

## THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:8-11  
Matthew 11:28-30

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Is there anyone here who would disagree with this statement?

“Americans are overworked and overmedicated, frantic and rushing in a world in which we falsely believe one more piece of technology will give us more time and happiness...” That quote comes from Dr. Matthew Sleeth, a former emergency room physician who is now devoting his life to writing and speaking about how Christians can make a positive difference on the environment. That quote comes from his book entitled, 24-6: A Prescription for a Happier, Healthier Life. He talks about the practice of sabbath from the point of view of a medical professional. He says that when we take work home - answering business emails, making calls, texting employees and colleagues during personal time - it disrupts our natural biological circadian rhythms. When we are never off, we experience insomnia, inattentiveness, anxiety, depression and overload.

I don't know very many people who feel that their lives are balanced in a healthy way. Listen to most people complain about the pace of their

lives and you'll find that most feel that they are **SLAVES** to their schedules and their devices.

Our spiritual tradition gives us an antidote to the syndrome of feeling crazy-busy. Ironically, the biblical commandment to keep the sabbath is all about freedom.

The commandment to remember the sabbath and keep it holy is given to the people of Israel as a way to remind them that once they were slaves and now they are free. When you are a slave, you have no control over what you do with your body or with your time. When Moses frees the people from the tyranny of the Pharaoh he saves them from lives of endless work.

I find it so ironic that we **CHOOSE** to be enslaved. We choose to fill our calendars until there's no empty space left. We choose to let ourselves become addicted to our phones and tablets.

The ten commandments seem at first like rigid restrictive rules. When presented in the negative, "Thou shalt not" format, it may appear that God is punishing us in advance by giving laws that ensure that we have no fun. But look closer, and you'll see that the commandments are actually meant to lead us towards lives of harmony and peace.

I have as much trouble observing the fourth commandment as anyone, and I'm well aware that we all live in the real world. We live in a 24/7/365 culture. We are not going to go back to the days when commerce stopped on Sundays, when there were no youth sporting events on Sundays. Those days are gone, and there's really no point complaining about it. If we are going to keep the Sabbath, we will have to be both creative and intentional.

To me, the idea of Sabbath is not so much about a day as it is about a mindset. The purpose of Sabbath is to stop our other activities and even our other thoughts long enough to focus on the meaning of life. One Jewish woman who practices sabbath says that for her, "sabbath provides space to pause in order to discover, consider, and implement ways of being in the world that add meaning." The word "Sabbath" from the Hebrew literally means "to stop." To practice Sabbath is to stop certain activities long enough to notice what it is we're doing with our time, and why.

In that stopping, we create space to notice the world around us and its created beauty. In that stopping, we create space to notice the people around us. We have time to pay attention to our inner lives. We remember to breathe, to rest. People who practice these times of Sabbath rest find that they experience more gratitude.

I know that most of us cannot set aside an entire day for Sabbath practices; it's just not practical - or even possible for many. But what about one night a week for an unhurried family dinner? What about one afternoon for a walk in a local park? What about ten minutes each morning to just sit and pray, meditate, think, before launching into the day's activities? All of these are sabbath practices. Which could you fit into your regular routine? How might it enhance your life?

Here's what one writer concludes about the benefits of keeping sabbath: "Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is a day when we partake of the wisdom, peace and delight that grow only in the soil of time - time consecrated specifically for play, refreshment, and renewal. Many of us, in our desperate drive to be successful and care for our many responsibilities, feel terrible guilt when we take time to rest. But the Sabbath has proven its wisdom over the ages. The Sabbath gives us the permission we need to stop, to restore our souls."

In helping people understand where to even begin incorporating sabbath into our lives, several experts have suggested that the key to sabbath is watching children. Children are fully immersed in the moment. If you've ever found yourself impatient getting ready to go somewhere in the morning as your children dawdle, you know that children don't have a sense of

urgency. Rather, they're filled with joy and wonder. They experience the world at their own pace. Take a walk with a child and notice what they notice. Then imagine what it would be like to find that inner child you used to be and live that way for an hour or so every week.

We had a six-week session on sabbath during CrossTraining this spring. This story was in one of the books we shared:

"Every day after school, the son of a well-known rabbi would enter his house, place his backpack on the dining room table, leave the house through the back door, and head into the woods behind the house.

At first, the rabbi gave little thought to his son's ritual. But it continued for days, and then for weeks. Every day, out into the woods for almost a half hour. The rabbi grew concerned.

"My son," he said one day. "I notice that every day you leave our home to spend time in the woods. What is it you are doing there?"

"Oh, Papa," the son replied. "There is no need to worry. I go into the woods to pray. It is in the woods that I can talk to God."

"Oh," the rabbi said, clearly relieved. "But as the son of a rabbi, you should know that God is the same everywhere."

"Yes, Papa. I know that God is the same everywhere. But I am not."

Where are those places in your life that fill you with a sense of awe and wonder? Where are those places that connect you more closely to God's spirit? Where can you go to feel the ways in which God is speaking to you?

We are living in a world that is changing faster than we can keep up. We are continually rushing, hurried and distracted. There is an energy, a sense of adrenaline, and a feeling of importance that comes from living at this pace and seeing our full calendars. But there is also a price to pay. Our souls begin to starve. We may know what we're doing but we no longer remember why.

Another story about the wisdom of Sabbath:

An important businessman, hurried and stressed, visits a Zen master, seeking guidance. The Zen master sits down, invites the businessman to sit, and pours the visitor a cup of tea. But even after the tea fills the cup, the Zen master continues to pour, allowing the tea to spill, now running over the entire table.

The businessman is taken aback. "Stop! Please stop pouring the tea! The cup is full and obviously can't hold any more."

The Zen master replies, "Yes. So it is with you. And you will not be able to receive any guidance unless you make some empty space first."

I have been reading about a small but growing trend among young people. They are becoming aware that their constant attention to technology and social media makes them feel more anxious and less centered. So they are imposing limits on themselves. One young person puts herself on a technology sabbath one weekend a month. She turns her phone off, puts it in a drawer, and doesn't get it out from Friday night until Monday morning. Others turn off certain applications for certain amounts of time - a social media diet of sorts. This intentional stopping makes room in their lives for other pursuits.

One participant in our CrossTraining class decided to try creating a sabbath basket in her home. From Saturday night until Sunday night she puts away her calendar, her laptop, and any paperwork she'd been attending to. She tells me the Sabbath basket has liberated her. She does not allow herself to do any work at all. She's been taking more walks, reading more, visiting relatives, and just having fun. She's been enjoying the gift of time.

The commandment to practice Sabbath is not in any way a punishment; it is a gift of love from the God who wants us to live whole and healthy lives. The more we enjoy the gift of life, the more we appreciate the beauty around us, the more motivated we will be to serve the God from

whom all blessings flow. Taking the time to stop, to pause, to rest, to breathe is not a self-indulgent luxury. It actually inspires us to lives of service. We WANT to be more faithful, we want to take better care of the earth, we want to reach out in compassion to those in need because we know what wonderful gifts we have been given.

Gandhi said, “There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

What I hope we encourage you to think about in this year-long focus on Sabbath is that we have more choices than we often realize. We do not need to be slaves to 24/7 consumerism, to non-stop busyness.

Most of our Jewish brothers and sisters are ahead of us in this regard. Sabbath-keeping is a part of life in most Jewish communities. Walk through a Jewish neighborhood from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday and you will notice that the pace of life changes; you will hear people greet one another with these words, “Shabbat Shalom.” Which means “Peace to you on the Sabbath. Peace to the world on this Sabbath. May wholeness and wellness prevail.”

It won't happen for us that stores will close, that Amazon Prime won't deliver, that soccer tournaments will be cancelled. We have to be more creative, more intentional and more countercultural if we are to experience

the gifts of Sabbath. When we consider how anxious and stressed most of us are, we have everything to gain by trying.

Jesus practiced Sabbath regularly, and he says to us, in the Message version of the bible, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Let us pray. Holy God, we confess to you that our lives feel out of balance and off-center. We know that we often rush unthinking from one activity to another. Our relationships suffer, including our relationship with you. Teach us the wisdom of keeping sabbath, as Jesus did. For in his name we pray and live. Amen.