

The Commandment So Nice, God Says it Twice
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Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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.

Here is the other reason why you shouldn't talk on the cell phone and drive at the same time.

A few years ago, I volunteered to develop and teach a course for new clergy on time and information management for new clergy, which was based on the David Allen *Getting Things Done* methodology. I've taught it each of the last two years, and these new pastors seem to appreciate it. One pastor told her church's Director of Christian Education about it, and she asked

me, while I was on the phone and driving, if I would teach it at the annual Professional Christian Educators' Fellowship Retreat for the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Since my schedule was open, I agreed. I had taught it before, so I have notes, handouts, and slides ready to go. I'm passionate about the material, and the preparation was already done, so it seemed like No Big Deal.

What I apparently missed in the driving-while-on-the-phone conversation was that, instead of teaching for 2.5 hours like I had in the past, I need to teach for 7.5 hours over the course of five sessions in two-and-a-half days, and preach, which means I will be teaching for considerably longer than it takes to read the book on which the class is based.

So, the last week or so has found me spending my discretionary time preparing to be a retreat leader, ironically reading page after page of material on time management, creating slides, and writing dozens of pages of lesson plans, in addition to the normal pastoral visitation, meetings, phone calls, e-mail, and, oh yeah, this morning's sermon which, as proof of God's sense of humor, is about rest, and honoring the God who found time to rest upon completing creation by honoring a commandment to dedicate a day, a tithe of each week, to God.

Now, I told you all of that, not so you could learn how busy this pastor has been, but so you busy people can see that I preach this sermon, not as an expert on this subject, but as a fellow sojourner with you, on this journey of searching, struggling, and from time to time, failing quite well, in an endeavor to live this

strange and blessed life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Today, I am preaching twice, teaching a fourth and fifth-grade Sunday school class, attending two meetings, and teaching confirmation class, before waking up, helping get the kids out the door, before I drive to Montpelier to teach some more.

This is all, of course, a self-aggrandizing way of saying, when it comes to Sabbath-keeping, I have no idea what I'm talking about. We are all in this together.

In her wonderful book, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, Lauren Winner talks about her practice of Sabbath (or what the Jews call *Shabbat*) from her perspective as an orthodox Jew who converted to Christianity. Winner points out that in Exodus 20, we are commanded to *remember* the Sabbath and keep it holy, but in Deuteronomy 5, we are called to *observe* the Sabbath and

keep it holy. Some rabbis hold these two versions of this commandment in tension together by teaching that Sunday through Tuesday are devoted to remembering the Sabbath just passed, and that Wednesday through Friday are devoted to preparing for the next Sabbath.¹ She goes on to say that in Jewish law, there are two kinds of commandments: *thou shalls*, and *thou shall nots*. The Sabbath commandment invokes both.²

I am afraid that when we Protestants consider spiritual practices like Sabbath-keeping, we basically see them something like this: they are *quaint*. They are beautiful ideas from the ancient world that, unless you are ordained or otherwise super-religious, are impossible to live in the modern world, and therefore *irrelevant* to our lives. Furthermore, because we are

¹ Winner, Lauren, F., *Mudhouse Sabbath: An Invitation to a life of Spiritual Discipline*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, MA, 2003, p. 4, 8-9.

² Ibid. 4-5.

Protestants and have a faith that leans heavily on the side of the importance of *belief* over the value of *works*, we feel that spiritual practices are *unnecessary* for our lives.

So, we regard tithing as something God cannot really expect because the economy is bad and stuff is expensive, or we argue that we cannot practice fasting because we cannot focus on work when we are really hungry, or we regard Sabbath-keeping as something that God may have expected of the ancients, people who didn't have e-mail, but God, aware as God is of, well, everything, God certainly knows how busy and competitive the world is, and how handicapped we would all be if we actually obeyed God's commandment to keep the Sabbath.

And therein lies my first point: God commands the Sabbath, both in remembrance and observance. You and I may

not like it, but the thing about being God is that you get to command things. It is a fringe benefit of being the Creator of space, the universe, the planets, time, life, heaven, earth, and strawberries. If you can pull off Creation, you get to tell the creatures what to do.

Yes, but I'm busy.

Yes, but I'm God.

And so forth.

For this reason, the matter is never about if we “feel like we need” the Sabbath. Lauren Winner points out that the Sabbath is not a bubble bath or a day at the spa, where it is all about us. Sabbath keeping is largely (if not entirely) about God. After six days of creating, God spent a day *not* creating. God commands Sabbath-keeping so that we might not only enjoy God's creation,

but that we might imitate God by not creating, by not even *planning* to create, as a practice of honoring and obeying the God of all creation. Therefore, the (very hard) question becomes not “How can God expect me, busy as I am, to keep the Sabbath” but “How can I, given that the Sabbath is a commandment on the same level as not killing or committing adultery, be involved in so much that I cannot observe the Sabbath?”

Now, before I come off as some smarmy, holier-than-thou, judgmental know-it-all, I’ll remind you that I’m the one who scheduled himself, and for that matter, many of you, into six appointments today. One of the reasons I chose Sabbath as the topic of this sermon series is because I so desperately need to

improve my own practice of it, and preparing for this series will help me to do so.

So even though remembering and observing the Sabbath is a commandment by God, it is not to say there is not practical benefit in it for people like us, busy though we are. Jesus famously remarks that “the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” The Sabbath, therefore is God’s gracious gift to us, a sign that God not only understands but is present in the midst of the business and the maelstrom of our lives. You and I were made by God, in God’s image. No one knows what we need quite like our designer. Indeed, we were created to work hard, but at the same time, we were created to rest, to be aware of the rhythms of time, but where and how do we begin such a counter-cultural, if not counter-intuitive

practice? Gandhi said there is more to life than merely increasing its speed, but what if life already feels like an out-of-control merry-go-round that is already spinning too fast to escape?

I believe that Sabbath not only shows that God is deserving of our obedience and aware of our great need for rest amidst our hectic lives. Sabbath also forces us to ask hard questions about our lives and what is most important to them, specifically if the life that we are living now is *really* the life that we want. In his book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, Wayne Muller quotes Jefferson, who understood life and liberty to be inexorably linked to the pursuit of happiness. Yet, when we regard the lives we are living and the physical, spiritual, and emotional cost of them, is this the happiness of

which Jefferson spoke?³ More importantly, is the life that you and I are living the abundant, “freed for joyful obedience” life that Jesus gave his life to bring?

Furthermore, who gets to define our happiness or our sense of abundance? Have we so believed that our faith is about what we think and not what we do that we have somehow seceded the ability and the right to define our happiness to the culture around us, a culture who treats business and overwork as a badge of honor and a sign of success?

In a “Peanuts” comic strip Charlie Brown is talking to Linus and asks, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and Linus answers, “Outrageously happy.” Nothing God commands makes sense outside of the understanding that God

³ Muller, Wayne, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, Bantam Books, New York, 1999, p. 4-5.

wants you (as well as your neighbor and enemy, whom we will discuss next week) to be outrageously happy. But not only outrageously happy, but outrageously aware of your blessings, outrageously aware of the needs of others, outrageously present (mentally, spiritually, emotionally) with those who need you, outrageously loving to those you love, outrageously receptive to the love of those who love you, and outrageously aware of God's presence, abundance, and love in your life.

But friends, we cannot say and be and do all of those things, things of which life is made, if our lives are nothing more than an endless chain of one thing after another, as the carousel spins round and round and round.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.