

Commandments IV: Rest and Relaxation

September 4, 2022

Exodus 20:8-11 and Mark 2:23-3:6

When I was in the 4th grade, one of the songs the 4th graders sang during our spring concert was titled “Help, I Need a Vacation,” and one of the lines from that song was “Help, I want it. Help, I need it. I’m going out of my mind.” Why I remember those I have not the slightest clue, but this cry for help and escape is something we all understand. Work, family life, current events, social media, there are innumerable things stressing us out at any given moment, and the concept of taking a vacation just sounds delightful. However, how many of you would say vacations are actually carefree or stress free? I agree with those of you who didn’t raise your hands. There’s cost of travel, food, rental of a room or cottage, and activities, any and all of which cause financial stress. There are the universal stressors like traffic, long stretches of boring nothingness along the way to/from your destination, getting through TSA, and health concerns. Just thinking about the stresses of vacation makes vacation sound like a horrifying prospect, and yet it always seems like just what the doctor ordered. Kind of counterintuitive, wouldn’t you say?

The issue in this disconnect, I believe, is that our thought processes aren’t wholistic. While vacation is a great time to rest up, it truly only gives the body rest. As humans, we have spirits, souls, that also need rest. When we’re going off on vacation, sipping drinks on the beach or by the pool, hiking various trails, whatever suits our fancy, our bodies may be physically removed from our day-to-day lives. However, we are not removed from “life.” Those stresses from which we’re taking a break, we know they will be waiting for us when we get home. Truthfully, there are also some stresses we just can’t escape, namely pandemics. Regardless of where we are or what we’re doing physically, our spirits are still going, still at home, always preparing us to take the blow of getting back to our day-to-day lives. It’s not called “hitting the ground running” for nothing. We get home, and we still want to be on vacation because we don’t feel nearly as rested as we’d like, or at least not enough to get back into the swing of things. Vacations never seem long enough. Truly, it’s almost as if we need something more than a vacation, and we’re right. That nagging feeling of “I need a break from life,” that’s your spirit telling you that you need more than just a vacation. You need a sabbath, but what exactly is a sabbath?

Literally, the word “sabbath” means “rest,” but it’s not rest as we traditionally think of it. When we observe a sabbath, we are resting not just our bodies but our spirits and our minds as well. We’re not just fishing off a dock, watching TV, and “doing nothing.” While those things might be *relaxing*, they are not *restful*. If we are truly observing Sabbath, our spirits are at rest as well. Beyond just taking a break from work, it’s taking a break from those things that we traditionally do to relax, and it’s doing only those things that help us to feel spiritually rejuvenated, and therein closer to God. It could be as simple as taking a walk, but not just taking a walk for the purpose of exercise, no. In this case, you would take a walk to feel closer to God, and maybe that means walking by moonlight rather than sunlight. Admittedly, some of my favorite and most memorable walks I’ve taken the dog on have been by moonlight without a flashlight, just gazing at the innumerable stars in the sky and marveling at the beauty of God’s creation. Then again, maybe it’s going for a walk in the rain, feeling each raindrop as a kiss from God and a sign of God’s nourishing the creation of which we are a part, therein feeling reassured of God’s loving and supporting us. Then again, maybe it doesn’t involve walking. It

could be as simple as turning your phone off or maybe even intentionally leaving it in another room so you can't be tempted to look at it while you sit on your porch and feel the wind blowing, the Sun's glowing, or the rain's falling as you listen to the sounds of Creation around you. Perhaps it's something else entirely. Regardless of how we do it, to observe Sabbath is to remove one's body, mind, and spirit from day-to-day living to allow one's self to feel as one with both Creation and the God who fashioned it. So important is this practice that the Fourth Commandment is about steadfastly observing it.

For the Israelites who were hearing this commandment, this had specific implications. It meant that not only were they not working but neither were their slaves or their beasts of burden. For a whole day, the Israelites would abstain from anything that involved work or that would lead to personal enrichment. The Sabbath day has been declared a holy day in this commandment, one meant for prayer, the hearing and reading of Scripture, and attending Temple. The Sabbath day was the one day a week where God's people would set aside their livelihoods and personal interests to praise the God who created all things, who instilled in them their gifts and talents, and who shows naught but love and mercy to Their people. It is a day to acknowledge God's hand in all that was, is, and shall be. So, if Sabbath is such an important practice and a holy day, why was Jesus doing work in the reading?

The gospel reading for today shows Jesus doing two different acts that would have been forbidden on the Sabbath: harvesting and healing. The first time, Jesus and his disciples are picking grain and eating it on the Sabbath. Then, in front of many witnesses, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, asking if it is right to heal on the Sabbath. This introduces an interesting duality: the Sabbath excuses us from doing work, but not from doing God's work. We may not have to do work, but this does not excuse us from being compassionate and doing what is right. In all moments of the day, regardless of the day, we are called to do right towards others *and* to ourselves, which leads us to the picking of grain. Jesus and his disciples are not picking grain for money, but for sustenance. They are doing what is right towards themselves. This leads us then into Jesus' other point.

Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath. Just as God's love and forgiveness is a gracious gift, so too is the Sabbath. It is a day that forces us to pause, to set aside all worries we may have the rest of the week, and to reconnect with our being a piece of something far greater. It gives us a day to marvel at God's creation, Their love and compassion, Their being the one constant in our ever-changing world. The Sabbath is a gift, one we neither have earned nor could ever earn, but that God graciously bestows upon us nonetheless. So, why does God give us this gift? Just so we can have a day off?

The purpose of Sabbath is the summation of these first four commandments and what Jesus says is the greatest commandment: To love the Lord, our God, with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In setting aside not only our work, our stresses, but also our personal investments and interests, we show our love for God. In our prayers, songs, Scripture readings, and hearing the Word, we acknowledge the marvelous nature of our God, who loves us even to the point of death on a cross. In sustaining ourselves, doing what we need to do to care for ourselves in body, mind, and spirit, we show love towards ourselves and therein show love for the God in whose image we are so wonderfully made. In sustaining others, doing what is just and compassionate, we love our neighbors, who are just as wonderfully made in God's image. The Sabbath is as much about God's love for us as it is our love for God. Through Sabbath, not only are our bodies rested, but our spirits rejuvenated. So, who's up for going on a Sabbath?