

“The Seventh Day Is a Sabbath...”

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 • Psalm 81:1-10 • 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 • Mark 2:23-3:6

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Our Gospel passage today includes two short but related stories. In the first, Jesus and his disciples pluck some grain; in the second, Jesus heals a man. Both happen on the Sabbath day, and in both stories, Jesus gets in trouble with the religious leaders. “Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” “They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.” Why was doing these things *on the Sabbath* an issue? What does it mean for *us*?

The Hebrew word for Sabbath is *Shabbat*. It occurs more than a hundred times in the Old Testament. Literally, it means “rest.” Abstaining from labor. Not doing work. It comes from a verb which means to “cease” or “desist” or, simply, to “stop.” Sabbath means *stop!* Like a red light. *Stop!*

This is what God did, according to the creation narrative in Genesis 1, after six days of creating the heavens and the earth. God *stopped*. “On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” God *stopped*. “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

The fourth of the Ten Commandments is about *Shabbat*. *Stop*. “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.” If the commandments are arranged in order of priority – which I think they are – then this ranks higher than most of the commandments; it’s more important than not coveting, not stealing, not committing murder, not committing adultery, not bearing false witness, and honoring your father and mother. The commandment to *stop!* is more important than *any* of those – and that’s saying a *lot*. Don’t have any other gods, that’s number one; don’t make any idols, that’s number two; don’t make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, that’s number three. Number four is *stop!* Don’t work every single day. Give yourself one day out of the week to *rest*. One day a week to simply *stop*. One day out of the week that’s just for *you*, and for *God*. That day is more important than almost *anything* else.

We’re not very good at that, are we? In our busy, bustling, modern, commercialized, 24/7/365 world, most of us don’t know how – or simply aren’t *allowed* – to just *stop* for an *entire day* every week.

The Ten Commandments are so important that they are repeated *twice* in the Old Testament, once in Exodus 20, and a second time in Deuteronomy 5. The two versions aren’t the same; there are some notable differences, *especially* in the commandment about the Sabbath. Deuteronomy puts it like

this: “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.” The *instruction* is the essentially the same, but the *reason* is different. In Exodus, the reason to observe the Sabbath is because *God* rested on the seventh day after working for six, and blessed that day and consecrated it, marking it for a different purpose than the other days of the week. But in Deuteronomy the reason to observe the Sabbath is that *everyone* needs a day of the week to rest, *including* your animals and anyone who works for you. The Israelites had once been enslaved in Egypt; they were forced to work long and hard hours *every day of the week*; they should *remember* what that kind of oppression feels like. The law allowed the Israelites to have slaves, but it didn’t allow them to make those slaves work *every day*. Those slaves had the right to *stop* for a *full day of rest* every week.

There were other laws pertaining to the Sabbath, including laws mandating a special year-long Shabbat every seven years, called a *sabbatical*: “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow so that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard and with your olive orchard.” (Exodus 23:10-11) Imagine. Giving your fields and your farmhands complete *rest* one year out of every seven. You’d have to plan ahead, making sure you had enough food stored up ahead of time. But imagine. Giving the land – and everyone who works it – a complete *stop break* for an entire year.

The Israelites were also told to *forgive all debts* in the sabbatical year. “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts.... Every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed.” (Deut. 15:1-2) Imagine. Forgiving *all debts* every seven years. Imagine. In our world ... mortgages, car payments, student loans. *Imagine!*

There was one more requirement for the Israelites every seven years: “Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the Festival of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God.” (Deut. 31:10-13) Assemble the *entire* people for a *special festival*. Remind them of *everything* God has done for them and asks of them. Let them all *learn* about the *love* and the *laws* of the Lord our God. *Imagine*. Imagine if we could gather *everyone*, absolutely *everyone*, every seven years, and tell them about *God*.

Then, after every seventh group of seven years, the fiftieth year was be *another* special year, the year of *jubilee*: “you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.” (Lev. 25:10) Leviticus 25 spells out a number of things that were to happen in the jubilee year: indentured servants who met certain criteria would be released; some debts would be forgiven; the idea was that it was a year to *stop* and *reset everything* the way it *should* be. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the year of jubilee was ever actually *observed*. There are no

references anywhere to it actually *happening* the way the biblical texts *say* it should. Just because something is a *law* doesn't mean that people *follow* it. The evidence suggests that the hoped-for *ideal* of the jubilee year never actually came about – which is unfortunate. Justice and jubilee remained *dreams*.

The sabbatical year, however, *was* observed, at least for a period of time. It is mentioned in several historical sources outside the Bible. It was probably observed for at least a couple hundred years before, during, and after the time of Jesus. It is also observed in modern Israel; the last sabbatical year began on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) in September 2021, and the next will begin in 2028.

The Sabbath day also was not faithfully observed at all times in ancient Israel, but by the time of Jesus it was a standard feature of Jewish life, and has been a hallmark of Judaism ever since. Shabbat begins a few minutes before sundown on Friday and ends just after sundown on Saturday. In modern Judaism it is a festive day, a day to *stop* and rest from the rigors of work, a day to enjoy special meals with your family, a day to make love to your spouse, a day to offer special prayers and songs to God.

We Christians don't have anything like it. Oh, sure, *technically* we observe the Sabbath on the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection; but in our modern American society, most of us Christians do not have anything resembling the depth of *joy* and *festivity* and *rich tradition* that the Jews have on the Sabbath day. A recent Gallup poll, published just a few months ago, reports that only 44% of Protestant Christians in America say they go to church "every week" or "almost every week." 13% report going "about once a month;" 27% say they "seldom" go; and 16% say "never." The numbers for Catholics are even lower. That suggests that a *lot* of Christians probably don't have any regular Sabbath observance in their lives – and even those who go to church might not be taking a full *day* to rest from their labors. Can anyone among us truthfully say they take a *full day* every week to *stop* and *rest* and *worship*? It's not built into our society; churches aren't very good at promoting it; pastors are notorious for not taking a day out of the week to *rest* and *worship*. (Believe me, what I'm doing right now is *work*!)

But, what about Jesus? Did *he* observe the Sabbath? There are numerous stories in the Gospels in which he does things that the religious authorities considered "work." Now, you have to keep in mind that Jesus felt that Judaism had gotten far too *legalistic*, and far too lacking in *justice*, *mercy*, and *faith*. The things he said and did posed a threat to religious establishment, and so many of the leaders were *looking* for potential charges they could lay against Jesus. So these incidents in the Gospels have more to do with the *authority of Jesus* than they do with the *Sabbath*. Jesus teaches: "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

So we are left with the question. How should *we* observe the Sabbath day, and keep it holy? What is – or is not – *work*? Doing a job for pay – that's obviously work. But, potentially, so is mowing the lawn, shopping for groceries, paying your bills, and a whole host of other things. On the other hand, if, say, *gardening* is peaceful and relaxing for you, something that brings you joy, and time to reflect and pray, then maybe it could be an appropriate part of your Sabbath day practices. Ultimately, *you're* the one who has to decide how you will – or will not – observe the Sabbath. There are no clear rules or guidelines anywhere in the New Testament. The commandment simply tells us to *stop working* and *keep the day holy*. What might that look like for you? In what specific ways can you make one day out of the week qualitatively *different* from the other days of the week? How can you make this day *holy*?

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