

January 31, 2010
First Things First ... Thankful Celebration
Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Today we come to Commandment 4, Deuteronomy 5:12-15: "*Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy ...*" Historically this has been interpreted in two ways by Christians.

1. Some people could be called "Sabbath-keepers." These people believe that the Old Testament principle that one day in seven is special applies to us, even though we observe the Sabbath on Sunday (Jews celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday). Stuart Briscoe describes his childhood: "*We went to Sunday morning church, Sunday afternoon church, and Sunday evening church. In between those services, we played no games and could not play outside; instead we prayed or read or took part in quiet family conversations. Once my parents got a radio, they never switched it on on the Lord's day. Neither would they dream of going to a restaurant on a Sunday; that would require someone else to work.*"¹ While Briscoe's childhood may take Sabbath-keeping to an extreme, many Christians hold to some form of this approach. Sunday is special. We act differently. Farmers don't farm. Students don't study. Businesses remain closed. Organized sports are unplayed.
2. Other Christians argue that, as people of the New Testament, we are under grace, not the law. Therefore we do not have to follow the old Sabbath-keeping principle. We are free to do whatever we like, any day of the week. To impose special regulations onto Sundays is to put ourselves under the bondage of a legalism that God has delivered us from in Jesus. After all, what about those of us who HAVE to work on Sundays?

Which is right? Let's look at the commandment in more detail ... What does it mean?

A Commandment with a difference

The Ten Commandments are recorded twice in our Scriptures. They are recorded in Exodus 20 when they were first given by the Lord to Moses. Moses then repeats them as the Israelites prepare to enter Egypt in Deuteronomy 5 ("Deuteronomy" is a Greek word for "Second law" - a retelling of the God's principles - a refresher course - a review). This is the only command that is significantly different in both accounts.

Both commands begin similarly: "*Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your oxen and donkeys and other livestock, and any foreigners living among you. All your male and female servants must rest as you do.*" But the reason is different ...

¹ Stuart Briscoe, *The Ten Commandments* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1993], p. 63

Exodus 20:8-11: In the Beginning ...

"The seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God ... for in six days the LORD made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy" (Exodus 20:10-11). The purpose of the Sabbath is a reestablishment of life to what it was created to be - a rhythm of work and rest, in fellowship and harmony with the Lord, one another, and creation.

God explains that we weren't created to work without rest ... God created everything in six days then rested on the seventh, so His gift to us is rest one day per week! The Sabbath day pattern (one day of rest in seven) was ordained and established by God. It wasn't that *God* needed rest ... He was establishing a model for us; we need rest. Everyone is to have a day of rest (even foreigners, servants, and animals!). It is interesting that when you look through the Bible at passages that speak out against Sabbath-breaking, the same passages inevitably also speak about the dangers of greed, exploitation, and gaining wealth at others expense. The Sabbath was for the good of society ... to keep our focus NOT on maximizing profit, but on God.

The focus of the Sabbath is God. When we rest on the seventh day as God rested, we are reminded that it is God who created the heavens and the earth! This commandment follows and reinforces the previous three. One of our primary human failings is that we forget God. We get so busy in our lives that we end up, perhaps more by default than intention, nudging God from the central focus in our lives and replacing Him with something else. Very often what ends up taking centre stage in our lives is work, wealth, and accumulating things

"Human beings were created to live and work in the earth. Alienated from God as the source of our fulfilment and rest, we endow work and the whole economic enterprise with a significance beyond its God-given role. Work itself and the material produce it generates can then become an idol to be served without the limitation of God's own higher claim on our lives. In fact, it can come to dominate the whole of life and to define our very being ('you are what you do'), thereby usurping the God in whose image we are made ... The command to rest from work on the Sabbath day forces a pause in this compulsive process and reminds us that time, like the earth itself, belongs to God, as does everything by which we are able to create wealth (cf. Deut. 8:17f)." ²

Sabbath protects us from making work the central focus of life - to keep God at the centre. In the regular routine of our lives, at least once a week, take time to celebrate there is only one God; we allow no substitutes (idols) in His place, and His name is holy. Sabbath is about **worship**.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15: Out of Africa

In Deuteronomy, the reason for Sabbath is this: *"You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God ... Remember*

² Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996], p. 74

that you were once slaves in Egypt, but the LORD your God brought you out with his strong hand and powerful arm. That is why the LORD your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:13-14). The Israelites had just come out of generations of slavery in Egypt. As slaves, they had been responsible for making bricks and building edifices for the Pharaohs of Egypt, day-in, day-out, year-in, year-out, without days-off, sick days, or vacation. They had been slaves to their masters. They were slaves to their work. Slaves had to sacrifice everything for their job - their family, their time, their health, their lives ...

When God brings the Israelites out of Egypt, He frees them from that oppressive slavery! For the first time in generations they would be getting their own land, establishing their own farms and businesses, earning their own money, making their own living. And for the first time in generations they wouldn't have to work all-day, every-day, year-in, year-out. They were free at last! Sabbath reminds us of God's deliverance from oppressive drudgery.

In our culture, we idolize work. An ad in the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper reads (condensed):

WORKAHOLICS WANTED

_____ Corporation is a dynamic, rapidly expanding e-commerce company. Our explosive growth requires that we immediately fill the following positions:

- 1. OFFICE MANAGER: We need someone to create order in a fast-paced environment ... We realize that we're looking for an individual with super hero qualities to get us organized ... multi-task is your middle name and you find stress a motivator. As you are the expert in the field, we want to know what additional skills you can bring to the position to get us on-track fast.*
- 2. SENIOR EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT: We need an individual comfortable with organizing the lives of our key executives. You are an MS Word wiz ...*
- 3. RECEPTIONIST: You are company gatekeeper. You are professional and personable in handling all front-of-the-house issues; including a busy multi-line switchboard, visiting clients, investors and suppliers, in addition to performing a variety of administrative support tasks. You have great interpersonal, communication and organizational skills. You are not divine but close to it.*

This company does not want Sabbath-keepers! But what will happen to its workaholic employees? They will be expected to sacrifice their families by working long hours and long weeks. They will be expected to sacrifice their time by forgoing leisure and vacations to see the company succeed. They may even be expected to sacrifice their health, by enduring so much stress (and by drinking too much cafeteria coffee!). In essence, this company is *asking* its employees to become slaves. To give up their freedom.

This corporation may be extreme. But we all probably know people - or maybe we are people - who cannot stop working. Have we given up our freedom to be the free people God created us to be. Let me ask: whom do we admire? Often the people who work, work, work obsessively.

I suggest we should admire the people who have found balance in their lives. People who know

how to work hard, but also to rest. Such people may not be the gold medal athletes at the Olympics, they may not be CEOs of major corporations, but I suggest they probably have a better quality of life - family, time, and health - than the "super-achievers" (depending on how you measure "achievement" of course).

When we rest on the seventh day, we are reminded it is God who has saved us. The great saving act of God for Israel was His miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt. For us, the great saving act of God is Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. In fact, one of the main reasons most Christians celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday is because it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose. We keep Sabbath to give thanks to God. We keep Sabbath to be free.

How do we keep the Sabbath today?

Paul writes, *"One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike"* (Romans 14:5). This is the heart of the Sabbath-keepers/non-Sabbath-keepers debate! What does Paul say? *"Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord."* (14:5-6). The corollary would be, *"He who treats every day as special does so to the Lord."* Paul goes on to say our attitude should be one of *"giving thanks to God"* (14:6). The big issue is that our lives are completely in the Lord's hands - we belong to Him. We need to worship Him, give thanks, and be free of idols (including work).

Paul is not saying Sabbath is unimportant and it doesn't matter anymore! He is saying that we need an attitude of humility, recognizing who we are and what we are is God's gift to us. We need an attitude of thanksgiving, recognizing our salvation, families, work, health, and rest all flow from Him. We can choose to keep one day per week as a special day to give thanks, rest, and worship God. Great! Be fully convinced in your own mind, says Paul, and do it! But don't just observe the day because of a legalistic "We have to," do so in thanksgiving and celebration!

Or, we can choose to try to take time every day to give thanks, rest, and worship God. Great! Be fully convinced in your own mind, says Paul, and do it! Note: this is not giving us permission to be workaholics! This is saying we have mini-Sabbaths every day to keep our lives focused on God. God is very much the centre! The key is to keep GOD central in our lives, whatever!

God's desire for us is balance - a balance of worship, work, and rest. The issue is this: when you look at your life, can you say with a clear conscience, *"Lord, I thank you for what you have given me - my salvation, my work, my family, my time, my health - this is how I've used these gifts. You are the centre of my life. I have worshipped you well. I have worked well. And I have rested well. Thank you."* Will you take time this week to work? To relax? To worship? How can you make sure those things happen this week?

©2010 by Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net