

# Remembering the Sabbath – Observing the Sabbath

Hespeler, June 2, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Second Sunday after Pentecost, Communion

[Deuteronomy 5:12-15](#), Psalm 81:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:6

**D**id you know that there are two accounts of the giving of the Ten Commandments in the Bible. The first one is likely the one that you are familiar with. It's the one that gets played out in the blockbuster movies. It takes place at Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 20. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the commandments directly from God while the people stand trembling at the foot of the mountain watching the terrifying sound and light show from a distance.

## The Second Giving

But the second giving of the commandments, the one we read from this morning, takes place about forty years later. The people of Israel, a whole new generation of people who have replaced those who died during the wilderness wandering, are just about to enter into the Promised Land. Moses, as one of his last acts before his death, is addressing them in what we know as the Book of Deuteronomy. As part of his address, he goes over the Ten Commandments one more time.

These two versions of the Ten Commandments don't contradict each other. They are clearly getting the same points across. But there is a strange thing you will notice if you read them side by side as I did. There are these slight variations in the wording. Nothing that would change the intent, but I find it interesting, nonetheless.

## The First Sabbath Law

For example, take the commandment we read this morning. In Exodus, speaking from Mount Sinai, God says, **"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."** The commandment continues from there much like we read from Deuteronomy this morning, but it starts with a command to **"remember."** Remember that.

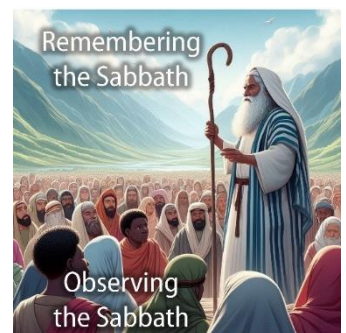
And then, after laying out what it means to remember the Sabbath, God gives the rationale for this commandment. **"For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it."** So, in Exodus, the reason for the Sabbath is that you need to imitate God. God rested and so therefore so should you.

## The Second Version

But the passage we read this morning is just a little bit different. **"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you."** Did you *observe* that? The command here is not to remember but to observe. Not enough to really change the meaning, I know, but maybe enough to make you go, "Hmm."

It goes on to lay out what observing the Sabbath means in the same way – working six days and then not on the seventh. It lists, in the same way, the people who aren't supposed to work: **"you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns."** But then it adds a phrase not found in Exodus: **"so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you."** So, it makes a point of saying that your slaves get the day off twice.

Then Moses gives the reason for the commandment, and it is different from the reason given at Sinai. **"Remember that you were a slave in the**



**land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”** So, instead doing this to be like God, the people are told to do this because of their past history of enslavement. And the command to remember has now been moved from remembering the Sabbath to remembering their past bad treatment when their taskmasters never gave them a day off.

### How These Differences Function

Now, if you read biblical scholars, they will have fancy literary and historical explanations for the variations between those two passages. Such studies are interesting but are not particularly what fascinates me today. I am much more interested in how these little changes function in the overall narrative that we find in the story of the people of Israel. I think the variations between the two commandments have been placed here quite intentionally and that there is a very important message in them for us today.

Think of it this way. At Sinai in the Book of Exodus, we are given the commandments in the direct voice of God. They offer a pure and idealistic view of the way that things should be. But in Deuteronomy, we have Moses’ restatement of the commandments just before the people enter into the Promised Land where they are supposed to live these commandments out. This is where the rubber meets the road, where the practical issues of living out God’s perfect will for God’s people need to be ironed out. That is how I understand the subtle rewording of this commandment.

### The Created Need for Rest

And I really do think that there is a very important message for us in that. It is precisely in the shift between the ideal and the practical that we struggle with the idea of Sabbath rest.

On one level, surely, we all agree that rest is a good thing. Everybody deserves a break. Everyone should get some time off. We recognize that, as human beings, we are not designed to be working and producing 24/7. This is something that has been confirmed by all kinds of scientific studies.

### A Biological Need

Human beings break down on a biological level and on a mental health level without proper breaks and rest. And when we try to overcome that biological design by pushing ourselves to work beyond what we were designed for, not only do we suffer for it, but our work also suffers from poor quality.

So, no one can argue against the *idea* of Sabbath. It is something that we are designed for. And I would say that that is exactly the way the commandment is presented in the Book of Exodus. There, the reason why you must remember the Sabbath is because of the way the world was created. Because God rested on the seventh day of creation, that means that all creation was designed with the necessity of rest in mind.

That’s why scientific studies into the nature of human beings find that rest is necessary. God designed us that way. Whether they believe in God or not, everyone accepts that basic idea. We do not have any issues with Sabbath rest on the level of ideology.

### My Struggle

But man, do we have issues when it comes to the practicalities! Let me tell you about my own struggles with writing this sermon. When I saw that all the readings today were connected to the idea of Sabbath, I knew that that was what I had to preach about – that it was something that God was calling us to consider.

But then, for two whole days, I just found that I could not even start writing. I sort of knew what I needed to say, but I couldn’t figure out how to say it. Now I do not usually have that kind of problem

getting started on a sermon. The demand of producing one every week honestly means that I can't really afford to not be writing a sermon almost all the time.

So, what was my problem? I do believe in Sabbath rest; I think it is something that we all need. But when it comes down to practicing it in the real world, I will confess that I am a bit of a failure. I generally work seven days a week. There was a time when I would have been in the church office six days a week, and I have at least and thankfully gotten away from that. But I am still working all those days wherever I happen to be.

## Just too Much to Do!

And if you challenge me on my work schedule, as you probably should, I will answer you and say that I know that God did not design us to work without days off, but that, given all I have to get done in a week, this is what the practicality of the situation demands. When the rubber meets the road, it's just not practical to stop working. There's just too much to be done. The problem with the Sabbath is not the idea of it, it is the practice.

I am far from unusual in this. I know that each and every one of us has times when we let the busyness of work take control of our lives because of very practical reasons. So that is one big reason why the idea of Sabbath breaks down when it encounters the real world, we make too many exceptions for ourselves because of the practicalities of real life.

## Christian Practice

And then, of course, there is a question of how we treat others. I have known many Christians who have a firm understanding of the practice of Sunday as a Sabbath. They will insist that they will always refuse to work at their job on Sunday. They go to churches where they preach regularly about the importance of keeping Sunday as a Sabbath.

But they fail to recognize that, given the society that we live in, that is something that only a privileged few can do. Our society is simply not set up like the ancient agrarian society of Israel. And, as much as we may rail against all the things that are open or active on Sundays, the very structure of our society and economy demands that things stay open. And lots of people simply cannot opt out.

And it would be one thing if Christians who had the privilege to opt out did that personally as a sign to our society that things could be different. I could get behind something like that. But that is often what I do not see.

I see Christians who go to church on a Sunday morning and are all smug about how they don't work, and then as soon as the service is over they run to a nearby restaurant where they expect to be waited on hand and foot and are often not even very charitable towards those who serve them. Sabbath for me but not for the ones who take care of me is, unfortunately, an attitude that I have sometimes encountered among Christians. I am not speaking about present company, please understand me. But I have certainly seen it.

## Moses' Address

So, Moses addresses the people of Israel just as they are about to leave the ideal time of the wilderness – a time when God has provided for their needs directly – and enter the real world where everything they need will be provided only through work and labour. He knows that they will be particularly tested in how they keep the Sabbath and so he tweaks the commandment for the new challenge.

Maybe it is not going to be enough to merely *remember* the Sabbath when they are in the Promised Land. Life in the real world requires a bit more. You are called to *observe* it, which means exactly the same thing in the Hebrew as it does in English. It means to watch, to keep your eye on it because, if you don't, the demands of practical life will keep creeping up on you and you will never rest.

## Keeping Watch

To personally practice Sabbath requires that you keep a watch on yourself. The fact of the matter is that the things that you feel you must do are not always necessary. They may be based on unrealistic expectations that others have put upon you or that you have put upon yourself.

I know that I do that in my work. I place huge expectations on myself on what I need to do before I consider my work done. Some of these expectations are good, of course, but others are more about me trying to control things that I don't need to control – about me refusing to trust in God for an outcome and feeling that I have to control every step of the process.

I'll bet that you all do that in certain areas of your life. But you will never know that if you do not observe and carefully evaluate the choices that you make. Life in the real world may require that we do more than just remember the Sabbath. It requires that we observe.

## The Reason for the Law

But where Moses particularly revises the Sabbath commandment for the new challenges is when it comes to the reason for it. We no longer see the appeal to creation and the nature of God, instead we learn that the reason for this command is rooted in the human condition. **“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”**

The biggest reason why we must watch to keep the Sabbath is because of the human tendency to exploit the labour of others. That is what we must remember and, because we remember it, we must watch to make sure that it doesn't happen. That is what Moses is saying. So it is never enough for you to enjoy whatever privilege you may have to rest.

## Valuing Labour

We live in a world that increasingly devalues the labour that people do. That is why, over the last several decades wages for labour have not kept pace with the earnings of the investment class. That's why people have to work more and more just to make ends meet. Those are exactly the trends that Moses is telling us that we need to watch out for. That's why he repeats the insistence that your slave needs to rest too. Those are the trends that increasingly mean that Sabbath rest of any sort is a privilege enjoyed by the few.

Moses is speaking to us as we seek to live out faithful lives in the real world. This commandment is not given to judge you and certainly not to give you a reason to judge others. But the command for you to build rest into life is given to teach you to trust in God enough to take a break from trying to control everything around you. It is given in order to encourage you to stand up for those who are exploited for their labour.

I know that we can't simply take the notion of Sabbath as it applied in the ancient agrarian society of Israel and apply it directly to life today, but, with Moses' help and wisdom, I do believe that we can *observe* the Sabbath in the real world of today.