

God's Everlasting Work

John 5:16-17

¹⁶ And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.

¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

Eternal Sabbath Work

Genesis tells us that God created the earth in six days. Each day is framed by a “morning” and an “evening.” But then we come to the seventh day. It tells us something important about this seventh day, and then it doesn't tell us something equally as important. First, what it tells us is that on this seventh day God “rested ... from all his work that he had done” (Gen 2:2). What it does not tell us is that this seventh day had a “morning” or “evening.” This framework which gives a neat and tidy bookend to each of the first six days is absent for this seventh day. This morning I'm going to tell you the significance of the work that God rested from doing and I'll tell you why this day does not have this framework of “morning” and “evening.”

I got this idea for this sermon from two places. First, I felt like I left our story in John 5:1-16 hanging. So today I want to finish it by looking at vv. 16-17. Second, one of you suggested I go out of sequence and preach the story of the blind man healed at the pool of Siloam as a contrast to this story. That story is found in John 9:1-41. Both of these miracles have several things in common. Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath near a pool of water and the religious leaders become furious. Yet, they have a very stark contrast, which is that the men he heals have very different reactions to the miracle Jesus gives them. Thus, I want this sermon to reinforce the attitudes about Jesus that I warned you about last week, while adding something significant about Jesus that we did not look at last week, as well as helping you see a little better exactly why Jesus chose to perform these miracles on the Sabbath.

Our passage today ends with Jesus saying the following words, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” There is something new going on here that we will look at in much more detail next week. It is this whole relationship that Jesus has with the Father. This week, I want to focus on this idea of both of them “working.” If you were to only read this verse, and too many Christians are in the bad habit of reading verses in isolation from the context, you would not have any idea what Jesus is talking about. It sounds pretty bland, pretty harmless. The Father has been working and Jesus has been working. So what?

But this comes on the heels of the preceding verse which says, “This was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath” (John 5:16). It is to this that Jesus answers, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” The idea is that God hasn’t stopped working. He even works on the Sabbath.

Now, you might think that this would be considered heretical in Judaism, and I suppose in a few quarters it was. The book of Jubilees records something of this idea, “He gave us a great sign, the sabbath day, so that we might work six days and observe a sabbath from all work on the seventh day. And he told ... all of the angels of the presence ... that [all] might keep the Sabbath with him in heaven and on earth” (Jub 2:17-20). In other words, every seventh day God stops working as do the angels and all Israelites.

But in actuality, it was common for Jewish leaders to accept this idea of God working on the Sabbath. The *Genesis Rabbah* (a midrash commentary) says, “God rested from work on the world, but not from his work on the godless and the righteous: ‘He works with both of them’” on the Sabbath (Gen Rab 11.8).¹ Another place says, “He ceased from the thought of work. Perhaps also from administering Justice? It says, ‘and rested’. This tells that he administration of justice never stops” (Shabbata 1).² Another one says the work God does on

¹ Cited in George R. Beasley-Murray, vol. 36, *Word Biblical Commentary : John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 74.

² Cited in Roger T. Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian: Biblical, Interstamental and Patristic Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 23.

Sabbath days is like a man carrying things within his own courtyard (Ex Rab 30:9).³

In other words, it is absurd that God stops working every seventh day. Perhaps Augustine said it best.

God can be understood to have rested from establishing different kinds of creatures, because he did not now establish any new kinds any more. But he rested like this in such a way as to continue from then on and up till now to operate the management of the things that were then set in place, not as though at least on that seventh day his power was withheld from the government of heaven and earth and of all the things he had established. If that had been done, they would immediately have collapsed into nothingness.

(AUGUSTINE, *ON THE LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS*
4.11[.21]–12 [.23])

What then is the function of this seventh day rest that God took? Notice that he rested from his work of “creation.” He is not ceasing all work. He is ceasing from a particular kind of work, and this is why some work is acceptable on the Sabbath.⁴

Jesus the Master Workman

So if it is not working on the Sabbath, *per se*, that is the issue (though the Pharisees can't seem to ever come an agreement on this as they continually contradict themselves at this point), what is the real issue here? It is this. It is the fact that Jesus is equating his work with the work of God. As I said, I will look at this Father-Son relationship in much more detail next week. This is only the beginning of such talk which

³ Ibid.

⁴ I will not consider here the significance of God “resting” to be enthroned as King of his creation. This is the ceremonial function of this rest. See Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* and John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*.

fills up the rest of John's Gospel. Today, though, I want to look at this idea of Jesus also "working" along with the Father, on the Sabbath.

To do this, I want to start with a passage most do not think of in regard to Jesus' statement. It is an OT passage found in Proverbs. Then I want to go to John 9 and contrast that story with the one we find here in [John 5:1-16](#). First, let's turn to the OT passage.

I was reminded of this passage because of two things. First, Jesus is said to be "working" with his Father ever since creation. Second, the language of this OT passage has the phrase "master workman." The passage is [Proverbs 8:23-31](#). It is a passage describing [Wisdom](#). Wisdom is seen as both part of God yet separate from God, both God and not God. It is that strange kind of language that caused even first century Jews to have a kind of Trinitarianism.

²³ Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,

²⁶ before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world.

²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸ when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,

³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man (**Pro 8:23-31** ESV).

Wisdom is the “**master workman**” right there with God, drawing, making, establishing, assigning, and marking the creation. This was Wisdom’s craft. This was His Work. I believe that Jesus is not so subtly referencing this kind of a passage in telling the Pharisees that “**I have also been working.**” Jesus is claiming to be this second person of the Godhead that they knew all about. The Pharisees got the point, because they recognize that he is equating himself with God. That’s what we will look at next week.

For the rest of today, it is because Jesus has always been working, and it is because the Father has been working throughout history on the Sabbath, and it is because he does what his Father does, and it is because Jesus is making a claim of deity here—deity and equality with God—that he continues to heal people on the Sabbath. John 9 gives us the same kind of a story as we find here in John 5, with of course, a lot of extra theology thrown in for the reader. I’ll do more work on John 9 when we come to it. But here, I want to focus on this idea of Jesus working on the Sabbath.

The Workman Working on the Sabbath

The story of John 9 is very long. Here are the highlights. Jesus passes by a blind man. The man has been blinded from birth (**John 9:1**). Someone raises the question about the obvious sin that this man or someone related to him must have committed to make him be born blind. Amazingly, that “someone” was his “disciples” (**9:2**). Jesus replies that this is not a matter of sin causing sickness, but rather than “**the works of God**” might be displayed in him (**9:3**). There is our keyword: “Work.” Jesus is about to do the work of God upon this man.

This has a kind of parallel in the John 5 story, when Jesus goes to the man and tells him not to sin anymore, lest something worse happen to him. I made the point last week that Jesus was not saying this man’s sin caused his sickness, but rather than his continued sin will bring eternal death. It is ironic, then, that the disciples would bring this same question up in this parallel story in John 9. Jesus continually has to overcome bad theology, even from his disciples. This man’s blindness is here so that God can display his work through him. That is a great way for us to pray today. When we see terrible things happening around us, we ought to pray that God might work and so display his power and mercy in a world that does not deserve it.

Jesus adds something strange here. He says, “**We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work**” (**9:4**). Then comes that famous verse, “**I am the light of the world.**” Why this reference to light all of

the sudden? In Jewish literature, the Sabbath was known as the day of light. *Bereshith Rabbah* 11:2 says, “**And God blessed the seventh day.’ Wherewith did he bless it? With light.**” Of course, wisdom is closely associated with light in the Scripture. “**I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness**” (**Ecc 2:13**). Or “**Light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him**” (**Dan 5:11**). So there is all kinds of rich OT symbolism that Jesus is using here as he explains to them the works that he, the Son of the Father, is about to perform. The work of God is a light to the world, a calling to them to come out of darkness and into the light. The very work teaches us about the attitude we are to have towards Christ.

With that, Jesus spit on the ground and made mud with his saliva. He then anointed the man’s eyes with the mud (**John 9:6**) and said, “**Go, wash in the pool of Siloam**” (which means Sent). So, the one Sent by God sent the blind man to the pool of Sent. What a wonderful play on ideas. So the man did so and came back seeing (**John 9:7**). There are many similarities between this story and the one in **John 5:1-16** (see chart), from the sin we have already looked at to the pool to the long standing disability to the works of God to the command of Jesus and the healing.

John 5:1-15	John 9:1-42
Sick for 38 years	Blind from birth
Sin no more than nothing worse may happen	Who has sinned, this man or his parents
My Father has been working, and so have I	So the “works of God” might be displayed

The pool of Bethesda	The pool of Siloam
Command: Pick up your mat and walk	Command: Go, wash in the pool

These similarities continue, but with some clear distinctions. The neighbors and others who had been him before as a beggar asked, “**Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?**” (9:8). This is a reaction of **wonder**. For others it was **incredulity**. “Other said, “**No, but he is like him.**” But he kept telling them that he was the man (9:9). This certainly says something about **Jewish culture**. Obviously, even his own neighbors did not know him well enough to be able to tell who this man was. What a despicable comment this is on a culture that sees the blind and other handicaps as so beneath ordinary citizenry that no one even gets to know them. But Jesus is not like this, for he went right up to the man and started talking to him. Do not let biases and prejudices cause you to be like these Jews.

At any rate, this reaction differs greatly from the one shown by the Pharisees in **John 5:10**, “**So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.’**” You may be thinking, well that’s because in the John 5 Jesus healed on the Sabbath. The problem is, he did the same thing here, for **John 9:14** tells us “**Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.**” The Pharisees ended up finding out about this miracle too, and some of them, though not all, were as furious over Jesus healing this man with mud as they were with

him commanding the other man to pick up his mat. For in both cases, they saw this as unlawful “work.”

But how did the Pharisees find out this time? This is a bit different. In John 5, they [went up to the man](#), presumably because he went to the temple (5:14). Later, that same man went back to the Pharisees and told them it was Jesus, after they had inquired as to who had done the healing (vs. 11). But they had already tipped their hat to this man that they meant Jesus no good, for they had accused him of breaking the Sabbath. Well, when Jesus finds the man and tells him to stop sinning, he returns the favor by telling the Pharisees that he’s the one who did it. Like playing a game of Adam and Eve, he did it!

This is not the case at all in ch. 9. At first, it is his neighbors who inquire; it is not the Pharisees. The formerly blind man knew that it was Jesus that healed him. This man, at some point, actually bothered to find out Jesus’ name, something you would think anyone who has just been miraculously healed by someone would want to do. This, in spite of the fact that, just like in the other story, he didn’t know where Jesus went.

So [the people bring the formerly blind man to the Pharisees](#). A dispute arises among the Pharisees, with some saying that Jesus is not from God, and others claiming that he must be. The principle reason for the disagreement was his [healing these people on the Sabbath](#). But Jesus says this is the work of God. “[We must work the works of God](#)” (vs. 3).

Now the Pharisees quiz this man, even as they did the first man. “How were you healed?” (John 9:15). In the first story, they didn’t care. The question here is innocent enough, even though there was some disputing. So the man tells them, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” This caused the great stir. “He does not keep the Sabbath.” Other said, “How can a sinner do such signs” (9:16)? Implying that if he can’t be sinning in what he is doing. At least for some and at least for a while, there is at least an open-mindedness about Jesus.

But it doesn’t seem to last long, or at least those who held a better opinion don’t seem to win out. Here then comes the greatest divergence of all. Unlike the first man, whom they never ask his opinion of Jesus, this time the leaders ask, “What do you say about him?” He answers, “He is a prophet” (9:17). He sounds just like the woman at the well (4:19). Common people were not biased in the same way against Jesus as the theologians were. Since the Pharisees did not know this man, many doubted that he had ever been blind at all; until they called his parents who confirmed it (9:18-20). But they said they had no idea how he had been given his sight. They did not know how and they did not know who (9:21). But they were lying, because they feared the Jews (9:22).

I’ve preached on how some lying is actually a morally acceptable thing. For example, when the midwives lied to the Egyptians because they knew the Hebrew babies would be murdered. But this feels different to me. It does not say that

they were trying to protect Jesus, but rather that they feared the Jews. There is a fine line sometimes because helping someone else and helping yourself. These parents seem to have crossed over that line.

In reality, they believed this was the Messiah, but the Jews were threatening to put anyone out of the synagogue who confessed Jesus to be the Christ. So now they play Adam and Eve and pass the buck onto their own son: “Ask him, he is of age” (9:21, 23). Now, that’s not a very nice thing to do, if I must say. The poor boy is trapped by his own parents. Thus, even people who believe that Messiah has come can be capable of sinning against him. It is a sorry lesson.

So now the Pharisees try to spring their own trap on the young man. “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner” (24). (We see which Pharisees won out). In other words, admit it. Don’t say he is a prophet. He isn’t from God at all. He is doing work on the Sabbath day (nevermind that now you can see).

But **the man does not give in**. He is a strong young boy, faithful to the one who healed him. His answer is profoundly different from the tattling response of the first man healed by a pool. “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (9:25). He gave glory to God, alright, but by not turning **Benedict Arnold** on Jesus. This, in the face of increasing pressure by the religious leaders of the day. They had the power to throw him out of the synagogue. They obviously thought Jesus was a sinner, and

wanted his testimony for evidence to be used against him in court. They even appeal to his own faith in God in a kind of threat. This in the face of his own parents passing such a burden onto him. But he remained steadfast. The day is coming, beloved, when you will be tested just like this in the United States. There is no doubt about it. Some tests may seem trivial, almost like that of the parents. Others will be more severe, such as disowning Christ himself. What will be your response, be it a great threat of death or a little threat that seems of little consequence how you respond? Pray to God that he would give you the strength to hold up under pressure that all of us would fold under if left to ourselves. Do not think yourself stronger than you really are.

Still, **they kept their arm on his throat** as they pinned him down, refusing to let go. “**What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?**” (9:26). They had already asked that question. He had answered honestly. What was the sense in it? The man, perhaps gullibly, perhaps sarcastically responds, “**I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?**” (9:27). I think he is egging them on. From here, the story becomes theological, and we will wait until the proper time to address those questions. I’ll leave this story with the conclusion that it gives. This man ends up believing that Jesus is the Son of Man. And **he worships him** (9:38). A greater contrast between this and the story in **John 5:1-16** could not be imagined.

John 5:1-15	John 9:1-42
Didn't know who healed him	Knew it was a man named Jesus
Jesus disappears	Jesus disappears
Pharisees find the man	People lead the man to the Pharisees
Problem: he is walking with his mat	Problem: he was healed with mud made from
Tattles on Jesus	Stays true to Jesus
Man seems unconcerned about Jesus	Man believes in Jesus

(End) Eternal Sabbath Rest

What then can we take from this? I would call the response of this man, entering into the eternal Sabbath rest of God. Here is the contrast. While God is working on his behalf, he ends up resting in the arms of Christ. Christ comes to do the work of the Father on the day of rest, so that people can enter into that rest while he works on their behalf! This man enters into the Sabbath rest meant for man, by trusting in the Savior. But not all will do this, for while God is busy working for them, many turn away or turn against him.

There is a long section in Hebrews that deals with this, picking up on things said in Exodus and the Psalms. “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (Heb 3:11). The “rest” being referred to here is the God’s rest on the seventh day of creation. That rest was open ended, without an evening, because it was to continue to the end of the age, so that all who believe in him might find their rest in him. But

many were unbelieving, and God cursed them for their sorry hardened hearts.

It is an amazing thought that Jesus Christ came in the flesh to work the works of God. The Father is working, but the Son is also working. He is Wisdom itself. The master craftsman alongside the Father and upheld by the Holy Spirit. He delights in doing the works of the Father. The Son has always been here, doing the works of God. But in the flesh, his works were for our salvation in a remarkable way, for he came and healed people of their diseases, cast out demons to deliver them from the clutches of Satan, taught them all the commandments of God, and offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

But after we rest in him, he invites us to work along side of him. Verse 4 says this, does it not? He was speaking to the disciples, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.” This has a specific application to their 3 year ministry with Jesus. And we want to be faithful to that. Yet, it is clear that the church is to enter into these works on his behalf today. This is why it is not unlawful to do good on the Sabbath, even if it means making a little mud with your own spit to do it. Jesus does this on the Sabbath to prove that he is LORD of the Sabbath, but also to show what kinds of things are lawful on the Sabbath. Some things are more important than others. Christians delight in such works, because he ordained that we should do them before the foundation of the world, that we

might be blameless and holy in his sight. Not that the works make us so, but that they come because we have been made so. Anyone who tells you not to do the works of God that you are able to do is a liar and must never be listened to.