

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

12 “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Exodus 20:8-11

8 “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 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. 11 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.

Observing the Sabbath is one of the most important marks of being a Christian.

It is our attention to the Sabbath that enables us to keep it holy and follow the commandment. I must admit that I am nostalgic for the Sunday family dinners I had at my foster mother's parents' home. And I can still remember their rule that I can't shake. You don't cut grass on Sunday; it's just not done. Remember Sunday dos and don'ts.

Remember the Blue Laws that required many businesses to close on Sunday.

In Huntsville, Alabama, in the mid-to-late sixties, I recall that there weren't school activities on Sundays, of course, but Wednesday night was reserved for Church as well.

But that was yesterday, and yesterday's gone. We as the church no longer have places of privilege in society, and I don't see it coming back.

While there was great joy for many of us, it was not so for everyone. Take the need for the Civil Rights movement, for example.

Therefore, we must find ways to observe the sabbath that take into account the changing times so we can focus on relationships as part of our being in the image of a God who desires to be in relationship with creation.

Sabbath is God's sacred gift to us. For Christians, this has traditionally been the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of resurrection.

God knows we need to rest; it is part of our being in God's image, and to ensure we rest, God commands us to do so. As Jimmy Buffett sings, "And now I must confess I could use some rest; I can't run at this pace very long." (Jimmy Buffett *Trying to Reason with Hurricane Season*.)

We must observe the Sabbath intentionally and do it when we can. In our nonstop, consumer-driven society, we might not be able to observe our Sabbath on Sunday. I know this is true for pastors and many others because they perform services that are needed on Sunday. Several pastors I know observe a Sabbath day for rest and renewal, as well as a day off. I tend to march to the beat of a different drummer, scheduling several shorter Sabbath breaks each week.

However we do it, everyone needs intentional time for rest and renewal in a way that works for them. The important part is to make regular time for rest and renewal, paying attention to God and your neighbor. That is how you keep the Sabbath holy.

There are two different versions of the fourth commandment, which is the Sabbath injunction, that provide us with two distinct motivations for making our Sabbath qualitatively different from our everyday activities.

In the Exodus version, we are to imitate God. Not only you and me, but also our families and businesses, our whole life-world is all to be about resting on the Sabbath because God rested. The Sabbath establishes a pattern of work and produce, then refresh and renew, pause and praise. In the Deuteronomy version, we observe the Sabbath and rest to take time to give thanks to God for our liberation. In the past, liberation was achieved from things like slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. In our modern lives, we are to give thanks to our God for freedom from sin, anxiety, fear, addictions, and other things that enslave us. Sabbath might be the cure for what ails us. The concept of resting on the seventh day is both theological and existential, emphasizing that all creation is built with a need for rest and renewal. That rest and renewal is a time to focus on God and God's good gifts. As God rested, so must we rest and give thanks to God. We also need to give thanks for God's redemption from those enslaving things that keep us separate from God and one another.

These dual motifs of creation and liberation indicate that all people and animals, and indeed all of creation, need a rest, not just those at the top, but all of creation, including Hebrew enslaved people and aliens in their midst. All have a need and a right to rest.

The Sabbath commandment served as a reminder that in Egypt, there was no such thing as a forty-hour workweek or a day off. Work, work, work, produce, produce, produce; over and over was the drumbeat for them. But God had another vision. Things are supposed to be different.

The Sabbath is God's insistence that we need to rest and renew, and it is to be a time of change from our daily routine.

When I first became serious about weightlifting as an adult, I would go to the gym every day and do a full-body workout. I had to learn that letting muscles rest and recover was just as vital to muscle growth as lifting weights. Our bodies have a built-in need for recovery and renewal.

I recall that when I was young in Little Rock, Arkansas, I had to rest in the summer from 12:00 to 2:00. Often, I didn't want to; I wanted to go out and play, but the housekeeper thought that during the hottest part of the day, I was to stay in and read a book. It was a commandment I was to rest and renew for my own good, and that is true for all of us. Indeed, how many of us would enjoy a command right now to read a book and take a nap?

Many of us are retired, yet we still feel overwhelmed. And others of us still work and are very busy seven days a week. For many, the Sabbath has become just a time to complete all those tasks we didn't have time for during the week. It can at times be more hectic than the rest of the week. We can try to cram new things that we have to do, creating new pharaohs, stressors, and producers of anxiety.

However, the Sabbath is there to remind us that we need to be free from all the things that enslave us and help us cast out our own personal pharaohs.

On the other hand, most of us are somewhat good at Sabbath. We are here, and that simple act makes the day different for us. You don't have to be here; there are many options. I want to suggest that, in many ways, we are making a counter-cultural statement by observing the Sabbath as a time that is distinct in both quality and quantity from the other times. When we take time to honor the Sabbath, we identify ourselves as a unique subset of society—members of a Christian community.

We join with God, saying “No” to the things that enslave and overwhelm us. We are saying, “No.” We are voicing our “no” to the huge acquisitive consumption engine that is consumerism and its friend, anxiety. They are demanding more, more, more, lying to us that if we slack up, we will be without and somehow be less of a person.

It is now clear that church attendance is no longer a cultural expectation, as it once was, so there is a sense of resistance to some societal values in our church attendance. We are saying that there is so much more to life than consumerism and acquisition.

We are not just saying “no” to those false Gods, we are saying “yes” to God, who knows we need to take time for reflection, rest, and renewal. It marks us off as God's people. We are being obedient.

Unlike God, Pharaoh did not observe a Sabbath for any reason. The Hebrew enslaved people worked every day with no rest to supply the consumption machine blessed by the gods and rulers of Egypt. The Hebrew people had to learn to rest. And sometimes we do too. They were always in a production mode and had to learn to let go and rest.

They needed a command to rest, and they were given one. People are not made to work without rest, even though many do.

To clarify the nature of the Sabbath, Jesus expands on these Sabbath principles by stating that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath. It should be celebrated with joy but should not

become an obstacle to health, wholeness, or faith. It is a duty but shouldn't be drudgery. Like most of God's commands, the focus is on the good that benefits the person, and society reaps from keeping the commandment. The Sabbath was made for us for our benefit.

He saw the Sabbath as a gift to us, not a burden. And bringing healing and wholeness to others was essential to the Sabbath.

How or when we observe the Sabbath may need to be adjusted, but it should be intentional. The church is an obvious place to include in our Sabbath plans in person or online. Of course, I was going to say that. Worship is where we praise God and focus on growing our faith. We are called and encouraged to put our beliefs into action. Prayer, Scripture and its interpretation, music, and sacraments. It is all at church—essential things for the growth and renewal of our spirit. In addition to the Church, Family and Friends are vital; we may not all have family close by, but we have friends, and Sabbath is a time for connection with them and not let the pace of everyday busyness keep us from connecting.

After that, we might ask what we can do to bring healing to another. Is there something as simple as calling, writing a card, sharing a meal, or visiting that we can do to bring some Sabbath joy to another?

Compassion and social justice matter even on the Sabbath. Concern for others and their situations is vital. It is written into our faith history as being enslaved in Egypt and as God worked to set us free not only from slavery but also from sin and anxiety. The Sabbath reminds us that we are to seek to set people free from the things that bind them.

Sabbath is a time for learning about areas in our society where our passions meet human needs. That too is part of our Sabbath practice. Like Jesus, we can heal on the sabbath.

The Sabbath is one of the fundamental pillars of Jewish tradition, as well as our own. And keeping it sacred is essential.

To keep the Sabbath holy is both a joy and a command. It focuses on our need for rest and renewal as people in God's image, but also our obligation to give thanks to God in word and in action for our freedom from sin and anxiety. In the days to come, let's reflect on our Sabbath practices and how we honor the Sabbath as a gift from God.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.