



3

**COMMANDMENT 4:
KEEPING THE SABBATH**

EXODUS 20:8-11, DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15

Background from the Author

The discoveries in this session largely depend on participants' making a comparison of the Sabbath Commandment versions in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The common material leads to discussions about holiness, the value and limitations of work, and the extent of the community of God's people.

The differences between the two versions lead to a discussion which reflects the two main points of view in the first part of the Old Testament. These points of view are called the Deuteronomic and Priestly theologies. The groups that promoted these theologies in the time during and after the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC) were probably the scribes and the priests respectively. Their influence stems from the fact that these were the two major groups who collected, edited and preserved the Scriptures in these critical centuries of formative Judaism. The Deuteronomic theology emphasized God's gracious action of delivering the people in the Exodus and making a covenant that defined the relationship between God and his people. The Priestly theology emphasized the law as the ordering of human life which reflects the God-created ordering of the cosmos. The Exodus version of the Fourth Commandment reflects a Priestly view, and the Deuteronomic version of the commandment reflects the views of the scribes.

The session encourages participants to see a link between the Fourth Commandment and the confession about who God is. This linkage then allows participants to understand that the keeping of the commandment recognizes God's very nature. For a discussion of the priestly view of creation, you could see Anderson, pp. 406-416. And a very good discussion of the Sabbatical principle can be found in Miller, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 134-140.

Consistent with the purposes of our whole study, questions concerning the modern implications of keeping the Sabbath are not addressed directly in this session. However, a thorough understanding of the meaning of and fundamental convictions in the commandment can lead to informed discussion of the Sabbath Commandment and the Sabbatical principle for today.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Discuss the meaning of the Fourth Commandment.
2. Define the sabbatical principle.
3. Show how Jesus both reinterprets and fulfills the Fourth Commandment.
4. State several ways we can remember the Sabbath in our own lives.

Resources You May Need

Chalkboard or newsprint and markers

Bibles

Copies of Worksheet A, "Honor the Sabbath"

Copies of Worksheet B, "Fundamental Convictions: Exodus and Deuteronomy"

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. **Listing Impressions of Sabbath.** Ask, "What comes to your mind when you think of Sabbath?" Participants may suggest such things as "No work," "Church," "Guilt." Write all their answers on chalkboard or newsprint, without discussing them. Conclude by saying that in this session they may gain some new insights into the Fourth Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath." (8-10 minutes)

or

Naming Ways to Rest. In groups of 3 or 4, talk about how they find rest in their lives. What activities (or nonactivities) make them feel rested in body, mind, and spirit? What places are restful for them? After 5-10 minutes, call the whole group back together and have participants call out answers to the question "What makes you feel rested?" Write their answers on chalkboard or newsprint. Conclude by reading the Fourth Commandment and saying that the Hebrew Sabbath means "to rest" or "to cease work." (15 minutes)

2. **Saying Commandments from Memory.** Have the group members say the preamble to the commandments (Exodus 20:2) and the first four commandments. List the commandments on chalkboard/newsprint as they say them. Referring to the introduction to this session in the *Resource Book*, mention that the Ten Commandments are part of the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible. *Torah* is often translated "law," but a better translation would be "instruction." (5 minutes)

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. **Remember the Sabbath.** Have the participants locate Exodus 20:8-11 in their Bibles and follow it with their eyes as you read aloud Deuteronomy 5:12-15, looking for similarities and differences between the two versions. Ask, "What is essentially the same in the two passages?" Write, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." If you have not already done so, explain that the Hebrew word *Sabbath* means "to cease work" or "to rest." Also mention that the Jewish Sabbath was the seventh day, Saturday, but that the early Christian church soon

moved its Sabbath observance to Sunday, celebrating the Sabbath as a weekly remembrance of Christ's resurrection.

The Fourth Commandment instructs us to remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Ask, "What comes to your mind when you think of the word *holy*?" Write responses on chalkboard/newsprint. Then have volunteers read aloud Leviticus 10:10 and 20:26. Invite the group to add any new ideas that came from hearing these verses. Then ask, "If God is Lord of all that is, why do we need to designate particular times and places as *holy*?" Conclude the discussion by observing that something that is holy is *set apart from the ordinary or the profane*. (10 minutes)

- 2. Sabbath Do and Don't Lists.** One way the Sabbath is set apart from the ordinary is by ceasing work. Referring to the section "The Meaning of the Fourth Commandment" in the *Resource Book*, make it clear that work has dignity and purpose, but that "everything God's people do for their labor is set in the context of remembering and recognizing God."

Draw a vertical line down the center of the board to divide it into two columns, or use two sheets of newsprint. Title one "DO NOT," the other "DO." Ask volunteers to read aloud the following scripture passages:

Exodus 34:21

Exodus 35:2-3

Isaiah 58:13-14

Nehemiah 13:15-18

Amos 8:4-6.

After each reading ask, "What is to be done or not to be done on the Sabbath?" Write answers in the appropriate column. Then invite the participants to think about ways Christians are to remember the Sabbath today. Ask, "What might you add to each of the lists you have made?" Write suggestions in the appropriate columns. In the "DO" list, be sure to include ideas about what it might mean to "take delight in the Lord" (Isaiah 58:13-14). (10-15 minutes)

or

Small Groups: Honor the Sabbath. In groups of 4-7, do Worksheet A, "Honor the Sabbath." After 20-25 minutes, bring the whole group together. Make a group

list of suggested changes for the members' lives by having a spokesperson from one group read the list, then invite the other groups to add ideas. (30-35 minutes)

3. Discussion: Underlying Actions of God. Now that the group has considered in some depth the parts of the Fourth Commandment that Exodus and Deuteronomy have in common, the focus moves to the differences between the two versions. Title two sides of the chalkboard or two sheets of newsprint "EXODUS" and "DEUTERONOMY." Ask volunteers to read aloud Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

- What reason is given in Exodus for remembering the Sabbath?
- What reason is given in Deuteronomy?
- What does each passage tell us about God?
- What does each passage suggest people are to do or not to do to remember the Sabbath?

Write responses in key phrases in the appropriate columns. Refer to the sections "Fundamental Convictions: Exodus" and "Fundamental Convictions: Deuteronomy" in the *Resource Book* for help in guiding this discussion. (15 minutes)

or

Worksheet: Fundamental Convictions. In groups of 4-7, do Worksheet B, "Fundamental Convictions: Exodus and Deuteronomy." After 20-25 minutes, bring the whole group together. Ask a spokesperson from each group to report on the group's discussion. Referring to the sections "Fundamental Convictions: Exodus" and "Fundamental Convictions: Deuteronomy" in the *Resource Book*, bring out any major points that the groups have failed to include. Be sure to mention that although Exodus and Deuteronomy explain the basis for the commandment differently, the sages and scribes who wrote, edited, and preserved the scriptures let both ideas stand side by side without trying to harmonize these differences. *Both* actions of God help explain why the Sabbath is so important to God's people. (40-45 minutes)

and

The Sabbatical Principle. Drawing on information from the section “Fundamental Convictions: Deuteronomy” in the *Resource Book*, introduce the *Sabbatical principle of redemption and release for the weakest* that lies behind the Sabbath Commandment in Deuteronomy. The Sabbatical principle appears as the guiding motivation for a number of the laws in the Torah.

Ask the group members to read silently Deuteronomy 15:1-18. Then ask, “How do you see the *Sabbatical principle* at work in this passage?” “How might the Sabbatical principle be applied in the world today?” List their suggestions on chalkboard or newsprint. Conclude the discussion by noting that the principle that lies behind the Sabbath Commandment in Deuteronomy is extended from remembering a particular day to setting forth a guideline for behavior and ethics every day. (15 minutes)

- 4. Gospel Connections.** Assign each of the following Gospel stories to a third of your group, asking them to read silently one of the following Gospel stories:

Mark 3:1-6: Healing a man with a withered hand

Luke 13:10-17: Healing a bent-over woman

Luke 14:1-6: Healing a man with dropsy

Then ask the whole group, “Where is Jesus often on the Sabbath? “What does he do in these stories?” “What things are more important than stopping work on the Sabbath?” “How does the news of the Kingdom fulfill the Sabbath Commandment?” Write key ideas on chalkboard/newsprint. (10 minutes)

and/or

Jesus and the Sabbatical Principle. If you discussed the Sabbatical principle in *Exploring the Scripture # 3*, refer back to that discussion. If not, briefly summarize Dr. Dutcher-Walls’ explanation of the Sabbatical principle. By basing the commandment to honor the Sabbath in Israel’s memory of the Lord’s action in freeing them from slavery, Deuteronomy makes a statement about who God is. God is the One who saves the weakest and most vulnerable, the One who

grants release, deliverance, and salvation. This principle is extended from the Sabbath Commandment to become a principle that guides the behavior and ethics of human society.

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Isaiah 61:1-4. Explain that according to Luke, Jesus began his ministry on a Sabbath day by quoting these words from Isaiah in a synagogue. Then invite a volunteer to read aloud Luke 4:16-21. Ask, "How does the Sabbatical principle seem to apply to Jesus' words?" "How does the whole ministry and mission of Jesus fulfill the Fourth Commandment?" "How might *we* apply the Sabbatical principle in our own lives?" Write key phrases on chalkboard or newsprint as ideas are given. (10-15 minutes)

CLOSING

1. **Hearing Scripture.** Ahead of time print each of the following scripture references on a separate 3 x 5 card. Distribute the cards, asking each of the volunteers to read a passage aloud. The selections may be read in random order. Suggest that the participants close their eyes and listen as each passage is read.

Psalm 23:1-3

Psalm 46:10

Matthew 11:28

Psalm 37:7

Isaiah 30:15

Matthew 11:29

Follow the readings with a period of silence. Then close with the prayer below or with your own prayer. (5-8 minutes)

and/or

2. **Psalm Prayer.** Read aloud the following words from Psalm 37: "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him" (verse 7, KJV). Ask each person to reflect quietly on these words for a few minutes and then to write a phrase or two that could complete the sentence, "For me, resting in God is...." After a few minutes, invite all who wish to do so to read their phrases aloud. Close by reading together or saying from memory Psalm 23. (10 minutes)

and/or

- 3. Your Own Prayer.** Offer your own prayer thanking God for providing for rest as well as for work, and asking God's help in making Sabbath an integral part of life. (3 minutes)

Looking Ahead

The next session (Exploring the Scripture) suggests writing "proclamations" promoting the values of the Fifth Commandment such as, "After conducting a six-month study of nursing homes, the Iowa Welfare Commission declares that . . ." You may want to add some examples that relate to specific issues in your community.

If you plan to ask volunteers to read mother and father images of God as part of the Closing, you will need to print these references on 3 x 5 cards ahead of time.

Worksheet A

Honor the Sabbath

Each person reflect quietly on the following two questions, making a few notes. Then share answers to these questions with the group.

Describe to the group what you do on a typical Sabbath day.

Tell how you think these activities keep or violate the intention of the Fourth Commandment.

Discuss as a group:

What prevents you from making the Sabbath a holy day—a day set apart?
(Make a group list)

The prophet Isaiah states: “If you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord” (Isaiah 58:13-14) **What might you do that would help you “call the Sabbath a delight?”** *(Make a group list.)*

What changes does this suggest for your lives? *(Write the changes below.)*

Worksheet B

Fundamental Convictions: Exodus and Deuteronomy

Read one of the following sets of scripture passages:

- a. Exodus 20:8-11 and Genesis 2:1-3

- b. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Deuteronomy 26:5-9

Discuss the following questions. Designate a spokesperson to make a brief report of your discussion to the whole group.

1. When God's people keep the Sabbath, what action of God does it remember and honor?
2. What does this action suggest about what God is like?
3. Using God as our role model, what does this action of God suggest people should do or not do?

DO

DON'T