

Deuteronomy 15-16 “The Sanctification of Time: the 4th Commandment”
Psalm 90
Colossians 2:6-23

Aug 22, 2021

I thought about titling this sermon “Six Days Shall You Labor” –
because I want to focus on that line –
but as I reflected on how to get at this,
I realized that the real point here is that God is teaching us how to think about *time*.

The third commandment focuses on the holiness of God’s *name*.
The fourth commandment turns to the sanctification of *time*.

We saw that God’s *name* is profaned both by our careless words – and our careless deeds.
And now we see that our use of time is also something that matters to God.

Why do we have a seven day “week”?
All of the other ways we measure time are based on some rhythm of nature.
Except the week.
The year is based on the earth’s revolutions around the sun.
The month was originally based on the phases of the moon.
The day is based on the earth’s rotation.

All of these are universal to all human cultures,
because the sun, moon, and stars provide a way of marking times and seasons.

But the week has no such relation to nature.
The seven-day week is based on God’s own creation of the world.
Many years ago I helped author the OPC’s Creation study report.
One of my main contributions was the statement of the “Analogical Day” position
because I argue that our seven-day week
is modeled after God’s seven-day creation week.
Our days are patterned after his!

And as we’ll see, in many ways the Sabbath is all about how our work and our rest
are patterned after God’s work and rest –
in our work, we enter into God’s creative work;
and in our rest, we enter into God’s sabbath rest!

Psalm 90 is all about that!

Sing Psalm 90
Read Colossians 2:6-23

1. “Six Days Shall You Labor...” The Ordinariness of Work

I grew up in a family and a church where Sunday was a day for worship –
and as long as you went to church, you could do whatever you wanted the rest of the day.

In high school, I had a job where I worked Sunday afternoons –
in college, Sunday was a prime homework day.

In other words, I was living my life like an ordinary American –
24/7

Everyone living his or her own life – doing whatever we feel like –
accountable to no one.

We are one of the most individualistic cultures in human history.

One result of that is that anything communal – anything corporate –
starts to feel like a straightjacket.

And the idea of Sabbath has been redefined by this individualistic mindset.

I know of many people who think that any day can be their sabbath –
as though “sabbath” could be an individual thing.

But the biblical concept of *sabbath* is not an individual concept.

It is a communal way of ordering time before God.

I was trying to think of a parallel case.

But every meaningful instance I could think of
has been similarly adjusted by modern technology and society!

Sure, there is “Super Bowl Sunday” –

but if you want to watch the game on Monday, go right ahead!

“Election Day” is always on a Tuesday –

but you can vote whenever you want!

We are very much in the habit of *bending time* to suit our individual preferences.

At what cost?

In my experience, the idea of an “individual” sabbath isn’t much of a sabbath.

After all, the idea of Sabbath is more than just a “day off.”

Sabbath is about participating in God’s rest.

That’s why the command begins, “*remember* the Sabbath day” –

or as Deuteronomy 5 paraphrases it, “*observe* the Sabbath day.”

The root idea of the Fourth Commandment is that our time is to be ordered by God –
not by ourselves.

How can you keep from getting snowed under the demands and burdens of life?
When I was in college, I would frequently get stressed out.
I would be so frantic that I didn't see how I could get everything done.
Then a professor taught us about the Sabbath,
how God commands us to give one day each week back to him,
as a day of holy rest and worship.
I decided to do it.
My friends thought I was crazy.
What? they said, All that study time wasted?
But for the last thirty years I have sought to keep the Sabbath holy,
and my life has changed.
Every Sunday is the Lord's Day--the Day of the Lord.
Every Sunday we are to set aside the normal, everyday burdens of life.
Sunday is a day devoted to the things of Christ.
Every week God has given you a day that is set apart for Christ;
a day which is focused on him,
If you keep this day holy,
then you will not likely forget God the rest of the time.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 states the Fourth Commandment in this way:

"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.
Six days you shall labor and do all your work,
but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.
On it you shall do no work:
you nor your son, nor your daughter,
nor your male servant, nor your female servant,
nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your livestock,
nor your sojourner who is within your gates,
that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.
You shall 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."

There are three basic points within this commandment,
and all three are expounded in Dt 15-16.

- 1) six days are for your labor; one day is for God
- 2) This day is not merely for you to rest--it is a day where you give rest to others
- 3) This is a day for remembering – and observing

These three things are taught to us by the Sabbath,
and are to applied in everyday life.

1) Six days are for labor; one day is for remembering.

What is meant by “labor”?

Today, when we say “work” we generally mean your “job” –
but for most of human history, work meant
“those things that you do in order to maintain and promote
the life and wellbeing of your community.”

So planting and harvesting crops – making food and clothing –
rearing and educating children –
planning for the future of the community –
building social bonds within the community –
all of this would be included in your “work.”

In other words, what we call job, housework, gardening, government, recreation –
all the ordinary stuff of life is what is to be included in the
“six days shall you labor and do all your work.”

From what I have heard and seen over the years,
it really does seem to be a problem:
we have lost sight of what it means to *work*.

At the heart of *work* is the *blessing* that God gave to Adam and Eve:
“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it,
and have dominion over the creatures...”

We still say that a woman is “going into labor,” when she is preparing to give birth,
because this is an important part of our *work*!
Getting married – making babies – and then, of course, rearing those children! –
is one of the most important parts of our *work*.

But so is *subduing the earth* and having dominion over the creatures.
In the fall, God promised pain in childbirth to Eve and her daughters –
and also he promised pain in subduing the earth to Adam and his sons.

This doesn’t mean that work was *easy* (or that childbirth would have been easy) before the fall.
It means that with the entrance of sin – misery also entered the world.

Our work – our everyday labor – the daily toil of
“those things that you do in order to maintain and promote
the life and wellbeing of your community”
has become tainted by misery.

But remember that God has called you to this work!
“Six days shall you labor and do all your work.”

Whether you are working in production or retail or service –
whether you are an engineer, a teacher, or a housewife –
your labor is part of God’s plan and purpose for his creation!

The work that you do in chopping up vegetables for dinner –
the labor that you do in studying for a test –
the drainage system that you are designing for that building –
are they small things?

Yes – sure!

But we are small people!

And there is no way that one mere mortal can do the great things.
The great things require us to work together!

And this is why the Sabbath principle is so important.

The Sabbath principle is that a community needs to have rhythms and patterns in life.
Six days shall you labor and do all your work – but on the seventh day you shall rest.
On the six days we enter into God’s creative work.
On the seventh day we enter into God’s sabbath rest.

Just as the command to work was given to humanity in common –
so also the command to rest!

After all – what happens when we try to do everything individually?

Just look at the American economy today!

Everything is open 24/7 – and no one has rest.

We keep moving at a frenetic pace – never stopping – always trying to keep up!

God is concerned even for the animals of Israel –

livestock was to be given a day of rest on the Sabbath!

This is why we need to appreciate the Sabbath for what it is!

A *gift* from God!

Deuteronomy 15 applies this principle in more ways than just 7 days.

God gave to Israel a “sabbatical year.”

2. What Is So Special About the “Seventh”? God’s Rest and Ours (Dt 15)

The Sabbath principle makes clear that this day is not merely for you to rest –

it is a communal day of rest – which means that you need to give rest to others!

Every seventh year God commanded a release of debts.

Verses 1-6 require the Israelites to forgive loans in the seventh year.

If your brother hasn’t paid you back yet –
then release him.

Verse 3 makes clear that you can require a *foreigner* to pay it –
but not your fellow Israelite.

As we saw last time, respecting the laws regarding “clean” and “unclean” –
God was teaching his people to distinguish between those who belong to God,
and those who don’t.

The “foreigner” is one who is outside the bounds of the people of God –
he is one who is not part of the holy community.
Moses is clear that if he wants to join the community – he is most welcome!
And further, this is a contract that the foreigner freely entered.
Therefore, there is no injustice to require him to fulfill it!

But God wants his people to understand that the Sabbath principle includes the idea
of giving *rest* to one another.

Long-term debt tends to create poverty.
Therefore, there shall be no long-term debt among the people of God!
Debts should be released in the seventh year!
The idea here is that one would only go into debt in an emergency.
Perhaps there was a fire – or some other unexpected disaster –
and so your neighbor is suddenly in a perilous position.

And God says that if your brother becomes poor and needs a loan –
lend him the money! – even if the seventh year, the year of release,
is at hand.

“As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.”
And what is the reason for this?
So that “there will be no poor among you.” (v4)

And yet disasters and miseries will continue to afflict us –
and so God says “there will never cease to be poor in the land” (v11).
But if you do what God says, there will be no poor among you!

How does this work?

The heart of poverty is not a lack of money.
The heart of poverty is a lack of connection.
Have you ever known a well-connected poor person?
Not for long!

That connection will result in that person having sufficient resources for her household.

Brian Fikkert talks about poverty having multiple aspects –
expressed in our relationship to God, to others, to self, and to nature.

When we are well connected to God, others, self, and nature –
then any setback in our finances is temporary (as God describes in Dt 15).
But when we are not well-connected to God, others, self, and nature –
then poverty is already a reality – and is likely going to express itself financially as well!

I should point out that this sabbatical principle of releasing debt
has been enshrined in American culture through bankruptcy laws.
Sure, we have individualized the principle –
but you can only discharge your debts through bankruptcy every 8 years!
In other words, you have to wait seven years...

But this is what *sabbath* is all about!
The sabbath is about the people of God sharing in God's rest!
And that rest comes through the financial provisions of verses 1-11 –
but also through the emancipation provision of verses 12-18.

After all, if the point of the sabbath is that God's people enter into his rest –
then it would not be appropriate to enslave God's people!
As God says in verse 15, "you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,
and the LORD your God redeemed you."
Therefore a Hebrew slave should only serve for six years,
and then be set free –
and set free with sufficient resources to be able to remain free!

These provisions are designed to ensure that the rich do not gain their wealth
at the expense of the poor –
while enabling the poor to rebuild wealth,
with the assistance of the community.

Deuteronomy's version of the 4th commandment includes this comment:
"You shall 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."

Sabbath keeping means remembering the slave –
remembering God's mighty deeds in saving you from slavery –
and therefore showing compassion and mercy to those who are afflicted,
so that *all* of God's people can share in the sabbath rest of God!

3. The Blessing of the Sabbath (Dt 16)

And that's why we speak of the *blessing* of the Sabbath.

Deuteronomy 16 speaks of the festal calendar of Israel.
Three times a year they were to gather together at the central sanctuary.

And each time, they are to *observe* the feast, and *remember* what God has done.

Verses 1-8 speak of the Passover – the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The directions highlight the importance of the central sanctuary –
the “place that the LORD your God will choose,
to make his name dwell in it” (v6).

And just as Dt 5 uses the word “observe” – rather than “remember” –

“Observe the Sabbath day” –

so now they are called to *observe* the month of Abib –
and *keep* the Passover.

And the reason for this is given in verse 3 –

“Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread – the bread of affliction –
for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste –
that all the days of your life you may remember the day
when you came out of the land of Egypt.”

Verses 9-12 then speak of the Feast of Weeks – Pentecost.

You count seven sabbaths from the sabbath of Passover –
and on the day after the seventh sabbath – on the 50th day –
you keep the Feast of Weeks.

God says that “you shall rejoice before the LORD your God” –
together with your children, your servants, the Levites,
the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.

And you should include them in your rejoicing

(in other words, you pay for their food!)

because “you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt.”

Verses 13-15 then speak of the Feast of Booths –

the harvest feast in the fall.

Again they are told to rejoice before the LORD with the whole community –

“because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce
and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.”

Notice how the theme of work and rest comes together in the feasts.

These are days for feasting – for rejoicing –

but also for resting from their labors.

In the OT, the feasts were the primary days of worship.

The Sabbath-principle was applied both in the weekly Sabbath,
and in the three annual feasts.

Deuteronomy is focusing on the seven-day principle.

Exodus and Leviticus will highlight the importance of the 8th day
(as we’ll see in coming weeks).

But this may help us understand what Paul is doing in Colossians 2,
which we read earlier.

4. The Sabbath as Shadow (Col 2)

Paul says, “let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink,
or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come,
but the substance belongs to Christ.” (2:16-17)

Why does Paul say this?

Well, what did Jesus do.

Col 2: 9 –

“For in him the fullness of deity dwells bodily” –

Jesus is God who came in the flesh – who joined himself to our humanity.

And why did he do this?

So that he might be joined to him –

“buried with him in baptism,

in which you were also raised with him

through faith in the powerful working of God, who raises the dead”

Jesus has canceled the record of debt that stood against us – nailing it to the cross.

He has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil –

and so therefore, the Law no longer has power over us.

The Law cannot condemn us,

because Jesus has fulfilled *all* the righteous requirement of the law.

Indeed, his greatest act of giving rest occurred on the Sabbath.

It was on a Friday that he was crucified.

He spent the Sabbath in the grave.

He spent the Sabbath enduring the wrath of God,

so that he might give his people rest.

And when he arose from the dead on the first day of the week,

he destroyed the power of sin, death and the devil forever.

And on that same day he gave rest to Mary--comforting her fears;

he gave rest to the disciples on the Emmaus road--breaking bread with them.

he gave rest to the eleven that evening--giving them joy in his presence.

And then, on the first day of the week, fifty days later, at Pentecost,

he sent the Holy Spirit--the Comforter

--who gives rest to all of his people.

So of course, Christ is the *substance* of the Sabbath – and indeed, of all the feasts!

After all, when Paul uses the term “Sabbath” – he is speaking of the seventh day.

(That's what *shabbat* means in Hebrew).

The Christian does not observe *shabbat* – the Christian worships on the 8th day – the first Day of the week.

Don't confuse the shadow for the substance!

And so Paul says that since Christ has canceled the record of debt, with its legal demands, therefore no one should be passing judgment against those who do not follow the OT calendar and food laws.

In Christ, God's saving power has been revealed so completely that the whole of the OT appears to be nothing more than shadows compared to the brilliant light of his glory!

To keep a Saturday Sabbath is to fall behind the times.

We are called to remember the Lord's Day--the Day of the Lord!

After all, think about what we saw in Dt 16:

What were those feasts for?

Passover--remember that God redeemed you from Egypt

Feast of Weeks--remember that you were slaves

Feast of Tabernacles--remember that God brought you through the wilderness

In Christ, we have only one feast:

The Lord's Supper

And this feast is celebrated on the Lord's Day--the day of resurrection and of joy.

Because we too are to remember.

Just as the Israelites were to remember what God had done,

in giving them rest from slavery and bondage in Egypt,

So also we are commanded to remember what God has done in Christ,

in giving us rest from slavery to sin and death;

Just as the Israelites were to remember what God had promised to do,

that he would send his Messiah to bring them into his rest,

So also we are to remember what God has promised that he will do,

that Christ will come again to bring us into glory!

Just as the Israelites were commanded to partake of their sacrificial meals,

so also we partake of our sacrificial meal.

As they gathered around the table and partook of the sacrifice,

they were to remember all that God had done.

Now, did they remember simply in their heads?

No!

v8 says that they were to have a sacred assembly.

and from all the other sacred assemblies in the OT,

it would have included the reading of the Scriptures,

the priests or levites would remind the people of the Exodus,

the people would sing Psalms,

they would pray,

and then they would partake of the sacrificial meal.
And that is what we do every Sunday.
Every Sunday we gather to remember Christ's death and resurrection.
Every Sunday we gather to rejoice in what God has done.

First let me make one note:
Obedience is costly.

Going to Jerusalem three times every year would not be cheap.
And lending money that doesn't get paid back...
And releasing your Jewish servants after six years –
and giving him enough to set up on his own!

But the comparisons to Egypt are designed to remind them:
If you treat people the way Pharaoh treated you,
God will judge you the same way he judged Pharaoh.

God is telling them that to enjoy the land and its benefits,
you must be willing to sacrifice them--to give them up.
If you rejoice in what God has given you,
then you too must give.

So how do we do this?

- 1) Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy
Remembering has to do with worshiping.
Remembering is something that we do as a body.
This is our joyful feast day.
We are to gather every Lord's Day and remember his death and resurrection.
So a large part of every Sunday should be taken up in worship.
We gather both on Sunday morning and on Sunday evening
as a picture of how the whole day is Christ's.
The Reformers would have services all day long (with a break for lunch).
The early Methodists would gather at dawn for prayer,
and then spend the whole day in worship and fellowship,
before heading back home in the evening.
Many Korean churches today--both in Korea and in America--
have a prayer meeting Saturday night,
gather at 6:00am Sunday morning for prayer,
have various worship services and classes until noon;
then they gather for lunch, and fellowship together while the children play,
until the evening service.
They have understood that the Day of the Lord is a day of rejoicing.
The Lord's Day is the day in which we remember what Christ has done,
and in which we eagerly look forward to Christ's return.

Is the Lord's Day a day of rejoicing for us?
Is Sunday a day of thanksgiving and joy?
It can be.
God gave it to us as a gift, and as a blessing.
If we spurn his gifts and blessings, we are saying that we prefer
the curse of a hectic schedule and a stressed-out life.

2) Six days are for your labor; one day is for God
The Lord's Day is to be different from all other days.
On this day you are not to do your own projects,
you are not to work; you are to rest.
In other words, don't do the things that you normally do on the other six days.
I'm not going to give you a list of dos and donts.
All the bible says is that you are to finish ALL your work in six days.
On the seventh day, you are to rest and remember his blessings.

3) This day is not merely for you to rest--it is a day where you give rest to others
Don't make other people work for you.
You are not supposed to work,
don't make your children work,
don't make your servants work
don't make strangers work for you;
in other words,
don't hire people to work for you.

Instead, look for ways to give rest to others.
This is a day for showing mercy.
It's not a day for sitting around the house, bored.
If you are ever bored on Sunday, then you are not keeping the Sabbath!
Find ways to give rest to others.
Have people over for a simple meal.
Spend time enjoying your children,
playing games, reading books out loud together,
singing hymns and talking about Jesus.

On Saturday night, gather together and spend some time in prayer and in singing.
If you don't have anything to sing, print out some copies of your favorite hymns
and sing them together.
Read the scriptures together and talk about how it shows us Jesus!

Pray that God will give you a heart that longs for Christ,
that longs to know him, and to rejoice in his presence.

On Sunday, while you are at church, look for ways to serve others.
Seek to encourage others, look for things that you can do to build each other up.

On Sunday afternoon, set aside everything else.

But Sunday is not merely a day to kick back, it is a day to serve others.

Look for ways to give rest to one another in your family and in the church.

If someone is hurting, bring them comfort.

You would not believe how much of a relief it is to simply forget everything
that you will have to do the following week.

That's why I love the Sabbath.

On this day,

God has commanded me to take the day to simply worship him.

God has commanded me to set aside all of my cares.

As Jesus put it, "come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest.

The Lord's Day is to be a picture of that rest

--a day when we get a taste of what Christ has prepared for us.