

Sabbath Keeping Ex. 35:1-2, 31:12-18, 20:8-11

Gratefully adapted from: The Gift Of Sabbath, by Vic Folkert @ SermonCentral.com

So we have come to the happy end of the book of Exodus, having been completely forgiven for their sin of worshipping the golden calf, the people now show a complete change of heart towards God. With the opening of chapter 35, when Moses comes down from his second 40 day sojourn up on Mt Sinai with the replacement set of tablets in hand and calls for the people to begin building the tabernacle, everyone responds! After asking for, "*whoever is of a generous heart*" to donate both their skills and supplies for building the ark, the altars, the tents and the priestly garments, the contributions were so generous that after a few days Moses had to order the people to stop giving; the artisans had all they needed to complete all the work. Remember that Israel was camping out in the wilderness so all these donations – all the gold, silver, bronze, jewelry, cloth, fiber, oil, perfumes and even the acacia wood for building the structures – had to be donated out of supplies that the people had brought with them from Egypt.

Chapters 35-40 are a joy to read as everyone begins to work; men and women together, cutting, shaping, gilding, weaving and sewing. It takes only 7-months to complete all the work on the tabernacle so that everything is in place and the priests are dressed and dedicated ready to go to work on the first day of the Hebrew New Year; exactly one year after God had ordered them to choose a lamb and begin preparations for the Passover.

But I want you to notice, that the first thing Moses said after coming down the mountain, even before he told the people to start building, that they were to always honor the Sabbath – even while building the tabernacle – and that any violation of the Sabbath would be a capital offense.

Moses assembled all the congregation of the Israelites and said to them

These are the things that the Lord has commanded,
For six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day
you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord;
whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

Ex. 35:1-2

Why was God so adamant about Israel's honoring the Sabbath?

The answer can be found in the last instruction which He gave to Moses before sending him down the mountain and perhaps you can guess that it was also about Sabbath keeping; the passage we just read this morning.

'You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign
between me and you throughout your generations,
given in order that you may know that

I, the Lord, sanctify you.

Exodus 31:13

For the people of Israel, this became one of their many names honoring God: **"The Lord who makes us holy."** Of all the other commands given, honoring the Sabbath would be the people's way of showing weekly that they remembered who it was who shaped them into a nation, delivered them from Egypt and established them in the Promised Land. To rest on the Sabbath was to acknowledge God's lordship over your life and your desire to live in close relation with Him. Of all the peoples of the world, God chose to build out of Israel a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

Thus to not keep the Sabbath, for a person of Israel, was to publicly declare that you did not wish to honor God and did not want to live according to the covenant relationship He made with you. Thus, lest, your heretical performance were to lead any other people astray, the law declared that you were immediately to be put to death. The people paid very careful attention to this law so that, thankfully, it was enforced only once in the Biblical record when a man was found gathering sticks one Sabbath; that law was later interpreted in such a way by the Rabbis so that no one else was killed (numbers 15:32-36).

So that was why Sabbath Keeping continues to be important all the way up the Jews of our day, because it weekly identifies and reminds them that they were a people chosen by God to be His holy people.

But what about us Gentile Christians now living 2,000 years after Christ? How many of the 10 commandments are optional for us?

For many Americans, seemingly all of them! You can hardly go through a day without hearing the Lord's name misused. Lying, stealing, cheating on taxes, adultery, prostitution, as long as it doesn't get too bad, is accepted. And coveting? That's what keeps the economy humming along.

Most Christians would not routinely steal, lie, murder, commit adultery, or use profanity—at least without feeling guilty and trying to improve their performance! But when we come to the fourth commandment...

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For 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. Exodus 20:8-11

Is Sabbath keeping optional for us?

The Jewish Sabbath was from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Early Jewish Christians would honor the Sabbath, then gather on Sunday, because it was the day of

Christ's resurrection, for fellowship and a meal. But in the Gentile world many Christians were slaves and they had to work all day Saturday and Sunday. So worship might have been done on Sunday evenings. How could Christians keep the Sabbath?

By the fourth century, Christianity had taken over the Roman Empire and there was a law against working on Sunday. By the ninth century, Sunday was called the "Lord's Day," a sort of Christian Sabbath. The Westminster Confession of 1648, a cornerstone document of the Presbyterian Church, says of Sunday,

This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up THE WHOLE TIME in the public and private exercises of [God's] worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy." (Book of Confessions, WC: 6.119)

Did they get it right? I grew up in a home that was not quite that strict, although we spent a lot of time at church on Sundays and we didn't go shopping, since most Blue Laws were still in effect. Sunday afternoons were quiet, I read a lot of books, watched TV. It may have been legalistic, but a break from normal activities had its benefits. Should that still be the standard for Christians?

When challenged, Jesus affirmed God's law, but He was not legalistic about the Sabbath. Jewish leaders were upset when He picked grain as He walked through a field, and when He healed on the Sabbath. His response was, "*The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:27) So are we, then, obligated to observe the Sabbath?

A related question is whether we, as followers of Christ, are obligated to obey ANY of the commandments.

If we are wondering whether we can rebel against what God says, the Apostle Paul is quite clear, "***Should we sin because we are not under law, but under grace? By no means!***" (Romans 6:15). We are not UNDER LAW. Our obedience is not to a list of rules, but to the will of God for us. In other words, we don't ask, "**What does the law require of me?**" but rather, "**What does God want for me to do?**" And yes, the Ten Commandments, with the assistance of the indwelling Holy Spirit, can still serve to teach what God wants for us. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "***We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.***" (Romans 7:6 ESV)

What Paul meant was that - unlike the Hebrew people - we are not required to keep the Sabbath in a legalistic way; we keep the Sabbath as the Holy Spirit leads us. At the same time, we take very seriously God's commandment to observe the Sabbath, because we trust Him to have our best interests at heart and like the Hebrew people of

old, we also consider ourselves to be a holy people who wish to publicly honor God for all that He has given us.

So, how might we implement the principle and practice of Sabbath in our lives today?
HOW CAN WE KEEP the SABBATH HOLY?

1. Set aside a regular day to relax from the pressures of everyday life. God built into His creation a rhythm; six days of work followed by a seventh day of rest. Did God need rest? Hardly. But we do! Thus, at the very beginning of our Scriptures, God gave people a maintenance schedule. Just like the regular maintenance which is required for our cars. Remember the good old days, when they would put a little sticker on your window to remind you of the next oil change? I guess that didn't work so well, now our new cars verbally, visually, and repeatedly remind us when they want their oil changed. Just like our cars, when we follow our regular maintenance schedule we reap a noticeable benefit.

Secular journalist A.J. Jacobs spent a year of his life living quite literally according to ancient Hebrew law. Some of the practices were very legalistic, although he found that through them he was drawn to forgiveness, prayer, and the Sabbath. Christianity Today asked him, "What did taking a Sabbath do for you?" He replied, "I had been a workaholic, so I would work 24 hours a day. The first thing I would do when I woke up was check my Blackberry. The Sabbath is a great thing, because the Bible is saying you can't work. You can't check e-mail. You have to spend the day with your family. It's a real smell-the-roses type of day. I found it to be a day for joy, for just really reconnecting with my life and realizing that work is not everything. I loved it, but it was a huge struggle. I had to do it in stages. I still practice the Sabbath now. I'm Jewish, so I do it on Saturday. It's a day where I spend time with the family and refuse to work." (CT, January 1, 2008)

Does our rest have to be on Saturday or Sunday? God gives us lot of flexibility: In his letter to the gentile Christians in Rome, Rabbi Paul wrote, "*One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*" (14:5). So your Sabbath doesn't have to be on Sunday, but you should set a day – not just an hour or two – to unwind, to let go of stress and busyness. Your Boss has told you to take some time off...every week! It is not optional; He is the Lord! Don't feel guilty!

What should you do with that time? Are you going to be stuck on your phone, or sitting around, feeling you should be doing something? You probably need a plan and your plan should involve a CHANGE OF PACE. If you are active all week, take a nap, watch TV, go fishing, or read a book. If you sit most of the time, get out and exercise, or work in the garden. If you constantly stare at a screen, turn everything off and take a quiet walk with your spouse. If you really enjoy mowing the lawn or doing the laundry, go ahead; if you don't enjoy it, plan ahead, so that your lack of clean socks or the angry

stares of your neighbors don't force you to get to work. You have a lot of freedom to choose, but don't cheat yourself!

2. Make Sabbath worship a priority. As I said, Jesus was no legalist when it came to the Sabbath. Yet we read in the Gospel of Luke, "Jesus went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, AS WAS HIS CUSTOM." (4:16). Worship was on His busy schedule every week.

When we worship every week, like the Hebrews of old, we are making a declaration to ourselves: "**God is center of my life.**" The center of my life is not work, not recreation, not even family. In fact, God is even more important than activities I might enjoy during the time when I worship. Weekly worship also makes a statement to our children, and to all those around us, about the priority of God in our lives.

The Sabbath has practical impact as well. Like rest, worship is also part of our preventive maintenance. We reflect on our lives, to eliminate confusion and confess our sins. We encounter God and renew our faith and passion. We gain perspective on our problems and pressures and receive guidance from God.

One of the best church ads I have ever seen is, "After the week you've had, you need a church like ours." I hope our church is the kind of church that resets us for another week.

Our participation in Sunday worship is also maintenance for the whole body of Christ, the church. Weekly worship is critical for a healthy, vibrant church that makes an impact in the world.

It says something about our culture in that it has now made weekly worship a challenge. Sports and recreation have taken over traditional worship times. Other people have to work because stores and restaurants chose to stay open on Sundays.

Of course the Covid pandemic has also made worship a challenge. Out of health concerns, many people now worship on YouTube, or gather their household together for family worship. Those are both good things, although it does not provide as many opportunities for people to share the gifts of teaching, music, caring, or encouragement. That is why the letter to the Hebrews encourages, "*Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" (10:24-25).

You know how it is when people are missing from church; you miss them. When you are the one who is missing, they miss you. Just sayin'.

How do we keep the Sabbath? Relax, worship and... Get a taste of heaven.

The Heidelberg Catechism, another of our cornerstone documents, has a great statement about the Sabbath: *[God's will for me is] "that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath."* (Q. & A. #103, based primarily on Hebrews 4:9-11.)

What would you like to do in heaven? In heaven, will you spend time with your family, a much larger and more perfect family? Will there be unimaginable beauty, fantastic music and an endless array of interesting things to do and see? Will you worship?

What is your ideal Sunday like? Is worship part of it? (If not, what does that say to you?). Does your ideal Sunday include a family dinner or family outing, a round of golf, or some family games, or an intimate conversation? Will you enjoy the beauty of nature? Will you create something? Will you take the time to visit or call someone in need of company? Will you do deeds of mercy and love? (In some traditions, people often took time on Sunday afternoons to visit those who were lonely or sick.)

Will you have intimate fellowship with God in private prayer? Will you spend time with a small group from church?

Your ideal Sabbath might tell you something about how ready for heaven you are! Your vision of heaven will carry over into the rest of your life. As the catechism says, *"that EVERY DAY of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin ALREADY IN THIS LIFE the eternal Sabbath"*

We will keep the Sabbath when God is at the center of our life, when we worship and love him; when people are a priority, especially family and church family and people in need; when we appreciate the good things that God gave us and give thanks for both them and the time He gives us to enjoy them.

For us, Sabbath keeping is not a law, but it is a God given privilege that is still ours to enjoy. A healthy life includes both productive times (six days!) and rejuvenating times.

Communal worship is also another of God's gifts to us; it builds our body as together we build the Body of Christ. So worship should be another priority. Maybe you need to change your commitments and plans. Also, when you come to worship, come prepared with a passionate desire for God, readiness to participate with others and high expectations.

Thus, through Sabbath keeping and worship, we can strive for a taste of heaven every day. We can spend time with God, do our work for His glory, love our families, and show His grace to everyone we meet.

Let's pray about this together.