

SABBATH AS A RULE OF LIFE
Part 3 – Resting in the Presence of My Enemies
Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ June 28, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



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. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15, NRSV)



I hope you got to celebrate the 4th of July in some fashion yesterday. Like everything else these days in quarantine, I'm sure the celebration was tempered. Even so, holiday like this one are important to honor. Did you know, by the way, that there is one holiday or another on just about every day of the year? Tomorrow, for example, is *World Kissing Day*. I'm not making this up. Proponents of this holiday, which began in England, suggest we celebrate by stealing kisses from our sweethearts all throughout the day and they caution us to avoid onions and garlic during meals. Tuesday is *Tell the Truth Day*. It appropriately follows *World Kissing Day* so you'll have an opportunity to confess if you kissed the wrong person the day before. Wednesday is *Video Games Day*. Again, I'm not making this up. July 8th is a day to "acknowledge the art and science behind video games and to appreciate the skills required to play them."¹ If you are a gamer and your parents always on you about playing too many video games, Wednesday is your day of liberation!

The word holiday comes from the Old English word *hāligdæg*, *hālig* meaning "holy" and *dæg* meaning "day". Nothing against *Video Games Day*, but true holidays are holy days. We celebrate many of them during the

church year, from Advent, to Christmas, to Easter, to Pentecost, to All Saints Day.

Any guesses what the most important holiday was in the Old Testament? It's the same holiday that was most important in the New Testament. By far, the most important holy day among God's people in biblical times was the Sabbath. Passover was celebrated once a year, as were most other holy days. The Sabbath, however, was celebrated every single week. Sabbath was so important, in fact, that not only was it instituted at the very outset of creation, it was enshrined in the Ten Commandments. Some of you know (and we'll talk more about this next week) that even Jesus himself addressed the Sabbath regularly in his teaching, often creating great controversy.

Biblical scholars go as far as to suggest that the 4th Commandment regarding Sabbath is the very heart of the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments speak to our relationship to God. The last six speak to our relationship with others. The fourth commandment is the great balancing commandment in the middle. It all-at-once incorporates our four great relationships: God, neighbor, self and earth.² In a way, it pulls the other commandments together. There is a reason why Jesus declared himself Lord of the Sabbath.³ It's that crucial.

So here's the question. If Sabbath was the most important holy day for Old Testament Israel, the New Testament church, and Jesus himself, and lies at the very center of God's Law to his people, why do so many Christians in our time neglect to honor its practice? None of the other Ten Commandments are treated with such contemptuous disregard as this one. Right? Which of the other nine do people in the church regard as optional? Idolatry? Adultery and murder? Truth-telling and stealing? And yet the commandment at the heart of the list, the commandment to take one day in seven and cease from all our work and honor God, is regularly ignored.

¹ For a full list of holidays go to <https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/fun/>

² I gained this insight from Earl Palmer in a seminar entitled *The Balanced Lifestyle* (National Youth Workers Convention, November, 1992).

³ See Matthew 12:8: "For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

By the way, do you know what holiday is today? It's *Workaholics Day*. I'm not making that up. July 5th is set aside as a day dedicated to people who spend seven days a week working. The purpose of the day is not to encourage such behavior, but to try and get such people to reevaluate the work and rest rhythms in their life.⁴ Sounds like a perfect day to consider Sabbath.

God commands us in the 4th Commandment, **“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy...”** The word “holy” literally means “set apart.” Remember Grover’s song on Sesame Street, “One of these things is not like the other.” That’s Sabbath. It’s one day that is not like the other days. The tithe is holy. We set apart the first tenth of our income to offer back to God, using those dollars differently than we use the others. This sanctuary is holy, we set it apart to use for activities we don’t generally do elsewhere. In Christ we know, of course, that all time, all days, all money, all space is made holy for his purposes, but still there are certain things in this life that are set apart for special purposes. The Sabbath day each week needs to look different than the other six days.

For one, on the other days we work. Notice that the commandment not only directs us to rest but also directs us to work: **“Six days you shall labor and do all your work.”** Our work is also sacred. We’ve done teaching on that here in the past.⁵ Work itself is not a consequence of the fall. Before there was sin there was work, though it was free of the burden it now carries with it.⁶ In heaven one day there will still be work, though it will be restored, once again infused with rest and delight. For now, as burdensome as work can be sometimes, God has ordained that we still spend six days out of seven working. Paul himself reminds the early church, **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”**⁷

By the way, there is no hint anywhere in scripture that retirement releases you from this command to work six days. Of course, not all work is paid employment and there will likely come a day for many of us when we stop working for a paycheck. Furthermore, as we grow older the nature of our work will likely change as our strength, energy and abilities diminish. That’s natural. I do have to say that so many of you have been such inspiring models for me in this as I have watched you, in retirement, find ways to continue to work in volunteer and ministry capacities for God’s purposes. Whether you are retired or not, six days a week we are

to wake up and ask God what work he has for us to do that day.

But one day a week we are to stop. **“The seventh day is a sabbath** [literally, a ‘ceasing’, a ‘stopping’] **to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.”** Notice this is not a suggestion. It is a command because, as commentator Eugene Peterson puts it, “Nothing less than a command has the power to intervene in the vicious, accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle of faithless and graceless busyness, the only part of which we are conscious being our good intentions.”⁸ This morning I want to list for you four purposes for this command. There may be more, but these four are a good place to start.

First, *God commands us to honor the Sabbath so that we can rest.* That’s what the word means. We stop. We cease. We quit our normal productive activities. And in our rest we play. Instead of creating we enjoy creation. Think of activities which, for you, are life-giving, activities that fill your soul, but which you rarely take time to enjoy. A slow walk on the river. Reading a book in the shade on your patio. An afternoon nap. An unhurried conversation with a friend over a really good cup of coffee. Making music. Looking through old photographs. Doing a puzzle. A game of *Candyland* with a child. Play is about wasting time in ways that delight. Children know how to play. We forget as adults, and there is something incredibly helpful about recovering the art, engaging once again in activities that produce nothing other than delight.⁹

There is a difference, by the way, between Sabbath and a “day off” or a vacation. In our culture, many of us return from our weekend or vacation more exhausted than when we left. Even though we aren’t technically working, we have packed in so many leisure activities because we are still trying to produce something, mainly maximizing our time away from work. And it wears us out. Sabbath, on the other hand, should leave you refreshed. The Jewish leaders in Jesus’ day forgot this part of Sabbath; they made it entirely religious, emptied it of its joy. We’ll talk more about this next week, but Sabbath must be about rest, about play. It’s not about doing nothing; it is about doing nothing that seeks to produce something that justifies us.

Second, *God commands us to honor the Sabbath so that we can revere.* We are to play but we are also to pray. Again, (verse 14) **“the seventh day is a sabbath to the**

⁴ <https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/fun/workaholics-day>

⁵ See our sermon series entitled “Sacred Work” from June, 2013 (<https://faithpresby.org/?m=201306>)

⁶ See Genesis 3:17-19

⁷ 2nd Thessalonians 3:10

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angels* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 72.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas once said, “God plays. God creates playing. And man should play if he is to live as humanly as possible and to know reality, since it is created by God’s playfulness.”

Lord your God.” In a way, the 4th Commandment protects the 1st and 2nd Commandments, which prohibit the worship of other gods and the making of idols. We are to trust in the Lord alone as the source of our identity, security and purpose. The great temptation in life is to instead trust in ourselves, our own efforts, our own accomplishments, our own strivings, our own plans. As we talked about last week, Sabbath reorients us both Godward and timeward. We remember that this world is in God’s hands, not ours. We remember that time is not scarce, but abundant, even eternal. If we trust God, we can stop. When we stop we learn how to trust God even more as we realize that even though we set our work down for a whole day, the world actually didn’t fall apart. It really doesn’t depend on us. As Eugene Peterson puts it, “If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week we take ourselves far too seriously.”¹⁰

Consider that the opposite of a slave is not a free person but a worshipper.¹¹ Once we realize that things in this world really don’t depend upon us we are free to rest. And in our rest, we naturally turn to worship the one who gives us this gift, the one who ultimately manages life on our behalf. God is not only sovereign but loving. Time is not scarce but abundant – we are heirs of eternity! In this rest, we can then even turn and enter the other six days as worshippers, seeking to bring God glory no matter what we do in our work.

Third, *God commands us to honor the Sabbath so that we can restore.* Sabbath, at its heart, is also about restorative justice. Verse 14 makes clear that Sabbath isn’t just for the Israelites, but for their families, their servants, their animals, and even the foreigners in their midst. Genesis grounds Sabbath in creation; Deuteronomy grounds it in liberation. God says to us, “Not only are you given the gift of rest, but everybody else around you is given that gift as well.”

Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays. Even Superbowl Sunday! If you’re craving a Spicy Chicken Sandwich today, you’re out of luck. You’re going to have to wait until tomorrow to satisfy that craving. The company’s founder, Truett Cathy, made the decision from the outset to shut the doors to all Chick-fil-A restaurants every Sunday primarily to allow his employees a day to rest. The company also pays its employees well enough, well above what other similar companies pay

their employees, to compensate for a day each week without wages.¹²

The rhythm of work and rest is meant to be creation-wide. Wise farmers over time allow their fields to go fallow every few years to help restore the soil. Even the earth needs to rest. Think of all the environmental benefits we saw this spring during periods of quarantine when the air and the water were allowed time to rest. This rhythm is especially important for people. In biblical days, your servant was not ultimately your servant. Sure, you might be the master now, just as you may be somebody else’s boss now, but this is only a temporal arrangement which will one day change. All people are made in God’s image and are, therefore, of eternal worth. All people need to rest.

I recognize that unlike in biblical times, we live in a culture that largely ignores the practice of Sabbath, which means that if we choose to practice it we will find ourselves swimming upstream. There is no way we will be able to urge everybody around us to rest. But that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t think carefully about how our neglect of Sabbath might hinder others in our small circle from rest. If you are an employer, what decisions can you make to help your employees be restored weekly. In our families, if some members are practicing sabbath and while other members are not, the result is often guilt in those who are trying to rest while watching others get things done, or resentment in those who are trying to get things done while watching other play.¹³ As we practice Sabbath, how can we do so with others in mind as well? As we receive this gift, how can we help others receive it as well?

Finally, *God commands us to honor the Sabbath so that we can remember.* Verse 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.”** The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years without a day off because slaves don’t get a day off. At least they don’t get to *choose* to take a day off. Plus, when you are a slave your only value is in what you can produce. What good is a slave who cannot produce something for his or her master.

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 73. Albert Winn adds, “The holy day does not invalidate human work, but it limits and relativizes it. It does not forbid work, but it forbids ultimate trust in our own work.” Quoted by Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy, Interpretation Series* (John Knox Press, 1990), 82.

¹¹ Mark Buchanan writes, “The opposite of a slave is not a free man. It’s a worshiper. The one who is most free is the one who turns the work of his hands into sacrament, into offering. All he makes and all he does

are gifts from God, through God, and to God.” *The Rest of God* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 24.

¹² The company was also named one of the best large companies for women based on compensation and culture. <https://churchleaders.com/news/342324-chick-fil-a-will-observe-the-sabbath-even-on-superbowl-sunday.html>

¹³ The story of Mary and Martha, found in Luke 10:38-42, is a great example of this.

This is why slavery is so evil, in all its forms. And when God delivered the Israelites from slavery, and when the people of God have worked over the centuries, and still work, to end all forms of slavery, one of the first gifts given to those redeemed out of slavery is rest. Every seven days God wants former slaves to rest so that they can remember that no longer is their worth as human beings tied to what they can produce. Their worth is now to be measured simply in the fact that they have been created in the image of a God who loves them because he is, by definition, love. Period.

Don't pretend that you don't also have slave-masters in your life, or task-masters if that term better fits. You know their voices well. "You're not done, you know. There is so much more to do. Shouldn't you be doing something useful with your time. Why are you wasting time? Lazy, that's what you are. People are going to be disappointed in you and your lack of production. Look at you, procrastinating again. So many things in your life are unfinished. Seriously, how can you even think about taking a day to rest!?" And the problem is that the voice speaks in half-truths. Some of what it says is true. We are sometimes lazy. We do, many of us, tend to procrastinate. We may not be living up to our God-given potential. We may not be honoring God's command to work six days. There may, in fact, be the need for some significant improvement here.

Nonetheless, every seventh day Sabbath says to the taskmasters, "Enough! Shut up! No more!" In this sense, Sabbath is an act of defiance against our enemies, within and around, who want to tie our worth to what we can produce or accomplish. In Sabbath God says to us, don't you dare put chains back on which I have removed. You are no longer a slave.

In Psalm 23 the Lord is portrayed as a Shepherd who leads us, his sheep, to lie down in green pastures, be still besides quiet waters, feast at table he has prepared, receive the blessing of divine anointing, and drink from a cup which perpetually overflows. Best of all, we are to receive all of this in *the presence of our enemies!* Sabbath leads us to defiantly rest, right in the presence of these taskmasters who are silenced and subdued by our loving and powerful Shepherd.

If you are somebody who has a hard time setting aside working and producing for one day every week, at least consider the possibility that you might still be a slave to your work, a slave to accomplishment. Ask yourself why. Is there a feeling of insecurity in me, a fear that my worth is tied up in what I produce or accomplish? Is it greed that motivates me, wanting more income so I

can achieve or maintain some higher standard of living? Am I just conforming to a culture around me that has nothing to do with God's heart or God's ways? Is this an ego thing? Am I trying to do too much myself because I have convinced myself that if I want it done right I need to do it myself?

It's debatable whether it's a sin to neglect the Sabbath. Whether or not it's sin, it's definitely stupid. Because Sabbath is such a gift, every week an entire day set apart by God for us to rest, revere, restore and remember. We are fools to ignore such a gift.

In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien, the hobbits, along with their guide, Strider, are on a dangerous, possibly fatal journey that has enemies waiting for them every stop of the way. But at one critical point they are invited into a season of rest and healing in the house of Elrond in Rivendell. Listen to the description.

For awhile the hobbits continued to talk and think of the past journey and of the perils that lay ahead; but such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song.¹⁴

It's true, Sabbath is a commandment, not a suggestion. But my prayer is that in this season God will move in your mind and heart to help you to see that ultimately it is a gift that you can't wait to receive. It won't be easy. Some of you who have tried to practice the Sabbath know how hard it can be. The voices of the taskmasters are relentless. In fact, the first week you practice Sabbath, it will probably not go well. Same the second week. It's a battle, to be honest, especially since we live in world where we may feel like we are practicing Sabbath alone.

It's helpful to remember that the first word in the 4th Commandment is the word "observe." In the original Hebrew it's *shâmar*, a word that is taken from the word for a hedge, often filled with thorns, that was set around the perimeter of a property to offer protection from unwanted intruders.¹⁵ The implication is clear. There is much working against us receiving this gift. That means Sabbath must be established and protected, guarded at all costs. Next week we are going to speak in very practical terms about how we might actually go about doing exactly that. We will talk about how you

¹⁴ Cited by Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 125.

¹⁵ <https://studybible.info/strongs/H8104>

might institute a Sabbath practice, and what such a day each week might specifically look like for you and your family. I am praying that many of you will take me up on my invitation to take steps in this direction.

As we move this morning to celebrate the Lord's Supper together, let this table serve as a reminder of why God has given us Sabbath. This is the Lord's table. He himself has prepared the feast. Slaves, you know, are not invited to sit at the table. Not even servants are given a seat. If they get to eat, they eat elsewhere, away from the master. The seats at the table are reserved exclusively for family and honored guests.

In Christ, we have been invited to come and to share in this feast and to eat right in the presence of our enemies who keep telling us we haven't done enough, haven't been good enough, haven't accomplished enough, haven't produced enough, to take a seat. But the host invites us anyway. He breaks bread and pours out a cup to remind us that his body was broken and his blood was shed (he did enough!) so that we might have a permanent place, no longer as slaves but as beloved children, sons and daughters of a Heavenly Father who delights in us. Here at this table we find rest. Here we revere the one who has made a place for us. Here we see justice restored, all people welcome, a taste of the coming reality when all wrong will be set right again. And here we remember, as Jesus commanded us to remember, that we belong to him and him alone.

If you trust in Jesus, trust him enough to stop and to rest, or even if you want to learn to trust him this way, know that you are invited to come and to share in this meal which he has prepared.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Deuteronomy 5:12-15 again. What exactly is God commanding here? What stands out to you from the command?
2. Is the Sabbath the most important holiday (i.e. holy day) we celebrate? Why or why not?
3. Jeff talked about four purposes of Sabbath: rest (i.e. play), revere (i.e. worship), restore (i.e. justice for others) and remember (i.e. we are no longer slaves!). Which one of these purposes would you like to more fully embrace in your own practice of Sabbath? Why?
4. Eugene Peterson says, "If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week we take ourselves far too seriously." What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?
5. Is Sabbath a justice issue? Even in our day, does our neglect of the Sabbath in some way keep others enslaved to their work?
6. What do the voices of the 'taskmasters' like to say to you? In what way are you tempted to justify yourself by what you accomplish or produce?
7. We are told to keep the Sabbath holy. The word "holy" literally means "set apart." What is one thing you can do (or already do) to make sure the Sabbath day looks different from the other six days?
8. Why do you think Jesus at one point referred to himself as "Lord of the Sabbath"? (Matthew 12:8)

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	Exodus 20/Psalm 95
Tuesday:	Exodus 21/Psalm 96
Wednesday:	Exodus 22/Psalm 97
Thursday:	Exodus 23/Psalm 98
Friday:	Exodus 24/Psalm 99
Saturday:	Exodus 25/Psalm 100
Sunday:	Exodus 26/Psalm 101