

Words to Live By
“You Need a Day Off!”
Exodus 20:8-11, Mark 2:23-28

Today, we continue our series on the Ten Commandments as we come to the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” It’s worthy of note that the Ten Commandments are often described as having two sections: the first four commandments are seen as telling us how to worship and honor God, while the other six tell us how God wants us to treat people. But this isn’t really an accurate way of viewing the commandments, because our worship of God cannot be separated from the way we treat each other. In fact, in the fourth commandment, we find that worship is directly connected to the way we treat ourselves and other people. This has to do with the fact that our lives are not our own. Our lives do not belong to us, but rather we belong to God. Our lives are basically on loan to us from God.

When you borrow something from someone, you usually treat it with special care. After the recent hailstorm, there was about a week during which my family was down to having only one drivable car. I know, what an extreme hardship! For the most part, we adjusted our schedules and made it work. There were, however, a couple occasions on which we just couldn’t do what we had to do with one car, and so I had to ask my parents to borrow one of their cars. Now, I’m not typically a reckless driver, but I can tell you, during those times when I was driving my parents’ car, I was REALLY careful. It’s bad enough when your own stuff gets damaged, but when **borrowed stuff** is damaged, you not only have damaged goods, but quite possibly a damaged relationship. So, we are usually very careful with borrowed things. The fourth commandment relates to this dynamic. God is telling us to take care of God’s stuff—which turns out to be us!

The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy has been understood in various ways throughout history. To begin with, for both ancient Israel and modern Judaism, the Sabbath has been understood as beginning on Friday night and continuing through Saturday. Nearly all Christians, to the extent that they practice any kind of Sabbath, do so on Sunday, because it is the day of our Lord’s resurrection. And then, there are different ways people actually observe the day. For some, it has been seen as a **holy day**, requiring time spent in formal worship. Many of us attend worship services on Sunday. The old-time Puritans, with whom we share a common theological heritage, used to spend many hours—nearly the whole day—in worship. Others focus more on the commandment to rest, and so the Sabbath becomes more of a **holiday** than a holy day. The truth is, both points of view are important if you want to keep this commandment.

Clearly, the Sabbath is to be a **day of rest**. What does the Bible say? “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.”

God recognizes that everyone needs a day off in order to be healthy. You can't work non-stop without doing damage to yourself, your family, and your other relationships. You know this to be true from the way life works on many different levels. If you continuously farm a piece of land without ever letting it rest or take in more nutrients, you will render it useless. If you are trying to build up muscle mass through weight lifting, you don't exercise the same muscles every day. You have to give them a break in order to rebuild after the stress of exercise. Some have called this the principle of "stress and release". Your body and mind grow through periods of stress and exercise, alternating with times to rest and regroup. If there is no rest, there is no growth, only fatigue and breakdown. This fall, we're going to put this principle to work with our ministry of learning in community through small groups, which will be called Growth Groups. They will take place in three trimesters lasting ten to twelve weeks – that's the stress or exercise part. Then there will be a four to six week period in between trimesters for you to rest and regroup. The point is, that for us to thrive, mentally, physically and spiritually, we need to alternate our times of work with times of rest, and the Sabbath definitely needs to include rest from work and stressful activity.

At the same time, the Sabbath is also to be **a day of reverence**. The Scriptures call us to keep the day holy, or sacred. They ground the commandment in the creation story, in which God is portrayed as resting after six days of creating. This means that, on the Sabbath, it is certainly appropriate to spend time in worship. But this doesn't mean you should spend your whole day in church like the Puritans used to. I'm pretty sure that would cease to be restful and become very stressful indeed! But even so, our approach to keeping a Sabbath, even if it is on Sunday, should involve reverence. It is a time to stop and reflect on the gifts God has given us, to appreciate the beauty of the world God has made, and, to enjoy what God has given us. The appropriate enjoyment of God's gifts is, according to some of our spiritual ancestors, actually a form of worship. God created many things that are to be enjoyed, and it is to God's glory when we do so. It wasn't necessary that we have music, or humor, or an appreciation for the beauty of nature or the arts. But God has given us these things that we may not merely live, but that we might also take delight in creation. To keep the Sabbath as a day of reverence, then, is a call to remember on that day the goodness of God, and to celebrate and enjoy the goodness of God's gifts. If you all you ever did was work and run around doing errands, when would you get the chance to stop and enjoy God's goodness? In fact, our tradition teaches that our purpose in life is to glorify God, and enjoy God forever. If you never stop running, that is hard to get much enjoyment out of life.

Ultimately, the commandment about the Sabbath is important to keep because **it's for your own good!** We need rest. Spiritually speaking, we need time to stop and recognize God's goodness and to enjoy God's gifts. People haven't always gotten this. In our New Testament reading, Jesus encountered some folks who were real legalists about the Sabbath. They missed the point, and thought it was all about determining what you could and could not do on that day. But Jesus taught them this: The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. That is to say, it is for our well being that God commands the Sabbath observance. It isn't something God needs, but rather it is something we need to be whole and healthy. And, since we belong to God, that is very important to God.