

10 Commandments – 4 – Remembering Sabbath and Keeping it Holy

Exodus 20:1-11

¹Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

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Among the Hebrew people observance of the Sabbath is a primary practice of the faith.

“Sabbath” means “to cease”.

Beginning at sundown on Friday, observant Jews light the Sabbath candles and offer a prayer to begin their day of rest.

Someone said that this one practice, with no parallel in the neighbors of their day, kept the Jewish people more than the Jewish people kept the Sabbath.

Early on, let us acknowledge that some made this a legalistic, empty, ritual.

When the biblical town of Gezer was excavated, piles of stone were uncovered that marked the distance from the city that people could walk on a Sabbath.

We remember that Jesus observed the Sabbath, but not all the Sabbath rules that had been devised. He said that God did not create people to observe the Sabbath; rather, God gave the Sabbath as a gift for people.

In 321 AD, Emperor Constantine decreed that Sunday was to be the day of rest for Christians. It was their day of worship; remember Jesus’ resurrection and the first day of the new creation.

Today, however, reclaiming the 4th commandment requires us to acknowledge people's first association with Sabbath.

For some

Blue laws

Prohibition

Boring Sundays – this week someone was telling me that they had to sneak out of their grandparent's house on Sunday if there was to be any hope of having fun.

What is Sabbath for Christians today?

Helpful to realize that there are two complimentary rationales for Sabbath observance given in Scripture:

Exodus – (what we read today) God created (worked) the world in 6 days and then rested on the 7th day. In so doing, God modeled for us a rhythm of work and rest.

Deuteronomy – commandment given to Israel after liberation from slavery in Egypt. The commandment suggests that slaves don't get to rest, but free people do.

Sabbath observance is receiving a great deal of attention. Probably have a dozen books with a chapter on Sabbath observance and one entire book written on it. They seem to share the realization that people today are walking weary. We have lost the rhythm of work and rest that God designed and like yards without rain, our enthusiasms grow brown and the soil of our soul begins to develop widening cracks.

Pastor Pete Scazzero uses a different image. He recalls early mid-western farmers who would get caught in whiteout blizzards and die lost in the snow but only feet from their front door. I want to read this quote in its entirety.

Many of us have lost our way, spiritually, in the whiteout of the blizzard swirling around us. Blizzards begin when we say yes to too many things. Between demands from work and family, our lives fall somewhere between full and overflowing. We multitask, so much so that we are unaware we are doing three things at once. We admire people who are able to accomplish so much in so little time. They are our role models.

At the same time many of us are overscheduled, tense, addicted to hurry, frantic, preoccupied, fatigued, and starved for time. Cramming as much as possible into our Blackberries and Palm Pilots, day planners and to-do lists, we battle life to make the best use of every spare minute we have.

Yet not much changes. Our over productivity becomes counter-productive. We end our days exhausted from work and raising children. And then our “free time” on weekends becomes filled with more demands in an already-overburdened life.

We listen to sermons and read books about slowing down and creating margins in our lives. We read about the need to rest and recharge our batteries. Our workplaces offer seminars on increased productivity through replenishing ourselves.

But we can't stop. And if we aren't busy, we feel guilty that we waste time and are not productive.

We go through the motions of doing so many things as if there is no alternative way of spending our days. It is like being addicted – only it is not to drugs or alcohol but to tasks, to work, to doing. Any sense of rhythm in our daily, weekly, and yearly lives has been swallowed up in the blizzard of our lives.

Add to this the storms and trials of life that blow into our lives unexpectedly and catch us off guard, and we wonder why so many of us are disoriented and confused.¹

If you're not motivated because of the rest part of Sabbath, I'd like to challenge you with the worth of our work.

In one of his recent poems, Wendell Berry, farmer poet, writes this

*I go by a field where once
I cultivated a few poor crops.
It is now covered with young trees,
for the forest that belongs here
has come back and reclaimed its own.
And I think of all the effort
I have wasted and all the time,
and of how much joy I took
in that failed work and how much
it taught me. For in so failing
I learned something of my place,
something of myself, and now
I welcome back the trees.²*

Thomas a Kempis said “The spiritual person puts the care of his soul before all else.”³ Sabbath helps us all to keep first things first.

¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 2006, p. 153-154

² Wendell Berry, *Sabbath 2007*

³ Thomas a Kempis, quoted in Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way*, p. 179

So what is Sabbath for Christians?

Sabbath is one way we remember that we are made in God's image and that we thrive when we repeat God's rhythm of

work and rest
work and rest
work and rest

not work, work, work!

but

work and rest.

Psalm 127:2 – It is in vain that you rise early and go late to rest eating the bread of anxious toil for God gives to his beloved sleep.

Remember the image of farmers dying in the blizzard feet from their home. Scazzero says that the Sabbath is God's life line home. He lists four practices of Sabbath observance that he and his wife, his staff, the leaders and members of his church follow: stopping, resting, delighting, contemplating.

STOPPING – Marva Dawn tells the story of a westward wagon train going from St. Louis to Oregon. Their pattern was six days of travel and one day of rest. When winter began the train was conflicted as to whether to continue their practice of one weekly day of rest or to push ahead without any rest. They divided into two trains. The one that reached Oregon first was the group that rested. Their six days of work out produced the seven day train because they had rest.

Sabbath means that we cease our work. If its work, or if it seems like work, we don't do it. (I can imagine at least one mother or father asking whether they change diapers on the Sabbath. Perhaps we make sure we have the diapers and perhaps we try to do it in a worshipful way. Or perhaps we acknowledge that the perfect Sabbath is not within our grasp. In any case, the exceptions should not undermine the blessing of Sabbath.)

We prepare before so that the Sabbath is not filled with work. May entail cooking a meal, or buying ingredients for a simple meal. Paying the bills or running necessary errands the day before Sabbath.

Above all else, Sabbath means stopping.

It also means RESTING from

Work
Physical exhaustion
Hurriedness
Multitasking
Competitiveness
Worry
Decision making
Errands
Technology
Resting with eyes closed or taking naps is a welcome Sabbath activity

As God did on the 7th day, Sabbath also means delighting in creation:

Watching birds
Tending garden
Visiting Phipps
Skipping stones on the river
Reading for delight
Many commented that one delight of Sabbath is husbands and wives making love
Enjoying a simple meal with friends

CONTEMPLATING GOD – the final aspect in Scazzero’s Sabbath is contemplating God.

Reading scripture
Devotional meditation

Frederick Buechner writes “You think of God resting after the creation was finally all created. You think of the deep hush of it, like the hush between breakers at the beach. You think of the new creation itself resting – the gray squirrel ceasing to twitch and chatter, the kingfisher settling down on the branch by the pond, the man and the woman standing still in the garden. You think of God blessing this one day of the seven, and hallowing it, making it holy.”⁴

Listening to Christian music: contemporary or classic
Reading a spiritual autobiography
Imagining walking with God or feeling the strong, loving arms of God embracing you

So those are his four practices: stopping, resting, delighting and contemplating.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words, p. 350

We've seen past distortions of this commandment where it becomes a legalistic thing. Each of us will practice Sabbath differently. What is work for one is play for another.

But its intent and its blessing is renewal.

Pete Scazzero likened Sabbath to snow days when life and its expectations shut down for a day. No one expects the normal push from you; it's a snow day.

Christians are given 52 snow days a year, and they're called "Sabbath".

So remember the Sabbath and make it holy.

Charge to the congregation:

It is in vain that we rise early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil
For God gives his beloved sleep.

Give yourself permission to observe the Sabbath by

- Stopping
- Resting
- Delighting
- Contemplating life as God's beloved