

September 17, 2017

Lesson 3: Sabbath Observance

Scripture: Exodus 31: 12-18 (Gen. 2:1-3; Exod. 31:12-18; Isa. 56:1-8)

Context:

Today we look at another form of covenant that may be a bit of a surprise: Sabbath. The main scripture lesson comes the book of Exodus with an excerpt from the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The passage is supported though by numerous other places in the Old Testament such as the creation story (Genesis) where God rested on the seventh day after creation and from the words of Isaiah as God makes a covenant with all those who keep the Sabbath holy. This repetition of the word “Sabbath” means that it is something that was important to God and to God’s people.

The definition of the word “sabbath” in Hebrew (shabbat) is related to the verb that means “to rest” found in Genesis 2:2-3, making it clear that it is to be the seventh day of the week.¹ All of the passages emphasize that there is a day that is to be set aside, to rest from the labors of the week. The passage from Exodus comes after the Ten Commandments that have been given along with the other rules and ordinances that God’s people are to follow. The Law of the Sabbath is the last one given before the tablets are to be taken down to the people. Sometimes it has been said to save the best or most important for last.

In these passages about the Sabbath, God wants the Israelites to imitate God just as God rested on the seventh day. There is something about worshipping God, reflecting, and resting that is holy. Historically, there are not a lot of parallels to other Near Eastern ancient cultures.² Observing Sabbath was a Jewish observance, something that set them apart among the other things like circumcision. The books of the prophets mention the observance of Sabbath when the people are exiled to Babylon. From sunset to sunset, the people cultivated a time to rest, pray, and reflect about where God was in their lives.

The early church also observed the Sabbath. In both Acts 20:7 and Revelation 1:10, the Sabbath is to be a day of religious assembly and is known as “the Lord’s day.”³ Over time the day moved from a seventh day observance to the first of the week,

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the New Testament to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011), 35.

² Ibid., 35.

³ Ibid., 35.

probably to establish Christians as a separate group from the Jews.⁴ The Sabbath became a day for Christians to worship and helped shaped the calendar for hundreds of years. In today's age we have Sunday, which is known as the "Lord's Day" with the great hour of worship being the time that Christians gather together to praise and hear the Word of God. Thus, the Sabbath became another form of covenant in the Christian tradition just as it had been established in the Jewish tradition.

Application:

Of all the commandments, I think this is the one that is probably broken more than any of the others. Even though it is in the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), and is later repeated in the passage for today, it is one of those that can slip by our minds as we focus on some of the others that focus more on our relationships with our neighbors.

In the covenant of Sabbath, we are reminded that rest, relaxation, reflection, worship, and recreation are all important things. Even God, the Creator of the universe, took time to slow down and rest after creating the whole world. God calls for us to observe the Sabbath not just to get our "checkmark" for going to church. Sunday is a day to pause and allow our bodies to rest.

As a pastor, sometimes "Sabbath" is a little different. I have discovered in my ministry that in all size churches, worship takes work to get done and there is a desire to make sure that all flows well. There is the sermon preparation, the picking of the music, planning special worship moments, the transitions with the sacraments, and coordinating readers, ushers, acolytes, greeters, etc. Regardless of where you serve, you want to glorify God to the best of your ability and hope that those sitting in the pews experience the awe and wonder that comes with praising and hearing how God speaks into today. Worship is how we connect to God and it is in worship that we are reminded to whom we belong.

But what I've discovered is that in order to prepare for those days, I have to observe "Sabbath" on my own time. There are some weeks where I have a day where I do not look or answer my phone, I may step aside from social media, and I even try to take a trip that may have no other purpose than it gives me joy. That trip may be coffee with an old friend. Or going to a coffee shop just to write in my journal or read a book. It might be a hike in the woods where I just get lost in the trails and enjoy the serenity. Eventually my Eno hammock appears and I fall asleep reading a book. It might also be going to play a sport just for fun, running with friends, or something like rafting or kayaking. To a degree, the back of my head might whisper: "Think of all the other things you should be doing instead." And then I realize that the whisper needs to be shushed. God created me and wants me to rest, to enjoy life, and to move my limbs as much as I am able.

Time and time again, I realize that I need time to myself and to do days where nothing "productive" is accomplished. It is not because I am being selfish or lazy, as the god of achievement might whisper in my ear. It is because God created my body to rest. At times I hear people brag about how they haven't taken a day off in this many years of work, and that being a true professional is being a "workaholic." And I realized I have done or said the same things at times in my ministry. How can we choose disobey God's

⁴ Ibid., 35.

command to observe the Sabbath, the keep days that are sacred for us to recharge and relax? To laity, I would encourage you to stay on your pastors about vacation and to encourage them to have Sabbath. For the week, that means having a day where they are off the grid and that doesn't mean just a day for sermon writing. The same goes for vacation. A vacation isn't getting in the car on Sunday night and returning Saturday morning. It is taking the whole week and taking that time to maybe worship at a service where they aren't leading or even getting lost in the woods or the beach without a phone or laptop right next to them.

I have discovered in my own ministry that when I rest and take time for myself, I am a better minister, preacher, and friend. Resting in God and allowing times for Sabbath help all of us depend on God and to recharge. How will you honor the Lord's covenant for Sabbath and how will you encourage others to do the same?

Respectfully,
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