

The Gift of Sabbath

Text: Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12, 15; Mark 2:27

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I smile a bit as I think about bringing a sermon on the subject of the Sabbath. I suppose it has taken me several decades in order to preach with passion and conviction the fact that the Sabbath ought to be rigorously observed. That is because of the way I was raised in my family home as a child. The Sabbath was observed very, very carefully. The Sabbath day was absolutely predictable; it never varied. If we, in the summertime, rented a cottage at a neighboring lake, we would move out on Saturday. That's when the rent began, of course, but we would go back home on Saturday night and do the Sunday ritual and go back on Sunday evening for the week's vacation. There was no frivolity, there was no playing. When I think about the Sabbath as I experienced it as a child and as a youth, I don't think it was exactly the intention of the Sabbath observance prescribed by the Ten Commandments.

We got up early in the morning, off to 9:30 church. My mother stayed behind. Part of the meal was prepared on Saturday night, the rest she prepared on Sunday morning because when we got home after church and Sunday School, we had to sit down immediately to eat because my father had to get a brief nap before he gathered my mother and me up and we went off to pick up my grandparents, and then they went to the Dutch service in the afternoon. I was left with some aunts, "unclaimed jewels" they were. Then they came back from the Dutch service for coffee and cookies and the extended family all came around. It was quite nice, really. And then we had to hurry home for a light supper in order to get back for the evening worship.

When I was a younger child, it was Junior Christian Endeavor on the Sunday afternoon, and when I got a little older, it was Intermediate Christian Endeavor before the evening service. And then, of course, because I was a mistake and came along rather lately, I got dragged along, my poor parents being burdened with me, and so I always had to go out for coffee and cake after the evening service. Now, that's a Sunday! That's a Sunday. When I think about it, I smile because obviously it was so contrary to the intention of Sabbath. That's the way Sabbath was observed and I also am mindful of the fact that for my parents, for our household, it was the total social structure of our life. The whole social

structure of our life centered around the church and therefore, I guess it didn't appear to be an oppressive thing to them or an abusive thing at all. For a child? It was a long day. When I was in college or seminary I heard the old Presbyterian minister who was a great preacher, Donald Grey Barnhouse, who experienced that in his Scottish Sabbatarian practice as a child, who said of the hymn, "Day of All the Week the Best, Emblem of Eternal Rest," "If heaven is like a Sunday, I don't know if I want to go there."

Well, that rigorous observance of Sabbath which had so much value is also very difficult to keep going without it slipping into legalism. That's a tension that we simply have to live with. If we're going to do something religiously, if we're going to do something rigorously, then there is a kind of obligation about it which, if we miss the glow of it, can be perceived and experienced as an oppressive legalism. I think in my own Dutch Calvinist roots there was a lot of legalism which a child simply has to endure, failing to see the intention behind the practice. So, I have to smile a bit when I think about how important I believe Sabbath observance is at this point in my life, the observance of Sabbath as that principle of punctuating one's life for rest and for refreshment and for worship, for the contemplation of God's creation, and for the remembering of God's grace. The point of my message this morning is that we have lost the Sabbath principle. It is almost non-existent in our society today and we are paying the price for it.

We live in this marvelous, exciting age in which we have been able through the application of intelligent mind, reason, skill and competence, to create a culture that is so filled with possibility. We have mastered so much of the universe. We have performed technological miracles. We have possibilities undreamed of only a generation or two or three ago. We call these things labor-saving devices, or time-savers, and the irony is that the more we have developed the capacity to save time and to multiply our productivity, we have not found more leisure or rest, but we have become more driven.

I do believe that we live at a frenetic pace and part of it is simply because we can. Look at all the gadgets and technology that are at our fingertips in order for us to do so much more than ever could have been done before, having created more time.

I heard on the very early CNN Headline News this morning that we are working more hours than ever before, according to a study just out, and the minority populations among us are having to work even more just in order to keep up. We live in a society where I am sure there are those of you out there who would say it's absolutely essential for us to maintain our standard of living to have two incomes in the home. And so, we become a people who are driven by our success. We become the victims of all of that which is possible for us, and there is precious little consciousness of Sabbath in terms of rest and cessation. We escape in exhaustion to the weekend, not the Sabbath. And then, because we're rather affluent and we have so much possibility, what we do on the weekend of escape in

order to let our hair down is rush off some place! We pack our cars and we have to keep up two places and we complain about that, but yet, we wouldn't give that up. We have all kinds of toys to enjoy and, of course, the weekend is just crammed with the wonderful good old American religion. It happens in the stadiums around the country, many of them brand new, with all kinds of creature comforts, wonderful professional sports. Football starts today, doesn't it? There's college football on the weekend. I mean, you can cram the whole weekend full with wonderful exhilarating experience until you are so exhausted you can't wait to get back to work in order to get exhausted again and to rush into the next weekend. Are we not in a frenzied pace? Are we not the victims of all the possibility and the prosperity and all the capabilities that are ours?

The Sabbath principle is almost non-existent, and I think that is a kind of syndrome that feeds on itself and we are in one of those spinning modes where we don't seem to be able to get off the trolley.

I heard on National Public Radio a few weeks ago some report about the German economy, the fact that they are being forced to open up more business hours through the week. Germany is probably the most highly structured European society, although The Netherlands is not far behind. In the 60s when I was in The Netherlands, there were just so many hours that a business could be open and so in the weekend on Sundays, most of the stores were closed. If you needed a pharmacy, it was printed in the paper as to what pharmacy in, for example, the city of Leiden, would be open. But, the government regulated how many hours it could be open. This was a humanitarian principle; it was for the well-being of the workers, for the well-being of society at large, and it was, I am sure, a residue of the old Dutch Calvinist Sabbatarian principle. But, I heard just recently that there is tremendous pressure being put on the German economy, the German government, to allow businesses to be open more hours because they are losing business in a world that is global, connected by the Internet where you can shop anywhere, 24 hours a day, and if you are closed, you have lost out.

Well, it's just an illustration of the fact that in our world we are going faster and faster and faster and the frenzied pace is dizzying and instead of finding ourselves able to relax and take time because of all of the possibilities, the array of technological devices, we are caught up in it, and it is for that reason that I preach this sermon, to bring you to awareness of the human need for Sabbath. It may sound like a complaint, like a Jeremiah, and I don't mean that at all, and as I said, if it slips into a legalism, it can become coercive and very negative in its effect, but I want to hold Sabbath before you today.

Let me just say a couple of things about the Sabbath in its biblical rootage. Obviously, in the first place, it is a gift. It was intended as a gift for the humanization of the creature. It was not some prohibition, even though it involved a prohibition. But, its heart, its purpose, its thrust was not prohibition, but invitation, invitation to catch one's breath, invitation to cease and desist. It

was a recognition in the wisdom of that early Hebrew culture of the need for life to be punctuated with pauses, the need for life to have those boundaries and limits to that unceasing, relentless cycle of work and labor and productivity. We have become managers, anxious, wanting to subdue and subject and to dominate, and the Sabbath principle was contrary to that human drive. If you take the whole Sabbath cycle, every seven years and every seventh seven years, every 50 years, that is, there was to be a cessation of that driving determination to produce and to accumulate and to acquire and to master. Every seventh day the human being was called simply to be, to be a human being rather than a human doing, simply to stop and to contemplate, to catch one's breath, to get out of the rat race, to let go and to be. The intention was that it be a wonderful gift. There are great social implications in the Sabbath observance because it was not only for you, but for your servants and for your animals and for your land. The intention was that the whole created order needs time, time to be.

The great Jewish Rabbi Heschel speaks of the Sabbath as the cathedral of time. The great European cathedrals are sacred space, but the Sabbath is sacred time. It was an oasis; it was a resting place; it was a very, very great gift. It was a gift that was marked by the cessation of work, of labor. And once again, that can become legalistic and that is not its intention. Although the Sabbath in the Hebrew Creation account is the seventh day, the Christian movement moved it to the first day in celebration of the resurrection, it could as well be the third day or the fifth day. The point is that life have a rhythm of work and rest. The point is that we need to have the cycle broken and when we have that cycle broken, the intention is that we not work, that we, indeed, rest.

I don't know where our drivenness comes from. Some might point to our Calvinism or our Puritan roots or whatever it may be, but while the biblical account recognizes the necessity of labor, that work was not an end in itself. In the creation account, the seventh day was the climax. It wasn't a mere interlude. All one's labor, all one's energy, all one's action was to culminate in rest, delight, contemplation of the wonder and the miracle of life, recognition that one is not one's own creator, recognition that one is borne along in a process, recognition that finally this whole created order is the gift of God. One could say it's the contemplation of creation according to the Exodus account, for if you read in the 20th chapter, the Sabbath commandment is in light of creation. But, if you go to the Deuteronomy account, the Sabbath commandment is based on the need to contemplate salvation or grace. You were slaves and God set you free. And so, it is a cessation of work but not as an end in itself, but as an opportunity to delight in the wonder of life and the miracle of life and the glory of life. The Sabbath is a time to be open to God.

If we don't have those seasons and days and rituals and actions, prayers, stories, sacred myths - if we don't have them, God dies. God dies in our awareness.

I was reading Karen Armstrong's *The Battle for God* and I came across that paragraph which I put in your insert. Just since the modern periods of the Enlightenment everything has been tried to be reduced to rationality, where the myths are exploded and perhaps the rituals and the cult looked at divisively. But if we don't have sacred space and sacred time and sacred language, God becomes a non-factor. We can become very numb, very dull to our rootedness in the Divine.

Thomas Moore, in *The Care of the Soul* suggests that it is not a case of remembering and so observing, it is a case of observing and then remembering. It is important for you to come here week after week and to be reminded in a hymn, in some word of scripture, some statement from the pulpit - it's important to come here in order to be made aware again, to be called to attention again, because we can dull to it, we can die to it. Dag Hammersjold says God does not die on the day we fail to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day that our life is no longer illumined by a radiance whose source we can never discover.

I need to be reminded. I need to be reminded that creation is God's gift, life is gift, and all is grace, and so I need this time, I need this time to come and to hear "When Morning Gilds the Sky, my heart, awakening, cries, 'May Jesus Christ be praised.'" "This Is My Father's World, I rest me in the thought," or "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound." I need to be gathered in this community where there is birth and there is death, where there is health and illness, where there is joy and there is sadness - I need to be reminded that I am a part of the bundle of life. I need to have time. If I don't have time, if I don't take time, if I don't make time, I'll lose part of my humanity and it's not that God is going to be angry with me, it's that I'm going to lose the sense of the presence full of grace. It's not that I'm going to go into free-fall; it's just that I'm going to forget that underneath are everlasting arms.

The gift of Sabbath, dear God, how we need it. How I think all of us probably need a lesson or two from my father and mother. (I didn't think I'd ever say that.)