

Honor Sabbath

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

God's six days of work and one day of rest becomes the prototype of our weekly practice.

On Thursday, I painted a bedroom in our home. I started the project several months ago but never finished it. The brown walls had become faded and worn through the years. It had been our son's room since he was five. When Andrew was young, he enjoyed drawing on his bedroom walls. He and his friends would push the furniture aside and play basketball with a tennis ball and a coat hanger rim. Let's just say his room took a pounding.

I painted the walls and trim with two coats of fresh paint. If I do say so myself, it looks really good. I finished the job by early evening and found myself returning periodically to the room to admire my handiwork. It was a delight to see his room transformed. I enjoyed showing Chris the finished product.

Finding so much pleasure in painting a room may seem excessive to you, but keep in mind, what I do for a living cannot be measured in such tangible ways. How do you measure success when you are working with people's souls? How do you quantify growth in Christian discipleship? It cannot be measured with a bottom line business equivalent. That's why I enjoy projects that can be readily measured. Hold that thought, and

I'll come back to it in a few moments.

This is the third week running in which we have focused on the Ten Commandments. These commands appear twice in the Bible, in a portion of Scripture called the Torah or Pentateuch, consisting of the first five books in the Old Testament. These commands first appear in Exodus, when they were originally given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. God's people then embark on a 40-year sojourn in search of the Promised Land. When they reach their destination, Moses, now an old man, rehearses the Ten Commandments once more. The title for the book that contains this second account, Deuteronomy, is a Hebrew word meaning a repetition or copy of the law.

Let's begin with the first account in Exodus. We are directed in this command to "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8). The rationale in Exodus for keeping the Sabbath becomes God's pattern of work and rest in creation: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but God rested on the Sabbath day; therefore God blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it" (Exodus 20:11). God's six days of work and one day of rest become the prototype of our weekly practice.

God's work is not finished until it is enjoyed.

Why does God take time to rest? Surely God isn't tired. I read in Isaiah that God never grows tired or weary (Isaiah 40:28). I read in Psalms that "The One who keeps Israel never slumbers or sleeps" (Psalm 121:4). Perhaps God rests to enjoy what he has made in much the same way I enjoy a freshly painted room. God's work is not finished until it is enjoyed. That's why, when God finished his work, he pronounced it good (Genesis 1:31).

We take the Ten Commandments for granted. But when these commands were originally given, they represented a quantum leap forward in social ethics. These laws were radical in their day. Take the fourth command. No other people in the Ancient Near East observed a weekly day of rest. There is not a single reference to Sabbath outside the Old Testament. It's one of the practices that distinguish God's people from their hedonistic neighbors.

Egypt, the country from which Israel took flight, worked their slaves to death. How else do you think they were able to build those massive pyramids? Egypt was the dominant superpower in those days, meaning they had access to an endless supply of cheap, manual labor.

The fourth command stipulates who is obliged to keep this command. "You shall not do any work—you, or your son or daughter, or your male servant or your female servant, or your livestock or the stranger within your gates." Even servants and

farm animals get time off on the Sabbath.

The Hebrew word for Sabbath, *sabat*, means to cease work and rest. God knows how work can be deified. Idolizing our work is a direct violation of the first two commands about no other gods and no idols.

When I work all the time, I obsess over it. I lose perspective. Little things wrap me around the proverbial axle. A day of rest reminds me that the things that worry me are not always that important.

We worship our busyness. Our words give us away. "How are you?" people ask. "Busy," we answer. We regale others with how busy we are as though busyness adds importance to our lives. We don't realize what an idol we have made of our busyness until we rest. Sabbath-keeping moderates this tendency to deify our work. Rest renews our energy. Recreation re-creates us! It enables us to approach our work with renewed vigor and enthusiasm. Sometimes I learn more about my work by not thinking about it than by thinking about it.

During the industrial revolution of the early 1900s, the French decided to give people a day of rest every ten days rather than the customary seven days. They thought by stretching the work week three days they could increase productivity. Shifting the Sabbath to every ten days was an abysmal failure. Researchers found that people's productivity decreased noticeably after six days. We are

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hard-wired to need a day of rest every seven days.

Sabbath-keeping reminds me that everything doesn't depend upon me. Some people are particularly susceptible to laziness. Not me; my Achilles heel is obsessive responsibility. I feel responsible for everybody and everything. When I observe Sabbath, I am reminded that I am not God.

If we compare these two references to the Ten Commandments, you'll notice in Exodus that the rationale for keeping the Sabbath is God's six days of work and one day of rest pattern. In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath is justified by the words, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 5:15). In other words, this miraculous Red Sea deliverance is not your doing; it is God's means of deliverance. Remember, Israel, you did not save yourselves, God saved you.

This fourth command calls us to "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 5:12). "Holy" means making the Sabbath separate or distinct from the other six days. To keep a day holy implores positive action.

"Remember" is a pivotal word in Deuteronomy. Memory makes us what we are. When we lose our memory, we cease living in any meaningful way. Obeying the Sabbath by keeping it holy helps us remember God. John Calvin said it this way: "On the Sabbath

we cease our work so God can do his work in us."

We observe Sabbath by what we are doing here: through worship. The original Sabbath was Saturday, but early Christians moved it to Sunday to shift the focus to Jesus' resurrection.

Worship centers us. Worship brings us back to those things that are really important. Otherwise, in the words of Abraham Heschel, we risk "becoming slaves to our own pettiness."

I'm holding a spoon that was mulched by our sink disposal. While I was washing the dishes one night, this spoon slipped into the disposal and was bent out of shape. You may feel like you've been run through the disposal lately and you are bent out of shape. Worship gives us back our shape. It draws us back into covenant relationship with God.

We run the risk of regarding worship as a passive exercise, as something we watch, rather than something we do. Worship acts as a verb in the Bible, rather than a noun. We worship God. If we are not careful, worship can become a spectator sport. We watch the choir sing and hear bells play; we listen to preachers pray and preach. I'll confess I'm a little nervous about worshiping in this hall, given these comfy seats and access to technology. Worship is not something we observe; it is something we participate in together.

Our order of worship is sometimes called a liturgy. Liturgy literally means "the work of the people." Worship involves work;

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good work, mind you, but work just the same. We consciously participate in corporate prayer; we make a deliberate attempt to internalize the words we sing. We listen for what God's Word says to us. When we depart from this place, we make a concerted effort to leave ready and willing to live for God.

There are six different disputes in the New Testament involving Jesus and the religious establishment over Sabbath keeping. Five of these disputes involve Jesus healing on the Sabbath; the other controversy concerns Jesus' disciples plucking grain from the fields, a violation of Sabbath law (Mark 2:23-27). God never specified what the commandment meant by working on the Sabbath, so people had to answer this question themselves. By Jesus' day, there were 1521 rules about working on the Sabbath, including such nit-picky rules as removing wheat from grain stalks.

In the midst of this dispute, Jesus utters the memorable words, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Thank you, Jesus! God did not create us to slavishly keep Sabbath laws; the Sabbath is God's gift to us. For any number of reasons, we are reluctant to take the gift, so God makes it a command: "Observe the Sabbath by keeping it holy."

We will conclude worship today with time for personal reflection. You may want to meditate on the images on the screen and allow the music to help

you focus in prayer. Or you may close your eyes to listen and reflect. There are questions at the end of the service for your consideration. Could God be speaking to you through this sermon about your busyness and the need for rest and worship? Where do you need to make changes in your life? We'll watch the time for you, so you won't be late for your next appointment!

