



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Sabbath (Cease, Rest)

Exodus 20:8-11; Luke 14:1-6

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July 18, 2021

Today we are going to be talking about the Sabbath. That's a Hebrew word that refers to one day in seven, set aside for worship. The noun, the Sabbath day, appears over 100x in the Old and New Testaments. It's still 'Sabbath' in the New Testament, whether in Greek or English. It comes from a verb that appears 71x in the Old Testament that means 'rest' or 'cease.' To better understand the Sabbath we are going to focus on the 4th of the Ten Commandments, which commands us to "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8) I want to spend some time understanding that commandment. Then we'll look at what Jesus had to say about the Sabbath as we try to understand the importance of it for us as Christians today.

The 4th Commandment (Exodus 20:8)

The simple form of the 4th Commandment is in Exodus 20:8... "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy." And you might have learned the Ten Commandments as a list of concise commandments, which many are. But there is quite a bit more about the Sabbath after verse 8 and before you get to the next commandment. I want to look at each part of that with you.

"Remember and keep holy" – Both 'remember' and 'keep' point to cultivating Sabbath-keeping as a holy habit. As with so much in life it is easy to get away from healthy habits. Holy is to set apart: different, distinct, reserved. And so we are to not just keep the rule every so often, but cultivate this setting apart of one day in seven as a regular part of our lives. Practically, this is like any thing else we would prioritize – exercise, healthy diet, regular study, relationships. It takes time and ongoing commitment. And all of that is bound up in "remember and keep holy."

“Six days you shall labor...” – While it is easy to focus on the one day in seven, the full commandment also mentions the other six. Those are the days for labor, for work. And besides the distinction between work and ceasing work, the attention to the full week reminds us of the importance of ordering our time and priorities. It’s similar to the commandment to tithe one part in ten. We are to set one part in ten aside off the top, not wait and see what’s left at the end of the month. So it is with the Sabbath. It orders our whole week, our whole time, in order that God and God’s intention for us be given first priority.

This is probably a good place to note that there are, of course, some people that have to work on Sundays or even have shifting schedules. The spirit of the commandment is to prioritize and set aside one day in seven. While most gathered worship happens on Sundays, if you aren’t able to do that there are ways to keep the spirit of the Sabbath commandment. The important thing is to regularly set aside time for this purpose that God has said is so important!

“Family/Household” – The great part of verse 10 lists all that was included in the ancient Hebrew household. Everyone was to observe the Sabbath, even the animals (i.e., no plowing, milking, etc...). What I’d lift up to you is the importance of gathering with the people of God and with your household. Like Christianity itself, Sabbath-keeping isn’t designed as an individual exercise, but one for the community of faith. That’s why Sabbath-keeping isn’t just coming to worship on Sunday morning, but extends through the whole day. If you live alone, you are not left out! One of the great gifts of the church is giving you an extended family of faith. It’s a great time to connect with other church friends for lunch or during the afternoon or evening. Make the most of it!

“For the Lord [created] and rested on the seventh day” – This is one of the few commandments that explains how and why it came to be. It roots the Sabbath commandment in Creation itself, citing the story in Genesis that describes God’s creative work for six days, followed by a day of rest. Exodus 20 teaches us that this is a pattern God established for us to follow.

“The Lord blessed the Sabbath day” – Finally, we read that “the Lord blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy.” When we observe the Sabbath, we participate in that blessing, we experience the GOOD that God designed for us to experience through Sabbath rest and through ordering our days around it.

The Purpose of the Sabbath (Luke 14)

Jesus honored and kept the Sabbath, but he also ran into conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees of his day, who had a very literal and extensive system of Sabbath-keeping in place. His actions and teachings around the Sabbath help us understand more clearly God's intent for us.

Jesus and the disciples did go to the synagogue and Temple to observe feasts and Sabbaths. They did worship the Lord. But he also did ministry on the Sabbath, not hesitating to care for people through acts of kindness or healing. On several occasions he healed on the Sabbath and the Pharisees accused him of breaking the Sabbath. Another time the disciples were hungry and picked some grain to eat. Jesus responded in several ways...

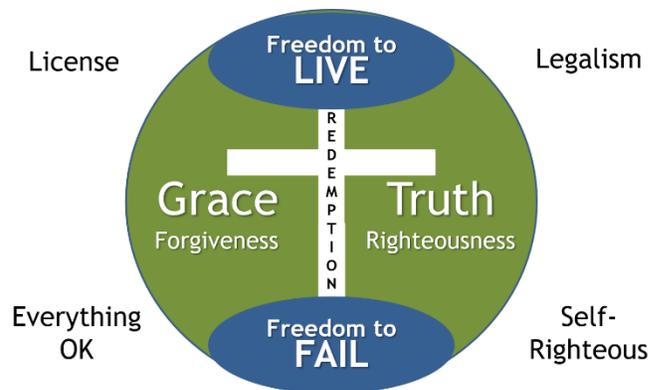
For one, he replied to the Pharisees that there is always time for mercy. In our second scripture reading today from Luke 14 he asked who would not pull a child or animal out of a well if they fell into it. So also, he taught, there is always time for mercy. Indeed, Jesus also taught on the Sabbath by quoting the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy and compassion, not sacrifice." (Matthew 12:7) The Sabbath is not just for worship and rest, but to do the Lord's work, particularly in mercy and compassion to those in need.

Jesus spoke more broadly to the purpose of the Sabbath when he taught that "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28) This frames the Sabbath in a way that is very helpful to me. It is easy for the Sabbath – a commandment of God – to be taken legalistically and rob us of joy and life. That seems to have happened among some of the Pharisees in Jesus day. And it is easy for us to slide into similar "Pharisaism." But Jesus taught that God does not command Sabbath-keeping for God's sake, as if it's something God needs from us. Rather, God gives us the Sabbath for *our sake!* I have said this before about God's Law; it is for our good, for our blessing. Remember, that's where the 4th Commandment ended: "The Lord blessed the Sabbath Day." By keeping it, we enter into and experience the Lord's blessing in our life: rest, renewal, spiritual growth, opportunity to gather in community and live out our faith in mercy and compassion. Of course we can also do those things throughout the week – the other six days. The Sabbath is a reminder to keep coming back to those critical actions on a regular basis, to keep our lives and our work and our purpose grounded in the worship and love of God and neighbor.

Finally, I want to mention one more verse, though I won't spend a lot of time on it. The Sabbath here on earth is a taste and a picture of Heaven, of life with God in eternity. And so in Hebrews 4 we read: "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (v.9) Again, eternity with God in Heaven won't be laying around napping all day, but 'resting' in the presence of God in worship, in community, and in the delight of participating in the life of God. Amen.

Don't Miss Out!

Clearly the Sabbath is important. But even I full the pull to make it a rule, a requirement. And indeed, it is one of the Ten Commandments! I also know what it is like to ignore it or turn it into a day to do whatever I want. I recognize the tendencies in both directions that I described once with this graphic that shows the errors of legalism and license and the place of redemption and blessing when we observe God's laws as they were intended.



I will confess that the past 15 months have been some of the poorest Sabbath-keeping of my life! Can that be? I'm here every Sunday, right? Well like many pastors, I try to take my Sabbath on Friday or Saturday since I am often working here on Sundays. But that has gone by the wayside during COVID, with me often working straight through both days and Sunday, too. I share that for two reasons. One is to say, "I know what it is to miss the mark on this one. I've been there... in some ways am there even still." But secondly, I've experienced the Sabbath enough to clearly see what it has cost me. I miss it and see the unhealthy results just as surely as when I stop exercising and the pounds start adding up.

So, WITH YOU, I hope you and I will hear today's topic as something God has designed and modeled for our good, for our blessing. I hope you and I will hear the holy invitation to order our time around God as our priority. I hope you and I will enjoy what Jesus described in saying "the Sabbath was made for you." Can you envision that? Have you ever thought about it in those terms or embraced it in that way? I invite you to do so and I re-commit myself to this. Let us take God at His Word and see what comes from it. I think we will be amazed and I know I need Sabbath in my own life! Amen.