

“Sabbath keeping”
by Rev. Frances Savill
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Deuteronomy 5:12-15
Mark 2:23-3:6

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

Over the decades, and I guess really over the centuries since God gave that command to Israel, there has been a lot of discussion about what it means to keep the Sabbath holy.

One of the stories I heard years ago was about the minister who was being reprimanded by the session of the church because he skated across a frozen pond to get to church. Did that constitute keeping the Sabbath holy? And the answer back was: “Did he enjoy it?” The implication at the time was, if he enjoyed it, it could not have been holy.

In days gone by, a woman was excommunicated from the church because she took a streetcar to church. Riding a streetcar was, at the time seen as a clear violation of not working on the Sabbath, and so she was thrown out of the church.

My stepmother Shirley knows all the hymns of the church very well because if she wanted to play the piano on Sunday all she was allowed to play was hymns. Some of you weren't allowed to play cards or games, or you weren't allowed to play with your friends on Sunday. In many homes the Sabbath was the day to be least happy and do virtually nothing.

Do we really believe that was what God intended?

Consider how much things have changed. Today, there are few rules about the Sabbath. Stores are open, sports are on, many people work on Saturday and Sunday. All days look the same.

How far we have come from God's command.

Consider our responsive reading from Isaiah. The beginning of the passage is about fasting in a way that is pleasing to God.

The Lord says to the people:

On the day when you fast, you do as you please.

You take advantage of all your workers.

⁴ When you fast, it ends in arguing and fighting.

The way you are now fasting

keeps your prayers from being heard in heaven.

⁶ "Here is the way I want you to fast.

"Set free those who are held by chains without any reason.

Untie the ropes that hold people as slaves.

Set free those who are crushed.

Break every evil chain.

⁷ Share your food with hungry people.

Provide homeless people with a place to stay.

Give naked people clothes to wear.

Provide for the needs of your own family.

⁸ Then the light of my blessing will shine on you like the rising sun.

Then the passage continues:

Do not work on the Sabbath day.

Do not do just anything you want to on my holy day.

Make the Sabbath a day you can enjoy.

Honor the Lord's holy day.

Do not work on it.

Do not do just anything you want to.

God's laws around fasting, around Sabbath keeping are around justice, around making life better for all people, for honouring God and honouring all of God's people.

Keep the Sabbath "holy". "Holy" has to do with separateness. God's holy people refer to the people God set aside for himself. When we call anything "holy" it means it is set apart for some special purpose. Other translations of this passage say that the Sabbath day is not to be "business as usual."

So the Sabbath is to be a day set apart for a special purpose. However we use it, it is to honour God. God commands that we make the Sabbath a day we can enjoy. Other versions say we are to take in delight in the Lord on that day.

So what would it look like for you to take delight in the Lord? For Jesus, it looked like healing a man with a withered hand. Jesus brought the man healing and wholeness. He blessed him, cared for him, ending his oppression, and restoring him, setting him free from his affliction.

What would it be for **you** to delight in the Lord? It might be a meal with friends. But it can't be a frantic, everything must be perfect, slaving in the kitchen all-day affair. When we are burdened, when we are busy, when we have lists, we are not delighting in anything.

It is a day to slow down, to let God be God, to do all things in a leisured pace. It might involve being out in God's creation, it might include taking a nap and allowing God to renew and restore you.

It might involve serving someone else, or visiting, or bringing a meal to someone else, but again it is not in the feverish, got to get it done, with 17 things to do way.

Keeping a Sabbath day holy sets us apart from the rest of the world. It invites to live in response to God, trusting in God's provision, and delighting in who we are, and who God is.

The Sabbath day, well kept, reminds us that we are holy, we are set apart as instruments of God's love in the world, we are God's people, we are not our own, we have been bought with a price.

It reminds us that God is holy, and mighty, and worthy of our devotion and our delight. And it reminds us that our neighbours are holy, whether they know it or not, whether they act like it or not, they are also God's people, precious in God's eyes.

And so we are not free to exploit others so that we can keep the Sabbath.

If I am to do things in a way that I can take delight in the Lord, then you should have that same opportunity. God's people were given the commandments to keep them as God's own. Jesus says the Sabbath is for us, for blessing us.

The watching world around us says we must always be busy, be important, be in control. God asks us for one day, to cease striving, to rest in the care of our loving God, to remember who we are, to step off the tread mill, and be set free to delight in God, and to set others free to do the same.

In his book *The Rest of God*, Mark Buchanan talks about Sabbath as both a day, a day set aside for feasting and resting and worship and play that is a gift, not a burden, and if neglected for too long will make your soul, like soil never left fallow, hard and dry and spent.

But he also sees Sabbath as an attitude, a perspective and orientation of the heart. It is a heart that is at rest and attentive to God's presence even in the midst of work, unrest and upheaval.

As we learn to keep the Sabbath holy, as we set aside time to worship and play and rest and cease striving, and delight in God, it not only transforms our day, but transforms our lives.

The other six days, our relationship to work, our relationship to God, our relationship with one another, our heart that dwells in Sabbath, learns to experience Sabbath in all our days. We learn Jesus' yoke, the gentle and humble way of our Saviour, we begin to have a heart that is at rest even in the unrest and upheaval of day to day life.

Keep the Sabbath holy, was woven into the very fabric of our creation. God rested on the seventh day, so that we might know we can rest and delight in God and God's creation.

So back to the story of the minister who skated to church and presumably skated home from church. I think, if he delighted in God's creation, in the wonder of the day, and worshipped God and enjoyed himself, then he was truly keeping the Sabbath holy. Thanks be to God.