

Ten Commandments Sermon Series: “10 Keys to the Joyful Life”

#4: Productive Idleness

Ex. 16:4-5,17-23a,27-30 and Ex. 20:8-11 (NLT)

By Pastor John Gill

One day, the preacher came and had dinner at Bobby’s house. The minister leaned over and said to Bobby, “You never go fishing on Sunday, do you, son?” “Oh, no sir!” “That’s a good boy, Bobby. Now – can you tell me WHY you don’t go fishing on Sunday?” “Yes, sir,” said Bobby. “‘Cause Pa says he doesn’t want to be bothered with me!”

The very next Sunday, Pa went fishing with a friend. They weren’t having too much luck, and as they were sitting there in the boat, the friend got to thinking about what they were doing. He said, “I feel bad being out here fishing when I ought to be in church.” “Yeh, I know how you feel,” Pa replied. “But I couldn’t have gone anyway. My wife is sick.”

Today we come to the fourth of the 10 Commandments (the only one that begins with the word “remember,” instead of “thou shalt not or thou shalt”): “Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.” Of all the commandments, this one is the easiest for us to ignore. We read this commandment and dismiss it with a “wink and a nod,” seeing it as a quaint relic of a simpler more innocent time, but not practical for the hectic modern world in which we live. After all, who still observes a TRUE Sabbath any more? The world today is just too busy to stop for one whole day a week!

How many of us are vigilant that we observe the Sabbath? Isn’t it true that most people (even many Christians), when they’re given a choice between going to church, and say . . . fishing or golfing or visiting friends or working or mowing the lawn, even shopping at Wal-Mart, would chose any of these diversions rather than go to worship? No. Like Bobby’s Pa, we feel no qualms about breaking this command of God.

But just because WE don’t take it seriously, that doesn’t mean that GOD doesn’t! It’s one of God’s “top ten” that we should observe the Sabbath, so we ignore it at our own peril!

What is the Sabbath, and why is it so important? “Sabbath” is based on a Hebrew word, “Shabbat,” that literally means “to cease, stop, or rest.” In fact, the word “shabbat” can be translated “stop-day.” Of course, it comes from the creation story in Genesis: After God had created the world and all that is in it in six days, the Bible says, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

I think it is interesting that the very first thing in all creation that God declared to be holy was the Sabbath. That’s why, for thousands of years, the Jewish people have faithfully observed a Sabbath from sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday – the seventh day of the week.

Then, when the Christian church came along, it added the first day of the week to our religious calendar – Sunday, the Lord’s Day, the day of Christ’s resurrection. Gradually, in the Christian

church, Sunday replaced Saturday as a Sabbath day of rest. But whether observed on Saturday or Sunday (or some other day) the command is the same: “Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.”

Throughout the ages, people have always had difficulty in keeping the Sabbath. They have tended to be drawn to one of two extreme approaches, both of which cause us to break this commandment:

On one extreme are the Legalists who take this commandment SO seriously that they distort its meaning by burdening it with all kinds of rules and regulations. Certainly, the Jews in the Old Testament were guilty of this. To help them be faithful to God, the Old Testament law outlined many things that God’s people were to refrain from doing on the Sabbath – anything that might be defined as “work.” But then, beyond that, religious leaders throughout the ages have added hundreds more prohibitions to make doubly sure no one might accidentally break this commandment. In fact, by the time of Jesus, there were 1,521 things that a person could NOT do on the Sabbath!

Now, most of those things made sense, but many of them bordered on the absurd. For instance, a person with a toothache could not gargle with vinegar – that would be “work” – but could use a toothbrush dipped in vinegar; or, a radish could be dipped in salt, but not left too long in the salt, lest it begin to pickle. Even today, there are Jewish legalists. If you travel to Israel, you would notice “Sabbath elevators.” On Saturday, they are set automatically to stop at every floor so that the faithful Jew won’t have to work by pressing a button.

It’s no wonder that Jesus gets in trouble with the Pharisees over this legalistic view of the Sabbath. In Mark, chapter 2, Jesus and his disciples were walking near a field of grain on the Sabbath, and the Disciples plucked some grain to eat. The Pharisees got all up in arms, because “picking grain on the Sabbath” is forbidden. And do you remember what Jesus told them? “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

He was saying that the Sabbath was given by God to be a blessing to be enjoyed, not a burden to be borne. There is a fine line between observing the Sabbath and becoming a slave to the Sabbath. The problem with legalism – as well-intentioned as it may be – is that it turns a blessing into a curse, and by doing so, it misses the point.

And don’t be so sure that all the legalists are Jewish! Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been just as obsessed with Sabbath rules that had to be meticulously followed: No working on Sunday; no sporting events; no playing games; no movies or dating or dancing or drinking; no loud talking or laughing – no having any fun! Sunday was for going to church (whether you wanted to, or not) and then just sitting around the house in your dress-up clothes – bored out of your gourd! Somehow, I don’t think that’s quite what God had in mind when he gave us the Sabbath.

So, while legalists (whether Jews or Christians) MAY keep the letter of the commandment, they break the spirit of this command by turning it into a duty, rather than a joy.

But let's be honest. Not many of us in this day and age break this command because we are so fastidious about rules and regulations. We are not legalists – we are Libertarians. Our sin is NOT that we obsess about this commandment, but that we tend to ignore it all together. In 21st century America, we are so out of touch with God that we don't even recognize that we are guilty of breaking a commandment.

No longer do we see Sunday as a Day of Rest. Businesses today make no distinction between Sunday or any other day of the week; most are open for business, and require their employees to work. Even Publix, that for years bucked the trend by remaining closed on Sunday, finally succumbed.

It's exceedingly rare nowadays to find any store or restaurant closed on Sundays (the only exceptions I can think of are Chick-fil-a, Discount Tire, and Hobby Lobby, all owned by unapologetic Christian) – and all are doing quite well – thank you very much!

Why are so many businesses open? Because you and I love to shop and eat out on Sundays.

My dad was a Methodist preacher who sometimes would preach about the Sabbath and how people shouldn't have to work the Sabbath, but he thought nothing of taking our family out to a restaurant for Sunday dinner (a tradition Terri and I have observed with our own family). One day when I was still a little boy, I remember saying to my dad, "Dad, when we go out to eat on Sunday, doesn't that make these people have to work?" I don't think my dad was too pleased! (By the way, if you do go out to eat after church today, be sure to leave a good tip – they will know you are a Christian, and at least let them discover that you are generous!)

Now, it's true that many people HAVE to work on Sundays (ministers, firefighters, police, hospital staff, etc. – or have employers who require it). But lots of people choose to work, in order to make a little more money.

And, even if we do get Sunday off, it seldom is a "day of rest!" We pack our Sundays full of all kinds of activities – so much so that often, going back to WORK is a relief! . . . shopping, sporting events, fishing, golfing, yard work, socializing with friends, and the list goes on and on . . . we seldom stop, even to catch our breath!

And often, the church itself doesn't help. We can keep good Christian folk busy from morning till night! And this is our day of REST!

Yes, WE are libertarians . . . we don't want anyone to tell us to rest – not even God – so we ignore God's command and fill every day of our lives full-to-overflowing – week after week, month after month, decade after exhausting decade. And then, we pay the consequences of our frenetic lifestyle. What consequences?

One of the consequences of ignoring this Sabbath commandment is **BURN- OUT**.

Sometime before the Iron Curtain fell, some of the communist countries decided to force their workers to work ten days straight without a break, thinking that productivity would go up. But

very soon after this policy went into effect, they had to revert to the divinely-decreed seventh day of rest. You see, their workers were getting sick, and productivity plummeted.

Sabbath is part of God's Master Plan. It's the way He designed His creation to work. It's how He designed us. We can ignore it if we want to, plowing on through life, working and playing without a break. But it will catch up with us. Sooner or later we have to "pay the piper."

That's what happened to the Jewish people. There is another part of the Law of God concerning the Sabbath in the Bible which specifies that every seventh year, the people were supposed to let their land go fallow – a sabbatical year – a Sabbath rest for the land. But the Jewish people failed to do that. Ultimately, they were taken into bondage in Babylon, and THEN the land in Israel finally got its Sabbath rest!

You see, if you and I neglect to observe God's Sabbath, sooner or later, we will have an enforced Sabbath rest – when our bodies become sick, and our minds burn-out, and our souls dry up. We are not machines. We are finite human beings, children of God. Sabbath is essential for our own health and well-being, and we ignore it to our detriment.

Another consequence of ignoring Sabbath is that it can give us **TUNNEL VISION**.

If we spend all our lives running at full-tilt trying to get ahead, or obsessed with entertaining ourselves, we can develop a kind of tunnel-vision, blinded to the larger world around us. Because all we can see is our own self-centered agenda, we cannot see the needs of others, even those of our own family. I think this is the underlying cause of divorce and broken families today. We are all so busy with our own agendas we fail to recognize the needs of those closest to us, and our relationships suffer.

A couple of years ago, I attended The Academy for Spiritual Formation in Leesburg (as I do every spring) and the theme of that year's spiritual retreat was "Sabbath." One of our presenters was a retired Jewish rabbi who taught us what Sabbath means to the Jews. One thing he stressed was that, in the Jewish faith, Sabbath is primarily centered in the home, not the synagogue. It is time set aside, not simply to focus on our relationship with God, but to make it possible to focus our attention on our most important human relationships – those with our spouses, our children, and other loved ones! We refrain from "work" and other busy activities so we can spend time loving on our families! He even said that the rabbis taught that sexual intimacy between husbands and wives on the Sabbath was especially blessed! Sharing uninterrupted family time once per week will strengthen any home, and every relationship!

As I said, if we don't stop, we get tunnel-vision, and all our relationships suffer. Yes, there are dire consequences to pay for being too busy.

Which brings us to the third and most serious consequence of ignoring Sabbath. When we ignore the Sabbath, **WE ARE FORGETTING THE GOD WHO ORDAINED IT**.

If WE are the center of our lives and every moment of every day is devoted to our own needs and desires, then there is no room for God. In a sense, being a workaholic is a kind of blasphemy,

because when we insist on being busy seven days a week, we're saying that a day of rest may be OK for God, but not for ME! The Universe may survive if GOD takes a day off, but if I should stop for one day, everything would come crashing down! When we say in all seriousness, "I can't afford to take a day off," we've knocked God off his throne.

So you see, whether you are a legalist or a libertarian in your approach to the Sabbath, you are breaking this commandment – because you have missed the whole point.

Ultimately, keeping the Sabbath is an issue of TRUST. The question this commandment puts to us is this: "Is God faithful to provide for our needs (as he has promised) or do we think we have to rely completely on ourselves?"

Our scripture lesson this morning tells the story of a people who were used to fending for themselves, and of their struggle to learn to trust God's provision. It's really a story about keeping the Sabbath.

The Jewish people had been slaves for many years. During those years, the Sabbath could not be observed because Egyptian task-masters would demand that they worked every day. No "days off" – ever! Finally, God liberated them from bondage in Egypt and gave them, as a sign of their new status as free men and women, the gift of a MANDATED "day off." No longer were they slaves. No longer did they have to work non-stop. From that moment on, whether you were rich or poor, it didn't matter – you were free to rest on the seventh day. So, Sabbath is also a symbol of liberation and freedom and human dignity.

Now, in this story, God is acting to provide for their need for food. He promised that every morning, a special substance called "manna" would be available on the ground, and that they should gather ONLY what they needed for that day. But some did not trust God to provide, and hoarded the manna, only to have it spoil overnight. That should have been enough to convince them to rely on God.

But God went a step farther. God also commanded that on the sixth day, they should collect twice as much, because the seventh day was the Sabbath, when no one was to work. Now, most of the people did this, and by God's grace, their manna did NOT spoil on the Sabbath.

But again, some of the people couldn't trust God and went out on the Sabbath to gather extra food, but there was none to be found. And the Bible sums up this story with these words, "Do they not realize that I have given them the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest? That is why I give you twice as much food on the sixth day, so there will be enough for two days. On the Sabbath day you must stay in your places. Do not pick up food from the ground on that day.' So the people rested on the seventh day."

You see, the Sabbath commandment is really a challenge. The bottom line is this: "Do we dare to accept that we are limited, and that there is Someone greater who will take care of us; or are we laboring under the mistaken belief that we have to do it all on our own?"

That is why Sabbath takes faith, and why the breaking of the Sabbath is listed in the Old Testament as a major cause for the disasters that struck Israel. Throughout their long history, they would not trust God to provide, and so they shut themselves out of his provision and his protection. Really, it is all a matter of release, of daring to let go – to trust God to be God.

So, Sabbath has nothing to do with observing all kinds of rules and regulations – but neither is it to be ignored and dismissed as unimportant. The proper way to view this command is the way Jesus viewed it: NOT on the particulars of observing the day, but instead, we should focus on the One who has given it to us. Sabbath is to be a day without any demands at all – except the one demand to set aside the day to rest, so we can focus on our relationship with God, and with those in our lives we love the most.

The great paradox of this commandment is that, just as we tend to think that WE are made holy by what we do or don't do, we also think that the SABBATH is made holy by what we do or don't do. But the reality is just the opposite. It's not what we DO that makes us holy (there's nothing we can do), we are made holy by our relationship with God. And the Sabbath is made holy when we are using it to build a strong and lasting relationship with Him.

So, keeping the Sabbath holy boils down to this: 1) By using the Sabbath as a time to step back from life and take account of our relationship with God, and 2) By spending time building that relationship.

It's been said that, "If you're too busy for God, you're just too busy." My friends, what about you? Have you crowded God out of your life? If so, maybe you're just too busy.