

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 3, 2018

[Deuteronomy 5:12-15](#) & [Mark 2:23-3:6](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (by Vanessa Lovelace, *workingpreacher.org*, June 3, 2018)

The Sabbath is usually only associated with rest. However, the Sabbath also emphasizes freedom from enslavement.

Most young people living in the U.S. today have probably never lived in a community with “blue laws” or “Sunday laws.” Although blue laws vary from county to county, they usually ban or restrict conducting business on Sundays. These laws, which are intended to enforce the observation of the Sabbath Day, are based on the third commandment (or fourth depending on the religious tradition) among the Ten Commandments or Decalogue (Greek for “ten words”; see also Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4). God mandated that Moses should instruct the Israelites to keep the Sabbath as a day set apart for rest. Although what activities are considered permissible (worship only?) on the Sabbath, the statute decrees that its adherents should refrain from doing any work.

Law versus instructions or teachings

The Decalogue can be found in the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Torah or Written Torah is the first division of the Jewish Tanak, commonly referred to as the Hebrew Bible in academic circles. Christians refer to the Torah as the Pentateuch, a Greek word meaning “fivefold” volume. The translation of the Hebrew noun *torah* as “law” often leads to the term being misinterpreted, especially in Christian traditions, as a strict legal code and Judaism as a legalistic religion. However, the term is more accurately translated “instruction” or “teaching.” Therefore, *torah* is better understood as a collection consisting of both narratives and legal texts that comprise the core teachings for Jewish life and practice. Although the Decalogue is included in the Torah, some Christians mistake the Decalogue for the Torah, and regard *it* as the core of God’s instructions. Despite differences of interpretation, many Jewish and Christian readers regard the Torah or Pentateuch as the law of Moses or Mosaic law because of the tradition that God revealed the law to Moses on Mount Sinai (also called Horeb). However, modern biblical scholarship has largely questioned the literary unity of the Torah and overall supports the theory that the Torah is a combination of material from different literary sources.

Different versions of the sabbath

There are two distinct versions of the Decalogue. The version most cited is Exodus 20:1-17, however Deuteronomy 5:6-21 is a lesser-known close parallel. Structurally, there is little difference between the two. Both open with the historical prologue giving the occasion for the covenant: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). Both offer a list of stipulations. However, they are at variance with each other regarding the Sabbath.

Of all the statutes in the Decalogue, the commandment to observe the Sabbath maintains a place of centrality in the lives of Jews and Christians. Scholars are unsure whether the Hebrew noun *shabbat* for Sabbath is related to the Hebrew verb *shabat*, "to rest," "to cease." Nevertheless, the earliest mention of a day set aside for rest in the Bible is found in the first creation account (Genesis 1:1-2:4a). The rationale for the sabbath in Genesis 1 is that after God finished speaking creation into existence over a six-day period, God rested (*shabat*) on the seventh day, blessed it and set it apart from the other days (Genesis 2:2-3). Likewise, humans in imitation of God (*imitatio Dei*), are expected to honor every seventh day as set apart from the others by divine fiat.

"Once we were slaves in Egypt, now we are free people"

The differences between Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 initially appear to be insignificant. Exodus 20:8 states, "Remember (*zakar*) the sabbath day, and keep it holy." In contrast, Deuteronomy 5:12 has "Observe (*shamar*) the sabbath day, and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you." The choice of the writer to use *shamar*, which also means "to keep," is perhaps intentional given that "to remember" suggests naming or calling something to mind, while "to keep," implies to habitually continue or cause to continue a course of action. However, the motive for keeping the Sabbath in Deuteronomy 5 is significantly different.

Both versions allot six days for laboring (Exodus 20:9; Deuteronomy 5:13). Yet, Deuteronomy 5:15 explains that the reason is because of God's redemptive act on Israel's behalf during the exodus experience rather than because God rested on the seventh day. The people are to keep the Sabbath in remembrance of their enslavement in Egypt. The Jewish prayer before and after the Sabbath meal expresses this viewpoint by including the words "Once we were slaves in Egypt, now we are free people." Both Exodus and Deuteronomy stipulate that rest from work is extended to everyone -- male and female, free and slave, human and animal, citizen and alien (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14), a radical departure from common practice in the ancient world. However, Israel, in recalling its own labor under Egyptian taskmasters, demands rest for all creation. Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez conveys the importance of freedom in the Deuteronomic instruction by stating that, "We have to observe the Sabbath, to rest (and make sure that others also rest), and to acknowledge that God is the source of our existence (Deuteronomy 5:12). However, we must not forget the reason for this rule: the liberation from the slavery endured in Egypt (verse 15)."

Commentary on Mark 2:23-3:6

(From the *Homiletics* archive; "Everyone's a Fundamentalist About Something" – June 1, 1997)

As the briefest, tersest version of the Good News, Mark's gospel tends to condense and compress events that the other gospel writers leisurely scatter throughout their books. In Mark, therefore, we end up with units of his gospel known as the journey motif, the miracles section or the confrontation unit. Today's text is taken from the midst of Mark's so-called confrontation section (Mark 2:1-3:6), including two distinct scenes. In both examples the common topic is Sabbath observance.

In the first pericope, a confrontation arises when the disciples are observed on a Sabbath "plucking heads of grain" from the field they are walking through. The Pharisees take issue with this practice, seeing it as an infringement on the prohibition against working (reaping) on the Sabbath. Strict Sabbath observation was and is one of the great identifying features of Judaism. It safeguards a separate, sacred time away from the grinding duties of daily existence. Most importantly, however, the Sabbath is to be strictly observed because God commanded that it be so. Sabbath observance is a symbol of the special, obedient relationship between God and the people of Israel. To acknowledge the Sabbath is to recognize the ruling presence of God in one's life.

Notice how the Pharisees' observation, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (v.24) is followed by an explanatory example given by Jesus. Jesus calls on Jewish history and cites an incident from the life of David as precedence for his own disciples' behavior. However, scholars have noted that this illustration is in many ways strangely unrelated to the situation the Pharisees are concerned about. Some scholars are convinced, therefore, that verses 25-26 are added explanatory verses. If they are correct, and the original consisted of verses 23-24,27, it was actually a much stronger, more radical incident than the text we now have presents it. Verses 23-24 and 27 make Jesus' response to the Pharisees' quite legitimate question stand out as a radical departure from accepted Jewish theology. By simply declaring, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath," Jesus disregards the unique divine foundation undergirding the rite and rituals that define the Jewish Sabbath.

Consider now how much the "explanatory" texts of verses 25-26 and the Christological focus of verse 28 soften the harshness of Jesus' conclusion in verse 27. First, Jesus cites the life of David -- an indisputable source of authority. By using this Davidic example, Jesus shifts the focus from the injunction against doing work on the Sabbath to a concern for those "in need" and "hungry." No observant Jew would think of arguing that Sabbath observance should prohibit one from offering compassionate care and comfort to anyone in need. Despite the fact that the incident Jesus uses to defend the disciples' behavior is nowhere identified as a Sabbath-related event, it does offer an example of David's companions' being given special dispensation to override sacred law because of personal needs.

Underlying this theory of editorial easement of the startling declaration of verse 27 is the question of whether this entire confrontation scene was placed here to address a prickly issue existing within the first-century Palestinian church as it developed within a strongly Jewish milieu. Accordingly, this understanding of verses 23-28 does not view it as confrontation between Jesus, his disciples and the Pharisees so much as an explanatory text enabling the late first-century church to defend its view of the Sabbath to the Jewish hierarchy.

Given the contrived feeling to the scene depicted in verses 23-24 -- a group of Pharisees happened along just as Jesus' disciples stopped their Sabbath-day stroll to pick ears of grain -- it is easy to see that scholars would wonder whether the disciples don't represent first-century Christians who had lately been "observed" by the Jewish authorities as not strictly following the traditional codes of the Jewish Sabbath -- Christians, who, in fact, had begun to worship on another day altogether.

The church community cushions the potentially combative nature of verse 27 by adding the further explanatory sentence found in verse 28. By specifying the "Son of Man" as the one with lordship over the Sabbath, first-century Christians continued to safeguard the uniquely divine nature of the Sabbath itself. It is not common men and women who hold control of the Sabbath in their hands. Rather it is the divine

one -- the Son of Man -- who legitimates the sacredness of that day. This claim took the responsibility for explaining their Sabbath-day practices out of the hands of believers and put it into the lap of the one already confessed as divine.

The second pericope read today (3:1-6) is a miracle story transformed into a Markan controversy event. Grammatical structure and telltale segues suggest that the story of Jesus' healing a man's withered hand has been woven together with Markan commentary to give this pericope an added purpose.

In nearly every verse, a Markan aside makes the story teem with tension. In 3:2, Mark adds "so that they might accuse him." In 3:4, he indicts the observers by noting, "But they were silent." Verse 5's apparently redactional commentary declares that Jesus was "grieved at their hardness of heart" even before he heals the man's withered hand. The mysterious "Herodians" are nowhere clearly identified in Mark's gospel and here serve as further evidence of the animosity that was growing between Jesus and the Pharisees.

There are two schools of thought about what traditional form Mark drew from when crafting the healing/controversy scene in 3:1-6. In one camp are those scholars who find the narrative model in the withering and restoration of King Jeroboam's hand in 1 Kings 13:4-6. But the similarities between the two appear superficial, and the other nuances of Mark 3:1-6 do not seem to be addressed by the 1 Kings text.

More credible is the scholarly argument that Mark's narrative template was Exodus 13-15. In these chapters, God is fully in control, saving Israel from Egypt. Likewise, before miracles occur they are met with a stony "hardness of heart." Moses becomes a witness to God's power when in obedience he stretches out his hand at the command of the divine. Likewise, the man with the withered hand is healed when he responds in obedience to Jesus' command. In both scenes miracles occur despite the stubbornness of disbelievers. But disciples must be obedient and do as they are commanded.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?