

The Fourth Word

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

In one sense, this is a very easy sermon for me to preach, since I have thought about and studied this commandment for many years. I have looked at all the different texts about the Sabbath day many, many times, and I am familiar with all the implications and applications of this fourth word. But yet, in another sense, this is one of the hardest sermons for me to preach, because what I want to communicate to you from God's word this morning is not merely doctrine. My goal is not merely an exegesis or explanation of the text. Nor is my goal merely to make clear any variety of applications. In my experience over the years, I know it is possible to achieve all of those goals and still fail to accomplish what I would desire the most.

My goal this morning is to communicate and stimulate a love for the sabbath day, a heart-felt desire not only to honor and glorify God, but to delight in this great blessing he gives us for our spiritual well-being. My challenge in preaching this morning comes from the realization that this law, perhaps more easily than any other, evokes feelings and impressions of legalism. Perhaps more than any other, this commandment most often seems to stimulate a negative response among God's people. For many people, Sabbath keeping is just a burdensome duty that consists of restrictions and hardships upon an otherwise happy and carefree life. It is an intrusion into the fun and enjoyment of life, a dull and dreary obligation merely to be endured without any sense of joy or delight. Or it is just a outdated relic of an earlier time, all but irrelevant in our day and age. In that context, applications of this commandment so easily seem harsh and oppressive, and that is the very last think I want to communicate.

So in one short sermon, I want to confront all of that and

convince you, from the Bible itself, that such a perspective on the sabbath day is entirely foreign to this written revelation which God has given to us as his covenant people. That positive perspective isn't hard to see with the other commandments. For example, with regard to the 7th commandment, I don't have to convince you that the duties and restraints imposed by that particular law are good, for instinctually, you will understand that a good and happy marriage requires faithfulness—especially sexually fidelity. It is such a good thing when the marriage bed is kept pure, and when a husband and wife are able to enjoy a relationship in which there is no adultery, no intrusion into the sanctity of their marital relationship. I don't need to spend time in order to convince you of the positive benefits of that all. And you all judge breakers of the seventh commandment for what they are, whether it is Jerry Sandusky or John Edwards. You identify those who are promiscuous as those who miss the good and perfect design with which God has created man, male and female. You understand that because of their sin, they have missed something very, very good.

Likewise, with the ninth commandment, you honor the blessing of truthfulness in your relationships with one another. You also understand the goodness that comes when children honor their parents according to the fifth commandment, and the benefits in life that are yours when honesty and integrity eliminate the practice of stealing, according to the eighth commandment. And you know that killing people isn't good at all! But the fourth commandment requires us to start at a more basic and fundamental point, establishing first, the blessings of the sabbath day. However, before I even seek to identify those blessings specifically, let's look at,

I. THE BASIS OF THE SABBATH DAY.

In other words, what is the reason God gives for this day? What is the foundation upon which the commandment is based? Understanding why God gave this commandment goes a long way toward rightly understanding the duties and applications that grow out of it. So why? Why one a one day sabbath every week? The first answer is,

A. REDEMPTION.

v.15

This is such an important point. This command is given with the reminder of God's work of salvation. This command is given to those people whom God has saved, whom he has loved. So the very reason given for this commandment is the work of God's grace to redeem a people for himself! There is nothing legalistic in that at all, for the command was not given so that the people of Israel could earn something before God so that he might redeem them. No, the commandment itself becomes a sign of God's grace by which he rescued his people out of the land of slavery! The commandment itself is a sign of the salvation of God, a sign to identify God's people within the covenant of grace.

Illus: I learned to love the sabbath day when I was a college student, and I experienced the benefit of this sign in an obvious way. I lived on campus all four years of my college life, and I ate in the campus dining hall every day. And it was different on Sunday. Instead of the usual thousands of people in the dining hall for a meal, there were typically only a couple hundred on Sunday morning. And they were dressed up, ready to go to church. Few others within the student body made the effort to get up early on Sunday morning in time for breakfast. I have never forgotten that experience.

For me, the sabbath was a visible sign to identify God's

people. It was a sign of my redemption! A sign of my salvation. A sign that I belonged to God, that he set me apart.

Ex. 31:17 "It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."

A sign between God and his people. A sign of his covenant. A sign of his grace and his mercy, because it was only by that grace that the people of Israel became the people of God! So when God gave the ten commandments a second time to Moses, the basis for this fourth commandment was changed. Yet in Exodus 20, when the law was first given, the sabbath day is established upon the basis of God's pattern in creation.

B. Creation.

This is quite a profound point, that the nature of sabbath keeping goes all the way back to creation. And, in fact, not just to the creation pattern of man's life, but the pattern God himself established by his own example. Thus as creatures, created in his image, we read that the law of the sabbath day is founded upon the work of God.

Ex. 20:11 "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

Now, let me emphasize here, the idea of a holy day. That concept is inherently positive. God made the day holy, from creation, the seventh day of the week. God made it special. God blessed it. God exalted it. God honored it. You can choose several other good, positive descriptions. God made the sabbath day. God kept the sabbath day. He made it holy. He made it good. He made it a blessing!

So we creatures, we human beings created in his image, we

ought to do the same thing! We read in,

Ex. 31:16 “Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. 17 It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”

We’ll come back there shortly, but for now, please note the emphasis. The reason the sabbath day has such blessing for God’s people is because God himself rested from his work of creation. The word “rested” is the word “sabbath.” God “sabbathed,” God rested from his work. He created the world in six days, and he calls us to live our lives in the same pattern, six days of labor and one day of rest.

So the sabbath day is a sign of God’s work of creation. A sign of God’s work of redemption. Now...

II. THE BLESSINGS OF THE SABBATH DAY.

I have already alluded to the chief blessing.

A. The blessed refreshment of rest.

The word “sabbath” means rest. It means to cease, to stop. The idea is to stop doing what you are doing. Specifically, your labor.

v.13-14

Now, that is put in the negative. Stop working. Let me put it in a positive form, “Take a day off.”

This principle is embedded in our culture, and it is a good one. When I was installed as the pastor here, you actually gave me 4 weeks vacation every year. I took one of them very recently. You didn’t compel me to take vacation, but you offered to me as a

benefit. A blessing. And I accepted. I didn’t say to you, “Thank you for the promise of a salary. Thank you for paying my health insurance and my retirement contributions. Thank you for reimbursing me when I use my car in the exercise of my ministry. But as for those weeks of vacation, no thank you, I don’t want them.”

Did any of you hear me say that? Did I say, “I don’t want those days of vacation, and please don’t impose them upon me. That’s too legalistic.”

Did any of you hear me say that? Of course not. I said “thank you” for those vacation weeks as well. I need break every now and then.

Likewise, in my own weekly schedule, I take a day off. Usually Mondays. I simply need a day off each week when I am not confronted with all the duties and responsibilities of my ministerial labors. A day off each week is a blessing, not a burden. Thus the blessing of the sabbath rest.

That’s the point here. God gives us a day off! A day to rest. A day to make special, because you don’t have to work. In that context, let me go back to,

Ex. 31:17 “It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.”

When I first studied what the Bible said about the sabbath day, really studied, this is the verse that stood out to me most of all. It is not just a day in which there are things you can’t do. Rather it is a day in which you are freed from the responsibilities of those things you have to do on the other days, so that you can be

refreshed. God himself was refreshed. That Hebrew word means to “take a breath.”

The refreshment of standing back and, perhaps literally, taking a breath—a very deep, satisfying, and contented breath. Beloved, the 4th commandment is a blessing. So often we get all caught up in the do’s and don’ts, what I can do and what I can’t do. And without this deeper perspective, that list will always miss the point. The point is not an emphasis upon what you can’t do. The point is the freedom from things you don’t have to do.

When it comes to Sundays, I don’t have to mow my lawn. I don’t have to finish all the administrative work that waits for me when I get back to my office on Tuesday morning. That’s the blessing.

Now, unfortunately, there are still some things that have to get done. We can’t escape from all the labors of this world, but the proper perspective on the Sabbath day is a deep desire that you could! For me, those necessary things that have to get done are an intrusion into the fullness of this blessing, so I try to get that list to be as short as possible. If you are raising children, there is some necessary work you have to do. If you want to eat, there is some necessary work you have to do. But the real blessing is in all those things that you don’t have to do! The blessing of refreshment. The blessing of being able to take a breath, the blessed freedom of enjoying a one-day vacation from all the activities of this world, just as much as possible.

In that context, let me emphasize the spiritual character of this refreshment. The sabbath is a holy day, verse 8, set apart by God for the refreshment of your soul. The goal is your spiritual refreshment. The objective is your spiritual vitality and your spiritual well-being. So that no matter what happens all week, no

matter how much you are required to engage yourself in the necessary labors of living and working in this earthly kingdom, no matter how busy you are and how full your schedule might be, God sets aside one day for the refreshment and renewal of your spiritual health and strength. And that’s the blessing,

B. The blessed refreshment of spiritual delight.

And so we read,

Is. 58:13 “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the Lord honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

That’s what I want. I want to ride upon the heights of the earth. I want my soul to feel delight in the Lord, that I might be able to enjoy him forever. There are many things in this world I most certainly enjoy, but what I really want, at all my best moments, is know what it means to enjoy God. I want to experience what it means to delight in God, to find my delight in him and ultimately, not in anything that is part of this earthly existence. I want to ride upon the heights of the earth! And that’s the blessed refreshment of the sabbath day.

Now do you get there? I learn from God to observe the boundaries which he has set up.

III. THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SABBATH DAY.

Again, if I may use the analogy of the 7th commandment, you understand the boundaries God establishes if you want to enjoy the fullness of my marriage relationship. I knew what that meant

before I got married, namely the boundary of marital faithfulness. Without those boundaries, there will, of course, be no possibility of enjoying the benefits of a good marriage. I don't need to be explicit to make my point.

So it is with the sabbath day. If you wish to take delight in the Lord, if you wish to ride upon the heights of the earth, if you wish for the spiritual refreshment that God himself even enjoys, then you must have,

A. A willingness to cease from all unnecessary work.

v.12-14a

I hope, at this point, you realize my emphasis is something far different than bare prohibitions and oppressive legalistic restraints. But with the goal of the sabbath day clearly in mind, the spiritual benefits which God has designed for you to enjoy come only when you observe this boundary, and do no unnecessary work.

Even your animals get a day of rest! And so do your servants.

v.14b

So if you want to enjoy the refreshment of sabbath rest, and if you delight in it yourself, you ought to give that same privilege to your servants. Today, those servants might work in a restaurant. They might work in a retail business. They might work in the entertainment industry. And those are God's boundaries. Cease from all unnecessary work, and don't employ others to work in your service, either.

When I first considered all the implications of this commandment, I was a college student. And at the exhortation of a faithful pastor, I determined to take a break from my college

studies every sabbath day. It was a very significant change in my schedule, and let me tell you, it was an unqualified blessing! I even carried the same pattern into my seminary studies. And I practice it in my ministry. Even in ministry, any work that I don't have to do on Sunday, I don't do on Sunday.

I know, of course, as I have mentioned, there are some necessary things that have to get done. Jesus didn't have a problem with that, did he? If your ox is in the ditch, get it out! What has to get done, get it done. There are works of mercy that also need to get done, including labors by faithful doctors and nurses in the care of the sick. But the point is in the desire to wish that you didn't have to work at all. Instead of trying to figure out how big a list you can make for "necessary work," trying to create as many exceptions as possible, you ought to try to make that list just as small as possible.

The promised blessing of spiritual refreshment comes to those who are committed to cease from all unnecessary work. Related to that is,

B. A willingness to cease from the pursuit of earthly recreations.

Here is where many people object. I don't work, but it's "my day." It is a day for my pleasure and a day to fulfill my desires. I hope you can realize just how counterproductive that sentiment really is. Because if it is a day for your pleasures, then you will learn to delight in those very pleasures!

So again,

Is. 58:13 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the Lord honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor

speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth.”

The whole point of spiritual refreshment is in this context that you are seeking that refreshment from the presence of God, which is why this holy day is also a day of worship. It is not a day to go your own way. It is not a day to seek your own pleasure, nor to engage yourself in worldly recreations. Not if you wish to learn what it means to take delight in the Lord!

The sabbath is a day to take delight in the Lord. And let me tie all of this together by putting it this way. The key to the enjoyment of the sabbath day is,

C. A desire to live in heaven one day each week.

That’s really what the sabbath day is. A vacation from the world. An escape from the world, if you will. The opportunity to escape from the world. Unfortunately, it is only temporary, and no matter how fully you enjoy Sunday, Monday morning is always just around the corner. The vacation ends. The freedom ends. All the responsibilities and duties and labors of life return. Week after week. But one day each week, now the first day of the week, we get to go to heaven. And even a temporary one-day visit is better than none at all. Indeed, far better, for each earthly sabbath gives us a foretaste of our eternal sabbath rest in heaven. Therefore, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, “there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God.

In Hebrews 4, the idea of “rest” is used to describe the secure position of God’s people Israel in the Old Covenant. Their experience becomes a warning to us.

Heb. 4:6 “Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter

because of disobedience, 7 again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. 9 So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, 10 for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. 11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”

Do you know what heaven is like? Here is one description, Rev. 14:13 “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

You see, heaven is a rest from your labors, an eternal and unending sabbath rest. And so, people of God, as you long for that eternal sabbath, enjoy the weekly foretaste which God gives you on this earth, a weekly foretaste of the glory of heaven.

“There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” It is a day which God has designed to enable you to enjoy the freedom from the burdens of life on this earth. It is a day to live in heaven, just as much as you possibly can, even as you live out your life on earth. It is a day to call blessed. It is a day to call a delight.

If you will honor that day, “not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure,...then you shall take delight in the Lord, and [God] will make you ride on the heights of the earth.”

So every week, just as much as you possibly can, take a breath. Call the sabbath a delight.