

We are back in our fall sermon series today on the 10 Commandments, looking today at the fourth Commandment, which in Deuteronomy 5 is actually the longest of them. So we're in for a treat today. Next week we will take a break from the series because we are hosting a combined service with Living Word church.

So just my way of reminder, when we look at these 10 Commandments, as I've mentioned in previous weeks, we're not meant to look at them as individual rules of legislation. These are divine words of wisdom that hang together. They actually build on one another.

Historically many have thought that we should categorically separate the first four commandments because they focus predominantly on Israel's relationship with God, whereas the other six focus on the Israelites' relationships with each other.

But I want to encourage you not to do that. It's not as if the first four are about God and the latter ones aren't. All of these Commandments, as I've been mentioning every week are about *what?* Shared identity. The Israelites are about to step into the land of their inheritance, and everything that they do going forward is meant to reflect the God who has redeemed them from slavery and who has now established himself as their God-King.

In other words, *all of these* commandments are about God's relationship with His people. And that's so important, because it keeps us from reducing these commandments to theological principles or rules. Many of these commandments—especially the one for today—have often been understood and applied in very legalistic ways.

So we need to go back and understand what this commandment meant for the Israelites and untangle our own assumptions *so that* we can regain what this commandment—what Sabbath—is really all about. **Deuteronomy 5:1-16.**

When I was preparing for this sermon, I glanced over at my bookshelf and realized that I have five books on Sabbath alone. And I couldn't help but notice that no other commandment takes up the same amount of real estate on my bookshelf. No other commandment, in general, has near as many books and articles and journals written about it. People just *love* to write about the Sabbath.

Why is that? Well, it's likely because the Sabbath is one of those Judeo-Christian practices that continues to surprise us, to captivate us, to intrigue us. We regularly fall out of the practice of it, and then routinely there comes a movement that picks it back up and reminds us of the importance of it.

Much has been written about 'how to do the Sabbath'. But I want to focus us again on thinking about 'shared identity' as our compass in this series. What does this commandment say about God's shared relationship with His people?

It says quite a number of things, actually; but today we're just going to focus on three. Starting at verse 12: "*Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.*"

Now, the word there for 'observe' in Hebrew also means to guard or keep. Again, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, our English language has far more words and is more nuanced. In Hebrew, there's much more overlap in meaning.

For example, this is the same word that is used by Cain when he had just killed his brother, Abel (Gen. 4), and he says to the Lord, "Am I my brother's *keeper*?" Am I meant to watch over my brother? Am I my brother's guardian?

So when we combine these meanings together, to "observe" isn't about following a rule. It comes with the understanding that something is being watched over or carefully guarded.

There's a lullaby that I sing over my sons—I started doing it when Kai was a baby—and it speaks of Jesus watching over the child and the angels *keeping* the child as he sleeps. Jesus, watch Him as He sleeps. Send your angels him to *keep*. Guard him. Protect him. Watch over this precious child.

That's what this verse is talking about. Watch over this precious day. Protect it. Guard the day of Sabbath.

Why? Because it's holy, verse 12 says. So what does that say about God's shared identity with His people? **That the Israelites were to guard this day because this day reflected God's desire to share His holiness with His people.**

Look at Exodus 31:13. The Lord says to the Israelites that the Sabbath "*will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.*"

What does this mean, that the Lord makes us holy? What does that imply? That we don't earn His holiness, correct? That we can't achieve a holy status, right? That we can only rely on Him to bring us into good standing with Himself, yes?

Israel's 'guarding' of the Sabbath was a sign that they couldn't earn holiness. Because they already had it. It was a sign of an important reality in their relationship with God, that He had conferred His holiness *to* them, that they were already a holy people by being in relationship with Him.

Guard this precious day as a holy day because Yahweh, the only holy God, has *made it* and has given it to His people as a part of their shared identity with Him. It's why He called the Israelites to *celebrate* the Sabbath (Exodus 31:16), and why it was meant to be a lasting covenant—a lasting arrangement. They shared in His holiness by way of the covenant, so Sabbath was the day they celebrated that relationship—like an anniversary.

As if God was saying to them, ‘You are holy because I am holy. And how you keep, how you guard, how you protect Sabbath will be *an indicator* of this holy status that you have as *my* people.’

Did you know that Sabbath is about celebrating your God-given holiness?

Secondly, look at verses 13-14: “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey, or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do.*”

Who is the Sabbath for? *Everybody*. **The Israelites were to guard this day because this day reflected God’s desire to share His Sabbath rest with *everybody*.** For all living things to live under His order and care.

Based on what we read here, Sabbath was a way of ensuring that everyone—whether they were born an Israelite, slave to an Israelite, or were finding asylum in the land of the Israelites—had equal opportunity to be a part of this common identity, to share in the blessing of God’s holiness.

Look at Exodus 23:10-11. The Lord says that the Israelites are to work their land for six years and then leave it unplowed and unused *in the seventh* so that the poor among them could get food from it. And He tells them to do the same with their vineyards and olive groves.

In other words, Sabbath was meant to so deeply enter into the peoples’ imagination that everything they did was organized around it. Because it communicated that this God was not like the rulers of Egypt who made them work 24/7. No other king or god had ever instituted a national day of rest every week. It wasn’t efficient. It wasn’t intuitive.

But *this* God was not like the other gods and rulers. So He’s inviting every single one of them to structure their lives around *His* ordering of the world. The rest of the world operates in a self-focused and self-dependant and self-destructive structure. *You* work, *you* build, *you* achieve, *you* gain, *you* tire, and then you wake up and do it all over again.

‘Not so with me,’ says the Lord. He literally built Sabbath into the fabric of creation, as we know from Genesis 1. So all of creation longs for it—to be at rest in His glory.

Sabbath was a key way that Israel could live into this reality over-and-over as *a whole community*. It wasn’t an individual discipline. It was a communal practice that relied on all them doing it together, because it was a gift that was meant to be shared.

Did you know that Sabbath is about *sharing* God’s rest with others?

And then lastly, verse 15: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” In other words, ‘You did not do this. You didn’t gain your freedom. You didn’t earn your ticket out of Egypt or work hard to buy this status that you now have. *I did it.*’

And Yahweh reminds them of this over and over because this was a people who had been oppressed, who carried the baggage of slavery, and who were yet tempted to find significance and power in things that would only re-enslave them.

The Israelites were to guard this day because this day reflected God’s desire to heal them.

To restore them. Sabbath was a reminder that they had once been an enslaved people, and that God had given them rest. New life. And He wanted to be everything for His people. He wanted to be their place of healing, and for them to have the fulness of their needs met in Him.

Did you know that Sabbath is about healing?

So when we consider these three aspects of Sabbath, when we pause to think about them, is it not the case that all these Sabbath ‘goals’ have been fulfilled in Jesus? Do they not continue to be relevant for us because all of these desires are still true *in Jesus*?

Everything that Sabbath was meant to be—God’s transferring of His holiness to His people, extending the invitation to all of creation, reflecting His desire to heal us—all of this we see fulfilled in Jesus.

God has transferred His holiness—His righteousness—to us *in Jesus*. God has extended the invitation of His rest to all people *in Jesus*. God has offered His healing hand to us *in Jesus*.

And if you read through the gospels, you’ll notice that everything Jesus does embodies the blessings of Sabbath.

Isn’t ‘Sabbath’ what Jesus was talking about when He said to His disciples, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest?” All of you who are burdened by the world’s expectations and trials, who are continually trying to earn your way into God’s favour?

It’s why Jesus gets so upset with the pharisees when they judge Him for doing *what* on the Sabbath? *Healing*. And I hope you see now how horribly ironic that is, because *healing* was what the Sabbath was all about. God’s desire to share His holiness had made way for that healing to occur.

But the Pharisees reveal how difficult it is—how unnatural it is—for us to understand this.

In her book, “Rhythms of Rest,” author Shelley Miller writes about someone who had reached out to her in distress about how her ‘Sabbaths’ were going. Here’s the letter:

“Well, another Sabbath day arriveth, my friends. The problem I’m finding is that Sundays rarely feel restful and life-giving. We’re hustling and bustling in the morning to get ourselves and the kids ready for church. “For heaven’s sake, come here and put your pants on so we can go!” is often said to one or both of the kids every Sunday. And sometimes (my husband] has to say it to me, too.

“Then there’s church itself, which is always a [mess] with our kids. It can go fine or REALLY NOT FINE. Small talk isn’t my forte, and every now and then being in church opens up some old wounds that are still healing. So it’s a tender time....

“Then there’s lunch after service. We jet home, wrestle my daughter’s stubborn will to get her down for a nap, get [my other child] settled after a high-sensory-input morning, then start cleaning and getting ready to host our small group at 5 p.m. (that can include up to twenty people).

“Then there’s the kids’ bedtime routine. After they’re out, I completely crash, only to get up and start the week on Monday, totally drained and wiped out. SUNDAYS ARE NOT SABBATH FOR ME. I’m trying to figure out how to honor *and* practice the art of Sabbath in our home when Sundays look like anything but rest for us.

“Sincerely,
Drained in Utah”

If that sounds familiar, then be assured that you’re not alone. But at the same time, I do want all of us to recognize how far this letter is from the original intention of Sabbath.

We think, or we’ve been trained to think, that Sabbath is mostly about our attempts to get it right. So what typically comes to mind for us are practices like attending church and *not* engaging in certain activities (work, shopping, mowing the law, etc.) out of a desire to keep the Sabbath holy.

But this woman’s letter demonstrates how—consciously or unconsciously—the emphasis is often on us to figure it out. Sabbath is what *I* do to honor it. And if I do it right, then it should result in God’s blessings.

So what I want to offer to you today isn’t a 1-2-3 step process for ‘how-to-do’ Sabbath. My hope for this morning is instead to re-captivate your imagination around the revolutionary nature of Sabbath as taught us here in Scripture. Because the way that Sabbath drew the Israelites into a deepened understanding of their covenant relationship with God is the same opportunity available for us today. And *that’s* where we need to start.

First, Sabbath—still today—is about embracing the gift of God’s holiness. Six days a week we strive, we try to gain control over our schedules, we succumb ourselves to everyone else’s expectations, to our own standards of excellence, or the opposite—to our feelings of failure.

And *one day of the week* God has invited us to re-enter ourselves into the great gift of His grace. To remember that *He* makes us holy.

And the more that we practice that reality, the more that the rest of the week becomes oriented around that reality. So rather than Sabbath being a reminder, it becomes a foundation. It’s not just a reprieve from the week. It *transforms* the week.

Because **secondly**, Sabbath—still today—is an opportunity to *share* the invitation of God’s rest with others, because we know that our communal identity in Him speaks *volumes* to a society that continues to heap the lie of self-sufficiency on an already-anxious culture.

I think we all know, or have at least started to realize, how anxious this generation is. How anxious our kids are; how anxious our grandchildren are; how anxious our friends are; how anxious *we* are. We live in what philosophers call the ‘age of anxiety.’

And Sabbath has the power to speak into that anxiety, to present a counternarrative—an alternative to the idol of self-sufficiency that drives us into the ground.

Because **lastly**, Sabbath—still today—enables us to encounter the healing hand of God. To consider how, in the cross of Christ, the Father has shown us how deeply He wants to heal us.

When *these* things are what Sabbath is about, we’re no longer striving to ‘get it right’ because the whole day becomes about letting *Christ* imprint His Sabbath *on us*. That He’s already done it.

I mean, is this not why we gather together *every week*? To remind ourselves that He makes us holy? That the invitation of His rest is for everyone? And that He wants to heal us?

Let me ask you this. Which of those Sabbath messages do *you* need to hear today? And how many people, do you think, need the blessing of Sabbath in *their* lives today? To know that Jesus wants to assure them that they don’t need to be afraid because His holy rest can heal anything?

As the writer of Hebrews put it, let us make every effort to enter this rest. Why? Because it’s exactly what the world is missing, and what it most needs to hear. And as we practice it communally with one another, under the new covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, slowly but surely the Sabbath of God begins to shape the way we approach every day of the week. As we ‘keep’ Sabbath, we become a people who reflect the grace of our Lord *every single day of the week*.

We become a Sabbath people. We shine the holy, all-embracing, healing nature of Jesus Christ—the Name we proclaim so that all those caught in slavery can know that *here* is where they find true rest.

So I urge you today to consider what Sabbath means to you. Consider what it means to have one day entirely reserved for reflecting on God's holiness given to you; a day reserved for sharing God's invitation of rest with others; a day reserved for letting the Spirit of Jesus bring you healing.

A day to remember that the Sabbath was made *for you* by He who is the Lord of the Sabbath, and who calls us to find our rest in Him.