

Deuteronomy 7

The Fourth Commandment – the Sabbath Rest

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:44-5:21

This is the most misunderstood commandment. The Fourth Commandment is the sabbath day rest. To most people this fourth commandment is nothing more than a command to go to church on Sunday. The exhortation to come together, like on a Sunday, does not come from here. Rather, that comes from Hebrews.

²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:24-25)

Our coming together, whether for church or home meetings, is an encouragement to each other as the family of God's people, 'to provoke one another to love and good deeds'. The fourth commandment may involve all that but there is much more. It is the sum of the first three commandments exhorting us to worship the only God who has created and redeemed us.

¹² Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any 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, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ 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; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

We are asked to observe the sabbath day and to keep it holy. The reason given here is that we should come away from the work of making a living to remember the Lord who brought us out of our Egyptian bondage. It is time spent to acknowledge the God who has given life to us and liberated us from the bondage of sin. It is time spent to acknowledge all that God has done. It is time for renewal which is what we all need. We ignore that to our own detriment.

Our secular society has gone against all that. We don't have enough time for the pursuit of our personal development and we make use of not only the Saturday, but also the Sunday. So the children of today do not have time for Sunday church. Of course this attitude is fostered by the parents. This is a commandment which we need to observe and not to resist.

There are two injunctions here - to observe the sabbath day and to keep it holy. They are linked. To observe the sabbath we can understand, but what is holy needs some explanation. Holiness is not a state that we achieve by what we do. Holiness is an attribute of God and it is His presence that imparts to us holiness. Apart from His presence with us or in us there is no holiness. What is implied here in this commandment is that we come away from the secular and material concerns of life to the God who will renew us by His presence. Indeed God has commanded us to do so. It is for our own good. The further we move away from God, the further we are on the path to error, and we need to call that error sin. We may continue to be successful, just like the Canaanites, until the day of reckoning.

We have said that the nature of the Ten Commandments is a statement of the nature of God. They are not merely given to us to put us in our place. What the commandments are saying here is that since this is the nature of God, we must be so too as we are created in the image of God,

blessed and made holy in Him. These are relational statements. The Fourth Commandment is not a commandment that we can ignore or treat as optional as so many do. The commandments give us an image of God. They tell us who God is – Creator of life and community. That is why we need to worship the only true God and to respect the sanctity of life and the material possession of the community. They are not mere rules to follow.

Why do we have to remember the Sabbath, the Seventh Day? Why can't we read the bible, have our private devotion and pray in the privacy of our homes or have the pastor visit us for a private devotion? The reason is given in the commandment itself. This is the only commandment that carries with it the reasons and there are two. The first is given to us in Exodus. It is creational as the account in Exodus says.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. (Ex. 20:8-11)

This has a direct reference to the creational account as the seventh day is the rest of God and we are in the seventh day of God. There is more to be said regarding the seventh day and we will not engage ourselves with that here.

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Gen. 2:1-3)

The second reason is redemptive as is given to us in this passage in Deuteronomy. We are to remember our deliverance.

¹⁵ 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; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut. 5:15)

The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath

God completed His creation and it was good. He blessed and made holy the 'Seventh Day' in which His creation exists. We live in the Seventh Day, the holy day. We live in the rest of God. And so the Sabbath, the Seventh Day, is given to us. It is God's gift. God made this Seventh Day for us, for our benefit. It is part and parcel of humanity living in the grace of God, living in the Seventh Day. That is why Jesus said that He is the Lord of the Sabbath. He made or ordained the Sabbath and gave it to us, a gift.

²³ One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28)

You see, the Pharisees missed the point of the Sabbath. They saw it as a ritual to be observed, a rule to be followed without knowing why. They saw it as something they do to please God. They got it wrong just as many Christians do today.

Our Rest (Sabbath) and Christian Re-formation

Blessing is what God gives to us. Holiness is what God is doing for us. The Sabbath is what God has made for us and this is part of His enabling for us to live the life He wants us to. It is the connectedness we have in the body of Christ where the blessing of God is passed on from one to another. We will not fully know Christ and the love of God until we know the body life in Christ. It is God's way of taking us away from the task in changing creation, eg. tilling the ground and setting right the errors of the body or structures, to be with Him in the body of Christ where the silent work of the Spirit takes place.

We are all outcome oriented people. We want to see the result of action. We need to do something to show that we can achieve something – outcome orientation. We do not think that we can see that by staying still. Yet that is precisely what the psalmist says to us.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations
I am exalted in the earth." (Ps. 46:10)

This is part of our Christian formation. The Sabbath is like this. It is like the husband seeing that the wife has worked so hard in keeping the home and now takes her away for a weekend by the beach so that they can be together. Sure, they had been together all week in the evenings, but the weekend away is a special time for them as husband and wife. It is a gift from the husband to the wife. It is the renewal of their marriage relationship. But the wife says no. She wants to spend the time tidying up the garden and the flower bed and to plant more vegetables. Those chores are necessary and good, but where is the priority?

As we have said regarding holiness – holiness is what is done to us and not by us. So in the Sabbath remembrance, it is what is done to us and not by us.

Story of pastor to parishioner not remembering the sermons.

So while we do something, God is using that to do something else to us.

Sabbath – Remembering Our Freedom

To some, observing the sabbath seems like a bondage while it is actually an expression of our freedom. For this we need to go back to the two records of the Ten Commandments – one in Exodus and the other in Deuteronomy. They are essentially the same except that in the Fourth Commandment, the reason given for the observation is put a little differently.

The one in Exodus gives the creational mandate, i.e. referring to the creation in six days. The one in Deuteronomy cites redemption as the reason. They dovetail into each other as we are created and redeemed by the Creator God.

This freedom is brought out in other parts of the Mosaic code – the seventh year and the jubilee (seven time seven years).

The Seventh Year

²When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. ³If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out

with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. ⁵ But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," ⁶ then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life. (Ex. 21:2-6)

The Jubilee of rest – rest for the land and rest for the servants

⁸ You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. ⁹ Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. ¹⁰ And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. ¹¹ That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. ¹² For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

¹³ In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. ¹⁴ When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. ¹⁵ When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. ¹⁶ If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. ¹⁷ You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 25:8-17)

The principle of renewal is programmed into God's creation. These are ordained by Him for the good of His creation. It is the rest creation needs in relationship with the Creator. This rest is found in Jesus Christ as we are brought into Him and in union with Him. Just as we need physical rest for the good of the body, in the same manner we need this sabbath rest for our spiritual well being as Jesus said.

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Sabbath keeping is part of our Christian formation. It is what God has provided for the up keeping of His creation. We ignore it to our peril. This is part of the creational package for us to receive the blessing of God and to be sanctified (made holy). It is our rest and the celebration of our freedom.

The Christian practice of keeping sabbath embodies a theology of creation, liberation, and resurrection. Keeping Sabbath forms persons and communities in faith and fosters resistance to distorted ways of living and inadequate views of human identity that implicit in the culturally dominant experience of time.¹

Augustine understood the commandments of God. He said,

Give what Thou commandest; and command what Thou wilt.
(because He has given us the enabling to do that)

Augustine also wrote in the first chapter of his *Confessions*, '... thou hast made us for thyself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee'.

We have little regard for the Sabbath Day. It was the same in Isaiah's days. And so he wrote,

¹³ If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight

¹ Bass, Dorothy, 'Christian Formation in and for Sabbath Rest', *Interpretation*, 59.1 (Jan. 2005), 25.

and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa. 58:13-14)

This is not the condition for receiving the blessing from God. We honor the Sabbath, the Seventh Day, for our own good. It is taking the gift of God and allowing Him to transform us and mold us to the kind of people we ought to be, i.e. fully in union with Him through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is our freedom, i.e. free from the chores that bind us to a self-ish existence.