

9.3.23 Sermon

Work Ethic | Mark 1:35

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

work, day, god, jesus, rest, fruitful, rhythm, today, communion, recreate, means, creation, female servant, sabbath day, spend, choose, invite, pendulum swing, lord, pin

SPEAKERS

Elder Kevin Brisbin

Yes, as he said, my name is Kevin. I am one of the elders here at Cornerstone. And as a good friend of mine used to say every time he preached, "I am your friend." I like to carry that forward. I genuinely want to be your friend.

So, as most of you probably know or may remember, we are in a new sermon series, of which this is the second. I heard that "woohoo." I will second that. Yeah. Yes, John's old news. So, as preachers, we're now in this "Choose Your Own Adventure" journey. That means, as preachers, we don't know what the next person or the former person is going to preach on either because there's no schedule that delineates the sequence of scriptures.

So, when we received this new assignment, the new schedule, I pondered, "Oh, which scripture do I want to begin with?" Initially, I considered using my favorite scripture, Romans 12, verse two. But then Pastor James preached on that very verse in the first sermon of the series. In this choose-your-own-adventure series, I thought it might not be best to immediately opt for the same path Pastor James had chosen. Although the approach we would have taken with that would have differed, and that would have been fine. I just didn't want you all to think this whole thing was rigged. Hence, I'm opting for something different, just to prove a point.

You see, Romans 12, verse two resonates deeply with me. This isn't merely a quirky anecdote I'm recounting because that's what Pastor James focused on. When I say this was my favorite verse first, I'm referring to when I was 16 years old. I had opened my very first checking account and needed to establish a PIN for it. Doing what any average 16-year-old boy in America would have done, I chose my favorite scripture verse. Hence, my PIN became 1202, representing Romans 12:2 - "Do not conform to the standards of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

It might seem peculiar, but maybe some of you can relate? Perhaps your first email address was "livingthelife24/7," and your password was "shine24/7," embodying the act of shining Jesus's light 24/7. This wasn't everyone's experience at 16, I guess it was just my unique path.

Well, thankfully, there is no shortage of great scriptures and splendid adventures to explore in the Bible. Yet, anyone who knows me is aware that this makes the task even more challenging. Dana mentioned to me last week, "How are you coping with this 'Choose Your Own Adventure'? It seems like an impossible feat for you." She was right; there are simply too many options, too many paths, and too many adventures to undertake. Despite the plethora of choices, I had to settle on one, because today has arrived and there is no more time to deliberate.

So, putting aside all the oversharing for now, and now that you're aware of all my old PIN numbers and passwords, and my indecisiveness, we can move forward.

Happy Labor Day weekend, everyone! Can I get an amen? Yeah, I anticipated a bit more enthusiasm. Nevertheless, I understand that a day off is a day off. Maybe the fatigue from work has left you devoid of any extra energy to muster a cheerful amen. I sympathize, as I have been working non-stop for the past 25 years, including summers. I want to acknowledge our teachers here; we appreciate you, even though not all of us have the luxury of breaks.

Labor Day is one of my favorite weekends of the year. There's something inherently special about having a Monday off. My deepest apologies and a moment of silence for those who have to work on Labor Day, especially those in retail facing an even busier day. A nod to you, Home Depot workers; I hope the double pay somewhat compensates. It's unfortunate that I have to mention this, but the work-life balance in our society, particularly in America and even more so on the East Coast, leaves much to be desired. This Northeast quarter, where we all reside, is notoriously bad in this regard.

I'm sincerely glad that those of you who are here and those joining online could make it today. Regrettably, not everyone can spare the time, and for many, Sundays have become just another work day. Life is indeed tough on these 2023 streets. Sadly, even when we manage to be here, our attention is constantly divided.

We live in a time where multitasking is praised and expected. Work emails flood our personal phones, and personal calls and texts interrupt our work hours. No matter where we are, there seems to be a demand for our presence elsewhere. It's an unsustainable cycle, and I recently found an echo of this sentiment in an unlikely place - the Barbie movie. I attended the pre-release "Barbie Blow-Up Bash," fully decked in pink attire, and was profoundly struck by a powerful monologue delivered by the character Gloria, portrayed by America Ferreira.

In the monologue, penned by Greta Gerwig, Gloria expresses the tremendous pressures women face in society to conform to myriad conflicting expectations. The desire to be thin but not too thin, to aspire for wealth without openly seeking it, to be leaders without overshadowing others, and to fulfill roles as mothers and career women while constantly navigating the labyrinthine rules society imposes upon them.

Gloria poignantly highlights the absurdity of the demands women face, where they are held accountable for men's actions, yet accused of complaining if they point out the unfairness. They are expected to maintain their beauty for men, yet not to the extent that it threatens other women or tempts men excessively. The monologue ends with a call for solidarity among women, encouraging them to be part of a sisterhood that supports one another amidst the complex and often contradictory expectations society imposes on them.

But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So, find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful. You have to never get old and never be rude. Never show off. Never be selfish. Never fall down; never fail. Never show fear. Never get out of line.

It's too hard. It's too contradictory. And nobody gives you a medal or says thank you. And it turns out, in fact, that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault. I'm so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is true for an adult just representing women, then I don't even know.

And while I am not a woman myself, I think there's a truth in that constant dissonance in which we are all conditioned to live. That resonates with a lot of us. So, hello, my name is Kevin Brisbin, and I am a workaholic. My name is also Kevin Brisbane. And I'm an Enneagram three achiever. And while that means I am ambitious and driven, a valued asset everywhere I exist and invest my time and energies, for me, that also means I am motivated by a constant fear that I am not and never will be good enough.

I work so, SO SO HARD everywhere that I am, just to exist, to justify existing anywhere that I am. And I achieve that in part by neglecting my own well-being. And I'm sure many of you do the same. I do that in order to divert all of my energies into improving the well-being of those around me. Just work, work, work, work, work, do do do do do. But I didn't learn that from Jesus.

Sure, my evangelical upbringing included the traditional mix of saved by grace, but also justified by works with a heavy emphasis on the latter. And again, as an Enneagram three, if

you give me a rubric by which we're all going to be graded, I'm going to follow that to the tee because that lets me prove over and over and over again that I can achieve and exceed it.

But as much as we've shared in sermon after sermon through the book of John, how we saw Jesus moving towards people, we did over and over again, see Jesus moving towards people. But we also see Jesus consistently moving towards himself. We see him moving away from the crowds to be with his friends, and away from all of the disciples to be with his core group of Peter, James, and John, and at other times time apart from all of them, time and space alone, solely in Trinitarian communion, paradox intended.

So, let's turn to Mark for a change today. In Mark one, there are no genealogies, no nativity, no childhood trips to the temple. Mark jumps feet first into the waters of the Jordan at the baptism of Jesus, this holy moment out in the wilderness, away from the crowds, and far from the eyes of the Pharisees. But together with God, in the Holy Spirit.

"You are my son, whom I love, and with you, I am well pleased," as a dove descends to rest on Him in Trinitarian communion. And then this is followed by 40 days of temptation in the wilderness, after which he calls the first disciples, drives out an impure spirit, and heals many.

Then in verse 35, today's text, it says, "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed." Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up and left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed. That first phrase is *proi...* it's a phrase that means, that's okay. It's a phrase that means in the fourth watch, specifically from 3 am to 6 am, which I think we would all agree, constitutes early in the morning.

I mean, it was even still and *ennychos*, meaning nocturnal night at night. And in this dark, early morning, Jesus arose, went out and moved away. He *enesteymyd*, *exorhomi*, and *aperchomai*, but *aperchomai* doesn't just mean to move away, it means to move away in order to follow.

Because just as we saying, God is the waymaker. And even Jesus himself is following, he is purposing into something even as he's moving away here. In Jesus, *aperchomai* to *anaremas*, a secluded solitary, desolate, place where he *proseuchomai*ed, made prayer.

I love that word *proseuchomai*ed, made prayer. I don't know why, but maybe it's because it breathes new life into the idea of prayer for me. When I hear it said that he made prayer, it's almost like I picture him making prayer like one would make bread, making something, gathering separate, perhaps even disparate ingredients and integrating them, kneading them into communion with one another, letting them rest and rise, placing them over heat, letting them bake and become something singularly wholly new.

And I like thinking of it like that, bringing the disparate things of our lives together in this moment, inviting the seemingly separate parts of ourselves into integration with one another and with God. The God of the Trinity, the God who is parts that are parts and also parts that are one, the God of integration.

I love the idea of working all of this out with my hands. The imagery of bread just really stuck with me. When I got there, I just kept going. I really liked the idea of kneading it with my fingers. You know, not over-kneading it but being able to feel right at that moment when everything is together and it's not going to be too tough from overheating, but just ready. I love feeling that because my hands are in it.

Then giving that space, that's a step in the bread-making process. Terri could explain this much better than I, but a step is letting it rest and rise. And then later returning to punch it. Or, I don't know, is that a step called something you like? Or kneading it again, a second kneading? No help, just on my own here, just letting me hang. Affirming. That's the punching step. That's an important one.

And then after that, letting it rest again and surrendering it to the fire of God to bake into something wholly new, something stable, something useful, something I can take in and consume, something that can sustain me. And this is what Jesus is doing in this dark early hour. Up, out, and away, away in order to follow. And that's an important nuance. Even this was Jesus following because these moments were just as much a part of His ministry as the miracles that we spent much more time talking about.

And if you look now that I pointed it out, as you look through the Gospels, you will see this rhythm modeled by Jesus throughout the Gospel readings, amid the miracles and the mountainside musings, and the myriad of people. These moments of moving inward, as well as moving outward, like breath in and out.

And I need you to hear this. For you with me, even Jesus rested. Even Jesus rested. We so often think that resting is weakness, or laziness, or something we should never do. Or we spend so much emphasis on the other things that we do. But even Jesus, God Himself and the Messiah rested. Even Jesus took breaks, took a breather, caught his breath. This is a virtue whose value is so often lost on us. Our rhythm is run, only ever forward, onward and upward, to infinity and beyond.

But if we profess to follow Jesus, we need to learn this rhythm of rest and work. And it's a rhythm that was written in both the world and the word, and Jesus is living this out. So, let's take a look at that.

Back in Genesis 1:1 where it all started: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And then from there, there's a processional of light, sky, land, seas, plants, stars, fish, birds, animals, mankind, and the punctuation of each and every event was, "and there was evening, and there was morning, the blank day." Evening, and morning. Evening and then morning.

I remember the first time someone shared this with me about the Jewish view of a day. Are any of you familiar with that? So, for anyone who's not, or just to relive it, because I do seriously love this, a Jewish day begins with "Erev", which is the Hebrew word for evening or sunset. Now, I've read Genesis hundreds of times, but I had always read it with my 20th-century paradigm: morning, then noon and night. And I guess, since I just saw two of those things were present, I just glanced over it and moved on.

But they're very specifically present as evening and then morning. And I remember being so struck by the beauty of this. So, in Hebrew culture, because the day begins with sunset, the very first thing that happens every day in the Jewish day is coming together and sharing the big meal, dinner, the breaking of bread, and the taking of time around the table. It's the first thing they do in their day, the way they view it. Then, following this time shared with those dearest to us, was sleep. So first we eat, then we sleep. We draw in first, we inhale.

Then the final thing we do, the last thing in our day is we wake up and work. But our priorities are family, food, sleep, work, in that order. Beautiful, right? Or maybe you're thinking, "so what? It's all the same stuff. What difference does it make? You're doing all the same things. You're just starting from a different point on the circle. Who cares?"

Well, I do, because it's a completely different perception. And perception shapes the way we experience everything. Our perceptions are our realities. So, the shift from the modern-day vantage point that having a meal to eat in the house to sleep in or the reward from the day's work, we earned them, we did that, versus enjoying time at the table with family and resting in a place of receiving and then responding with a heart of gratitude and producing the day's work.

Said another way, are we replenishing a well that's run dry? Are we just trying to climb back up to zero at the end of every day? Or are we starting from a place of deposited time, space, food, rest, and relationship, and then working out from that abundance? These are two very different experiences.

Chances are, if you're still unsure, one last example might help: think about a car. In one scenario, you put gas in first and then drive to Philly, and in the other, you have to drive to Philly first and then get gas. These are very different experiences; in only one of those do you actually get out of the driveway.

And if we want to orient our lives around Christ, we need to remember that he worked from a place of rest. Now, hear me out: both of these viewpoints include work. This is not anti-work rhetoric. Working in this rhythm is good. It's part of the creation that was deemed good. Work is the act of creation.

But let's look at that template laid out again since the beginning. Humans were created on day six. And then on day seven, God rested. So, the first full day of humankind was a day of rest. From there, they began the work of tending the garden. But first came a time of relational connection with God and one another, and a deposit of rest. This doesn't just apply to mankind.

What do you think God was doing before the first day of creation? This realization blows my mind. Because God has existed from eternity to eternity, like without time in both directions, which you know, our brains cannot comprehend. Before the world began, God was resting in an eternity of communion with Himself, with themselves. The work of creation itself proceeded from the eternal deposit of resting relational love between God, Jesus, and the Spirit, before "in the beginning" ever began.

So, there it is, modeled in the makeup of the world itself, in its very DNA: the seed of relationship planted in the dark soil of rest and communion. And from that grew the Garden of Eden, the luscious, most beautiful garden they could depict in a story. Come on.

But I told you this was not only written in the world, it was also written in words. Let's look at both accounts of the Ten Commandments. I say both because there are slight differences, and they're both really cool.

The first is in Exodus 20: "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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

In the Bible studies of my youth, we were always taught that when you get to a "therefore," you stop and ask, "what's it there for?" So, in this one, I'll ask you. We get to "Therefore the LORD

blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." So, what's it there for? We're resting because in six days of creation, God made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. So, because God set up that rhythm, that pattern right in creation, therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Now let's look at Deuteronomy 5, specifically commandment number four, verses 12 to 15. This section, even more verbose than the latter, is one of the longest commandments in the set of ten.

It goes: "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest as you do." Here, it diverges slightly and continues, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." In this instance, what's the "therefore" there for? It brings us back to the memory of being slaves in Egypt, a time when they could not stop working, when resting wasn't a choice. But now, as free people, they can choose to rest, to take time to simply be, resting assured that God would take care of them. They were children of God, seated at His table, enjoying manna from heaven, and resting under the protection of the pillar of fire at night. The work followed all of that, but love and rest came first.

And it must. Like the readers of Deuteronomy, don't we all need to be reminded of this truth? Remember, first be, and then do. First, know who you are, and then work to manifest that truth into the world.

Three EDM is a ministry that utilizes shapes to convey these truths in an easy-to-remember way. They have a shape for this truth, known as the semi-circle, which I'd like to share with you. It has certainly resonated with me, becoming a message I carry with me always. Despite this, I must admit that I'm still not perfect at embodying it, and find myself revisiting it time and time again.

I invite you to share in this with me. The concept places rest and work on a continuum, mapping out a semi-circular path between them. It urges us to envision traveling this path like a well-balanced pendulum, swinging from rest to work and back to rest again. Aligning with our gardening analogy, it recognizes that the aim of work is fruitfulness, which is achieved through periods of growth or expansion, and pruning or reduction.

Now, we're all in different seasons in this space. Maybe you're coming out of a season of pruning or planting new seeds, and you're moving into a season of growth. Or maybe you've been in a season of growing but are now noticing that you're not as fruitful as you once were or as fruitful as you want to be. You may feel the need to enter into a season of pruning in order to grow. Remember, Jesus went away to find direction, and sometimes we need to prune to encourage growth. We can't breathe out without first breathing in. Rest is not laziness. Rest isn't even passive. It's an active engagement, actively pruning so that our work can be fruitful.

Rest is time still spent in the proverbial garden. It's just time spent with a different intention. My favorite aspect of the three-dimensional lesson of this shape is how it re-envision this concept. It highlights recreation. Spoiler alert! Well, no, I mean, it's time. Yes, yes, Colin, can you stand up? It's on the back of his shirt. You can just look at that. It says "recreational" on it. I saw it earlier. There we go. I noticed everything. I see you all: recreation. And yet this 3D semi-circle shape reframes the word "recreation" to mean "re-creation" instead of just recreation.

Oh, there. That's it. And then the next one. There, see. Let's do it again. We got this far. There it is: recreation, re-creation." Because that's what recreation is meant to do; it's meant to recreate you. When you look at your life through this lens, you understand that in order to engage in the act of creating, you need to balance that with actively pursuing restorative activities that will recreate you. How are we all doing in that regard?

How is your work-life balance? I think the fact that we call it "work-life balance" and not "life-work balance" is quite telling. Let's use today's language to reframe this concept. Ask yourself, "How is your rest-work balance?" This is not a rhetorical question. Look at your life. What activities are you engaging in that recreate you? When was the last time you indulged in them? When was the last time you purposefully pursued one of these recreational activities?

Now, another question: how fruitful are you? Is your work producing fruit? Because this is our ultimate task, both according to the guidance given to Adam, "Be fruitful and multiply", and in the New Testament where it discusses how we're supposed to bear fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The goal has always been to be fruitful, not to work just for the sake of working, but to genuinely be fruitful. Being fruitful is a state of being, not just an action.

Just like AJ's tomato plant, evaluate whether your life is bearing fruit. Is your work fruitful? Is it fulfilling in the way you'd like? Is it as fruitful as you are capable of being, if you were well-rested and rejuvenated, or if you were growing in a larger space? Contrary to what the world might suggest, the path to productivity is not relentless work. Fruitfulness is found in a healthy rhythm of rest and work, time away to commune with the Creator, allowing the Creator to nurture and guide you, just like AJ and his tomato plant.

It's a pendulum swing between creation and re-creation. But without recreation and rest, we cannot create; our work will not be fruitful. Haven't we all found ourselves in situations where we're working tirelessly but just not being productive? We all reach points where we're simply too exhausted, not functioning at our best or being effective in our endeavors. This is your sign that you need to rest, preferably before reaching this state of burnout.

But if you find yourself at this point, make it a priority to actively pursue whatever recreates you. I invite you to take a minute now and evaluate where you are in this pendulum swing. "Can you put the semi-circle back up? Two slides back. Yes, that's perfect." So, we can see it all, take a moment to evaluate where you are on this spectrum. Are you well-rested and ready to swing towards growth and work, or are you stressed and feeling unfruitful, realizing that you need to invest time in discerning what might need to be pruned?

In either case, I encourage you to spend time today, either here or when you return home, pondering what recreates you. This will vary for everyone, and you might have several activities that rejuvenate you. Consider what these things are, make a list, and then devise a plan for an activity you can do this Labor Day weekend to rejuvenate yourself. Leverage this extra day, if you have it, to do something that will recreate you today or tomorrow. Make a commitment to reenter the work-rest cycle with a healthier rhythm, but remember, nothing changes without intention and purpose.

As we think back to the teachings of Jesus, we recall that he routinely allocated time to step away and find direction. We must follow suit if we aim to follow his path. Consider the Last Supper, a significant moment early in his ministry. He took the time to be alone and retreat.

Now think about the Last Supper in the context of his Jewish upbringing. It marked the beginning of the day of his crucifixion. So, at the very start of the day, what does he do? He shares a meal with his friends, gathers around a table with his family, just like we do, to emphasize the importance of relationships. "We are created for these relationships, for these gatherings at the table," he seemed to say. This communal meal symbolizes our primary essence: being created for relationships. He then broke bread, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Take it and eat, let it nourish you." He followed by presenting the cup, proclaiming, "This is the blood of the new covenant, shared and given for you."

After the supper, he ventured into the garden, engaging in prayer and inviting his friends to join him. He distanced himself a bit, fostering a time of solitude and connection with the Father. From this nourishment received through friendship and prayer, he embarked on the task of fulfilling the new covenant he had spoken of. So, as we partake in communion today, I invite you to embrace and remember this imagery, carrying it with us into our daily lives.