

Sabbath as a Commandment / First Baptist Church of Oxford / 10.08.17

Introduction

- † **[1: bay]** Suppose you were praying tonight, and you perceived that God wanted to send you on a vacation, two weeks, all expenses paid, and while you were gone he would take care of your health, loved ones, house, job, whatever cares you have in your life. Would you be excited by that? This sounds like a good deal, right? a gift from God we should enjoy.
- Suppose God had one requirement: you have to go to a place where you would relax and where you would be more likely to sense God's presence and spend some focused time with him. Can you picture such a place? Would you still be excited, even with this requirement?
- † **[2: Exodus 20]** We have been talking through the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20. You can turn there in your Bible [p.61 in the pew Bibles]. This set of commandments was the foundation for what we now call the Mosaic Law, the legal code which God gave to his people of Israel.
- The fourth commandment is found in **Exodus 20.8-11 ESV: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD [Yahweh] your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner [visitor] who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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.**
 - Here we have a command, how to obey, and the reason for it. Yet we still have questions. When exactly is the Sabbath? Sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. So are we honoring this commandment every week? I mean, today – when we are gathered for worship – is Sunday, not Saturday. Should we feel guilty that we are not following this commandment? or is there a reason the church meets on Sunday?
 - Why did God mandate a specific day for a Sabbath? Why did he command Israel to honor it every week? What did God hope to accomplish with a weekly Sabbath? Was it a blessing or a restriction? Does this still apply to us today? Let's see whether we can answer these questions.

Reflect God

- † Look at the reason for this commandment: **Exodus 20.11 ESV:** [They are to keep the Sabbath; why?] **For [because] in six days the LORD made heaven and 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.**
- **[3: Genesis 2]** Let's turn to Genesis 2 [p.2], so we can look at this creation account. **Genesis 2.2-3 ESV: And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.**
 - God had a Sabbath day of rest at creation, so God declared the seventh day to be a holy Sabbath day of rest, therefore God wanted his people to have a Sabbath day of rest each week.
 - We will talk about the concepts of holiness and rest in a few minutes, but first I want to talk about why God would want people to reflect him or imitate him.

- † **[4: Genesis 1]** On Day six of creation, in **Genesis 1.27 ESV: So God created man [mankind] in his own image, in the image of God he created him [them]; male and female he created them.**
- God created people to be his image bearers. Studying this, you see that people were to reflect God's character, represent God in daily life, reproduce God's image by raising up children to walk with God, and rule as God's stewards over the rest of creation on Earth.
 - I represent this relationship with three circles. God the creator has authority over everything he created. But God created the human family to represent him to the rest of creation and to rule in his name over the rest of creation.
 - God created people in his image, then he rested and declared – way back then – that the weekly Sabbath day was holy. It seems even in the Garden of Eden, part of being God's image bearer was to reflect or imitate God by having this weekly sabbath day of rest.
- † **[5: Exodus 19]** Let's return to the time of the Ten Commandments. Turn to Exodus 19 [p.60]. By this time, all the peoples of the world had strayed from God, so God chose the family of Abraham to become his representative people. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and now was forming them into a representative nation. **Exodus 19.5-6 ESV: [God speaking] "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..."**
- We have a new three circle paradigm, similar to the first. God the creator and deliverer has authority over everything. But God delivered the family of Abraham, the nation of Israel, to be his special image bearers, to reflect God's character, represent God, and reproduce God's image among the other nations, and eventually they were to rule as God's stewards over the nations.
 - Just as at creation, God declared in the ten commandments that his image bearers must have a weekly Sabbath. The people of Israel must remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
 - Scholar Victor Hamilton wrote, "The primary purpose/motive for Sabbath observance is that in resting on this day, the Israelites take as their model the Lord... The God who brooks no other god, the God who is provoked to jealousy by any human-made representation of him, the God who guards the sanctity of his name severely, here says, "Be like me" [339].
- † *Our first main point [if you are using the handout] is that God wanted his people, his image bearers, to reflect him or imitate him by honoring the Sabbath.*

Gather to Worship God

- † **[6: Holy]** At creation, **Genesis 2.3 ESV: So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.** In the exodus, **Exodus 20.8 ESV: [God commanded] Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.**
- Let's talk about holiness. Whether we translate it as "to sanctify," "to consecrate," or "to make holy," the Hebrew verb [שׁוּבָה] means to set something apart for God's purposes.
 - For example, suppose you raised hogs for slaughter, but you kept one 4-H blue ribbon winner for breeding; you would set that hog apart for your own purposes. This is what we mean when we say God sanctified something or made something holy: he set it apart for his own purposes.
 - God created all the material universe to be holy, but he particularly sanctified people by creating us in his image. God made all of time useful for his purposes, but he particularly sanctified the seventh day, which became known as the Sabbath, God set it apart for his own purposes.

- † **[7: Leviticus 23]** Turn to Leviticus 23.3 [p.101]. God was giving Moses more commands for the people: **Leviticus 23.3 ESV: “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the LORD in all your dwelling places.”**
- How many of you know what a convocation is? It’s not a common word anymore. The Hebrew word [מִקְרָא] meant an assembly, so God commanded that on the Sabbath Israel would have a holy assembly, they would gather together to worship God and learn from his revelation.
- † **[8: Deuteronomy 5]** With that in mind, turn to **Deuteronomy 5.15 ESV** [p.150]. This is part of a more developed legal code God gave Israel just before they entered the promised land. God said, **“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD [Yahweh] your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”**
- In the Ten Commandments, as the reason for the command, they were reminded of creation; here they are reminded of deliverance from slavery. Part of Israel’s worship and teaching was to remember who God is, how powerful and majestic he is, what he had already done for his people, and his ability to deliver them from anything.
 - Is there value today in reflecting on who God is, how powerful he is, how much he has done for us? I think such reflection could help us trust God more, be more intentional about obeying God, worship God more passionately, and maintain our hope and inner peace in hard times.
- † **[9: Holy gathering]** So God declared the seventh day Sabbath to be holy, set apart for his purposes; on that day, Israel was to gather together for a holy convocation – an assembly set apart for God – during which they would worship God, learn from God, and remind themselves that God can deliver them from anything, that God loves them, that God is awesome.
- They also would remind themselves that God is in the top circle, that God has all authority over his creation and over his delivered people. As Jewish scholar Matitahu Tsevat wrote, “Every seventh day the Israelite renounces his autonomy [over his time] and affirms God’s dominion over him. Keeping the Sabbath is acceptance of the sovereignty of God” [“The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath,” as quoted in Victor Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, 339].
 - *Our second main point is that God declared the Sabbath to be holy, set apart for him, as a time to gather together so as to honor God with worship, remembrance, and submissive obedience.*

Rest

- † **[10: Exodus 20.8-11]** The Hebrew term [שַׁבָּת] or “Sabbath” refers to a day of rest. We have seen that God ceased his creative work and rested on the seventh day, and that God commanded Israel to imitate him as his image bearers, to follow his example, by setting this day apart for rest.
- Let’s return to the commandment God gave to Israel in **Exodus 20.8-11 ESV** [p.61]: **Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner [visitor] who is within your gates [i.e., *nobody* is to work!]. For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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.**

- Later [Exodus 23.12], God elaborated that this rest was necessary so everyone could get refreshed. Apparently, the way God made us, we need periodic times of rest, not only sleep at night, but also a weekly day off. God designed us to rest, as he rested.
- Economic theory and studies prove that your productivity will decline the longer you work without rest. That's why some companies actually insist that you take a coffee break, an hour for lunch, the weekend, and regular vacation time. It's actually good for the company in the long-run that you periodically take time off to rest and get refreshed!

[11: Exodus 34] With that in mind, here is something upon which many of us should reflect: Turn to **Exodus 34.21 ESV** [p.74]. God said **"Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest."**

- People were to rest one out of every seven days, even when there was important work to do! Instead of relying on ourselves to accomplish earthly goals, we should trust God for those, and make it our priority to fulfill our worship obligations. The Sabbath is a reminder that God is in charge of us, that we need to depend on his provision and submit by doing things his way.
- Even if you never skip church to go to work, how many of us feel we can never take a full day off, how many of us neglect to get rest and refreshment every week because we tend to neglect our health so as to keep everyone else happy? God wants us to get the rest we need.
- *Our third main point is God created the Sabbath to provide rest and remind people of their dependence on him.*

Affirmation of Covenant Relationship

† **[12: Exodus 31]** There is one more aspect of the Sabbath I want to explore. Turn to Exodus 31.12 [p.72; not all on slide]. **Exodus 31.12-17 ESV: 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 heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.'"**

- One thing that stands out here is that honoring the Sabbath was so important to God that those who violated the Sabbath in Israel were to be put to death by the covenant community!
- Why? Because observing the Sabbath day of rest and worship was to acknowledge the covenant between God and Israel. It was a time to cease working so as to worship, which meant admitting your dependence on God, your trust in God's provision, and your submission and obedience to God.
- If you neglected the Sabbath you were being disobedient, and thus not reflecting God's image, not submitting to him, not trusting in him, not depending on him, not resting in him, not making him your priority, and thus not worshipping him.
- Observing the Sabbath was the way to acknowledge that it was Yahweh, the one true God, who sanctified you; that a person had no value, no purpose, no holiness except that given by God

and lived out through obedient life with God. Being created in God's image gives us value and purpose; but we throw that away if we are not worshipping, obeying, and depending on God; and one way Israel did those things was by affirming their covenant by honoring the Sabbath.

- † It is hard for us to understand all this time later. Consider, if people are not willing to set aside one day, or even half a day like Sunday morning, to worship God together, what does that say to God? what does that suggest about our devotion level, our priorities, our spiritual health and maturity?
 - Suppose your grown children lived close to you, but were not willing to visit with you even once per week, would you feel loved, would you think you were an important part of their life?
 - What if your children were elementary school aged, but living in an Oxford rental with friends, and were not interested in seeing you even once per week, though you would bring money, food, and advice, would you think they were in a healthy state of mind?
 - *Our fourth main point is that the Sabbath was a time to reaffirm the covenant relationship between image-bearing Israel and God and between image bearing individuals and God.*

Blessing

- † **[13: blessing]** I hope you can see that the Sabbath was meant to be a blessing: it was part of God's plan to equip people as his image-bearers; to ensure people stayed rested and healthy, physically, intellectually, and emotionally; to help people remain intimate with God and to gather for corporate worship; and to help people think right about their relationship with God, so they also could be spiritually rested and healthy.
 - Today we often forget all that and think the Sabbath was legalistic. One reason we have that impression is because we learn in the Bible that over time people corrupted the Sabbath concept. By the time Jesus was born, the Pharisees had made the Sabbath a source of stress by imposing many man-made rules about it. They might have had good motivations – to protect the Jewish faith in the midst of a pagan culture, to protect people from slipping up – but the results actually drove people away from feeling refreshed and away from walking with God.
 - After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD70, the Pharisees came to dominate Judaism, which is why today's rabbis are direct heirs to the Pharisaic traditions, which in turn is why the modern Sabbath rules seem so strange to us. It was never God's intention that people would think they could ride an elevator but not push the buttons; or that they could enjoy lighted rooms in the evening, but only if a non-Jew flipped the switch or lit the candle.
 - **[14: refrain from providing]** So I want to stress that the limits which God imposed on the Sabbath were good, not cruel or complicated. We saw earlier, at essence the concept was **[Exodus 31.15 ESV]: Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD.** People were not to work their jobs, they were not to work to provide for themselves, on the Sabbath; and this included not just hard labor, but also the transportation or sale of goods; they were to take a day off. This gave them time for rest and worship, and reinforced their trust that God ultimately was the provider, no matter what they did. I don't deny that we might struggle with this, but it is not legalism or cruelty, is it?
- † **[15: Exodus 16; 35]** During the exodus, God taught the Israelites about the Sabbath [16.22-26]. As part of their deliverance, God was providing a bread-like substance called "manna" for the people to eat, but he provided none on the Sabbath. People were to gather and prepare extra on the sixth day of the week, so they could rest and honor the Sabbath on the seventh. Later [35.2-3], God

made this part of the law for Israel, that they were not to cook on the Sabbath, because that was part of providing for your own needs.

- This required a little planning, but it was not a hardship, was it? It was meant as a blessing. LeeAnn and I often put this into practice today by preparing a salad and a stew or soup, which we can eat on Saturday and Sunday, so that we don't have to cook after church.

† **[16: Nehemiah]** The true believers in Nehemiah's day extended this to not shopping on the Sabbath [Nehemiah 10.31]. This was an extension of the concept that you should not be working to provide for yourself, you should not be out gathering provisions.

- When LeeAnn and I have a day off, too often we run errands or do chores instead of resting. This is the tendency God wanted to prevent, so people would be blessed, not stressed.

† **[17: doing good]** What about helping people on the Sabbath? Jesus said God the Father rested from his creative work, but not from his work sustaining life and the universe [John 5.17].

- Jesus also said, if God the Father could rest without being idle, so could he as the Son of God. Even while here as a man, Jesus could avoid violating the Mosaic Law by focusing on God and experiencing rest even while he continued to do good, like healing people and teaching them about God and his revelation.
- This also is true for God's people: the Sabbath law did not prohibit doing good. So it would be ok to help a family member, serve in the synagogue [or church], or visit a sick or elderly shut-in.

† **[18: Mark 2.27]** In **Mark 2.27 ESV**, Jesus said, "**The Sabbath was made for man [or mankind], not man for the Sabbath.**" This shocked his listeners, but it is consistent with all we just learned about the Sabbath from the Old Testament: God designed the Sabbath to help people, not to force hardship on them.

- *Our fifth main point is that the Sabbath rules were a blessing. They were not very restrictive: essentially people were to prepare beforehand, so they could avoid doing anything to provide for themselves on the Sabbath; thus they could reinforce their dependence on God while they rested and worshipped.*

New Covenant

† **[19: Colossians 2.16]** Now the big question: How much of this applies to us? Do you know, observing the Sabbath is never commanded for Christians in the New Testament? It is the only one of the ten commandments not repeated for the church.

- Paul wrote to the Colossians that they should not let anyone judge them by whether or not they celebrated the Sabbath. **Colossians 2.16 ESV: 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.**
- In any case, the Sabbath was sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, not on Sunday when Christians typically have worshipped from the very earliest days of the church. So even when we come in to worship on Sunday, you and I are not following the Sabbath law of Israel.

† **[20: Ignatius/circles]** And that's ok: churches like Seventh Day Adventists actually misunderstand scripture: they do not understand that the covenant for the church differs from that which was for

Israel before Christ. Jesus said he was inaugurating the New Covenant to replace the Mosaic one [Luke 22.20]. In this era, God has different requirements for his people.

- We have a new three circle paradigm: God is in authority over everything; his saved people, the church, are to reflect God's character, represent God in daily life, reproduce the image of God through evangelism and raising up children to walk with God, and rule as God's stewards, meaning we are God's ambassadors to the people and people groups who do not know him yet.
- The early church documents after the New Testament reveal that Christians began worshiping on Sunday, the first day of the week, while the apostles were still alive, to commemorate Christ's resurrection [Svigel; Didache 14.1]. **Ignatius [the pastor in Antioch] to the Magnesians 9.1: ...those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day [Sunday]...**
- *So our sixth main point is that the Sabbath law does not apply to the church.*

Application

- † **[21: Title]** But let me tell you something: even though honoring the Sabbath is not a command for the church, I think you should take the principles of the Sabbath law and apply them to your life. I think we should have one day each week on which we do no work, no non-essential chores, one day on which instead we gather to worship together, get rest, have fun, and do good things for people.
 - Nothing has changed about our need for rest and refreshment. This is how God made us, which is one reason he instituted the Sabbath in the first place, right after he created the first people. So I think you should plan one day off each week, sacrifice some productivity and maybe earnings in the short-run to gain long-run health and stability in your body, mind, and emotions.
 - As with Israel, our benefit goes beyond rest; taking a day off reminds us of who is in control, who has blessed us so immensely already. We come together to honor and praise God, to serve God through the church ministries, to remember what he has done for us through Christ and in many other ways, to reiterate our trust in his provision instead of our own.
 - Like Israel, we have a community covenant with God and we are his image bearers. That is one reason we all try to take the same day off, even though we could take any day off. Carving out one day for worship and rest together reminds us of our covenant relationship with God, not only as individuals who are made in God's image and seek to imitate and reflect him, but also collectively as a church to whom God has promised eternal rest through Christ.
- † I have one remaining question: in the church age, does it have to be Sunday? In the past, I have argued for flexibility, that so long as you gathered as a church for worship, the day was not important. I still think gathering together is more important than choosing Sunday, but as I study this further, I note that the early church all were meeting on Sunday, and one reason was to commemorate the resurrection of Christ our savior. That is food for thought.
 - I still say we should not be legalistic about the Sabbath, but I hope we each will reflect on the value of taking a day, particularly Sunday, so that we can worship and rest together as part of the covenant community of image bearers in the church.
- † *Our seventh main point is that we should apply the principles of the Sabbath to our lives, even though it is not commanded for the church under the New Covenant. Let's pray...*