

## **“The Sabbath” (Luke 14:1–6)**

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Here’s something that most people don’t know about me: I have a ringing in my ears. It’s technically called tinnitus. I’m not sure exactly when it started, but I know that I noticed it sometime in 2006 or 2007. I was at home, at night, reading a book. It was quiet and no appliances other than the refrigerator were running. Yet I heard this high pitch. I got up and went to the refrigerator, which was relatively new, to see if it was making the sound. It wasn’t the refrigerator. I tried to think of any other electrical device that might be emitting that annoying, high pitch. It only slowly dawned on me that the ringing wasn’t outside me but was inside me. And it hasn’t stopped since that time. I suppose I tune out the noise when I’m busy or focusing on something. But it’s always there, sometimes a little louder, and sometimes a little softer. But I haven’t experienced complete quiet in over a decade.

Recently, I read an article about tinnitus online.<sup>1</sup> The author of the article claims that between 15 to 20 percent of people will experience tinnitus in their lifetime. Then the author claimed that tinnitus was simply a symptom of a larger problem: noise pollution. Noise pollution leads to stress, which negatively affects our health: “Trying to filter unwanted sounds creates a chemical spike in our bodies. Glucocorticoid enzyme levels rise by as much as 40 percent when we’re separating noise from signal, resulting in fatigue and stress.” And I can relate to that: I’m sure I experience more stress now than when I did before the ringing in my ears. And there’s a lot of stress that is caused from all kinds of noise: noise from my family and, more importantly, noise from the world. And the noise I have in mind is largely metaphorical. We’re bombarded with all kinds of messages that assault us, causing stress. It’s hard to unplug from the world in order to find rest.

Perhaps your issue isn’t noise. Maybe you experience stress because of physical pain, or stressful relationships, or financial concerns. Jobs are often the source of great stress and fatigue. All of us have some source of worry, things that drain our energy. We live in a restless world. Yet we all long for rest, for healing and wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Beres, “Tinnitus and the Deafening Problem of Noise Pollution,” *Big Think*, May 16, 2019, <https://bigthink.com/politics-current-affairs/tinnitus>, accessed May 31, 2019.

I mention this because today, as we continue to study the Gospel of Luke, we're going to see once again that Jesus enters into controversy on the Sabbath. Once again, he heals someone on the seventh day, the Jewish day of rest. And once again, the religious leaders of the day seem to be opposed to Jesus.

Today, what I want to do is look at the short passage before us, Luke 14:1–6, and explain what's happening there. Then, I want to consider two things: how Jesus gives us rest, and how we practice Sabbath. The two are intertwined.

So, without further ado, let's read Luke 14:1–6:

<sup>1</sup> One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. <sup>2</sup> And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. <sup>3</sup> And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" <sup>4</sup> But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. <sup>5</sup> And he said to them, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" <sup>6</sup> And they could not reply to these things.<sup>2</sup>

It is the Sabbath day, and Jesus is eating in the house of a Pharisee. The Pharisees were influential lay leaders in Israel at this time. This isn't just any Pharisee, but a leader of some kind. It's surprising that Jesus would eat in the house of a Pharisee, because for quite some time now, Jesus and the Pharisees have been in conflict. Tension between the two has been mounting. We're told at the end of Luke 11 that "the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say" (Luke 11:53–54). In other words, the Pharisees and the experts of the Jewish law were trying to trap Jesus, hoping to catch him doing or saying something wrong so they could charge him with a crime. They did this not because Jesus ever did anything wrong—he never failed, he never sinned, he never committed one act of evil, selfishness, greed, covetousness, or all the things that you and I do. No, they did this because they hated Jesus, because they were jealous of the attention he was getting, and because they didn't believe that Jesus was the Christ, or Messiah. They certainly didn't believe that he is the Son of God. These Jewish religious leaders were trying to set a trap for Jesus, and Jesus must have known that.

Yet Jesus goes to this man's house and eats with him. Meal scenes are very common in Luke (Luke 5:29; 7:36; 9:16; 10:38; 11:37; 22:14; 24:30). So are parables that talk about meals

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

(Luke 14:7–11, 12–24; 15:11–32). Meals are important because they’re intimate gatherings where something vital—life-sustaining food—is shared. Jesus is willing to dine with his enemies, even enemies who “were watching him carefully,” which suggests that they’re lying in wait, hoping to catch him doing something wrong. The Pharisees are embodying Psalm 37:32: “The wicked watches for the righteous and seeks to put him to death.”

And when Jesus eats with the Pharisees, there among them is a man who has dropsy. Dropsy is an old-fashioned term for a type of edema, a swelling of tissue. Specifically, the body retains water, and this man’s limbs and abdomen would be obviously swollen. This condition is sometimes known as “thirsty dropsy,” because people who had it would have an unquenchable thirst. Often, this is associated with chronic heart failure. Strangely, though a person with dropsy would be full of water, they wanted more and more, and their thirst was never satisfied. That’s why dropsy was often associated with gluttony and greed. According to a theologian from 1,500 years ago, Caesarius of Arles (c.468–542), “all avaricious and covetous men seem to be sick with dropsy. Just as a man with dropsy thirsts all the more, the more he drinks, so the avaricious and covetous man runs a risk by acquiring more and is not satisfied with it when it does abound.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus sees this man, and it appears that he has compassion on him. We’re told he “responded to the lawyers and the Pharisees,” though they didn’t say anything. He’s probably responding to their thoughts, which he knows. He knows that they want to catch him working on the Sabbath, and in their minds healing this man would count as work. Jesus has already healed people on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–11; 13:10–17). Just three weeks ago, I talked a bit about the Old Testament background to the Sabbath.<sup>4</sup> To recap quickly, in Genesis 1, we are told that God made or fashioned the world in six days. At the beginning of Genesis 2, we’re told that he rested. But that doesn’t mean God became really tired. And it doesn’t mean that he stopped working. God continually sustains his creation at every moment. Without God, the universe would cease to exist. And in John 5, when Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, he says quite clearly, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (John 5:17). God’s seventh day has no end.<sup>5</sup> In other words, God works on the Sabbath. But what rest meant was that everything was rightly

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<sup>3</sup> *Sermo* CCXXII, quoted in M. A. Riva et al, “The ‘Thirsty Dropsy’: Early Descriptions in Medical and Non-Medical Authors of Thirst as Symptom of Chronic Heart Failure,” *International Journal of Cardiology* 245 (2017): 187–189.

<sup>4</sup> See the May 12, 2019 sermon, “You Are Freed,” available at <https://wbcommunity.org/luke>.

<sup>5</sup> The seventh day, in Genesis 2:1–3, lacks the phrase “there was evening and there was morning” that serves as a refrain in Genesis 1, marking the end of each day.

ordered and in harmony, and God could, metaphorically speaking, sit on his throne and survey his creation, ruling over it.

The law given to the Israelites stated that they should keep every seventh day as a Sabbath, a day of rest, a day to cease from their labors. This is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The Israelites were to do this after the pattern of Genesis 1:3–2:3 (Exod. 20:8–11) and also as a reminder that God brought them out of brutal, oppressive work as slaves in Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15). Jewish leaders took the Sabbath seriously and required that people not work, even creating a list of all kinds of things forbidden on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was one of the distinctive marks of Judaism, along with circumcision and dietary laws.

Now, Jesus knows all of this, and he knows the Pharisees' hearts. And he knows that this man who has dropsy isn't in an emergency. He didn't need to be healed on the Sabbath. If Jesus wanted to heal him, he could have waited a day. But Jesus plans to heal him. So, first he asks, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" The Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest, a day of healing. It wasn't supposed to be something that turned into legalism. The Pharisees and the experts of the law don't answer Jesus. If they say no, they will appear not to care for this man who has dropsy. If they say yes, they can't trap Jesus. So, they remain silent. And then Jesus heals the man.

Jesus then chastises them by asking a question: "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" If these men had an animal that was caught in a well, they would pull it out. If they had a son who had fallen into a well, of course they would pull him out. Jesus seems to be implying, "How much more should you heal a child of God on the Sabbath day." Once again, the Pharisees and experts of the law couldn't say anything. Their trap had failed. They knew Jesus did the right thing, but they couldn't admit it, for fear of making Jesus look good.

It's clear that Jesus doesn't violate the Sabbath. He is actually fulfilling its intent. And it's clear whose side God is on, the side of Jesus, the one who is miraculously healing people. The people who should have been the godliest have set a trap for the Son of God, which reveals how much they're actually opposed to God. And their trap failed. But they won't quit trying. Their conflict with Jesus will continue, and they will find a way to put Jesus on the cross.

But for now, let's think about this: Why does Jesus continually heal on the Sabbath? And why does Luke tell us about this multiple times? Jesus didn't have to heal on the Sabbath. These weren't life-or-death situations.

I think the answer is that Jesus came to fulfill the Sabbath. Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament law, to obey the demands of the old covenant that Israel failed to obey (Matt. 5:17). Jesus does what Adam and Israel couldn't do, perfectly loving God and loving other people, perfectly obeying God's commands. Jesus is the end of the law, the one to whom the law pointed (Rom. 10:4). And Jesus not only perfectly obeyed the Sabbath, including God's intent for that holy day, but he also fulfilled its purpose. I think it's clear from the New Testament that the Sabbath day not only pointed back to the seventh day of creation, but also pointed forward to Jesus, the one who gives us true rest.

The word Sabbath basically means rest.<sup>6</sup> In Matthew's Gospel, before one of the occasions when Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). And immediately after that, we're told that Jesus' disciples picked grain on the Sabbath and Jesus healed on the Sabbath. He told the Pharisees that he is the "lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8). It seems that Jesus was trying to teach that the Sabbath, just like the temple and the animal sacrifices performed there, were meant to foreshadow Jesus. They had a purpose for a time. A large part of their purpose was to point to Christ. But now that he had come, their day was ending.

Significantly, the apostle Paul addresses the Sabbath. Paul was greatly concerned that Jewish and Gentile Christians be one the same footing. That meant teaching about the law. In Galatians, he makes it quite clear that we are not under the law. He was alarmed by the false teaching that said you need to put your faith in Jesus and obey the law in order to be justified, or declared in the right with God. So, Paul writes, in Galatians 4:9–11:

<sup>9</sup> But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? <sup>10</sup> You observe days and months and seasons and years! <sup>11</sup> I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew noun translated as "Sabbath" (*šabbāt*) is related to the verb *šābat*, which means to cease or rest.

“Days and months and seasons and years” must refer not only to Jewish festivals like the Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles, and things like the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee, but also to the weekly Sabbath.

In Colossians 2:16–17: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” The Sabbath and the other holy days of Judaism were only shadows. They were things that foreshadowed the coming of Jesus. Now that Jesus has come, we should celebrate the substance, not the shadow. Jesus is the main event, and the Sabbath was the undercard. The Sabbath was a trailer, but Jesus is the full movie. So, Paul tells the Colossians, “Don’t let anyone tell you that you have to observe the Sabbath or continue to observe dietary laws. Trust Jesus and follow him.”

So, I don’t believe that we follow the Sabbath by taking a seventh day of rest, on which we don’t work at all. We should observe the Lord’s Day, Sunday, as a day to worship together. This is in honor of the day when Jesus rose from the grave. When Jesus died, he died on the sixth day, when he completed his work and said, “It is finished” (John 20:30). He died to pay the penalty that we all deserve because we are sinners and we have sinned. We are rebels against God, not living for him and loving him and obeying as we should. That crime deserves the harshest punishment. Yet Jesus, who never sinned, died in the place of all who put their trust in him, who come under his rule and receive his blessings. When he died, he was placed in a tomb, where he rested on the seventh day. And he rose from the grave on the first day of a new week, inaugurating a new creation for which we are still waiting. According to Athanasius (c. 298–373), bishop of Alexandria, “The Sabbath was the end of the first creation, the Lord’s day was the beginning of the second, in which he renewed and restored the old in the same way as he prescribed that they should formerly observe the Sabbath as a memorial of the end of the first things, so we honor the Lord’s Day as being the memorial of the new creation.”<sup>7</sup>

Some Christians believe that the Sabbath is still in effect, and that it moved from Saturday to Sunday, the Lord’s Day. The Bible never says this, and I think the passages that I’ve cited actually speak against this idea. Also, in the Roman Empire, Sunday was not a day of rest until the year 321. So, Christians had to work on Sunday for almost three hundred years after

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<sup>7</sup> Athanasius, *On the Sabbath and Circumcision* 3, quoted in Craig L. Blomberg, “The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ,” in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*, ed. Christopher John Danto (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 310–11.

Jesus died and rose from the grave. They would gather to worship on that day, probably early in the morning or at night, but they would also have to work. If Sunday was the new Sabbath and work was forbidden, Christians wouldn't be able to have jobs. They wouldn't have survived. So, both biblically and historically, it doesn't seem like the Sunday was the Sabbath.

But Christians are free to disagree about such matters. In Romans, Paul writes, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). Paul doesn't mean that everyone is right. Paul means that with some of these issues, even if people are wrong, it's worth respecting other people's convictions.

So, Jesus came to fulfill the Sabbath and to give us rest. How does he do this? He does this by addressing the root of what causes us so much unrest. What disrupts rest? What causes all the anxiety, the stress, the fatigue of the world? It's sin. Before sin entered into the world, there was harmony: God and humans had a harmonious relationship. Creation was not marred by natural disasters. There was no death. All was well. But when the first humans failed to love and trust God, and when they disobeyed his commandment, sin entered into the world and flooded it. The consequences of sin include things like natural disasters. Creation isn't always harmonious, and our relationship to it isn't one of peace. There are floods and earthquakes and famines. We are often not at peace with one another. We argue and fight and covet and steal and kill. We're not even at peace with ourselves. So much of the noise that I experience comes from within. And I'm not talking about my ringing ears. I'm talking about the many ways that my divided heart and mind are at war. And we are not at peace with God as long as we continue to rebel against him.

Sin is the cause of ringing ears, bad relationships, economic hardships, bad health, bad governments and politicians, and death itself. Sin causes unrest. But Jesus came to give us rest, and he said that everyone who comes to him in faith will receive that rest. He came to do the work that we can't do because of our sin. He lived a perfect life. And he came to take on the punishment that we should receive, dying on a cross, an instrument of torture, shame, and death. And he also bore God's wrath on the cross, which goes far beyond physical pain. He experienced hell on earth so that all who come to him in faith won't experience hell forever. Everyone who loves Jesus, trusts him, and starts to follow him (even if imperfectly) have their sins wiped away and forgiven, they are adopted into God's family, and they will live with God forever, in heaven

and in the new creation, when God restores the world. Those who trust in Jesus are at rest with God.

Though Jesus has inaugurated the true Sabbath in the spiritual rest that he provides for his disciples, the final fulfillment of that Sabbath rest is still future. The author of Hebrews writes, “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9). Whoever has entered God’s rest, through faith in Christ, has already rested from his or her works, as God rested after his creative activity (v. 10). In Revelation 14:13 it is said that those who die in the Lord rest from their labors (Rev. 14:13), indicating a future rest, which is achieved when God’s people are with him after death and, ultimately, in the new creation.

So, what should we do with this message? If you are not a Christian, I tell you that you will never find true rest until you put your faith in Jesus. You can try every other solution in the world, every other thing that people tell you will bring you ultimate comfort and peace and satisfaction in life. And it will fail every time. The reason why money, a good career, a great marriage, great health, pleasures of all kinds, power, celebrity and everything else that people chase after won’t give you rest is because they were never meant to do that. A lot of those things are good things, gifts from God, but they can’t satisfy your soul. They can’t make you whole. They won’t heal you.

If you continue to chase those things and remain unsatisfied, you’re like the man who has dropsy. You drink and drink and drink, and you’re bloated with all the things of the world, but you remain thirsty. That’s basically the human condition. We’re sick and thirsty, but we keep drinking from the wrong well. But God beckons us to stop trying to fix ourselves, and to let him fix us instead. In Isaiah 55, he says,

- <sup>1</sup> “Come, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.
- <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.
- <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;  
hear, that your soul may live (Isa. 55:1–3a).

If you're not a Christian, I would love to talk with you more about what it means to follow Jesus and how you can do that. I urge you to speak to God, tell him you realize you have sinned and you can't save yourself, and ask him to forgive you and to grant you faith and repentance. Turn away from your old ways of living for yourself and live for God.

If you are a Christian, remember to rest in Christ. It's so easy for us to get caught up in the ways of the world, to get worried about all kinds of things, as if God is not on this throne and he is not on our side. We worry so much. A friend of mine, who is concerned about his job status, told me how he had applied for different jobs and was anxiously waiting to hear back from potential employers. He's a Christian, yet he was acting as if God wouldn't provide for him. I told him to rest in Christ. So many of us try to find rest in other things, even after we come to Christ. We need to remember what Augustine prayed to God: "You stir men to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>8</sup>

So many of us are worried about health and death. We worry not only about our own health, but the health of our loved ones. A couple of weeks ago, I happened to look at a book of Charles Spurgeon's letters. Spurgeon (1832–1892), was a pastor in London in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was famous and he is rightly regarded as the "Prince of Preachers." He died at the age of 57, and as he was dying, he wrote letters to his church. In one letter, written 25 days before he died, he writes,

On looking back upon the valley of the shadow of death through which I passed so short a time ago, I feel my mind grasping with firmer grip than ever that everlasting gospel which for so many years I have preached to you. We have not been deceived. Jesus does give rest to those who come to him, he does save those who trust him, he does photograph his image on those who learn of him. . . . Cling to the gospel of forgiveness through the substitutionary sacrifice, and spread it with all your might, each one of you, for it is the only cure for bleeding hearts.<sup>9</sup>

That is my message to you. Trust in Christ. Cling to Christ. Rest in Christ. That is how we keep the Sabbath.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Suffering Letters of C. H. Spurgeon* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 2007), 118–119.