



Rediscovering the Sabbath

SERIES: *The Good Life: Finding Freedom in the Ten Commandments*

While I was in the Philippines I broke the pastors up into small groups and had them share various things about their lives. One of the questions I asked them had to do with what they like to do in their spare time; what do they to relax. As I walked from group to group and listened to their responses I kept hearing the same thing: "Spare time...I don't have any spare time."

A lot of us feel that way, even little kids. A photographer was snapping pictures of first graders at an elementary school, making small talk to put the kids at ease. "What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked one little girl. "Tired," she said.

That's a very observant little girl because it's true, a lot of us grown-ups are tired. I like what Will Rogers said, "Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save." And we fool ourselves if we think this nonstop pace makes us more effective. The average office worker gets 220 messages a day—in e-mails, memos, phone calls, interruptions, and ads. No wonder a survey of over 1,300 managers on four continents found that "one-third of managers suffer from ill health as a direct consequence of stress associated with information overload. This figure increases to 43% with senior managers."

Sometimes our exhaustion makes us dangerous. The most notorious industrial accidents in recent years—Exxon Valdez, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl—all occurred in the middle of the night. In the Challenger space shuttle disaster, NASA officials made the decision to go ahead with the launch after working twenty hours straight and getting only two to three hours of sleep the night before. Their error in judgment cost the lives of seven astronauts. We ignore our need for rest and renewal at the peril of others and ourselves.

And perhaps the greatest danger is the harm we do to our own soul. Could this be another form of idolatry? Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we're running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see the least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand." Perhaps that's why Gordon MacDonald says, "I'm of the opinion that busyness is a deeper threat to the soul than pornography ever was."

So what's the answer to this problem? How do we find rest and renewal not just for our bodies but for our souls? The answer is in the fourth commandment. Let me read it from Deut. 5:12-14, "**Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 'Six days you**

shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.'"

How do we find rest and renewal for our souls? Observe the Sabbath. This morning I want to ask three simple questions of this commandment. First, What does it mean? Second, Why was it given? And third, How do we keep it?

I. What does the command mean?

What does this commandment mean? We're told to observe or to guard or to remember the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week. He says to keep this day holy. In Exodus he says "**the Lord blessed the seventh day and made it holy.**" So God made it holy but we have to keep it holy. What does it mean to be holy? It means it's different; it's unique; it's special. God made it that way but we have to have to keep it that way. It's kind of like remembering your anniversary. It's not enough to come home and say, "Oh yeah, I remember, it's our anniversary." It takes dinner and flowers, maybe even a weekend away. It's the same way with the Sabbath; it's to be treated with special care and significance.

But how? What he says is clear. The first thing is to stop working. The word "sabbath" means "to cease" or "stop." This was for everyone. He mentions children, slaves, even animals are included. So we're not to work but we're not to make them work either. This wasn't an entirely new concept for the Israelites. Even before the Ten Commandments were given, as the Israelites were on their way to Mount Sinai, God provided manna six days out of seven. Every day they went out to gather the manna, but the seventh day was a day of rest. They were to stop gathering. You keep this day holy by stopping your work and resting.

But to keep something holy in the biblical sense also means to dedicate it for worship. The Sabbath wasn't just a day to rest but it was also a day to worship; a day to replenish the soul. This is the positive side of the fourth command. Leviticus calls the Sabbath "**a holy convocation**" (Lev.23:3), meaning a time for God's people to gather for worship. In other words, it wasn't just a day to rest but a day to pray. The Puritans called the Sabbath the "market day of the soul." On the other days of the week you do ordinary business but on this day you do spiritual business, trading in the currency of heaven. It's a day to not only rejuvenate the body but also the spirit.

Eugene Peterson writes, "Sabbath: uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our own activities so we can see what God was and is doing. If we don't regularly quit work one day a week we take ourselves far too seriously. The moral sweat pouring off our brow blinds us to the primal action of God in and around us."

II. Why was the command given?

This is what it means to keep the Sabbath. To stop working for a day a week so that our body and soul can be replenished through rest and worship. Next question: why was this command given?

A. Because God took a Sabbath: There are two reasons for this. The first reason is found in Exodus 20:11. After giving the commandment, Moses wrote, "**For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.**" We're to keep the Sabbath because God, after creating the heavens and the earth, stopped working on the seventh day and rested. A teacher was quizzing his preschool class about the story of Creation and asked them what God did on the seventh day. A three-year-old raised her hand and said, "I think he mowed the yard." That may be what dad does, but not God. The idea is, "Listen, if God stopped working on the seventh day, so should you." Of course, God didn't need to rest. It's not like he got tired and couldn't go on. But, he chose to rest as an example for us.

Notice this took place before the fall of man, before sin entered into the world. The Sabbath was a part of the paradise that Adam and Eve enjoyed. They were to subdue the earth; but he also gave them the Sabbath. Not only that, it took place before God gave Israel the law. The Sabbath isn't something that applies solely to the Israelites. Before the Israelites there was a Sabbath. It's almost as if God built into the very fabric of time and creation a rhythm of work, rest, work, rest, etc. Each one of us has a built-in need to observe this rhythm. And if we don't, our lives go sour. Of course we experience this most noticeably in our daily rhythm of work and sleep. Try to go without sleep for too long and watch out, you'll pay for it. George MacDonald said, "Sleep is God's contrivance for giving us the help he couldn't get into us when we were awake." We all have to sleep. But, unfortunately, keeping to a weekly rhythm of work/rest isn't quite as easy, so it has to be commanded.

B. Because God delivered his people: But there is still another reason to keep the Sabbath and we see it in Deut. 5:15. After giving them this commandment, Moses says, "**And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.**" Here the reason they were to observe the Sabbath was that they were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord delivered them from that slavery. For 400 years Israel labored as slaves in Egypt without a Sabbath. Then God came along and gave them rest by delivering them from that slavery.

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foreigners what the Egyptians did to them they are to keep the Sabbath. Israel was to show the same mercy to others that God had shown to them. There is a humanitarian aspect to keeping the Sabbath. People are more than just machines, good only for what they can produce. The Sabbath reminds us of that and protects people from being reduced to units of production. During the aftermath of the French Revolution the Sabbath was abolished, being substituted with one day's rest in ten. Voltaire said, "We cannot destroy Christianity until we first destroy the Sabbath." But apparently the experiment was a disaster; men and women crumbled under the strain and animals literally collapsed in the streets. People need Sabbath because they're people, not machines.

III. How do we keep this command today?

But we still have to answer the question, how do we keep this command today? This is an important question because there are some who say that this is the one commandment we're no longer obligated to keep. They would say that never in the New Testament are we told we have an obligation to keep the Sabbath. So if we're going to answer this question we have to start with what Jesus and the early church taught about the Sabbath.

A. Jesus and the Sabbath: As we look into the New Testament we see first of all that Jesus practiced it but with a whole new understanding. In Luke 4:16 we read, "**And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.**" Jesus was in the habit of observing at least one aspect of the Sabbath and that's the need for public worship. You might say that Jesus observed the Sabbath by going to church.

But, if you look at the gospels you can also see that Jesus had a different understanding of the Sabbath than the religious leaders of the day. One day Jesus was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath and his disciples were hungry and began to pick the heads of grain. The Pharisees saw this and were upset. They had created a very elaborate code of restrictions of what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. They had 39 articles which practically prohibited you from breaking a sweat on the Sabbath. So they said to Jesus, "Why are they breaking the Sabbath law?" Jesus responded by reminding them of what King David did when he and his friends became hungry: they entered the Temple and ate the consecrated bread, which wasn't lawful for anyone to eat except the priests. And then Jesus said, "**The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath**" (Mk 2:27). Another time he healed a guy on the Sabbath and they accused him again of working. To that he said "**What man shall there be among you, who has one sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath**" (Mt.12:11-12).

The Pharisees had added so many restrictions to the Sabbath that it ended up being a burden. Its purpose was to give rest and spiritual refreshment, but in their legalism they had made it into a form a slavery. In their desire to protect the Sabbath they corrupted it. Jesus came along and

didn't throw out the Sabbath but restored its true meaning as a day of rest, worship and mercy.

B. The early church and the Lord's Day: But as we go to the practice of the early church in the book of Acts and the Epistles we see that something very unique had happened to change their view of the Sabbath. The Jewish Sabbath, which they were used to keeping, was on the seventh day of the week. But Jesus was raised up from the dead not on the seventh day but on the first day of the week—Sunday. It seems the early church felt the freedom to switch days and make Sunday instead of Saturday the special day. So we read in Acts 20:7, **“And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.”** Notice the church gathered together on the first day of the week, not the seventh. That's why in 1 Cor.16:2 Paul says, **“On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.”** Paul says take offering on the first day of every week because that's when the church gathered for worship. Finally, in Rev.1:10. John says, **“I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet.”** John doesn't tell us when the Lord's Day was but we have good reason to believe it was the first day of the week. Isn't it interesting John calls it the “Lord's day”? Even for New Testament believers there was one day set among seven set aside as uniquely the Lord's.

But we have to be careful. This doesn't mean that the New Testament church rigidly observed every rule that the Old Testament law laid down about the Sabbath only on Sunday instead of Saturday. As a matter of fact, Paul reprimands the Colossians for keeping a legalistic Sabbath. He says, **“Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ”** (Col.2:16-17). When he says, “The substance belongs to Christ,” what does he mean? Somehow the Sabbath looked forward to Christ; Jesus fulfills the Sabbath. The Sabbath is all about ceasing from our work and about resting. That's not only true in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense. Before Christ we depended on our own good works to get us into heaven. It was all about being good enough. But now Christ has fulfilled the law. His death and resurrection frees us from having to work to earn his favor and love. We can rest completely in him for our righteousness. Hebrews says, **“For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His”** (4:10). If we trust Christ we have rested from our works. In a spiritual sense, we can enjoy Sabbath rest seven days a week.

As those under Christ and not the law we're free from the rigid restriction of a legalistic Sabbath to earn favor with God, but we don't ignore the original purpose of the Sabbath. The Christian Sabbath, or the Lord's Day, is still a day for rest; a day for worship; and a day for showing mercy.

C. A day of mercy: Let's take these in reverse order. First, it's a day to show mercy. That's what Jesus did. It's a great day to welcome a hurting person into your home, or

visit someone in the hospital, or feed someone who is hungry, or just spend time with someone who is lonely.

Sometimes this mercy begins with how we run our businesses. Most of us are involved in some kind of employee/employer relationship. Some of you as employees know what it's like to work seven days a week or at least 60-70 hours a week. And you know that when that happens you begin to feel violated regardless of how much money you're making. You begin to feel more like a unit of production than a human being made in the image of God. For those of you that are employers you need to recognize this. Your employees are more than machines that exist for your benefit. One of the ways you can protect them from feeling that way is to observe the Sabbath as a day of mercy.

Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants is a successful businessman. The 79-year-old CEO of the nearly 1,000 Chick-fil-A restaurants has closed his restaurants on Sundays since 1948. He doesn't mind losing millions of dollars of business to honor the Lord's day. He recognizes that his employees need rest. He shows mercy to them by freeing them from work one day a week.

D. A day of worship: Second, it's a day of worship; a day for a holy convocation; a day uniquely blessed for the refreshment of God's people as we gather together and worship the Lord and hear his word. This is why it's wrong to simply equate Sabbath with a “day off.” A “day off” is a secularized “Sabbath.” The sole goal of a day off is leisure, fun, play. Isn't it interesting that we live in a culture that is obsessed with leisure and recreation, but very few people are rested. We actually have a leisure industry, a very profitable one at that! And yet we have more exhaustion, fatigue and burnout than ever before. I think we've lost a biblical view of rest. Rest that includes a recognition and appreciation of God. Rest that includes a spiritual rejuvenation that only comes through worship of the living God and fellowship with his people. Albert Schweitzer said, “If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan.”

So the Lord's Day is a day to meet together with God's people. It doesn't necessarily have to be Sunday, but we need a weekly rhythm where we observe a discipline of gathering for worship. I have hardwood floors in my home and over the years some of the planks of wood sort of worked loose. The result is every once in a while the nails have to be pounded back in to regain a snug hold. This “repounding” is what happens when we come to church each week on the Lord's Day. As we sing the great truths of the Christian life, as we pray together as a body, as we hear and obey the scriptures, we hammer in the nails of our faith convictions. They tend to work loose during the week, but on Sunday the nails are pounded back in and our drifting spirit is brought back to the center.

E. A day of rest: Finally, it's a day of rest. It's a day to catch our breath. A day NOT to go to work. If your work is at home as housewife, it's a day for you to have a break from the grind of cooking and cleaning and getting things done. If your work is as a student, it's a day for you to rest from the burden of endless books to read, projects to finish and papers to write. Whatever is YOUR work, stop it once a week and relax. Instead of working, do things that refuel

your body, your mind, your relationships and your soul. If you like the movies, go to the movies. If you like to ride your bike, do that. If you like to hike, take a long one. If you like to read, go for it. If you like to garden, plant some flowers. J.I. Packer says we should "choose the leisure activities that bring us closest to God, to people, to beauty, and to all that ennoble."

The important thing is to detach ourselves from our everyday work. It's a time to say, "I'm not a human doing but a human being. I'm more than my work." It takes faith to do this. You have to say, "I'll stop working and trust God that work I could be doing on this day will somehow get done. God will see to that."

CONCLUSION

The Lord's Day is a day for rest, a day for worship and a day for showing mercy. Someone told the story of a man who was approached by a beggar on the street. The man reached into his pocket to see what he had. He found seven dollars and feeling sorry for the beggar, he held out six bills and said, "You can have this." Not only did the beggar grab the six dollars but with the other hand he hit the guy in the face and grabbed the seventh dollar as well.

What do you think of the beggar? Don't you think he's a jerk? Then what do you think of a person who has been rescued by the grace of Jesus, who insists on grabbing not just six days a week but all seven for himself? The way to avoid that is to guard the Sabbath as a day of rest, a day for worship, and a day for showing mercy.