

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 A Sabbath Unto the Lord
Mark 2:23-3:6
June 2, 2024

To me, one of the interesting features of history is that it centers around advancements in the human ability to work. Even pre-history is defined by such progress; by the discovery of how to control and use fire, and later, the technology of the wheel and all things round; and the development of simple tools.

Even later comes the domestication of animals, especially large ones, and the cultivation of crops, which makes food more accessible to more people more easily.

Eventually simple tools became more complex until calling them tools seemed inadequate, so, machines, and then more and more complex machines and divisions of labor and systems and processes; miracles of transportation and communications (which are not really miracles at all), planes, trains, and automobiles, and spaceships; telegraph, telephone, television, and smart devices with satellite technology that can do your thinking for you. All of these things involve revolutions in work.

The human capacity for work; physical, intellectual, and relational (that is, teamwork, work in relationship with other people), has become one of the central features of human history. When one studies history, one learns the history of work.

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord . . . on it, you shall not do any work . . .”

Every indication is that the Sabbath commandment is not really about the work/rest divide, but about God, and thus about spiritual things. People are always getting spiritual things wrong in their obsessions, either their excessive work, or their religious devotion, like the attempts to keep the Sabbath found in some gospel texts, which is where we find Jesus and his followers in the reading for the day.

There are two scenes described here, the first is in a grain field, where the disciples pick grain (it means they worked). Included in the group were some Pharisees who objected to what they saw as a breaking of the Sabbath law. At his point they came into conflict with Jesus. He told them,

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath.”

The second happens in a synagogue, what we would call a church service. There was man there with a withered hand. By this time some were looking to see if Jesus would break the rules. Before he heals the man’s hand (once again, he is working) he challenges them with the following;

“Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?”

In the modern world even among the devout, there are ways in which the command to cease from labor is qualified. We work in the yard; we drive to visit relatives or to come to church; we eat out (which means someone else has to work); we enjoy live television events (which also means someone else has to work); we take care of essential needs.

Back when farm life was prevalent, the observance of Sabbath could make sense, even for the animals and servants. No one went anywhere. No one did anything. But as the world became more industrialized, its operation on a 24/7/365 basis, clouded the waters, so to speak, made it more difficult to discern what was necessary and not necessary, what activities constituted work and leisure and rest.

So how do we, “keep the Sabbath holy?”

By way of an answer, we can offer two suggestions. One must agree with the benefit of building rest into one’s life. Some of the commandments have a practical application. Human beings are better when rested. They perform physical tasks better, they think and make decisions better, they handle crises better, and they get along better with others. “Sleep on it,” is a commonly heard expression.

I must tell a running story. It is about the great coach at the University of Oregon and creative founder of

Nike, Bill Bowerman, and one of his runners, Kenny Moore.

Moore had been a pretty good high school runner in the early 1960s. Growing up in Eugene, his dream was to become a runner on the Oregon track team. Imbued with a strong work ethic, he built up to a habit of running 120 miles per week, which is about 17 miles a day (which is a lot, even for an elite runner). In the first couple of years, however, he failed to improve on his high school performances. He was working hard and not getting better.

The coach, who was an innovator and thought *rest* was important, ordered him to reduce his mileage to 70 miles per week (which is still a lot), but he was obsessed like many runners are, and not inclined to obey. He was not allowed to run races and threatened with the loss of his scholarship. He was assigned a partner and told not to run alone. He was told that his picture had been sent to the Eugene police who were asked to arrest him if they caught him running by himself.

After several months, he was entered in a two-mile race in which he improved his high school time by forty seconds (which is a lot). He went on to become a world class marathoner, who notoriously, was the dreaded fourth place finisher in two olympic marathon races, and became a writer of all things running for Sports Illustrated.

It is no surprise that athletes like Kenny Moore perform better, not only when they have had a good night's sleep, but when like a healthy diet, they have made rest a part for their preparation, their life-practices.

It is also no surprise that since work is so central to human life, there are spiritual issues to talk about and religious ideas with which to contend.

There is something more than rest for its own sake, in the idea of Sabbath. There is rest from the ordinary routines of life for the purpose of giving proper attention to spiritual things, - the divine relationship; to take time for giving thanks; and for considering and acknowledging God as Creator of life, as the one upon whom we are dependent for life, and the one who redeems our lives.

For we are better when we are reminded of our limitations and our sinfulness. We are better when we acknowledge God's majesty and power, grace and love. We act and think better, we are not just better at the tasks of life, but we are better humans beings, when we focus our attention on such things.

One can't help but think that if the human race had been better at practicing Sabbath, it might have made better decisions, it might have avoided some of the negative results of its work-related achievements; like the atomic bomb, child labor, slavery, industrial-sized messes that are not easily cleaned up, those sort of things

Whether humility, generosity, faithfulness, compassion, the acceptance of others; peace and love and joy and hope, result when we observe a Sabbath unto the Lord is an open question, but we will hardly achieve them without it. For they are not achievements in the normal sense, but extensions of the gift.

I do not believe I can solve for us the riddle of how to keep Sabbath holy in the modern world, each must wrestle with the question and decide. I do believe that here in this fourth commandment we have an opportunity to behold the grace of God, and grounded in that grace, to better know the forgiveness and reconciliation; the liberating and healing power that meets us in Christ Jesus, who is our Lord and Redeemer, Lord not only of the Sabbath, but of all life, and we can experience less stress and better all around health in the meeting of life's demands, and be nurtured to a heightened experience of life as precious and sacred, now and forever.

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