

“Ten Commandments: It’s About Time”

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 • Mark 2:23-3:6

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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When I was growing up in Louisiana, like most Southern states we had what are called “Blue Laws.” These were laws that required businesses to be closed on Sundays and for those that were permitted to be open the laws regulated what could be sold on Sunday. For example, I first learned to drive on Sunday in the parking lot of the mall because it was closed. In fact, I worked for a department store during college and worked the first Sunday that stores were permitted to open. We were only open from 1-5. I remember that we didn’t sell much that day even though there were people in the store. It was as if they came to the mall just to see if anything bad would happen to them for shopping on a Sunday.

Drug stores were allowed to be open, and for good reason, but there were some things that they couldn’t legally sell on Sunday. They kept those things behind the counter. Like electronics. You could buy a battery-powered alarm clock or radio on Sunday but not one that plugged in.

Blue laws were fairly common in the East and South and there are still some restrictions in place in many places. Sales of alcohol on Sunday is still regulated in many places, including in Texas. You also can’t buy a car from a dealer on Sunday. In some states it’s against the law to hunt on Sunday. In Virginia you are not permitted to hunt deer, turkey, dove, or duck on Sunday. You are allowed, though, to hunt bears and raccoons. Go figure.

At the time of Jesus the Pharisees had their own version of blue laws. In the fourth commandment God says that we are to keep the Sabbath day holy, which means we are not to do any work that day. But what constitutes work? And how much is too much? Over the years they came up with 39 different categories of work with multiple rules in each category. For instance, one of the categories prohibited carrying burdens on the Sabbath. How big a

burden? Anything heavier than half a dried fig was considered a burden. Half of a fig was fine but a whole fig was out of the question.

Traveling was considered work but you still needed to get to the Temple for worship, so they determined that a little less than half a mile was fine. Even today in areas with large Jewish populations there are special accommodations to prevent “working” on the Sabbath. Pressing electrical switches is considered work, including the buttons on elevators. So the elevators in those areas have a special Sabbath setting that causes it to stop and every floor, allowing people to get on or off without violating the Sabbath rules.

So we come to this story of Jesus’ disciples picking some heads of grain on the Sabbath, rubbing them in their hands to get the husk off, and eating them. This is such an important story that it’s found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Pharisees see them and ask Jesus, “why are they working on the Sabbath? It’s against the law!” By their definition, plucking the grain is harvesting and rubbing it in their hand is threshing.

Jesus could have said, “look, you guys are being ridiculous. This is not work. They were hungry and they had a snack.” Instead, Jesus uses this as another opportunity to say something about himself and about how they have missed the whole point of the Sabbath. The first thing Jesus does is remind them of a story about David, when he was fleeing from Saul. Jesus in effect says that David’s service to God was more important than the Sabbath rules. In the version of this passage in Matthew 12 Jesus also points out that the priests in the Temple violate the Sabbath by working and it’s OK because their service to God is more important than the Sabbath rules. His point to the Pharisees is that the disciples are serving God by being His disciples and their service is also more important than the rules. Then Jesus

says, "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." In other words, Jesus claims for himself divine authority over the Sabbath. He is claiming to be God.

Jesus then goes into the synagogue and sees a man with a deformed hand. The Pharisees are watching to see if Jesus will heal on the Sabbath, which they would consider to be a violation of the commandment. In their efforts to protect the Sabbath, the Pharisees had forgotten its purpose. Jesus asks them, "Is the Sabbath intended for helping or hurting people?" It's a rhetorical question. As he says in verse 27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." God commands us to keep the Sabbath for *our* benefit.

The word *Sabbath* in Hebrew literally means "cease." God says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

There are two parts to this. The first part is that we are to work six days a week. That doesn't mean you have to work at your job for six days. It means that God gives us six days a week to take care of all of our personal business. We are to work. You and I were made to work. From the beginning the Bible shows us that God works and you and I are made in His image. So work is important to our humanity and our dignity. But we are also to stop working and rest for one out of every seven days.

One author gives this great illustration. He says imagine someone comes up to you in the parking lot and asks for a few dollars to get something to eat. In your pocket you have seven dollar bills. So you take out six and hand them to him. He takes them but then knocks

you down and takes the seventh dollar as well. Would that upset you? The point is that God has given us six days to conduct our business. How offensive if we then just take the seventh day also. But ultimately when we do that it's not God who is harmed, it's us. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So let's look at why God gave us the Sabbath and what we lose if we don't keep it. The main purpose is to give you time to tend to your soul. In the early days of John Wesley's Methodist movement in England, when they would meet in their small groups they would ask one another, "How is it with your soul?" And they were genuinely asking and holding each other accountable. How is it with *your* soul? When was the last time you thought about that?

This commandment begins, "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy." If you and I are going to keep this commandment there are four principles we need to remember. This is not just remembering facts. It's more like remembering your anniversary. Remembering involves actually doing something about it. The first is *rest*. The Sabbath is about resting from our work one day out of every seven. We all need rest and it was the one thing the Israelites didn't get while in Egypt. Even machines need a time of rest. Workaholics usually realize this after their first (or second) heart attack. We need physical rest so our bodies can recover from working. But we also need emotional rest so that we are able to face our circumstances and we need spiritual rest. Getting this rest requires trust. We must be willing to trust that God is really in control and he doesn't need our help to keep the world running. Some of you really struggle with this. Sometimes I do, too. Spending a day without working or even thinking about work shows that you trust God to take care of you.

The second principle is that the Sabbath is for worship. As we have seen the past few weeks, the first commandment is really about worshiping God with your mind by worshiping the correct God. The second commandment

involves worshiping God with your heart by worshiping the correct God correctly. You keep the third commandment by worshiping God with your mouth, taking His name seriously. And so the fourth commandment is about worshiping God with your time. These days many people, including many Christians, consider gathering to worship a low priority. It's something we do if we're not too busy. Keeping the fourth commandment means making corporate worship a high priority in your week. If you have young children I know how hard it can be to get here on Sunday mornings. But it's critically important that they see worship as one of your highest priorities.

The third part of keeping the Sabbath goes hand in hand with worship—spending time in fellowship with God's people. Sunday mornings are not just Jesus and me. We worship together and we support and encourage one another.

That shouldn't end at noon. Find someone to go to lunch after the service. Spend some time in Kleberg Hall after worship visiting with your church family.

Finally, the fourth principle of the Sabbath is that it serves as a sign to the world that we are marked as God's people. We have different priorities. Forty years ago nobody would have thought twice about places like Hobby Lobby or Chick-fil-a being closed on Sunday because most places were closed. But today they stand out and everyone knows they are closed because of their faith. Imagine the impact if all Christians took the Sabbath seriously. Imagine if people who are frenzied and at the end of their rope could see an alternative by seeing Christians joyfully taking one day a week to gather, worship, rest, and serve others, not because we have to but because we want to.

Amen.