

The Fourth Word

Exodus 20:8-11

I love the sabbath day. I find it to be an experience of great freedom, for this one day in seven each week I can escape the world in which we live. The ordinary, common, necessary work of the other six days can be laid aside, sort of like a weekly vacation. And we are invited to join together on this day to enter into the very presence of God, as close to the experience of heaven as we can possibly be. Longing for the final, permanent day which the Bible calls our eternal sabbath rest.

I also realize that this day is imperfect. We can rest entirely. If you have young children, you still have to care for them. We all do still need to eat as well as attend to a variety of other necessities of life. And for me, as a minister, there is a lot of labor extended, so that by the end of the day I am pretty well worn out, both physically and mentally. There are other works of ministry and of Christian mercy besides those things I do as well. And others of our body are committed to the work of healthcare in some form or another, and surely there are many times when work cannot take a break.

But all those exceptions should simply prove the rule. How good it is to have the opportunity to enjoy a day of rest and spiritual refreshment, a day to call a delight, a day to withdraw from this world just as much as you possibly can, in order to enjoy the presence of the Lord and his people.

This has been a hard week for me, a tiring week, for many reasons. Not the least of which was the occasion to attend the funeral service for my sister's husband of 32 years, the first such occasion in the experiences of my generation on either side of the family. He was only a couple years older than me, and my sister

and I were only a year apart, having gone through our high school and college years very much together. And even though the funeral itself was a celebration of the life of a man who loved God, it was a reminder of the realities of life in this world.

So I have no interest in promoting a legalistic and oppressive concept of the sabbath day, as if that is what God calls us to observe. Quite the contrary. My goal this afternoon is to reinforce 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.

The common view of sabbath keeping as a drudgery is entirely foreign to the 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 with reference to that commandment. It is such a good thing when there is 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.

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. 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.

v.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. And a sign of God's work of,

B. REDEMPTION.

Deut. 5:15 "And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

This is such an important point, and it is the one great difference between the giving of the ten commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy. 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 also tell people that 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, a second basis for this fourth commandment was provided. The command is rooted not only in creation, but also redemption.

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The commandment itself is a sign of the salvation of God, a sign to identify God's people within the covenant of grace, people whom God himself has created. Then we see,

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.9-10

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. Employers, when they hire people to work for them, typically provide benefits. And among those benefits is the provision for vacation days. And no one I have ever known turned down that benefit. No rejects the benefit and blessing of vacation days, as it that was an oppressive imposition upon them. Quite to the contrary.

We need that rest, that refreshment. 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.

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, of course, 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. For most of us, 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 your marriage relationship. Without those boundaries, there will be, of course, 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.9-10

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, as verse 10 specifies.

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 was a college student, at the encouragement 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 over time I came to realize that 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, and call the sabbath a delight.