

**Introduction:**

- A. *Illus.*: Have you ever had a sleep study? I’ve had a couple. One time I went into the sleep clinic at about 9:30 p.m. and a technician began sticking about 20 electrodes all over me, from head to foot. All the while I’m sitting in a straight-backed chair under bright fluorescent lights. When he finished about 10:30, the technician said, “OK, you can go to bed now.” So I climbed into the strange bed, feeling like a marionette. He walked out and turned off the lights. I couldn’t believe it! I wasn’t tired! It was earlier than my usual bedtime. I felt like I had taffy all over my body. I was in a strange bed. There was a camera watching me, little red light blinking up there. And I was wide-awake. Laying there, stiff, nervous and eyes wide as saucers.

After a while I called into the darkness, knowing there was mic somewhere in the room, “Could I read a little or something till I get sleepy?”

The attendant came on and I repeated my question. (He was new, I think.) “No!” he said sternly. “You need to go to sleep now.” Of course, I lay there wide awake till 2:30 in the morning, at which time he brought in the CPAP mask, which meant I didn’t sleep all night!

- B. Is your inner life like that? Your soul? You’re so tired, but you can’t rest inwardly. You know you’re supposed to be at peace within, especially if you’re a Christian, but you’re troubled, unsettled, uneasy, burdened, weary?
- C. As you heard last week, Jesus said in **Matt. 11:28-30**,  
*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is*

*light.*” As Jamie said last week, this wasn’t an offer to give busy people a vacation. It was an offer to those whose religious leaders kept piling on the *shoulds*, and *ought-tos*, and *or-elses*. It is an offer for those whose souls cannot bear the weight of religious duty, or of I-can-do-it-myself. In **Acts 15:10** Paul was persuading the other Christian leaders not to lay all the religious rituals of the Mosaic law on the new Gentile believers. He said, “*Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*”

- D. Jesus said, “*You will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” It is as if Jesus says to us, “*You need to climb a high mountain to God.*”

You look up and say, “I can’t possibly make it.”

“*Let’s do it together,*” he says. “*Get into this yoke with me and we’ll pull. Now I’ve died for your sins, and I rose again to give you resurrection life and power. I’ve given you the Holy Spirit. I won’t ever leave you. So let’s pull the weight of righteousness up to God. Let’s lift up this burden of holiness together.*”

“This is *easy!*” you say after a few steps. “I never imagined the burden of righteousness could be so light! This is like a walk in the park!”

- E. Turn to **Matt. 12**. The next verses are all about the Sabbath day, the day of rest which God commanded Israel to observe the seventh day of every week. No exceptions. No excuses. The connection Matthew is making is this: Jesus said he offered “*rest for your souls*” and the Sabbath was intended to do the same thing—offer rest for the souls of God’s people. In fact, 1500 years of observing the Sabbath

every week was God’s schooling so his people would a sense of their need for spiritual rest in their nation’s DNA. But the whole business had gone off the rails. **Vv.1-2...**

- F. The fourth of the Ten Commandments is, “*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...*” Well, what exactly qualifies as work? Over time the rabbis had developed a detailed list of 39 different categories of work, and one of them was reaping grain. When the disciples plucked and shucked that grain, they broke the law against working by harvesting grain, said the Pharisees. If you said to those guys, “*Are you kidding me!! There’s no work in that!*” they’d look back at you stony-faced, and say, “*It’s the principle of the thing.*” Case closed.

- G. Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t roll his eyes and say, “Don’t be ridiculous!” It’s as if Jesus says, “OK, let’s say it was work.” And then he gives them two case studies. **Vv.3-4...** This story is in 1 Sam. 21. I won’t review the details but in effect Jesus is posing the question, “Why was that ok and this isn’t.” What goes unsaid is *One greater than David is here, and these are my companions*. If David’s men could eat consecrated bread which only priests were supposed to eat, then my men can eat this grain because I’m greater than David.

Then the second example: **vv.5-6...** This is an example pastors can relate to. If we’re not supposed to work on Sunday, what about us? It’s the only day we *do* work! If Jews aren’t supposed to do *any* work—not even eat grain—what about the priests in the temple? God doesn’t condemn them; they’re innocent. And if that’s true of those who

serve in God's Temple, what about those who serve someone is greater than God's Temple—his Messiah?!

- H. **Vv.7-8...** Jesus quoted this same verse from **Hosea 6:6** once before, in Mt 9:13, when he was criticized for eating with sinners. God told the Israelites who were big on religion for God and lousy at relationship with God, "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*" The sacrifices Hosea and Jesus had in mind were these difficult rituals or expectations added to God's commands. Keeping the Sabbath is a sacrifice, or sorts, but mostly it is God's gift. *Take the day off. Every week. No excuses. Rest. Enjoy your family. Eat a good meal. Enjoy your God. But whatever you do, don't work! Just rest your souls.* But when the rabbis added layer after layer to God's law the idea of rest for souls was lost in all the picayune, petty sacrifices that *taxed* people's souls.

*Illus.:* When I was in high school our pastor's name was Pastor Moses. I remember telling Mrs. Moses one Sunday morning that I couldn't come to church Sunday night because I didn't have my homework done. She chewed me out for doing my homework on the Lord's Day. Now, I don't think it would harm anyone to simply set aside our work on Sundays and just relax with God and his people, but the effect on me of Mrs. Moses' comment was resentment—not just with her but at least a little with God who had such sticky rules. Mercy would have gone a long way, and would have helped me understand God better.

The clincher in this section is **v.8**, "*For the Son of Man [that's Jesus] is Lord of the Sabbath.*" He is the King of Soul Rest. He makes the rules. He renders the judgments. He has the last word. The most important thing is not merely that he is the Lord of the Sabbath Day; he *is* the

Sabbath. No day, no matter how rigorously guarded, can actually rest your soul. Only Jesus, the King of Soul Rest, can give us rest for our souls. So here's the first point:

**I. JESUS GIVES US REST FOR OUR SOULS BY MEETING US WITH MERCY (12:1-8)**

- A. People often have the idea that to curry favor with God they have to make sacrifices; some kind of payment. “*Get me out of this mess alive and I’ll go to church every Sunday.*” “*Heal my loved one and I’ll turn over a new leaf.*” Some think that the tougher the sacrifices they make the higher their spiritual rank. A guy says, “I tithe on my income.” And the better guy says, “That’s nothing, I tithe on my crop of mint in my garden!” A woman says, “I try to give God my Sundays. I go to church. I put my briefcase away. I try to rest.” But the *better* woman says, “I never go to the store. I prepare all the meals ahead of time. And I put away the Sunday paper till Monday.” It’s not because she’s trying to rest her soul. It’s because she figures the greater the sacrifice, the higher her Sabbath score.
- B. Jesus said, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” *I will be your Sabbath.* Instead of soul-deadening sacrifices, Jesus offers us mercy. He forgives our sins. He lifts the burden of our inadequacy and failures. He frees us to do good out of love, not to score points.

You can be a Christian and still be driven, because you have no inward Sabbath; no rest for your soul. Not because it isn’t available, but because you won’t take it. You won’t stop *on the inside*. Someone keeps pushing you. Your parents, maybe, even if they’re long gone. Or maybe it is just your personality.

Remember when Jesus visited the home of Martha.  
Luke 10:38-42 says,

*“She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”*

*“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”* Jesus was resting Mary’s soul. What will you choose?

There’s another short story about Sabbath trouble: **vv.9-14...** *“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”* A legal question. What does the law of Moses say? Nothing, at least not directly. But healing is *doing* something so it must be work, and thus God forbids it. Some rabbis said that you *could* offer help on the Sabbath only if it was a matter of life and death; and some wouldn’t even allow that. But this man’s withered hand could certainly have been healed the next day and he would have been just as happy.

Elsewhere Jesus used a similar argument but he upped the ante. What if your child falls in a well? Would that be forbidden work? Here, he is saying that if you can help an animal in trouble, you should certainly be able to help a fellow man. But Jesus takes it farther. *It’s better to do good on the Sabbath than to do nothing.* **Good doing is better than nothing doing!**

Take another look at the healing itself. *“Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ So he stretched it out and it was completely restored.”* Jesus said no words of healing. He didn’t even touch the man. In one sense, you can hardly say Jesus *did* any work. He simply *willed* the man’s healing and it was done. But it was enough to sign his death warrant. After all, it’s the principle of the thing!

Now the point:

## II. JESUS GIVES US REST FOR OUR SOULS BY DOING US GOOD (12:9-14)

- A. Our souls are like that man's withered hand. They're all shriveled up and useless. Jesus restores our souls. Recognize that language? It's from Ps. 23, the Good Shepherd "restores my soul," the way Jesus restored that man's hand. Jesus, who *is* our Sabbath, invigorates our souls by doing our souls good.
- B. Then, all along our walk with Jesus, he never hesitates to do good for our souls so that we can rest.

"Lord Jesus, I'm having so much trouble forgiving Marge."

*"I'd be happy to help you with that, and you'll rest so much easier when you do."*

"Lord Jesus, I'm so worried about my meeting. What if they cut my job?"

*"I've got a good idea! How about we work through a peace plan so you can rest."*

"Lord, I know I have sinned badly. I don't even really want to talk to you about it. But I just feel sick about it."

*"You don't have to crawl. Stand up and walk up to me boldly. I love to give you mercy and help you find grace in this need. Wouldn't a clean heart feel great!"*

### Conclusion

My good friend was a great success. Top salesman in a huge company for two years running when he was in his mid-30s. He worked like a dog and he loved winning. When he won, expected the others working for him to work hard and to achieve as much. After all, if he could do it, they could do it.

When he was growing up, he was taught that what mattered was appearances—how things looked. If he got good grades, he was expected to get better grades. If he didn't do as well as his parents demanded he heard, "What's wrong with you?" He said he felt like a pole vaulter. You finally rise up and clear the bar. As you fall your hands are in the air. You hit the mat, get up and walk ten steps, look up... and they've raised the bar. He didn't get a hug—not *one* hug—from his father till he was 37 years old.

In his later 30s he came to Christ. "What was that like?" I asked him. "I didn't have to succeed anymore. I didn't have to be better than anyone else. I had more value than I could ever imagine because God loved me."

Did you realize that Jesus' mercy makes provision for that? That's already part of your health plan? Did you know that Jesus loves to do good for your soul, to heal what's withered, to lead you still waters and green pastures and restore your soul? Did you know that? Come to Jesus!