

Why the Sabbath Matters Numbers 15:32-36

When Jen and I were living in our first home—a two bedroom brick house with a finished attic in a nice part of town—we got by for the first year with a used lawnmower someone from church joyfully donated to our household. But mid-Spring one year that borrowed lawnmower gave out during a busy time—which happened to coincide with a lot of April showers—and in about two weeks our lawn jumped to about 18 inches. Finally on a Saturday I was able to buy a new lawnmower but got home too late to assemble and mow before darkness fell.

So I made the choice on a Sunday afternoon do something that I was raised never to do—work outside on the Sabbath. I spent about two hours with that new lawnmower on a glorious Sunday afternoon cutting down a moderate forest of dense, green grass—fearing that just a few more days of Spring growth would necessitate a brush hog to finish the job. I finished mowing and asked God for forgiveness.

On Monday, the very next day I received notice of a registered letter at the post office. I immediately got excited because I was expecting a nice check in the mail. I went down to the post office at the first opportunity and waited in long line, well over half an hour. Finally, I got the letter into my hands and I ripped it open not to find a check but instead a citation from the city of Oakwood, Ohio for having grass that was too tall.

And I learned how seriously our little city took people not mowing their grass.

That very morning I had been reading a book on Church History that talked about how during the Reformation, cities used to fine people for working on the Sabbath. If a family did not remember the Sabbath in Geneva they were fined three groats or about seven dollars per Sunday—a pretty big sum in the 1500's. They took the Sabbath seriously. Of course you were also fined for falling asleep during the sermon—so maybe the law weren't all bad.

But it wasn't just in Switzerland where the Sabbath mattered, where they took it seriously. In 1644 the British Parliament passed this law:

That no person or persons whatsoever, so shall publickly cry shew forth, or expose for sale and Wares, Merchandises, Fruit , Herbs, Goods or Chattels whatsoever, upon the Lord's day...and that no person or persons whatsoever, shall, without reasonable cause for the same, travel, carry burthens, or do any worldly labors, or work whatsoever, upon that day...use, exercise, keep, maintain, or be present at any Wrastlings, shooting, Bowling, Ringing of Bells for Pleasure or Pastime, Masque, Wake, otherwise called Feasts, Church-Ale, Dancing, Games, Sport or pastime whatsoever.

And in the British Empire if you rang bells for pleasure or pastime, took part in wrastlings or church-ale (whatever that is) or, I assume, even mowed your lawn on the Sabbath, you could go to jail. They took the Sabbath seriously. The Sabbath mattered that much.

But that is nothing compared to the seriousness that God told His people Israel to regard the Sabbath. The story we read today about a man who was stoned for picking up sticks on the Sabbath tells us that.

I want us to come away from today understanding why sabbath matters so much and why we can trust practicing sabbath to do what God's Word promises it will do.

When we live under God's covenant, He provides and everything we do either pulls us further into His covenant and places us outside His covenant. One way leads to life, the other way leads to death.

And there is no more visible way we keep God's covenant, than "Remembering the Sabbath."

So here in Numbers Chapter 15 is this short story of a man playing pick up sticks one Saturday morning, presumably to make a fire, and did not live to see the end of the day. It's actually a shocking read for 21st Century people. Because we don't take the Sabbath seriously as much anymore, we cannot believe gathering sticks on the Sabbath was a capital offense—but the fact that it is tells us not only a lot about the Sabbath itself but also tells us why its so important.

While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him.

Numbers 15:32-34

While God's people wandered in the wilderness, a man was found gathering sticks to make a fire. The people grabbed him and brought him to their leaders—Moses and Aaron because they didn't know what to do.

We don't know why they didn't know what do. We don't know why the next step for this man gathering sticks was not clear because the law was really clear. Remembering the Sabbath was to be taken really, really seriously. Remembering the Sabbath, not doing any work on the Sabbath or allowing or even facilitating doing any work on the Sabbath is the Fourth Commandment—so that's really clear. But there are not punishments specified in the Ten Commandments. At the same time, we are told in Exodus 35 that the punishment for working on the Sabbath was death:

Moses assembled all the congregation of the people of Israel and said to them, "These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do. Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day."

Exodus 35:1-3

So, there it is in black and white—couldn't be clearer. And this man was caught in what Scripture calls a 'high-handed' sin, meaning a sin that is deliberate and intentional—literally a sin that gives God the Heisman. The punishment for that kind of sin, the Old Testament, teaches us was to be cast away from the people and cast out into the wilderness, which meant certain death.

Maybe the people knew the law but they just didn't want to carry it out. Maybe they didn't want to see this unnamed man die. Maybe they knew they had sinned too and had a guilty conscience. Maybe he was picking up sticks for some of them.

So, the man was imprisoned but immediately the Lord cleared up any confusion and the death sentence was carried out:

They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. And the LORD said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” And all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the LORD commanded Moses.

Numbers 15:34-36

Stoning someone for gathering sticks on the Sabbath seems absolutely crazy to our 21st Century ears. It sounds so crazy that this passage is one I am sure many of you have never heard. And people who don't love God's Word or people for whom God's Word is not authoritative might be tempted to just write this story off as Israel's ramblings about a vengeful and angry God.

But let's take this passage seriously and ask, “Why was this man stoned for something that at least to us seems like a minor sin and one that I cannot imagine that all of us in this room have broken at one time or another.” You might even be asking, “Pastor Eric, are you suggesting we stone people for breaking the Sabbath?”

Let me put your fears at ease. I am not—in case you are wondering—advocating for stoning. When you see a death sentence in the Old Testament for breaking God's law we are not today being commanded and called to carry out that sentence. That was the punishment under the Old Covenant of works. Following Jesus' death on the cross which paid for our sins we live under the New Covenant of grace. And when Jesus, the author of the law, refused to stone the woman caught in adultery, which the Old Testament clearly taught should be done, He overturned the law.

But there is still a very important message for us.

We started this sermon series a few weeks ago with a bold ambition. I said I wanted to change the way we think about time. For a lot of us time seems like something of which there is never enough—at least for most of our life. We have a job, kids, clubs, responsibilities, duties, chores. We need to drive someone somewhere or cook dinner, prepare lunches for school tomorrow, reply to some e-mails, do laundry.

And there is nothing wrong with this. Work is good. Being productive is good. We are made to create.

But when we live outside of God's covenant, the result is death. When we choose to follow the ways of the world, we import death into our lives. God gives us a choice. We can live by His covenant or we can live in covenant with the world. We don't usually think in those terms but the choice before is pretty stark—either we live in covenant with God or we live in covenant with the world.

And one way leads to life and the other way leads to death.

And he said, “Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. “Observe what I command you this day...Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut

down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land...

Exodus 34:10-15

And remembering the Sabbath—making the time to cease in order to commune with God, so that He can re-create us and we can create things worth creating things worth creating, is the key to keeping the other nine commandments and loving our God with all our heart, mind and strength, loving our neighbor as ourselves and our walk with Jesus.

The Sabbath is a covenant practice.

What is a covenant? A covenant is an unbreakable promise between two parties. The covenant is kept regardless of either party's response. If I am in a covenant with you and I do not live up to my end of the covenant, you are still obligated to keep up your end. Covenants and contracts are different. In a contract, if one party doesn't hold up their end, the other party is released. The contract, the agreement, is null and void. If you agree to sell your car to me and I don't pay, I don't get your car. If I don't pay mortgage, the bank gets my house. We usually keep covenants in our relationships and we have contracts with things.

The most famous covenant, of course, is marriage. The intent of marriage is to remain married no matter what—till death do you part. The husband and wife covenant to love each other regardless of how well they are loved. And the covenant is how God loves us. God loves us no matter our response. God keeps His covenants. But God's faithfulness to us doesn't set us free to live however we like—to ignore His commands, neglect His love and be indifferent to Jesus. God commands us to keep our covenant by doing some simple things. God's people are supposed to live differently. We do not keep covenant with the sinful and broken world. We keep covenant with the One made it and Who is making all things new.

Remembering the Sabbath, periodically making sure we cease from creating in order to commune with God, is the first thing God's people are called to do in order to live into God's covenant with us. **(insert cease, commune, create graphic)** To not remember the Sabbath, to burn through every minute of the day we are given in order to create more and more constantly, is how we live in covenant with the world, that's how we live like people of the land, the people not called by God to be His children, the people whose sinful rebellion against God pollutes the land. When we do not cease from creating in order to commune with God, we simply do not create Kingdom things. We create sinful things that pollute the world rather than build up the Kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

And this is serious because it means that we are using our time, the one thing we cannot create, to create things that oppose God and will be washed away with a broken world when Jesus makes all things new. Remembering the Sabbath sanctifies our time. Remembering the Sabbath sets aside all of our time for Kingdom purposes.

Maybe this is why "Remember the Sabbath" is the one commandment where God commands us encourage other people to keep it as well, where God commands us to create the conditions where everyone can practice it—not just the people of God—but people everywhere. That's why God commands that on the Sabbath no one works:

Either you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

Exodus 20:10

When a society, a culture, a people, a nation or even a neighborhood refuses to remember the Sabbath, everything simply falls apart. It is that serious. We create death where God intends life.

Ezekiel Chapter 20 describes this very thing:

So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live. Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned.

Ezekiel 20:10–13

Remembering the Sabbath is not only the key to keeping covenant with our God, keeping the other nine commandments, loving God with all our heart, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourself, and our walk with Jesus but it is also the key to life.

Covenanting with the world means death. Covenanting with God means life.

All our time, as God's creatures, is to be run through the filter of the Sabbath. The Sabbath sanctifies our time. We tend to think of the Sabbath as an after-thought, as something that we take only if we are tired, so that we can rest up and start to work again. And if we break the Sabbath, if we don't take it seriously, no one gets that upset about it. Despite the fact that this it is the most repeated commandment in the Old Testament, for most Christians "Remember the Sabbath" seems more than any other commandment, like its 'optional' commandment—more about our own psychological well-being and being productive in the long term than honoring God—and we can take it or leave it based upon whether we feel like we need it or not.

But that perspective comes with a price. It places us in a lifestyle outside of God's covenant, a lifestyle that tells the Creator of the Cosmos, the Lord of everything, the author of abundance, the King of every living thing, I can provide for myself through my work better than you can provide for me through yours.

And isn't interesting that as we have turned away from the Sabbath, that we have increasingly made Sunday like any other day rather than that one that is set apart, that we increasingly struggle with having enough—enough time, enough money, enough security, enough freedom, enough rest, enough friendships, enough satisfaction, enough stuff, enough intimacy, enough clarity, enough truth, enough trust. It seems like we never have enough yet we have more than any people who have ever lived.

When we live practice the Sabbath and live by God's covenant, we are blessed with abundance. John Calvin put like this:

When our shop windows are shut in on the Sunday, when we travail not after the common order and fashion of men, this is to the end we should have more liberty and leisure to attend on that which God commands.

To practice sabbath, our ceasing from creating must lead us to communing with Jesus, our ceasing must drive us deeper into Christ's covenant with us.

There was an article this week in the Wall Street Journal that caught my attention. It was written for us during a tough time, a time when a lot of people are struggling emotionally with the roller coaster of crisis we are on—from politics to pandemic to inflation to war. The article said that ¾ of Americans polled said they feel overwhelmed by the number of crises facing the world now.

The headline of the article was “You Can Feel Joy When the World Seems Bleak But You Have to Try Harder.” And I thought to myself, “Well, that’s the opposite of what practicing sabbath says!” But then the article went on to say that we need to unplug from the world, turn off social media, get away from the news, go on walks, appreciate nature, seek out beauty, pet your cat, binge watch your favorite show, even help someone else. And I was interested in how much they talked about ceasing to create as a way to create joy.

So there is some truth there. But its incomplete.

This last week my family spent a day at Silver Dollar City and it seemed like half of Missouri was there with us. I have never seen an amusement park so packed. Everything was at least an hour long wait including lines to get food. So by 2:00 PM after walking all day, we were all so desperately hungry, I walked into a candy store and dropped \$20 on some chocolate covered peanut brittle which we all greedily gobbled down. And that filled our bellies but it left me feeling sick and within about 45 minutes, I was falling asleep waiting in line for the next ride.

Unless my ceasing from creating is about more than stopping to smell the roses, doing something fun, so I can restore myself, my sabbath is still about me and I am still not taking it seriously. Unless our sabbath, unless our ceasing, causes us to also commune with Jesus, drives us deeper into dependence God's covenant—it is spiritual junk food that will briefly fill our soul but soon leave us spiritually hungrier and tired than we were before.

The Jewish rabbis said that God did not create a place for a palace on earth so that we might go there to worship Him. Instead He created a palace of time so that we might return to Him over and over again regardless of where we are. This is creates the new life we so desperately crave.

Taking sabbath seriously, making sabbath matter, means living by God's covenant and creating space for Him. Sabbath is ceasing from creating in order to commune with God so that He can re-create us so that we may create things worth creating—Kingdom things.