

Prioritizing Love

The Ten Commandments-Pt.1

21.11.21 | Jeff Lockyer

I wonder, for how many of us, the commandment we're going to study today is perceived as the weirdest one of all. After three commandments that all clearly relate directly to God—and then six more we're going to look at in the winter that have everything to do with how we relate to other people—there's this fourth commandment on... Sabbath-keeping. That's right: taking a day off is 10-Commandment worthy!

And, beyond, that, this commandment is a huge deal in the Bible. Later on in the book of Exodus, it refers to violating the Sabbath law as worthy of the death penalty! Imagine a prison inmate sharing with another inmate, "What are you in here for?" "Didn't take a day off!" And even in the New Testament, we see the church in the book of Romans on the verge of a split over whether people needed to observe the Sabbath or not. If you think a society polarizing over COVID-19 vaccines is wild—imagine arguing over whether you were faithful to God by fully taking a day off every week.

Actually, for some of us, we might not have to imagine. Here in Canada, it was June 3, 1992 that marked the end of an 85-year ban on retail activity in Ontario—some of you will remember that as the beginning of Sunday shopping. What was referred to as the "Federal Lord's Day Act" was defeated in 1985, but had extended provincially for some seven additional years. This led to a generation of infighting in churches like ours over Sunday working, Sunday shopping (which

forced others to work) and even Sunday sports. Just a generation ago, people fought about the Sabbath. It was that big a deal.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why? Why is Sabbath keeping not a big deal now, but was a big deal a generation ago and was a 10-Commandment level deal?

That's what we want to look at in Exodus 20 today, where God provides a command, specificity on that command and then rationale for it. Beginning in verse 8:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”

The word “Sabbath” literally means “cease,” so this day was a day intended to cease the regular things you did every other day. To “remember” it, wasn't an idle exercise (like remembering a phone number); the word implied an active observance throughout the day. This made the day “holy”—literally set apart. And, considering that Sabbath-keeping was unique to Israel at that time, it certainly set them apart from the rest.

The text goes on to provide some specification to the command. Verse 9:

“Six days you shall labour and do all your work, 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 animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.”

I hope you can appreciate the cyclical nature of what God describes here. The Sabbath was not just a day on its own to observe; Sabbath was a rhythm to establish week-in and week-out—kind of like the inhaling and exhaling of breathing. And notice the specificity of how it was to apply to everything and everybody, regardless of class. Think of the equality and freedom of oppression that this commandment provided. I heard someone describe it as a “brake pedal on the exploitation of other people.” That also would have provided the removal of any excuses to not observe the Sabbath—there was no, “Sorry, I just called into work” back then, because both the person getting the call and the person doing the calling were to observe the Sabbath. It was a community-wide commandment, applying to everyone, equally without hierarchy.

Then, finally, there comes the rationale behind the commandment. Verse 11:

“For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

This refers back to the story of Creation found in the first couple chapters of Genesis, and in so doing, makes a couple key points. The first is that, resting and taking a day off was a reflection of the divine order—it’s how people were created to live. So, taking a day off is part of what it means to be fully human. But it’s more than that, because resting was also part of the very nature of God. As image-bearers, observing a Sabbath is also what it means to be fully alive. It’s “of God” to establish a regular routine of restfulness. And it’s not just patterning

ourselves after what God *does*, but after who He *is*. God, by nature, is a rhythmically restful Creator who wants us to experience it too.

That's ultimately the point of this Fourth Commandment: that living out God's covenant relationship of reciprocal love involves patterning the rhythm of our lives around his restfulness. And we do that by remembering to cease doing once a week.

It's also important to understand—as we unpack this commandment to Sabbath—that the underlying value of a rhythm of restfulness is one that is fundamentally *for* us, not against us. Jesus sought to clarify this in Mark 2:27:

“Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Appreciate that God's vision for Sabbath-keeping is a *do*—not a *do-not*; it's promotive of a way of life, as opposed to being restrictive. When you understand the value of a rhythm of restfulness, you start to see it as a “can do” not about what you “can't do.”

I remember awakening to this value in high school when it came to my participation in long-distance running. One year, two twins transferred to my school and joined our training group. They were curious about our schedule, so I shared with them our weekly routine—which days were workouts and which days were recovery runs. And then I told them we took every Friday off. “A day off? Why do you do that?” they asked. I didn't have an answer, and wasn't even sure

why they asked the question, until they explained that a day off each week amounted to 52 days off every year—that was seven and a half weeks of no running. How could we get better by taking off seven and a half weeks off running every single year? So later on that evening I asked my coach, and walked him through the same math, wondering how we could get better by taking off seven and a half weeks of running every single year. Their response was game changing. They didn't see it as seven and a half weeks of *no training*; they saw it as 52 weeks of *good training*, because of the complementary nature of stress and rest.

That's why the practice of Sabbath keeping matters so much—not because it's a ritual intended to be repressive, but because it's a rhythm of refreshment and recovery. Growth = stress + rest, not just stress-upon-stress-on-top-of-more-stress. The practice of rest allows you to be and become the very best version of yourself—it's for you!

And, this is why the practice of Sabbath keeping is considered 10-Commandment worthy by God—not because it's an outlier to the other aspects of loving God and people, but because it's a deal-breakingly critical component to both. How can you love people well if you're in an increasingly worn-down, burnt-out state? Loving God and people well requires bringing them the very best version of yourself, including one whose identity is free from “you are what you do.” Sabbath-keeping is *for* you!

So, if that's the case, why is it so challenging to build this rhythm into our lives? Admittedly, the good news on Sabbath keeping, for many, doesn't automatically translate into better news. There's actually very little biblical clarity on how to observe a Sabbath—on how to experience the maximum rest and refreshment—so many times we wonder, or even feel a little guilty, about whether we're doing it right. And for all of us, life tries to get in the way, especially when other responsibilities and seasons of challenging circumstances enter the equation. So how are you supposed to Sabbath?

In the second recounting of the 10 Commandments, in Deuteronomy 5, there's a clue provided. The text there uses the word "guard" to describe how Sabbath-keeping happens. It requires guarding on our part. And, from nothing more spiritual than trial-and-error, there are at least four features to guarding a Sabbath rhythm. The first is to **proactively designate a Sabbath**. It might not be Sunday, but it needs to be some day, consistently every week. By designating it, literally block it off in your calendar—don't look at it as available to book other things; treat it as already fully booked. Then, it requires us to **reassign other responsibilities**. Jeff Manion was so helpful in clarifying this a few years ago, because if you fill your intended Sabbath with yard work, errands and taxiing, you'll be more exhausted than after a regular day of work. Related to this, we have to fully **embrace the value of rest and refreshment**. Allow yourself guilt-free sleeping in. I once heard an expert on spiritual formation say, "The greatest step some of us could take to grow spiritually is to take a nap." You're allowed to chill—in fact, you were made to! And then, finally, **fill the day with what fills you**. If exercise or activity outdoors gives you life, do it! If a passion or a good book fills

your soul, do it. If certain people lift your spirits, schedule time with them! The expert on self care is you, yourself.

If you need any more encouragement to give yourself permission to enjoy the regular rhythm of restful recharging that Sabbath-keeping provides, then read through that second rendition of the 10 Commandments found in Deuteronomy chapter 5. It basically follows the identical structure as Exodus 20, except there's one more phrase:

“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”.

Specific to Israel's context, they were encouraged to engage in the counter-cultural practice of Sabbath-keeping in response to remembering their former slavery. Sabbath keeping was intended to remind the Israelites that they weren't slaves anymore! And it provides a stark contrast to the life we've been invited into by Jesus Himself—in fact, Mike sent this **Tweet** the other day to contrast whose it is we're allowing to govern our lives: a Pharaoh who wants more work from us, or a Jesus who wants to give us rest?

We might think the notion of Sabbath-keeping is weird to include in the 10 Commandments. And we might feel it's completely offside to refer to assigning the death penalty as the consequence for breaking it. But when you think about your most overworked, worn-down, burnt-out, emotionally numb, stressed-out,

embittered self, have you and I not been already choosing the death penalty when we choose to rob ourselves of a way of life of greatest vitality through embracing God's rhythm of rest?

We titled this morning "Prioritizing Love" because it's only through our rested, refreshed, best versions of ourselves that we can love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbours as ourselves. If you're dying these days, embrace the Way of Jesus like never before. This is why Sabbath-keeping matters!