

Remember the Sabbath, Part 1
Men's Bible Study at Park View
October 25, 2005

Scriptures: Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8, 31:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:14b-15; Isaiah 56:1-8, 58:13-14; Leviticus 25:1-12

For the next two sessions, we will be studying the fourth commandment. There are two reasons to take extra time to study this commandment: there are extensive references to Sabbath in the Old Testament, and the application of this commandment by Christians has been both controversial and confusing. In the first session, we will look at the way this commandment was observed in the Old Testament. In the second session, we will examine the teachings of Jesus and Christian understandings of the Sabbath.

It is interesting to observe that the Sabbath commandment is the longest in the Decalogue. It is the fourth and last of the ten commandments to speak directly about the relationship between the people and God.

To remember or observe the Sabbath means "to rest." It has been so closely associated with the seventh day of the week that some have also related the word "Sabbath" to "seventh (day)." In its earliest uses in the law of Moses, Sabbath observance did not imply a time for worship or celebration, but rather a day of rest after six days of work. The Sabbath day was to be set apart as holy by observing it in a *different* way from ordinary work days.

The fourth commandment is the only case among the ten commandments where the wording in Exodus and Deuteronomy is sufficiently different from each other to change the interpretation of the passage. In Exodus, the reason given for observing the Sabbath is to follow the example of the Creator, who rested on the seventh day after six days of creation. The reason given for Sabbath observance in Deuteronomy is to serve as a reminder of God's deliverance of the Israelite slaves from their labor in Egypt. In the former case, Sabbath is rooted in God's creative acts. In the latter, Sabbath is rooted in God's redemptive acts. In both cases, it is rooted in God's initiative.

Therefore, Sabbath observance is designed to remind the people of God's initiative. As Waldemar Janzen has noted, "This is the paradox of grace, that the most important thing humans can do for God is to desist from trying to do anything." "All of these [religious activities] are meant to be human responses to God's initiative, not human initiatives to activate God. The Sabbath is, above all, a call for humans to let God be God and to desist from all human attempts to manage the world through work and achievement, including religious work and achievement" (Janzen, *Exodus*, Herald Press, p. 258).

Some have argued that this commandment sets forth an imperative to work. After all, the command says, “six days you shall labor and do all your work.” Therefore, G. Campbell Morgan said, “He who never works is unfitted for worship. He who never pauses to worship is rendered incapable of work.” However, it seems that the emphasis on work in this commandment is descriptive, not imperative. The surrounding culture assumed that people must work to make a living, but not that people must rest and remember God’s acts.

The Sabbath may have been particularly appealing to recently liberated slaves after years of forced labor. The Sabbath was established as the weekly occasion when people from the top to the bottom of the social ladder were allowed to rest. Foreigners, animals and even the land were granted rest. The sabbatical year allowed fallow land to be rejuvenated every seven years. And on the seventh cycle of the seventh year, a Jubilee year provided a time of forgiveness of debts and the return of land to its ancestral owners. In this way, Sabbath was an economic boon to those who had lost land or freedom. It placed a barrier in the path of those who craved financial gain and/or hoarded wealth.

The Sabbath was initiated by God to help people remember those things which are most valuable in life, those things that could not be earned by anxious striving. As Hedges has said, “The Sabbath is the time set aside to nurture all that gives us meaning in life, all that makes life worth living. The Sabbath is the recognition that work, that all the hours we spend making a living, are in fact the means to this end, to the ability to have and sustain love.”

Sabbath provided a time for families to be together without the need to toil. It was to be a day of re-creation and rejuvenation. It was to be a day to nurture loving relationships. To this day, the list of proper activities for Jewish Sabbath observance includes lovemaking with one’s spouse.

The following quotations from Wayne Muller (*Sabbath: restoring the sacred rhythm of rest*, 1999) have been instructive for me: “Sabbath requires surrender. If we only stop when we are finished with all our work, we will never stop – because our work is never completely done.”

“During Sabbath, things that grow in time are honored at least as much as those things we would buy and sell. At rest, we can take deeper measure of our true wealth. If we do not rest, if we do not taste and eat and serve and teach and pray and give thanks and do all those things that grow only in time, we will become more impoverished than we will ever know.”

Questions to ponder: What were you taught as a child about keeping the Sabbath? What has changed in the way that you or your family celebrate the Sabbath (if at all) today? In what ways might we benefit from the Jewish idea of weekly rest as outlined in this study? In what ways might it help to bring a better rhythm to our lives?