

Introduction

Is anyone here tired? Is anyone here busy? Who needs a break? God knew that you'd find yourself in that spot and He provided a remedy in what is called "the Sabbath." What comes to mind when we hear that term? For many, maybe even most, the first thing that comes to mind is the word "rest."

For the most part, I would contend that all of the Ten Commandments are actually pretty straightforward. Jesus, without much controversy, distilled them down to loving God with all your heart, soul and mind and loving your neighbor as yourself. Difficult things aren't typically that easy to reduce down to their essence like that. While aspects of the Ten Commandments are not easy, it is all rather simple.

Oddly, though, this command may be, for some, the most controversial or the most debated. While there are varying degrees of observance among varying sects and expressions of the Jewish religion, it is a cornerstone to Jewish religious life and a staple of Jewish culture. (ou.org) The "controversy" or "debate" is found among New Covenant Christians (believers in Jesus Christ) who sometimes debate our Sabbath observance as those found in Christ.

Most of us fall someone further down the list in that we consider the principles of the Sabbath to apply to Sundays, but we practically treat Sunday like another day of the weekend in which we knock out the church stuff in the morning and then catch up on missed chores, watch a football game or veg out in recovery mode from an overstuffed schedule. "Rest" carries a lot of different meanings for a culture steeped in leisure and recreation. By that, I mean that much of what makes us feel so busy isn't really the work that we do, but the extracurricular activities that litter our schedule. (These are usually extracurriculars for our children, but I'll leave that one alone for the moment.) As a result, though, we are plagued by a busyness that can only be alleviated by trips and getaways akin to a sabbatical because we don't take the fourth command seriously.

Exodus 20:8-11

Sabbath Pushes Against Our Flesh... "Remember the Sabbath"

If we're being honest, from time to time, we all drift in our spiritual walk and obedience to the Lord. While we are delivered in Christ from the punishment for our sin, its lingering effects still plague us day by day. As such, we can be prone or tempted to forgetfulness. We can forget the cost of our deliverance from sin. We can forget the call to whole hearted allegiance to God. We can forget that God is sovereign. This last temptation to forget God's sovereignty seems to be at the root of the command to "remember" the Sabbath day. There are a lot of things in our lives that we readily understand to be out of our control, but our work and the precipitating effects it has on our livelihood and success can be an area where we risk forgetting that God is our source and our provision. In a lot of subtle ways, our work can behave like a little god in our lives.

- Our work tempts us to trust in our efforts.
- Our work tempts us to let it shape our identity.
- Our work seeks to command our allegiance.

- Our work seeks to shape our identity.

The reason this is so pernicious is that work is a necessary and good thing. Ambition in the workplace can be an extension of the dominion mandate. Work was given to mankind before the fall. Adam was to tend and keep the garden while bringing creation under the dominion of mankind. The curse upon work wasn't the introduction of work, but the realization that work would be hard, plagued with thorns and thistles, and that it would only come by sweat and labor and no longer joy and gladness. Work is a great example of how a good thing can quickly become a god-thing.

So God, in His infinite wisdom and understanding of our frail humanity, drops right into the middle of the Ten Commandments this command to remember to rest. This remembrance to rest is a resistance to our flesh that seeks to replace god with anything it can find. The Hebrew word for remember here is "*zakar*" (sounds like zahair) and it obviously means "*remember*", but it also carries notes of "*making a memorial*." It's not translated that way, but it's about remembering. In short, God wants us to remember that our rest is not found in our labor.

Sabbath Pushes Us Toward Worship...“to the Lord”

The aim of Sabbath rest is to reflect on the goodness of God and the provision of God. The way the command frames our view is that we have six days in the week for our pursuits and concerns, particularly our work, but the seventh day is a day, not for yourself, but "*to the Lord*." Quick caveat, this doesn't mean that you are to just wile away your six days for selfishness and then wipe the slate clean on the seventh. The very essence of the whole of God's law is meant to orient His people to live their whole lives as His people which is rooted in sacrifice and selflessness. The Sabbath, however, is a built-in feature by God to ensure that His people are without a good reason or excuse to give themselves to proper worship.

It is often the letter of this that creates consternation among certain believers or those who call themselves Christians as we discussed in the introduction. On the one hand, you have those who adhere strictly to Saturday as a day of worship or even Sunday as a day to refrain from leisure and on the other hand you have those that think the only point of Sabbath is rest and so they make silly claims about how they are worshipping in the woods when they're out deer hunting or hiking. One emphasizes the command for a day and other a command for rest. In reality, the Sabbath day in the Old Testament is a sign that illuminates our need for rest which, like the other commands, finds its fulfillment in Jesus. In short, worship and rest go hand in hand.

Time would prevent me from illuminating every instance, but there's actually a number of conflicts between Jesus and the religious elites, particularly the Pharisees, about Sabbath-related issues. Jesus healed a lot on the Sabbath. This continually caused problems for Jesus. John 5:18, "*This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*" They didn't want to kill Jesus because He didn't take his vacations. In the Jewish mind, Sabbath marked them as God's people (see Exodus 31), but Jesus flipped it. On

one occasion, his disciples plucked grain and ate it on the Sabbath. In Mark 2:23–28 we read, *“One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.’”* Here’s my point and I think the point Jesus is making. You took a thing meant to point you to your reliance on God and made it a god to you. It was for your good, but you’ve only used it to excuse your carnality and lack of mercy. It’s supposed to make you look like God, but you’re not letting it. This letter of the law approach by many misses the point of the Sabbath and makes Sabbath the point.

Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath by offering rest in Himself, not a piece of land. Matthew 11:28–30, says, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* This is what Hebrews 4:8–10 gets at, *“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.”*

Sabbath Pushes Us Toward Humility... “For in six days the Lord...and rested on the seventh day.”

Finally we consider that Sabbath pushes us toward humility. I’ve made the point multiple times and will continue to do so, that the point of the Law of God is rooted in the character of God. It is a guide for how to be the people of God. Frankly, we’ve become so ingrained by the impacts of Christian values that we don’t fully appreciate how the Law sets God’s people apart. As Glen Scrivener argues in his book *The Air We Breathe*, the modern West assumes that our modern values are obvious, natural, universal – but history tells us that the Christian revolution in society has shaped our world and makes our values make sense. I digress, but the point is that the Law is a reflection of God’s character and nowhere is that more clearly stated than in the fourth commandment. Therein, the argument and example given is essentially, look at all that God was able to do in six days followed by rest. Therefore, you must follow that example. In some ways, our work/rest rhythm is evangelistic in that it is rooted in our being transformed into the image of God’s Son and invites others to the same. It takes a certain hubris to claim that what God has commanded and modeled isn’t what is best for you and me.

Consider that God is so concerned about this that He repeats Himself in Exodus 31; the very last thing logged in the Law before Moses goes back down the mountain. Here’s what He says, *“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. ‘Whoever does any work on it, that*

soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.” And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” (Exodus 31:12-18)

I’m going to ask you to track with me for just a moment while we get a little nerdy and technical, but notice the word Sabbaths. Built into God’s Law is this pattern:

- Weekly Sabbath
- A seven year Sabbath for the land wherein all farming is ceased so the land can rest
- A jubilee celebration every 70 years wherein all debts are forgiven, all lands are returned to their proper clan and family of ownership, slaves are freed, etc. It’s like a full reboot.

As an aside, notice all the debating about weekly Sabbaths, but nearly zero attempts to make a stab at honoring the Sabbath patterns, but that’s for another day. This pattern of Sabbath rest is laid out to make God’s people different, but they didn’t do it. In short, they arrogantly ignored God’s command and, in essence, forgot it or chose not to remember it and what happened? Exile and punishment. Listen to 2 Chronicles 36:17–21, *“Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”*

Conclusion

Sabbath matters, but not in the ways that so many people want to argue. Too many people are trying to get the letter of the law right and they’re ignoring the point. We are all tired, not just because of our kids’ sports or extracurricular activities or our work schedules, but because the brokenness of our world strives to keep us from finding our rest in Christ. We give in to the flesh and give our worship to the wrong things and we arrogantly assume that we can find a better or comparable way to God’s plan.

However, the essence of Sabbath is trust.

- When Sabbath rest pushes against our flesh, we trust God’s ways are meant to sanctify us
- When Sabbath rest pushes us toward worship, we trust in a God who care and not a god who merely takes and consumes

- When Sabbath rest pushes us toward humility, we trust that God's ways are wiser than our's

This is what much of the debate about the role of the Sabbath in New Covenant life as Christians gets wrong. Paul cautioned the Colossians "*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*" (Colossians 2:16-17) As one friend of mine put it, "*The sabbath is meant to temper the curse and bring partial but very real holistic redemption.*" (Randall Breland)