6:35, 66), this man receives healing for his sickness but rejects healing for his soul. Ignoring Jesus' warning, he continues in his sin and puts himself in danger of something much worse than his decades-long disease: he puts himself in danger of the fires of hell.

### Beware Something Worse

Deathbed conversions are common because one of the ways we procrastinate repentance is by ignoring our mortality. When we can no longer do so, the threat of eternal judgment looms unavoidably before us, so that we feel compelled to make peace with God before we die. The thing

about deathbed conversions, though, is that sometimes people do not die, but they instead get well. In such cases, we find out quickly whether the convert is genuinely transformed by their experience of the mercy of God, or whether they intend to keep on sinning, regardless of whether something worse may happen. Do we learn gratitude in the face of our experience, or are our hearts hardened so that we do not beware something worse?

Even if we do not face an actual deathbed, we encounter the mercy of God constantly in our lives. Each time we take a breath, and each time our heart beats, we are enjoying the blessing of the forbearance of God as he patiently withholds the righteous judgment that we so readily deserve (Rom. 3:23–25). Sometimes, we experience God’s mercy by receiving what we need—healing from an illness, the provision of a job, the companionship of a friend, or food to eat when we are hungry. Other times, we experience God’s mercy in avoiding the suffering that others endure. In such cases, God is not rewarding us or giving us good gifts because we deserve them; rather, he is reminding us at every turn that he is a gracious God who shows mercy to his people. Each gift of God’s mercy should not lead us to believe that we are charmed or indestructible, but rather to see the necessity of our own repentance. God’s kindness is intended to lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4), for unless we repent, we likewise will perish (Luke 13:1–5). Rather than superstitiously “thanking your lucky stars” or “knocking on wood,” and rather than arrogantly writing off God’s kindness toward you as something you deserve, what can you thank God for today?

Additionally, we should not overlook the fact that Jesus gives us a principle for ministry of mercy to the poor, sick, and needy by meeting this man’s physical needs before addressing his spiritual needs. It is not that Jesus always takes care of someone’s physical needs before their spiritual needs, since in the story that comes directly before this one, Jesus pressed on the royal official’s lack of faith before he agreed to heal that man’s son. Jesus exercises pastoral sensitivity and discretion in the way that he approaches individuals. Nevertheless, he does not exclusively address physical needs, nor does he exclusively address spiritual needs, but Jesus seeks to heal the whole person. In the same way, the local church must address both the physical and the spiritual needs of people, which is why Jesus commanded that his church appoint *both* elders (1 Tim. 3:1–7) who do not deviate from the preaching of the word, even to serve food to the hungry (Acts 6:2, 4), *as well as* deacons (1 Tim. 3:8–13) so that physical needs like sickness and hunger are not ignored. It does not profit a man anything to give him the whole world if he loses his soul to spiritual sickness (Mark 8:36), but God created us to be whole people whose bodies are important are important too. In Jesus’ own ministry, our Lord sets before us the example of dedicating himself not only to preaching, but to the ministry of mercy by caring for the poor and the sick.

## **The Restful Work of Sabbath-Keeping (John 5:16–18)**

Earlier, we differentiated the “burden” of this man from the burdens that God commanded his people not to bear on the Sabbath. Jesus did *not* command the healed man to violate the Sabbath (only the traditions of the elders are violated), and carrying his mat was part of the way in which people could see that Jesus had performed a miraculous sign in their midst. Still, Jesus has more to teach about the Sabbath at the end of this story in John 5:16–18—and even still more that he will explain in John 9, when he performs another miracle of healing on the Sabbath day. Nevertheless, John wants us to know that a significant conflict has begun here: “And this was why the Jews were

persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath” (John 5:16). At the root of this controversy is a simple question: Who gets to be Lord of the Sabbath—the religious leaders, or Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Jesus answers the religious leaders with this extraordinary claim: “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (John 5:17). Three questions arise from this claim: (1) In what sense is God the Father working? (2) In what sense is Jesus claiming to work? and (3) What do we learn about our own participation in the Sabbath from what Jesus says? Let us examine each of these questions in turn.

### “My Father is working...”

When Jesus speaks of the work of his Father, he is alluding to the testimony of Genesis 2:1–3: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished 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.” On one level, the text of Genesis is very clear that God has finished not only the seven days of creation, but that he both finished and rested from *all* his work in creation. But on another level, God certainly could not stop working altogether on the seventh day, for he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). If for a moment God stopped *working* (even on the Sabbath day), the entire universe would collapse. But if God does indeed work on the Sabbath, then does God violate his own Sabbath?<sup>17</sup>

The Jews recognized this dilemma, and they rejected the idea that God breaks the Sabbath. The rabbis explained the solution to this dilemma by acknowledging that God never carries anything outside of his own domain, since the entire universe falls within his domain, and he never lifts anything higher than his own stature, which is infinite.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, God works, but not in a way that violates the Sabbath or that contradicts the rest that he enjoys in Genesis 2:1–3. Certainly, this is true, but they developed these explanations out of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the Sabbath—the very misunderstanding at the heart of their persecution of Jesus for healing a lame man on the Sabbath.

### “...and I am working”

Jesus, then, claims the same thing for himself—that just as his Father works, so also he is working. He does not abolish the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, telling us that we need not worry about keeping the Sabbath holy. Instead, Jesus is arguing that what he does *keeps* the Sabbath in a better, truer sense than the religious leaders were doing with all of their legalistic traditions that they had superimposed on top of God’s commandment concerning the Sabbath. There is a paradox here: Jesus models the faithful observance of Sabbath rest by working, just as his Father works.

William Hendriksen explains this paradox powerfully:

Instead of looking upon it as a day of special consecration unto works of gratitude for the salvation which God had given, they viewed it as a day of cessation from all (common) work with a view to the salvation which man must merit. For them the sabbath meant idleness; for Christ it meant work. Nevertheless, for them it constituted hardship; for him, rest. As they saw it, man was made for the sabbath; as he knew it, the sabbath was made for man.<sup>19</sup>



Jesus engaged in restful work, not idle hardship! John Calvin explains this further:

What Christ insists upon is this, that the holy rest which was enjoined by the Law of Moses is not disturbed when we are employed in works of God. And for this reason he excuses not only his own action, but also the action of the man who carried his bed; for it was an appendage, and — as we might say — a part of the miracle, for it was nothing else than an approbation of it. Besides, if thanksgiving and the publication of the divine glory be reckoned among the works of God, it was not a profanation of the Sabbath to testify the grace of God by feet and hands.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus employs himself in the works of God, and when the man picks up his bed, he is bearing witness to the reality of the great work that God has done through his Son, Jesus Christ.

In addition to defending this work on the Sabbath, the Jews recognize the Jesus is claiming something much bigger: equality with God (John 5:18). If God is the Father of Jesus, then Jesus is of the same substance with his Father. As the Son of God, he is not a part of creation, below God, but on equal footing with God the Father. Just as the Jewish leaders were blind to the miracle of healing that Jesus performs, they are blind to the truth of this claim, and they reject it as blasphemy, seeking to kill Jesus for saying this. They eventually succeed, but they willfully refuse to recognize that by doing so they will be crucifying the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). We will pick up this issue in more detail in our next study, Lord willing.

### The Restful Work of Sabbath-Keeping

What Jesus teaches us, then, is not that we can disregard the commandment to rest on the Sabbath. Nevertheless, he tells us that Sabbath rest takes a very particular shape: participating in the works of God. We refrain from common work one day each week not because our rest constitutes work that will earn us righteousness in the sight of God, but to celebrate the work that God has done to heal his broken creation. The point of the Sabbath is not to keep us from *all* work, but from the common, worldly labor that we do throughout the week to provide for our material needs. That does not mean that common labor is bad any more than God's work during the first six days of creation was bad—quite the opposite! God *loves* our work, because God uses our work as a part of his providential care for his creation. God uses farmers to provide food for the world, teachers to educate the world, law enforcement professionals to protect the world, and manufacturers to meet the world's needs. Our work becomes the “fingers of God” to care for the world.<sup>21</sup>

Just as God rested from his good work on the seventh day, so he calls us to rest from our good work in order to set aside one day of the week as holy. After the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday, God's people began to observe the *Christian* Sabbath day on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10).<sup>22</sup> In light of the finished work of Jesus Christ, we rest *before* our work instead of than resting *after* our work. Then, rather than reclining in burdensome idleness and inactivity on the Sabbath, God commands that we engage ourselves in three kinds of work: (1) duties of necessity that cannot wait until after the Sabbath, but primarily (2) worship, and (3) acts of mercy.<sup>23</sup> In worship, we pray, sing, read God's word, preach God's word, and receive the Lord's Supper to praise and glorify God for his works of creation and salvation. In mercy, we seek to minister to others in

need with a view toward their full restoration as image-bearers of God in the way that Jesus himself serves this lame man in John 5. The work that God commands we do on the Sabbath, then, focuses on *God's* works of creation and salvation, while we lay aside *our* common work of toiling by the sweat of our brow in the cursed ground amidst thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17–19). We rest on the Sabbath not through complete inactivity but through entering into *God's* works.

We are not working to earn something, for Christ has already purchased our salvation through his life, death, and resurrection. Instead, we keep the Sabbath by working at worship and mercy in response to God's work in our lives, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we remember what God has done through the work of our worship and mercy, we find the true Sabbath rest that God promises to his people until the day that God brings us into our eternal rest in the new heavens and the new earth (Heb. 3:7–4:13).

## Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to know that God does not love you because you are somehow lovable? How does that idea undermine your pride? How does that idea uplift your depression and anxieties? How does that idea compel you to love other unlovable people?
2. What kind of rest does God seek from us on the Sabbath day? Why is it important to rest from our common work on the Sabbath?
3. What can you thank God for today? Have you overlooked or taken for granted his mercy and kindness toward you in some area? What would your life look like if you lived in perpetual gratitude, thanking God for everything he provides in his kindness and mercy?
4. What kind of work does God seek from us on the Sabbath day? How does God use worship and acts of mercy in our lives to reorient us toward his work of salvation? How do you use the Sabbath to enter into the works of God?

## Notes

1. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 181–82.
2. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 241.
3. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 635–36.
4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 242.
5. ESV footnote.
6. See Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 179, and Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 242.
7. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 243.
8. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 192.
9. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 243.
10. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 193.
11. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 369.

12. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 244.
13. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 366–67.
14. So Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 245–46.
15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 195.
16. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 644.
17. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 375.
18. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 247.
19. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 193.
20. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, 195–96. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xi.iii.html>>
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22. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 21.7.
23. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 21.8.