

Basics of the Faith: Ten Words: The Law of God (3)
Exodus 20:8-11
July 12, 2020

My brother and I walk carefully along the path leading into the cemetery. Careful because we are being watched by the eagle eyes of my father who is relentless in his insistence that we do not stray from the path, do not run wild, do not go left or right and get into trouble. And of course, young, restless, full of energy and mischievous young boys, find it hard to maintain the adult discipline. It's Sunday afternoon on our weekly walk of several miles. My mom and dad, my aunts, my brother and I have been meandering for hours and finally we arrive at the cemetery gates. It's a familiar destination. The cemetery is quiet, the trees and bushes alive with birds, thrushes, sparrows, blackbirds, and lots I don't know. The temptation to look for birds' eggs is overwhelming. But sharp words from dad keep us bridled.

It's the Sabbath and all respectable folk keep the Sabbath. Nothing moves in Scotland on Sunday; no movies, no games, no shopping, no running wild, just plain old walking, Sunday School and church (possibly) in the morning, but not much else.

The influence of God's Law was all over our church and society. Like the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai we trembled before a God who imposed more rules for life than we could remember or keep. It was as if God wore a huge black cloak which every Sabbath God cast over Scotland from the top of Sinai. God was seen as Lawgiver, a God who would "get you" if you strayed from the path of obedience. John Knox would have been proud. Mostly we are bored out of our minds. But that was life then, but not now.

Today Sunday's buzz with activity. Hockey, sports of every kind, shopping till you drop, movies by the dozens, television, entertainment galore. You drive into Fortinos on Sunday and it seems busier than any day of the week. The world into which I was born has been turned upside down. We have gained so much. But have we lost something?

This fourth commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy”, has been a difficult one for Christians and Jews. Its origins can be traced back to the story of creation when God created in six days and rested on the seventh. This was the pause that is built into creation and one that humanity was asked to observe. In time Judaism would create a cartload of rules and regulations about what you could and couldn’t do on the Sabbath. By Jesus time the scribes had developed thirty-nine different categories of infractions against the Law. Since then Jewish scholars have since listed a total of 1521 infractions derived from these. From prohibitions against “plowing”, for example, we get additional rules. You can’t dig a trench, or drag a stick along the ground. “Reaping” comes to include picking grapes, plucking olives of the tree, and pulling off the tops of wheat.

Jesus and his disciples, you remember, got into trouble with this rule. They were plucking the wheat off as they passed through a field and the Pharisees pointed this out to them. Mark records: *The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ...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.”*

What Jesus is saying here in this radical statement by a Jewish teacher of his day is that the Sabbath was a day set aside from the rest of our busy week to enjoy renewal, rest and worship. It wasn’t meant to put our human behavior into a straightjacket!

Even good deeds, like healing, became verboten. That too was pointed out to Jesus as an infraction of the Sabbath. But Jesus’ response shows that the rules had got out of hand and had made the Sabbath a burden, not the delight it intended to be.

We were in Jerusalem at Easter/Passover in 2019. We were staying in a large hotel along with many other tourist groups. But in addition to tourists were hundreds of Jewish pilgrims from all over Israel celebrating Passover. It was a fascinating experience having dinner in the huge dining hall with all these tables of pilgrims, each table with their own rabbi. They sang, prayed,

talked, each table a buzz of activity and celebration. It was strange for us to realize that food restrictions were carefully preserved at all meals: no mixing meat with dairy-which meant no coffee at dinner for me! And, of course, no bacon with our eggs at breakfast! On the Sabbath I was perplexed by the system of shutting off the electric in our rooms after a certain time on the Sabbath. I was amazed at how seriously the Jewish pilgrims, and the entire hotel, observed the Sabbath. All evening the elevator no longer responded to our insistent pressing of the floor number we wanted. It simply stopped on every floor. Pressing the button, turning on lights, was to be work and therefore, to break the Sabbath!

The creation story is the foundation of this law. God's plan for the world is a week divided into seven days, six for work and one set aside to the creator. The week was to be punctuated by a day of rest and worship. God says to us in this law that we need a day to rest from the labour of the week, a day that moves to a different rhythm from the other days in the week. They tell me that when workers in Scotland were finally released from their dark factories and workplaces on Sunday they came out in the thousands to loll in the sun amid the parks being created in cities. This Sabbath rest is critical for our wellbeing. Even the animals, slaves and aliens in Israel are to enjoy this rest. In the days of heavy labour a day set apart was relief for sore muscles and tired bodies. Today we need to rest from the frantic pace of life, from the pressures of work and the stress and demands of our usual rhythm.

Most of us would respond that life is too busy. There isn't enough time to do everything anymore. Sunday is the one day we have time to shop, play, visit, party, and catch up on the hundred and one things that we have put off. Setting Sunday aside as a Sabbath rest to God, well we just don't have time for that. Sports for our children force us to put worship and church on the back burner. How can we buck the trend to everything being scheduled for Sunday? Secular society has chosen to free us from the legacy of boring Sunday walks like my brother and I endured, and fill our Sundays with all the activities we didn't have time for during the week.

But at what price? What is the message we give to our children about the Sabbath? What ultimately shapes their impressionable lives, God's rhythm of worship, rest and holiness for the Sabbath, or secular society's rhythm of play, business and entertainment first? And what happens to us who are caught in this weekly mad dash through life? What effect has this unending demand to entertain and be entertained on our fragile psyche? What happens to our soul when Sabbath rest and worship only punctuate our weekly rhythm every once in a while, when it's convenient? Do we really think that God's institution of Sabbath rest, founded on the rhythm of creation's origins, can be blithely ignored? Is there no cost to our disregard of Sabbath rest and worship? Somewhere deep inside I think we all know the answer to that question.

My parents' society got the Sabbath wrong. They missed the point Jesus made about Sabbath being made for us, not us for Sabbath. The Sabbath law was not instituted to make us keep to that path and not run wild. It wasn't intended to become a legal system of rules to make us pull the blinds down on life. The Sabbath was given for our delight and for our good. It was instituted in order to free us from the weekly grind of labour and the punishing demands on our time and energy. It was given so that we could pause from that rhythm and move slowly into another mode. It opens up to us the opportunity to be renewed through worship, through prayer, through meditation, through quiet. It was after all "a Sabbath to the Lord." Its movement is toward our Creator and Redeemer.

By the phrase "holy day" the bible simply means a day set aside to God. Centered in God our soul is nourished, given perspective again, enabling us to walk out into our world with different eyes and ears. The day opens up to us on Sunday with life-giving possibilities. We can join in our afternoon sports, visits, whatever we do, but we do these things after we have fulfilled the creation mandate of worship. Such a priority of "holy day" offered to God changes our attitudes toward our Sunday obligations of family, friends, and activities. It doesn't stop us from these things; it simply prioritizes response to God. Rest, worship, service, quiet,

reflection, centering ourselves in God's love and purpose as individuals and families, all this helps to nourish our spirits and free us from the bondage society's demands on us. This is the meaning of the "good life", not what society tells us is the good life. We may find that as God's people, as a counter culture community, we do not follow the herd on Sunday. We make a decision to provide a different model of Sabbath rest and worship. Perhaps we avoid the press of Malls, the clamour of Silver City, the jostling at supermarkets, the demand by society that Sunday be no different from other days.

This doesn't mean we never shop, never go to films or play sports, and never move off the path. But it perhaps means that as people of faith seeking to follow the path set out by Jesus, our choices are different from our society's choices. We intentionally put worship first on the Sabbath. We seek to be a community that models a different attitude to the Sabbath and teach this to our children. We take seriously this command to make the Sabbath a day of rest, a day holy to God, a day designed by God for the nourishment of our souls and rest to our spirits, and a day to promote the well-being of our families. We all need this day to be lived in a different rhythm from the other busy days of our lives. We need to trust that God does know best and didn't give us the Sabbath to rob us of life; rather as a gift.

AMEN