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The 10 Commandments – “Remember the Sabbath”

Introduction to worship

Every day, we are challenged to make sense of the world as it unfolds around us, and to judge what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is just and unjust. When we watch the news, discuss politics with friends, or talk about corporate policies with coworkers... we are confronted with issues and debates that we must weigh in on, and decide where we stand. How often do we stop to wonder what we are using as our moral compass?

For thousands of years, the Judeo-Christian faith has found guidance in the 10 Commandments, established as ground rules for healthy community living thousands of years ago. It's time for us to ask, not just what are the 10 Commandments, but what do they mean for us today?

Over the summer, we'll be taking an in depth look at each of these ten guiding principles of our faith – at what they meant for the Israelite people in the early days, but also how they impact our own lives. Do they still apply to us, and if so, how? How can these historical statutes transform our faith and our lives still today?

Over the past two weeks, we have wrestled with a contemporary understanding of the commandments, “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other God's before me,” and “You shall not take God's name in vain.” Today we turn our attention to the third commandment, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” As we enter into this time of worship, I invite you to consider what rest looks like for you; soul-recharging, spiritually-renewing rest... and to start processing what you know about Sabbath and the way we live it out today.

Genesis 2:2-3

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

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.

I came across two articles that caught my attention this week. One was about Japan's work culture, which is so intense, that people in the 1970s invented a word that translates to "death by overwork." "Karoshi," as it's known, involves employees committing suicide or suffering from heart failure and stroke because of long work hours. It's not uncommon in the late evenings or early mornings to find salarymen passed out on the street... people who were too tired to actually make it home after a long day's work, and fell asleep somewhere on their commute and just stayed there. Because of the widespread use of alcohol to manage work-related stress, the number of people found sleeping on the street triples on Friday nights as people stagger out of the bars and never actually make it home.

The other article was about the stress of working at fast paced, quota related jobs like Amazon's packing facilities, and the number of health challenges associated with them – some suffering heart attack and stroke from the intensity and pressure of the job. In our super competitive, capitalistic, consumer driven society, these stories are not unique – they might be extreme cases, but examples like them can be found all over the world... We have created a system that survives on the overworking of many, for the benefit of a few who rake in obscene amounts of wealth. While there are no chains and shackles, we have enslaved ourselves in our global economy, where profit margins matter more than the wellbeing of workers on all levels of the corporate ladder.

It is into this contemporary reality that we hear again the third commandment, "You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Some of us hear the word Sabbath, and think about the blue laws, the restrictions that were placed on what you could and could not do on Sundays. In the past, absolutely nothing happened on the Sabbath... stores weren't open, sporting events weren't scheduled, work in all its many forms ceased, forcing people to slow down, take a walk, spend time with loved ones, and to just BE. Sabbath was meant to remind us that life is about more than busyness and noise; that while work is important, it can take over your life and be a distraction to what really matters. This might be what comes to mind when we think Sabbath, but let's talk a little more about what it meant for those early Israelites, to which this command was given.

In the ancient world, there were two ideas about time and about work... 1st – leisure was the privilege only of the gods... Humans worked and the gods sat back and watched... and the only time we got to rest, was after death... And in some ways, this concept has persisted... If you think about it, what do we call heaven? "eternal rest" – we don't call it

“eternal good work” or eternal “community”, we say, “Rest in peace”... The 2nd concept from the ancient world was that humans were slaves for the sake of the few men who owned them... Our contemporary minds balk at the thought of slavery being the norm, but that was their reality... slavery was simply a way of life, an economic policy that persisted in an age of minimal technology. Ancient civilizations were built on the backs of the common man. Putting these two concepts together, rest was for the gods, and people worked at the discretion of their master... God’s call for a weekly day of rest – a day when you shall not do any work – was bold! This is a serious, and counter cultural commandment. And this call for rest is not just for the Israelite people, it is for all the living things – no one or thing shall be forced to work on the Sabbath... all deserve this day of rest. Among all of the cultures of the ancient world – the celebration of Sabbath as a tribute to the dignity of all life is unique to the Hebrew people.

But...Sabbath is not just about rest, meaning relaxation and naptime... it is about the justice of time, who gets it and how they use it... it’s about being alive in time, and taking the *time* to celebrate life. On the Sabbath, life changed, time changed. The privileges and expectations of standard roles and relationships simply ceased on the Sabbath. It was the great day of freedom, of liberation for everyone.

Which makes me stop and wonder... in our world today, who gets to rest? in your office? in your family, in our neighborhood? Who can’t afford to rest on weekends, or holidays? Who is forced to work... God’s all for Sabbath rest reminds us that none of us have the right to keep another enslaved to any corporation, any market, anywhere, as if they’re expendable, usable.

Somehow we have lost that notion that everyone is to be freed to rest one day a week. We have a minimum wage scale that makes any kind of rest impossible for the poor. If they aren’t out scrounging at every moment, how do they eat. Working class people are forced to work two or more part time jobs, if they can’t find one full time job, because PT jobs provide no benefits, so no matter how much time it’s taking them to get to their PT jobs, they’ll never make enough money there to feed their kids. Children in developing countries are being forced to work 70 hours a weeks to provide consumer goods for the Western world, jewelry, cell phones, pants, shirts, toys for our children while we practice economic exploitation on theirs. Animals are being destroyed to provide humans with cosmetics and coats... we put them to work for us, grinding up their bodies to do it.

Sabbath is a word that demands justice for all living things. Sabbath is not the day of rest because people are tired, it is a day of rest because people are human and no people ought to be driven to death by any other people at any time. Sabbath says we need to take time for reflection on the way we are living life, because if we don’t take it, we become cogs in this whole enslaving system.... working ourselves and others to death, burning the candle at both ends until we are burnt out, and no good for anyone!

Every living thing requires time in order to renew itself – spiritually as well as physically – and Sabbath is the day for that renewal by reflection on those things that are really worthwhile. Sundays are meant to be different than other days so we can rest, recharge,

and reflect. It's the day to reflect, like God did in the creation story, whether our own work is good...

Breaking the 3rd commandment surely is not as simple as not going to church, it's not seriously seeking God, not living a serious spiritual life. While worship can help us do these things... helping us focus on God and providing spiritual food for the week, Sabbath never ends in church, it really only begins there. Sabbath is about making room for God in the rest in our lives, and for recognizing the value of others as well.

Over the next week, I invite you to reflect on the rhythm and use of your time, as well as that of your neighbors. Are you using your time to honor God and treat others with justice and love? Do you always feel like there's never enough time to do what you need to do? If so, how can you reorder and prioritize your commitments to take more time to rest and renew your spirit? And what is God calling you to do in the face of a society that devalues entire segments of the population, overworking and underpaying the working class? As we go into the week, may we not take time for granted, but rather, use it as best we can to honor God, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.