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SUMMARY

The Sabbath Commandment shows how God's people should structure their lives to express their commitment to God. If the LORD alone is God of all, then how people use their time and resources must witness to this. A comparison of the Sabbath Commandment in Exodus and Deuteronomy will show how the same commandment can be faithfully explained in two ways. In Exodus, "sacred time" is expressed in the rhythm of six days of work and one of rest. In Deuteronomy, a humanistic concern for the welfare of all the people is the reason for the Sabbath.

In the Gospels, Jesus does not undermine the idea of the "sacred time" of the Sabbath, but he questions the forms and actions by which this is best expressed. In several stories, Jesus heals on the Sabbath, upholding the Sabbath law but asserting its true meaning as compassion.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Exodus 20:8-11

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Genesis 1

Mark 3:1-6

Luke 13:10-17

Luke 14:1-6

WORD LIST

Torah

Holy

Sabbath

Sabbatical



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COMMANDMENT 4: KEEPING THE SABBATH

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

In starting to study the Fourth Commandment, we have moved from the focus on God in the first three commandments, but not by much. **Read Deuteronomy 5:12-15.** How many times is God mentioned? While this commandment is about human beings keeping the Sabbath, it is also about God. This focus on God **and** humanity runs throughout the commandments and we shall see more in this session about how the Fourth Commandment has this double focus.

Read Exodus 20:8-11. Now compare the Fourth Commandment, in either the Exodus or Deuteronomy versions, to the other commandments. Do you notice that this is one of only two commandments that are phrased positively? It's not a "Thou shalt NOT" but a "Thou shalt." And this commandment is also one of the two longest, with quite a bit of "explanation." Look ahead; what other commandment contains "explanatory" material?

In the first two sessions we saw that the explanatory phrases helped to make clear the meaning of the laws. This points out a significant characteristic of "law" in the Old Testament. The word translated as "law" is the Hebrew term "Torah" and is used to refer to the five books of the law in Genesis through Deuteronomy. While "law" is an acceptable translation, a more descriptive term would be "instruction." The Torah is the instruction God gives to the people for how to live according to God's ways. Such an emphasis on teaching helps us see that the laws, including the commandments, are not

meant to be mere legal lists. Rather, they explain and persuade, teach and convince the people about God's expectations for human life. The Sabbath Commandment is one such expectation.

Meaning of the Fourth Commandment: Details and Specifics

We want to explore the meaning of this commandment for God's people. Start by reading the Fourth Commandment in both Exodus and Deuteronomy again (Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Do you see that it is the only commandment where there are significant differences between the two versions? Make a careful comparison now, writing out the common and different material. Some differences we will not consider in detail. For example, there is a variation in emphasis in the first words of each version. "Remember" picks up the idea of the Sabbath being a sacred commemoration. And "observe" emphasizes the doing of the commandment. However, in this session we will look at the similarities in the first three verses and at the major difference in the last verse of each version.

Looking at similarities, we see the basic commandment is to keep the Sabbath "holy." You get a sense of what the word "holy" means by looking at several verses in Leviticus, because that book is very concerned to communicate and preserve holiness. Read Leviticus 10:10 and 20:26. You might also consult an English dictionary, or a Bible dictionary, or make a list of synonyms for "holy." Can you see that the holy is that which is **set apart** or **separated** from what is common or profane? God himself is totally separate or holy and anything that belongs to him is likewise to be holy. So the Sabbath should be dedicated to God, set apart from the ordinary, and sanctified. It is to be a "holy day" or holiday.

What sets the Sabbath apart from the ordinary? This should not be taken as a disregard for the importance of work. The Scriptures have a great respect for the dignity of work. In Genesis 2:15, the second creation story, what is the role of work? Work is necessary for the survival, clothing and feeding of people, care for the natural world, creativity and the arts, and enjoyment of God's blessings. It is a natural and necessary part of life. Six days of every week humanity is to pursue its various tasks and labors. But if work is to be stopped one day out of seven, how important is it? What is more important?

Work has its dignity and purposes, but it is not of ultimate importance. The Sabbath Commandment implies that human life is not to be defined by labor, nor our value by our

work. All that God's people do for their labor is set in the context of remembering and recognizing God. In the First and Second Commandments, the people are to have no other gods, no idols or images. In exactly that way, work cannot become an idol, something more important than the Lord. No matter how crucial work may seem, it must not be valued more highly than God.

The holiness or sanctity of the Sabbath day is to be shown by ceasing work. What work are the people not to do on the Sabbath? The commandment does not spell this out and, in fact, Scripture does not give any complete listing. One of the things the rabbis and teachers of the law did around the time of Jesus was to try to help the community by defining classes of "work" that were and were not prohibited. We can get some sense of what labor had to stop on the Sabbath by looking at some parallel passages. Activities like plowing (Exodus 34:21), building fires (Exodus 35:2-3), selling food (Nehemiah 13:15-18) and grain (Amos 8:4-6) while neglecting the poor were forbidden. The Sabbath breaks the cycles of several important spheres of life, in particular the agricultural year and the business of the marketplace. But a very few actions did overrule the Sabbath in Jewish tradition, among them the ritual of circumcision and the saving of a life.

What were God's people to **do** on the Sabbath? Again the Scriptures give no strict guidelines. What does the Isaiah passage read above suggest that the tone of the day is? Jewish and Christian tradition about the Sabbath day have associated religious worship and religious instruction as appropriate activities for a day of rest dedicated to the Lord.

Who participates in the Sabbath day of rest? Read the commandments again and list the participants. We noted in the last session that the social understanding of the family household stood behind the warning in the Second Commandment. Here, the members of that household are made explicit, with the mother and father in the house understood as those directly addressed by the commandment. The servants or slaves are those who were, perhaps, escaping debt by working for another family. What is a little surprising is that even animals were considered part of the household. This means that even those whose social value was defined by labor, i.e. servants and beasts of burden, were part of keeping the Sabbath holy. What was even more surprising is that the boundary of the community does not stop with the group of households. The alien, or visiting stranger or sojourner, is also to be included in the day of rest. This indicates that the "people" of God are not defined just as the insiders;

rather, everyone in the community is to be included in recognizing God as Lord of the Sabbath.

The Fundamental Convictions: Exodus

Now look at the differences between the two versions of the commandment. What function do these explanatory phrases play in the commandment? What other Old Testament passages does each call to mind? Make a list or look up some of those passages now. We will take some time to explore the meaning of each of these versions because they go to the heart of what the Sabbath is really all about.

First, consider the fact that there are two different versions even in a text as central as the Ten Commandments. What does that say about how the traditions concerning the Sabbath were preserved? What does it indicate about the preservation and transmission of Israel's earliest and most sacred memories? It is a remarkable fact that the sages and scribes who wrote and edited and preserved the scriptures never tried to harmonize differences or apparent contradictions between different versions of the same event or story. Rather, they preserved the richness and depth of the different versions, seemingly because the "both/and" spoke more truthfully about the holy than any rigid uniformity.

While the two versions are different, they both explain why the Sabbath is so important to God's people. Where do both versions base the true meaning of the Sabbath? Can you see how each draws a parallel between who God is and what God has done and what humans must therefore do? This is the most important reason the Fourth Commandment does not get very far away from God. Like the first three commandments, the Sabbath Commandment is rooted in Israel's basic confession that the LORD alone is God.

Read Exodus 20:8-11 and Genesis 2:1-3. Compare Exodus 20:11 to Genesis 2:1-3. According to this version, why are God's people to keep the Sabbath? What statement does the explanation assert about who God is? Even the all-powerful and sovereign creator God rested on the seventh day. Moreover, the Lord blessed the day and made it holy. Therefore, God's people are to keep the day holy by resting as God did. This makes the Sabbath a recognition of God as the creator, a day that humans and beasts return to their creator. It also means that Sabbath is part of the divinely created cosmic order. Keeping the Sabbath is not presented as merely one option for spending a holiday. Rather, it states a fundamental

conviction that humans recognize the order of the universe which was created by the Lord of the universe.

We can see a related meaning the Sabbath had by reading the creation story. **Read Genesis 1.** What intangible, nonmaterial creation has God made besides the physical universe and all it contains? In fact, what does the very first act of creation bring into being besides the separation of light and darkness? When day and night are made, so is time. Time, the forward, marked-out progression of reality has been created out of the timeless chaos before creation. The division into the seven days of creation, and the marking of the seventh day as a blessed, holy day asserts that the Lord is also the Lord of time. When human beings keep the Sabbath, they express another fundamental conviction that God is sovereign over time.

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.¹

Another tradition concerning the Sabbath preserved in Scripture builds on this recognition of God as Lord of creation and time. When the priests of ancient Israel instructed the people in the religious rituals and celebrations which God had ordained, they often spoke about the importance of these acts of worship. (See Exodus 31:12-17.) What is the function of the Sabbath remembrance in this passage?

Fundamental Convictions: Deuteronomy

Now we turn to the explanation of the importance of the Sabbath given in Deuteronomy. **Read Deuteronomy 5:12-15** and the parallel to this in Exodus 23:12. Consider these questions:

- What is the reason for keeping the Sabbath in these verses? What purposes does the Sabbath serve according to these verses?

¹ A. J. Heschel, as quoted in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), p.552.

- Who is being cared for by the way the commandment is phrased? Whom should that remind the people of?
- When God's people keep the Sabbath, what action does it remember and honor?

The commandment to keep the Sabbath in the Deuteronomy version appears to be built on a deep compassion for the slaves and the poor and vulnerable, for those who are the least among the people. As God's people were once slaves, so should they remember the least among them. And that is not a wrong interpretation.

But something more is urged than just a psychological or emotional tie to the weakest members of society. God's people are to remember the Lord's action in freeing them from slavery, the release and deliverance God accomplished in the Exodus event. What the people remember in keeping the Sabbath is their own vulnerability, but more importantly, it is a remembrance of God's salvation. Thus here as well, the reason for Sabbath expresses a statement about who God is. God is the One who saves the weakest and most vulnerable, the One who grants release and deliverance and salvation.

The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy portrays a fundamental conviction that everyone in the community, from greatest to least, is to be cared for. Just as God acted and acts to save the weakest, so God's people should care for and seek the redemption of the weakest and most vulnerable. This principle lies behind the Sabbath Commandment in Deuteronomy. And this principle is extended from the Sabbath Commandment to become a principle that guides the behavior and ethics of human society. This "Sabbatical principle" of redemption and release for the weakest is not based in human nature. Rather it is based in God's gracious nature and compassion.

The Sabbatical principle appears as the guiding motivation and reason for a number of the laws throughout Scripture. Read Exodus 23:10-11, Leviticus 25:1-12, and Deuteronomy 15:1-18.

What human activities and institutions are subject to the Sabbatical principle in these passages? How does the principle of divinely-based redemption and release change these activities? How are God's nature and compassion recognized in these laws?

Gospel Connections

The interpretation of the Sabbath Commandment was an issue in the Jewish communities of Jesus' day. All Jews understood the Sabbath to be one of the most important marks of their faith, and some Jewish groups were concerned to define it more strictly in order to protect its sanctity. Jesus, during his ministry, performed actions and healings on the Sabbath. While ordinary Jews might have accepted Jesus' interpretations, his actions challenged those Jewish interpreters and leaders who seemed to pursue a highly authoritarian reading of what was permitted on the Sabbath. The controversies that the Gospel writers remember both help define Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath and, more significantly, help portray his preaching of the Kingdom.

Read Mark 2:23-28 (plucking grain on the Sabbath), **Mark 3:1-6** (healing the man with the withered hand), **Luke 13:10-17** and **14:1-6** (Luke's stories of healing on the Sabbath).

Where is Jesus often on the Sabbath? What does he do there in these stories? What things are more important than stopping work on the Sabbath? How does the good news of the Kingdom then fulfill the Sabbath Commandment?

But Jesus' fulfillment of the Sabbath goes even deeper than these stories indicate. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' first public words take place in a synagogue on a Sabbath. And what he says there defines his whole ministry and mission as God's son. Read Luke 4:16-21 and Isaiah 61:1-4. Can you see that the Sabbatical principle is behind the words of Isaiah that Jesus quotes? How then does Jesus define his mission as the one who announces and brings the Kingdom of God?

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. Memorize either Exodus 20:8-11 or Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Also memorize Luke 4:17-21.

Research

1. "Remembering" plays an important role in shaping the faith of God's people. Using a concordance, look up the word "remember" and sample a number of passages using the word. Who does the remembering? What are God's people supposed to remember? What will they learn from the memory?

2. Besides the Sabbath, what other religious observances did ancient Israel follow to worship God? Read Exodus 34:18-24 and Deuteronomy 16:1-17. In a Bible dictionary, look up “Passover/Unleavened Bread,” “Feast of Weeks,” and “Feast of Booths.” (Some dictionaries may cover these topics under “Feast and Festivals.”) How do these various festivals demonstrate the worship of God?

Reflection

1. What is the meaning of the Sabbath for today’s church? What ways can Christians “keep the Sabbath” that are true to the meaning and importance of this “holy day”?
2. How can the Christian church enact the Sabbatical principle today? What areas of life might be included in the concern of this principle?