

No Longer Slaves: remember the Sabbath to keep it holy

Here's a commandment we can readily love, right? Read Exodus 20:8-11, where the commandment to keep the Sabbath is set out. This is the fourth commandment repeated, with a few differences, in Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Read that passage too.

- Spot the differences? What do you make of them?

With the commandment to “remember” the Sabbath we face an unusual challenge of interpretation. This is because, unlike some of the other commandments, this one can easily be packaged for export. The idea that we should “stop work” regularly is culturally familiar. GPs these days will often prescribe “rest” to those with symptoms of stress and anxiety. Any farmer knows you have to leave the land alone for a time, if you are to ask anything of it later.

Familiarity, it is often said, breeds contempt. Aware that “rest is a good idea” we too easily cheapen the idea of Sabbath, and neglect to work out what “sanctifying the Sabbath” really means for the people of God – a holy nation, a kingdom of priests! – who bear the Name of the Lord in witness to the world. Something much bigger is at stake.

But since rest *is* a good idea, and since so many of us are addicted to “work”, consider:

1. What does “rest” mean for you?
2. When and how do you practise “rest”?

One reason why we tend to think of the Sabbath as primarily about rest is that it clearly involves a whole lot of “not working”. Read some of the passages that set out ways in which Israel was *not* to work on the Sabbath.

- Exodus 16:22-30 on the question of collecting food and cooking it
- Exodus 34:21 on plowing and harvesting
- Exodus 35:3 on kindling fire
- Numbers 15:32-36 on chopping wood
- Jeremiah 17:19-27, Amos 8:5 and Nehemiah 13:15-22 on trading

3. What do these various activities achieve for us – is there a common thread?

In the message on March 10th I suggested that all of these activities help advance our situation in the world of “space-time”: our investment in earthly life. They are good to do, by the Lord’s command, for six days out of seven (Exodus 20:9)! But by laying these aside we enter a “place” which is unearthly, a region of pure time, of God-time, akin to eternity. Other activities are proper to such a place, a holy place belonging to God, into which he invites us.

But what? Crucially, is Sabbath allowed to be fun? Consider a long-running debate between Rabbinical, or mainstream, Judaism, and the minority Karaite Jews, concerning the prohibition on fire during Sabbath. Mainstream Judaism teaches that it’s okay to keep a fire burning during Sabbath, so long as you light it *beforehand*. Karaite Judaism teaches that combustion is work, and that by tending a fire you are working when you should not. No fires burn, and no lights are lit, in Karaite homes. It’s a somber vision of Sabbath life, particularly in winter.

In most Jewish homes, though, fires burn merrily. And Sabbath is a day intended for us as something good, not as a legalistic enslavement, as Jesus affirmed (Mark 2:27-28). It is for what the Rabbis call “menuha”: joyous repose, tranquility and delight!

4. What are activities that are not “work” yet which bring you joyous repose, tranquility and delight?

The core of Sabbath observance is clued in the very first word of the commandment: “remember”. This is not just about remembering to “have” a Sabbath, though it isn’t less than that. Rather, remembering is the business of Sabbath. Remembering who God is, what He has done, who He has made us to be, what He has promised will come. Exodus points us to the creation of the world (Exodus 20:11); Deuteronomy to our redemption from slavery (Deuteronomy 5:15).

That’s why we lay aside “work”. When we work we are tempted by the myth of our ordinariness, and the myth of our insecurity, and the myth of our command – or need for command – in the ordering of our lives. When we lay that aside we remember that we have been gifted our life by the Creator, which makes us altogether extraordinary! We remember that we have been given security and peace by the Lord who redeemed us and has promised us eternal life. And we remember that our lives are ordered by the Lord, in the company of other believers. We then “re-member” (i.e. “put together”) our own stories in light of what we’ve remembered of the Lord and his covenant with us.

5. What activities help you “remember” these things?

In the message on March 10th I pointed to three aspects of Sabbath practice that help us remember well.

- We gather with other believers, where stories are best shared, and where our own stories can be heard and find their place.
- We practice the giving and receiving of gifts, enacting the truth that our lives are gifted by the Lord in creating us, and supremely in the gift of grace in the life of God’s Son. We give gifts of simple hospitality as we eat together; of loving and encouraging words; of shared play and creativity; of laughter.
- We celebrate the goodness of God in creation, redemption and promised consummation. Feasting and song belong here.

6. Which of these are part of your current “sabbath practice”?
7. Which of these is the Spirit nudging you toward?

Conclude in prayer, asking the Spirit help you to remember the Sabbath and to make it holy. If you’re with others, share with them what you plan to do, so they can help you to follow through.

Note. There are many resources around to help you think through good practices for Sabbath. Venn’s recent offering is stimulating and useful; copies from John Dennison (\$20 each). Marva Dawn’s “Keeping the Sabbath Wholly” is a classic. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s meditation is profound (“The Sabbath”). Walter Brueggemann’s “Sabbath as Resistance” is a thought-provoking call to action.