

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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.

A: *What is the subject of the text?*

The subject of the text is the sabbath day, specifically the observance thereof, in remembrance of God's rest following creation, as recorded in Genesis 2:2.

B: *What is said about the subject?*

The sabbath day is to be kept holy, and is to be observed every six days. There is no work to be done by those to whom this commandment was given, neither are their children, slaves, livestock or any foreign visitors to work on the sabbath. It is not unlike the concept of letting the land lay fallow, as described in Leviticus 25:4. Just as land needs time to recoup its ability to produce, so does mankind.

C: *What is the purpose of what is said?*

Taken in conjunction with Jesus' reprimand of the Pharisees in Mark 2:27, the purpose of declaring the sabbath holy, and reserving it as a day of rest and reprieve from work, is to ensure that everyone be given a chance to rest from their labors in order to draw near to YHWH. This includes those of prominence, as well as all who are subservient to them: sons, daughters, slaves and foreigners.

Theologically speaking, since we know that God is not limited in any way, and given the context in which we see Jesus addressing the concept of sabbath as it relates food consumption and ceremonial symbolism, we can derive the following theological tenets in regard to the sabbath, and for whom its institution has been established:

- I. God is indefatigable, therefore he does not need rest.**
Sabbath rest was God's example for man's recuperation.
 - II. God is inexhaustible, therefore he does not need to eat.**
Show bread was symbolic of God's communion with man.
 - III. God is incorruptible, therefore he did not need to die.**
Christ's death was an atoning substitute on man's behalf.
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In Exodus 20:8, the command from God to the people of Israel by proxy of Moses is to **זָכוֹר** *remember* the sabbath day and keep it holy. It is interesting that the command to remember is in the Qal infinitive absolute. Therefore, the occasion of remembrance is not tied to any particular temporal point in time, but rather can be understood to be an ongoing process of marveling at God's original work. Therefore, the sabbath is to be remembered in the immediate sense (upon relay of the message from Moses to the people) because of God's creation and resting, but also going forward as well. The remembrance is not time-boxed. The holy day of rest is to be perpetuated indefinitely.

Perhaps just as important as remembering the sabbath is the Qal imperfect use of **תַּעֲבֹר** *to work*. The imperfect tense implies, much like the aforementioned command of remembrance, an ongoing state of action. The specific instruction given here "six days you shall labor" brings to mind 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Paul instructs the hearers in no uncertain terms that if they are lazy and do not **ἐργάζεσθαι** *work*, then neither shall they be given anything to eat (In the Septuagint, this same root for work **ἐργα** is used in Exodus 20:9). A state of perpetual rest/laziness is

rewarded with the fruits of that labor (or lack thereof), an empty stomach. Later on in Exodus 32, when Moses is also speaking with God, the people of Israel quickly degenerate into that which Paul warns: turning away from what is virtuous and right, instead worshipping a false god fashioned by their own hands. They still do labor, in that they pour molten gold to construct a calf, but this is not the honest toil which has been commanded them. Their charge is to do six days of labor, then rest, but instead they make leisure their primary focus, and what little work they do is to make a mockery of God. Ironically, punishment at the hand of Moses in Exodus 32:20 is drinking the ashes of the calf. They chose revelry instead of work, and remnants of that sin poisoned their bellies.

Exodus 20:10 specifies those who are to be at rest on the sabbath day: all males and females of a household, whether there by birth or by nature of social, are to cease from work. Additionally, any resident alien and all animals are to be allowed to rest as well. There is specific mention of livestock, meaning that any slaughtering or milking was to be done in advance, that none of the preparatory work occur on the sabbath itself. The sabbath day in Jewish culture, *shabbāt*, was to be observed and celebrated for the entirety of Saturday: from sundown on Friday to the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday night. It is interesting that though the Israelites were monotheists, that the tradition of watching for three stars became the measurement of sabbath completion.

In Christianity, the observation of the sabbath has traditionally been on Sunday, because this is the day on which Jesus arose from the dead. As followers of Christ, Easter is the measure by which we take our cue for rest and remembrance. Clearly though, there is a particular person, and sometimes even large groups of people, who are simply unable to rest on the Christian sabbath. Sunday mornings are hectic times for any pastor and

church staff, regardless of a congregation's size. In the case of a mega church, as soon as the worship service (or multiple services) are done on Sunday, work begins anew to prepare for the following week's programs. In his book *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit* by Lovett H. Weems likens the busy pace of the sanctuary to a spectator sport...

Ministry in a large church is like a football game: 10 thousand people who are desperately in need of exercise watching 22 people who are desperately in need of rest.

Thankfully, the concept and practice of sabbath rest is not restricted to a particular day of the week, as was assumed under the customs of early Judaism. Legalism and (mis)understanding of the Spirit behind the sabbath gradually gave rise to superfluous laws and regulations. So much so, that in when the Pharisees chastised Jesus for not exercising greater control over his disciples, it was not for stealing grain, for clearly gleaning was allowed under Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 23:25; Ruth 2:2). Rather, it is because the Pharisees had become so preoccupied with behavioral micromanagement that they disallowed gleaning on the sabbath, as if plucking a few heads of grain would be enough strain as to constitute an act of labor on the day of rest. Jesus chastises them back, citing David actually *eating* the bread of the Presence, a clear blasphemy and well over-the-top in comparison to an otherwise legal act of gleaning done on the wrong day. This interchange in critical dialog is recorded for us in Mark 2:24-28...

The Pharisees said to [Jesus], "Look, why are [the disciples] doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Beyond simply grasping for justification of the disciple's actions, Jesus uses clever word-play here to put the Pharisees back in their place. He takes them down a few notches from their holy positions as priests, by pointing out that the King of Israel ate from the bread specifically reserved for symbolism of God's attendance. In so doing, there are a few metaphors at play: First, David was commander in chief, a soldier but not a priest, yet here he is acting out a priestly duty out of necessity –under the nose of the high priest, no less. Secondly, since the behavior of the disciples is in question, and not that of Jesus, by condoning their eating Jesus is essentially telling the Pharisees that even lowly, common, unlearned fishermen are priests in his book (though not in theirs). Lastly, Jesus tells the Pharisees in no uncertain terms that he is the Son of Man, and his command over the sabbath is the final authority in the argument. In the Trinitarian sense, it was he himself who instituted the sabbath, by resting after creating all of existence. Jesus clarifies that the purpose of the sabbath is for man's benefit, not vice-versa. In this regard, the Pharisees had their facts backwards for centuries.

Clearly though, the importance of the sabbath is not diminished by Jesus' poignant words of clarification. It still is just as holy and soporific, but the true intent has been refined. This restores freedom and restfulness to the sabbath, instead of being on pins and needles over the many stipulations as to what was and wasn't allowed. One can have peace in knowing that the day is not about technicalities but about communion with the God who instituted the commandments in the first place. The Decalogue was not given that we may be proven guilty, but that we may see our utter dependence on God.

This leeway is far too often mistaken for license to continue working tirelessly for seven days each and every week. Nowhere is this more true than in the ministry. Rather

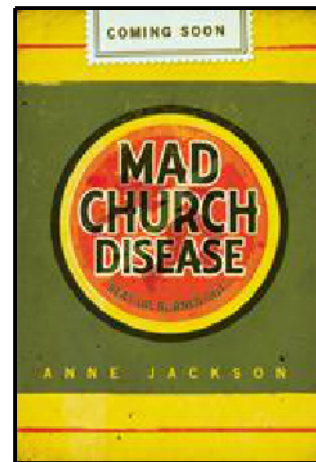
than sitting judgmentally as the Pharisees once did, nit-picking the affairs of others under the guise of resting on the holy day, modern-day pastors take the opposite approach. The pendulum of American clergy has swung to the other extreme, that of ministry to the point of burn-out. Like a police officer, the pastor is always on duty, whether in his own mind, the eyes of the congregation, or both. Unlike a police officer, the nature of the occupation is not dictated by uniform. The pastor remains a sought-after authority and counselor even when not adorned in his preaching vestments. Far too often, he/she takes upon his/herself the role of Christ, buying into the savior-complex mentality.

This level of self-sacrifice does nothing more than mask vanity in a layer of false humility. Any man or woman who thinks that the weight of an entire church can be shouldered by a single person is bound to fail in such an endeavor.

Parishioners that stroke the ego of their leaders by incessantly pestering them about trivial details are partly to blame as well.

This is a topic tackled by Christian author Anne Jackson in her

upcoming book, *Mad Church Disease* (www.madchurchdisease.com).



Taken into account the inherent portability of sabbath (now Sunday instead of Saturday for most Christians), many pastors have realized that even though they cannot truly rest on weekends because their congregations need them, they can take this same time of rest and relaxation on a different day of the week. The importance then, is not *which* day is set aside for remembrance, but the frequency with which we are in reverent conversation with the God. As long as this block of time is set aside with regularity of six-day increments, the sabbath is kept, we are rejuvenated, and the Lord is honored.