

# *Sabbath Ceasing*

Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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Did God command Sabbath keeping because it's good? Or is it good because God commanded it? That's an age-old issue that can be asked of any divine command.

## Exodus 20:8-11

*Remember the sabbath day, and 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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

## Deuteronomy 5:12-15

*Observe the sabbath day and 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 to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD 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.*

It's good to read both versions of the commandment on the Sabbath to see how they're the same and how they're different. In both versions it is the longest of any of the commandments. It's also a commandment that keeps coming up in other parts of the Bible.

Compared to the other 9 commandments, it is unique in this respect: it includes both a **prohibition** (no work on the Sabbath) and a **command** (remember/keep the Sabbath holy).

While the 2 versions of the commandment are very much alike, the differences between them are instructive: these differences aren't contradictory, rather, they are complementary. The two together deepen and enrich our understanding of Sabbath.

Exodus says to **remember** the Sabbath—that is, to be mindful of rather than keep; Deuteronomy says to **observe/keep** the Sabbath. In other words, there is both a **memorial** dimension and an **observance** dimension to the Sabbath.

They provide different rationales for Sabbath remembrance and observance. Exodus harkens back to the creation when God worked 6 days to create the world, then took the 7<sup>th</sup> day off. Deuteronomy harkens back to when the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, when Pharaoh wouldn't even give them a day off from their hard, physical labor of brick-making, but then God liberated them from the oppression. The Jewish Sabbath liturgy came to be known as “**a remembrance of the going out from Egypt.**”

The Sabbath commandment is the great leveler: not only should the people of God keep the Sabbath, but they should give the day off to their servants and even their livestock—AND the aliens in their midst. And while women and girls are often anonymous in the Old Testament, this commandment explicitly includes women and girls. They too are to have the gift of a Sabbath. This commandment is an equalizer.

This commandment, the 4<sup>th</sup>, is the last of the commandments on the first tablet of the 10 commandments, which all address our relationship with God. But it's also the hinge commandment leading to the second tablet of the 10 Commandments dealing with our relationship with others, with our neighbors. It's as though Sabbath keeping reorients us both toward God and toward others.

### **Sabbath in Jewish faith and practice**

We can learn a lot from the Jewish community about Sabbath keeping because they've been doing it a whole lot longer than Christians have. In this regard, I commend to you Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's now classic work, *The Sabbath*. This being the weekend when we remember Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., I should point out that Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King were friends. Rabbi Heschel marched with King and Heschel said later that when he marched with King he was using his feet to pray.

Heschel says that for the Jewish community time is sacred, material things are not. After each day of creation, God declared that what he had made was good. But he didn't say that the material world is holy or sacred. That would be idolatry. But on the 7<sup>th</sup> day when he rested, he said that day is holy; it was set aside for rest and for us to recalibrate our relationship with God and the world of work—to put work in its rightful place, necessary but not absolute. We might be able to conquer space, but we can't conquer time. In the end time will conquer us.

The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant God made with the Hebrew people. Keeping the Sabbath reminds them even now of that covenant and serves as a renewal of that covenant.

Sabbath is not just a day of rest; it is also a day of joy, peace, harmony. Heschel says it's a sin to be sad on Sabbath.

Jews read through the Torah each year on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day when they reach the end of the Torah, they begin reading it all over again. That day is called "The Joy of the Sabbath."

Resting on the Sabbath means cessation of labor, but also cessation of anxiety that comes from the productivity and acquisitiveness of the other 6 days of the week—both **outer rest** and **inner repose** are involved.

Sabbath is a foreshadowing of eternity. To keep Sabbath is to have a bit of eternity infiltrate time and space. Heschel says that Sabbath is an example of the world to come. If we haven't learned to enjoy the mini-eternity of Sabbath, we may not be ready for eternity in the life to come.

Jews observe Sabbath on Saturday, but they begin at sundown the previous day and then break Sabbath at sundown on the day of. I sometimes think that would be a good habit for Christians to develop: to start our Sabbath at dusk on Saturday and break it at dusk on Sunday.

Finally, Jews say that it's not just that they keep the Sabbath; the Sabbath keeps them. "Just as Israel has kept Shabbat so Shabbat has kept Israel" (*Union Prayer Book*). It maintains their sense of identity and reinforces their covenant with God.

### **Sabbath: where to from here for us?**

Sabbath-keeping is as much about what we do as what we cease doing. But my assignment this Sunday is on the **ceasing** part; future Sundays will take on the **doing** part. When it comes to what we don't to, we should avoid two extremes: **legalism** on the one hand and **libertarianism** on the other.

- On legalism: Any religion based on rules and laws tends to devolve over time into preoccupation with ways to bend the rules rather than keep them. If Sabbath keeping becomes another bothersome obligation, it is defeating the purpose of Sabbath.
- On libertarianism: I think some Christians, myself included, have not been thoughtful and intentional enough about Sabbath keeping and we slip into bad habits. We can talk flippantly about breaking the Sabbath in the interest of what? Work? But what other commandment would we so blithely ignore or joke about? Would we joke about lying or stealing or murdering or committing adultery?

We should also avoid judgmentalism. We will not all choose the same path when it comes to what we do or don't do on the Sabbath. We're different persons and our responses will be different. We need to extend to one another a measure of grace about these matters.

So then what should we cease doing? Observant Jews would say anything that changes creation, the immaterial world, should cease. So does this mean no gardening or yard work on Sunday? Again, we're all different. Some people would find domestic chores like that drudgery, others find it a source of relaxation and joy—Sabbath rest. Also, we should be challenged to avoid anything that has to do with commerce or making our living, but here too we can't be legalistic or judgmental.

In this age where technology rules supreme, maybe we need to find ways to step back away from technology on this day. Stop social media? I haven't. I wish I could. Maybe I should. Some Christians have adopted a practice of leaving cell phones at home Sunday morning. That may work for some people, but I like to keep myself available if others need to reach me for some reason.

Sabbath keeping should neither be laborious nor boring. As a child I thought Sundays were boring. I couldn't understand why my parents want to do anything Sunday afternoons other than

read and nap. Now I'm at that stage of life where I understand why reading and napping are so essential to Sabbath keeping, for me.

“The Sabbath is a gift of God as much as it is a command,” says Patrick D. Miller, an Old Testament scholar. How should we receive this gift? Perhaps a key to this is asking ourselves: What gives us joy? What brings us rest? What relieves us of stress and anxiety?

Sabbath keeping should set the tone for the rest of our week. It's not as though we come to worship God on Sunday and then we can get on with our lives the rest of the week until the next Sunday comes around again.

Sabbath keeping may be compared to a watch that loses a little time and needs recalibration once a week. That's a little like our lives: we get preoccupied with other things in our daily living and we lose some of the edge of Sabbath keeping. It's like spiritual entropy. Sabbath keeping is a way to weekly revitalize and recalibrate our lives.

So what do we recalibrate with Sabbath keeping?

- Our relationship with God, recalling what God has done for us in the past.
- Our relationship with God's creation by taking delight in it.
- Our relationship with our neighbors and the foreigners in our midst. There is an unavoidable justice dimension to Sabbath keeping. In Deuteronomy the focus is on caring for the widows, the orphans, and the aliens in their midst.
  - In our time we should lament the fact that some people get such meager wages that they have to work 2 and 3 jobs, which often involves working on Sabbath. We need to advocate for livable wages for all people.
- Our work: Sabbath keeping puts our work in its place; work is necessary but not ultimate. We are more than our jobs.
- Sabbath keeping challenges materialism, productivity, acquisitiveness, consumerism.

This week I told a men's group I'm in that we're having this series on Sabbath at Berkey. One member in our group, John Hickey, who until about a year ago was pastor of Faith Lutheran around the corner from us, said: “When we had a series on the Sabbath at Faith Lutheran several years ago, people asked: ‘Why haven't we been talking about the Sabbath?’”

So now we're having a series on the Sabbath and I hope it gets us talking and challenging, but not judging each other.

I must confess that working on this topic has challenged me like nothing else in recent years, and I gather from talking with the pastoral team that they are having a similar experience. It is making me look seriously at my Sabbath habits, good and bad. I think I stunned my adult Sunday school class a few years ago when I told them I love going to church and feel a sense of emptiness when I miss it. But keeping Sabbath is more than going to church. That's like eating the appetizer or the dessert and foregoing the main course.

I have come to the conviction that if we were to take the Sabbath seriously, it could result in a renewal of the church both individually and corporately. As Walter Brueggemann has said, “Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms.”

## **Sources**

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