

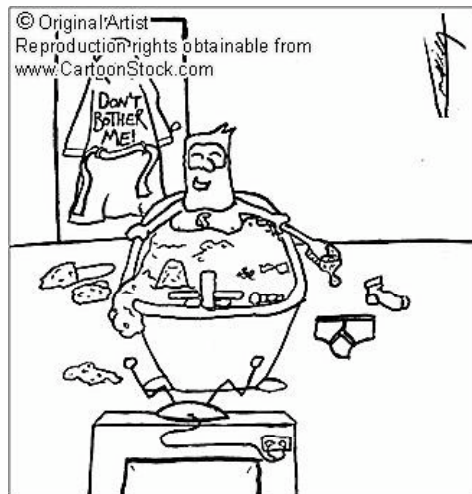
REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY BY KEEPING IT HOLY

Exod 20:8

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 10.26.2003



The only creation that God was truly proud of was the Sabbath

For those who are listening to the recording of this sermon, projected on the screen behind me is a cartoon. God is relaxing in a bathtub filled with warm, soapy water, with a TV in front of Him and a smile on his face. The caption reads: “The only creation God was truly proud of was the Sabbath.”

On a more serious note, many of us have seen the 1981 Academy-Award-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. It is based on the true story of two British athletes competing in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Englishman Harold Abrahams, having overcome racial and class prejudice in order to compete, finds himself up against the “Flying Scotsman,” Eric Liddell in the 100 meters race. But Liddell drops out of the event because his religious convictions prevent him from running on Sunday, a day he honors as the Christian Sabbath. Liddell is allowed, however, to compete in the 400 meters race instead.

Wayne Muller, an ordained minister and therapist and founder of “Bread for the Journey,” an organization serving families in need, has recently authored a book entitled *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (Bantam Books, 1999). According to Muller, today’s so-called “successful” life has become a violent enterprise. In our drive for success, we are seduced by the promises of more: more effectiveness, more satisfaction, more profit, more information, and more influence. Our standard greeting has become, “I’m so busy.” We say this to one another with no small degree of pride, as if our exhaustion were a trophy, and our ability to withstand increasing stress a badge of true spiritual character. Thousands of years ago, the tradition of Sabbath created “an oasis of sacred time within a life of unceasing labor.” All spiritual traditions insist that a life well-lived requires rest. Only from rest may we gain the nourishment, wisdom, courage, and vision necessary to heal the world.

Now we are ready for Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**” (20:1-3).

“**You shall not make for yourself an idol**, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments” (20:4-6)

“**You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God**, for Yahweh will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name” (20:7).

“**Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy**. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your livestock, or the alien resident who is within your settlements. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy” (20:8-11).

This commandment, as recorded in Deuteronomy, gives another reason for keeping the Sabbath Day holy:

“. . . Remember that you were once a slave in the land of Egypt, and that Yahweh your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand [amazing power] and an

outstretched arm [mighty deeds]; therefore, Yahweh your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath Day” (Deut 5:15).

The Sabbath, then, (1) is rooted in the rhythm of creation and (2) it recalls the redemption of Yahweh.

As studies continue to show, we citizens of the United States are working longer and longer hours and are enjoying it less and less. Furthermore, we are doing far less than we used to do when we worked fewer hours. We vacation less, we play less, we volunteer less, we join groups less frequently, we have less sex, we eat more fast food and grow less healthy. In short, we work more and we do less. And for this, our country, our communities, and our families pay a price that is far greater than the national deficit.

According to the opening chapters of Genesis, it is ordained in the very fabric of creation that the world is *not* to be a place of endless ambition, activity, or anxiety. God Himself rested: He stopped working and He “took a break.” The Sabbath is *a gift of God* as much as it is *a command of God*. To keep the Sabbath Day holy is to set it apart from the other six days as “a sanctuary of time.” Sabbath keeping is not about devising a system of rules and restrictions—“blue laws” as they were once called. Rather, Sabbath keeping is the regular and disciplined disengagement from “the rat race” that uses people up to exhaustion. Don’t raise your hands—How many of you here today feel worn-out and weary? Overworked? Overburdened? Too busy and too little time? How many of you felt rushed just to get here today? How many of you are already dreading tomorrow morning? How many of you are thinking: “Thanks a lot Royce! I already felt tired, now I feel guilty too!” Sabbath keeping is not a practice to add to the list of everything else that we need to do. Oh no. *Sabbath keeping is about the way we order our lives*. The point of the Sabbath is not to invalidate human work; it is to keep humans from ultimate trust in their own work. Sabbath keeping is more than simply taking a day off; it is a matter of taking a day off *for God*.

Although worship is not explicitly mentioned in the fourth commandment, Sabbath keeping does involve remembering that it is Yahweh, the Lord God, who has redeemed us. Not only do we look back to our exodus from bondage, we also look forward to the promised rest of God. In the words of Heb 4:9-10,

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from His.

But there is something more about the Sabbath: *it envisions the equality of all people.* The Sabbath is a great day of equalization in which sexual, social, and racial distinctions are erased as both male and female, both free and slave, both Jew and resident non-Jew, and even the animals, all rest alike. The gift of the Sabbath is universal: just as the Creator rested, the creation rests also. Notice with me the following rabbinic legend:

At the time when God was giving the Torah to Israel, He said to them: “My children! If you accept the Torah and observe My commandments, I will give you for all eternity a thing most precious that I have in My possession.”

—“And what,” asked Israel, “is that precious thing which You will give to us if we obey Your Torah?”

—“The world to come.”

—“Show us in this world an example of the world to come.”

—“The Sabbath is an example of the world to come.”

(Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 73.)

In the United States it is often our immigrants, whether judged “legal or illegal,” who do the vast portion of the work nobody else wants to do. And far too often we hear it said of such immigrants, “they take all our jobs”; “they use all of our welfare resources”; “they flood our schools with their own customs and languages, refusing to learn English.” Ancient Israel was commanded to include their foreigners in their most important regular celebration, that of Sabbath. Surely our segregated, single-classed, homogeneous Sunday morning services hardly resemble the Sabbath envisioned in the fourth commandment! What would happen if we included the strangers among us, in all their diversity, in our celebrations? What could we learn—about them and about ourselves? Perhaps we would be reminded that once we were strangers in a strange land, slaves who were set free by the mighty hand of God.

Every Sunday, in the Churches of Christ, we gather together to share in the Lord’s Supper. There is much in the celebration of Communion that is similar to the Jewish celebration of the Sabbath. First, it is a holy time, a set apart time, a special time devoted to our Savior. Second, it recalls our redemption. We look backward to the cross of Christ and we look forward as we “proclaim His death until He comes” (1 Cor 11:26). Third, it confronts us as a church concerning our insulation and isolation from a world of increasing diversity. The Lord’s Supper anticipates the ultimate banquet feast when the redeemed “from every tribe and language and people and nation” will worship the One seated on the throne and Jesus Christ the Lamb of God. Yes indeed, there remains a

Sabbath-rest for the people of God, and we are reminded of this every week as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

How, then, do we today "remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy"? *First, on a regular basis we take a break from our normal routines and work activities to gain rest and refreshment. Second, we take a break and set the time aside to God; worship and service are aspects of the time of rest. Third, we actively seek to extend the blessings of Sabbath to everyone.*

But above all else, *Sabbath keeping is not a practice to add to the list of everything else that we need to do; it is about the way we order our lives.* In the words of Psalm 90:

The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away. . . .
So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart (vv. 10, 12)

Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1 (Abingdon Press, 1994).

Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1991).

Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Abingdon Press, 1999).

John C. Holbert, *The Ten Commandments: A Preaching Commentary* (Abingdon Press, 2002).

Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1990).

Rubel Shelly, *Living by the Rules: The Contemporary Value of the Ten Commandments* (20th Century Christian Foundation, 1982).