

Sermon 106, The Sabbath, Pt. 3, Exodus 31:12-18

Proposition: The Sabbath Day is not to be profaned, even for the great purpose of building the house of God.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to another mention of the Sabbath in the text of Exodus. What we will see here, in God's seventh speech to Moses on the summit of Sinai, is that the Sabbath day is not to be profaned, not even for the great purpose of building the house of God.

I. Previous Mentions of the Sabbath

Now, one major key to understanding this mention of the Sabbath here at the end of God's speech to Moses during his forty days atop Mt. Sinai is to look at the previous two mentions of the Sabbath. The first mention of it in scripture (at least by name; the thing itself is mentioned in Gen. 1-2) is in Exodus 16.

A. Exodus 16:29, in the provision of manna

There God tells His people that they must keep His Sabbath because it is a day of rest, a holy day on which to pause. The message there was "Do not go out and gather manna on the Sabbath day, because I will provide for you on the other six days." The first mention of pausing on the Sabbath, then, indicates that one is to pause from the daily round of getting food. Work for six days to provide yourself with food; on the seventh day, stop. God provides for you through your

work, but on the seventh day He wants you to stop working and remember that He provides for you.

B. Exodus 20:8-11, in the fourth commandment

The second mention of the Sabbath is in ch. 20. The fourth commandment requires the keeping holy to God such set times of worship as He has appointed, expressly one whole day in seven to be a holy Sabbath to Himself. We spoke at length about this commandment in two whole sermons about six months ago.

C. Exodus 23:10-12, the book of the covenant

The third mention of the Sabbath comes in the book of the covenant, in a whole section on life in the land. When you come into the land, you are work the land in a six years on, one year off pattern. And you are to work in a six days on, one day off pattern as well.

II. This Mention of the Sabbath

So this is now the fourth mention of the Sabbath in the book of Exodus. It is matched with a fifth mention.

A. A Frame Around the Golden Calf Incident, 31:12, 35:1-3

Immediately after this passage begins the story of the Golden Calf, that unholy cow that nearly brought about the destruction of Israel. And as soon as the story of the Golden Calf is over, the text once again contains a reminder to keep the sabbath. In other words, this Sabbath passage is a frame around the Golden Calf incident. What does that mean? God's rest surrounds His people's sin. The time to rest ends the instructions for the tabernacle, and begins the account of building the tabernacle. Even though God's people sinned, they cannot stop Him coming to dwell among them. And that Sabbath is the day on which His dwelling is most meaningful, because it is the day they spend with Him. When you live with someone, if you're working and he's working you may hardly see each other. That's why God tells His people to build a day for Him into their weekly schedule. He is living with us, not so that we can say "Oh, yeah, Yahweh — He's around here somewhere," but so that we can say "I know God. I spend meaningful time with Him in His house every week."

The Golden Calf, wicked as it was, cannot stop this. The calf will not cause God to give up and say "I don't want to spend time with you."

Can you believe that? This is the love and generosity of our Father. He spends time with us, and He wants to spend time with us. He cares for us, and He wants to care for us. He lives with us, and He wants to live with us. What an incredible message! God has conquered sin, wiping it away so that we can dwell with Him and He with us.

That's the truth of the Sabbath. No matter how you have sinned this week, the fact that this holy day still rolls around and God still wants to meet with you on it tells you that your sin is not the end of the story. The Sabbath means not only that you get to pause from work, but that God wants you to be with Him.

B. A Reminder that Holy Time Precedes Holy Space

The placement of the Sabbath command here also reminds us that holy time precedes holy space. God planted the garden eastward in Eden to be a temple for Himself. But then He took the

Sabbath day and ceased from His work. But Eden is not called holy, whereas the Sabbath is. God makes time holy first, before making a place holy. Maybe that's because we can choose to enter a geographical place, or to leave it. But we must pass through time whether we want to or not. Holiness comes to us from outside; God brings us into His holy time for a whole day each week, and we get to experience a day that is set apart uniquely for Him.

In other words, brothers and sisters, to everyone who would agree, "Oh, yes, the tabernacle and temple are very important and should never be profaned," the Lord says "Well, just remember that the holiness of my day is prior in time and importance even to the holiness of my dwelling place." That's not something that we remember easily. But it's something true, something vital.

C. An Insistence that Building the Tent Does Not Supersede Sabbathing

Similarly, the placement of the instructions here in God's speech to Moses also makes it clear that building the tent for God is not more important than Sabbathing. As crucial as the tabernacle is, keeping the seventh day holy is more crucial.

This applies far more to pastors than to the rest of you, though it certainly applies to you too. But I'm preaching to myself when I say "Caleb, it is more important to rest and enjoy God on His day than it is to build His church."

Do I actually believe that? Pastors can be really challenged to actually enjoy their holy day with God. It's a busy day, a day of spending time with God's people and trying to listen to them, discern their needs, and hopefully meet their needs. My goal is to serve a delicious three-course meal of spiritual food each Sunday. I spend the whole week cooking up this food, preparing it so I can dish it out to you. Do I remember to eat it myself? Do I enjoy the banquet as much as anyone else? Do I rest in the Lord and let myself be refreshed by His presence? Building the tent does not supersede sabbathing. Working to build up the church, as good and as vital as that is, does not take precedence over making the day holy by resting. Now, I still need to do the work of worshiping God, just as you do. We rest from our daily work, not to do nothing, but to make the day holy by spending it with God in the public and private exercises of His worship. If you don't cease from your other labors, you certainly won't and can't worship. But even ceasing from your labors is not enough. The day is a day to gather for worship and fellowship. Yes, the church is primarily built on Sundays. But it is built not by offering people more to do but by offering them rest. Isn't that what Jesus said? "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you more burdens." No. He said "And I will give you rest."

He gives rest. One of the biggest ways He gives rest is through the work of worship. Don't forget it. That's why the command to build the tabernacle closes and opens with a command to remember the Sabbath day.

D. A Dual Rooting of the Sabbath, 31:13, 17

Furthermore, the sabbath day is rooted in two major truths here in this passage.

1. As Covenant Sign Between God and Israel

First of all, the sabbath is a covenant sign. It points to something beyond itself.

Now, what does the sabbath signify? According to this verse, it signifies that God is Yahweh, and that He makes us holy. The sabbath points beyond itself to tell us that not only are we resting from our six-days' work today, we also are made holy from beyond the world, by God's work in us. You don't make yourself holy; you don't change your own purpose. God makes you holy; He changes your purpose so that you live for Him.

But the sabbath signifies not only God's new-creation power to take sinners and make them holy, but also His power in the original creation.

2. As Imitation of God's Own Rest & Refreshment

The sabbath signifies, says v. 17, that our life as God's people is to be like His life as our God. He worked six days and rested one in the creation of the world, and He calls on us to work for six days and to rest for one day in our weekly cycle too. Six on, one off. That is the pattern. God didn't do it for Himself, but for us, so that we could remember Him as creator and redeemer, as the God who made heaven and earth and also as the God who makes us holy.

III. What the Sabbath Demands from Us

What does the Sabbath demand from us? The first thing I want to point out is that this commandment has not lapsed or been fulfilled by Christ in the sense that we no longer have to do it. Yes, the command to operate the Levitical system in the tabernacle was fulfilled by Christ so that we no longer have to do it. But the Sabbath command wasn't.

A. God Keeps Bringing It Up Because He Really Means It

First of all, God keeps bringing it up because He really means it. The Sabbath is not mentioned over and over in Exodus to give us the hint that this pattern is really rather temporary and going to vanish away. No. Just as you repeat to your children the commands that are truly important for them to follow, so God repeats to His children the commands that He really needs them to follow. Notice, too, in the New Testament, that though Paul uses language that *might* imply that the Sabbath has ceased to be a binding command, Jesus is clearer in His teaching. And Jesus instructs us to pray that our flight would not be on a Sabbath day — indicating that He fully expected His followers to continue to keep the Sabbath day after He had returned to Heaven. If the interpretation of Paul can go either way, but the interpretation of Jesus can go only one way, I think we all know which interpretation is the safe one to follow.

So the Sabbath is repeated throughout Exodus, and throughout the Bible, because God really means it. From the first week of creation, He wants us to imitate Him and use this holy day for His purposes.

B. The Sabbath Demands a Pattern of Six On, One Off

What does that mean? As we saw, the command itself does not refer to any particular day of the week. It refers only to a pattern of six on, one off. You work six days and take one off. Which day do you take off? Strictly speaking, that is not the moral part of the command. That is the ceremonial, changeable aspect. The NT apostles and Christians took the first day of the week as God's holy day, and the mainstream of the church has always stuck to that. As my lawyer friend Dustin pointed out, the institutional church has to have Sunday or it can't exist. We exist by gathering people together on a weekly basis for their entire lives. That is only possible when

people have time to gather. And that time has to be taken away from the other pursuits of our lives. As we all know, if you wait for a good time to do something you'll never do it. You have to simply make the time. That is one of the truths of Sabbath. If you don't make time for God you won't have time for God.

C. The Day Off Is Holy — It Exists for God

That is what God means when He calls the day "holy." You have to observe the pause day, because it is holy to you. That is, you have to know that it exists for God. The Sabbath day is for God. The NT gets at this same truth by calling it the Lord's Day. Christmas is not your birthday, and the Lord's Day is not your day. It's His. So you have to use it for Him.

D. You Can't Keep One Command by Breaking Another

Well, clearly one truth (which we've already talked about a bit) of the placement of this command is that you can't keep one command by breaking another. The Lord commanded them to build His tabernacle, and they couldn't keep that command by breaking the Sabbath day. He has told us to submit as raw materials to the process of being built into the dwelling place for God by the Spirit, and we can't keep that command by breaking the Sabbath day. As I just mentioned, we are built up above all by gathering with one another for worship. If you don't take the time to do that, it doesn't happen. You can't keep the command to let Jesus build His church with you if you don't come to church, and if you don't acknowledge and protect the holiness of the Lord's Day you're not too likely to be in church.

E. Being Put to Death Is a Just Punishment for Sabbath Profaning, v. 14a

Now, in order to understand just how seriously the Lord takes the sin of Sabbath-breaking, consider that He here institutes the death penalty for Sabbath-breaking — and we see this death penalty carried out in Numbers 15 on a man who had been gathering sticks on the Sabbath.

It's deliberately shocking. The Lord is making a point. The point is that this day is His. No longer is this penalty to be enforced; it is of the nature of a civil law rather than a moral law, and anyway, even in our judicial system, the penalty is largely up to the discretion of the judge, with the legislator imposing only a maximum penalty for most crimes.

The point is not that we ought to kill all Sabbath-breakers. The point is that the death penalty is a just punishment for this sin.

How, you ask? In this way: Just as someone who touched the Ark or profaned some other aspect of the Tabernacle's holy space would be put to death by God (as Nadab and Ahihu were, or Uzzah was), so someone who profaned Yahweh's holy time would be put to death. The biggest difference is that the Lord Himself policed the boundaries of His holy space, while He entrusted the civil authorities in Israel with policing His holy time.

The death penalty is a just punishment for Sabbath-breaking because the death penalty is a just punishment for every sin, considered as a sin against God. Considered as a sin against one's fellowman, Sabbath-breaking or petty theft seem rather insignificant. Considered as sins against the Almighty, they appear in their full horror, as attacks on the majesty and holiness of Yahweh God.

F. Being Cut Off From Israel Is a Just Punishment for Sabbath Working, v. 14b

Thus God's further statement that those who take His holy day and use it for their own purposes of working are thereby denying both the original creation and the new creation. They are denying the holiness of Israel by profaning the day that signifies the holiness of Israel. And thus, they are justly cut off from God's people.

Brothers and sisters, keep the Sabbath holy. Use it for worship and works of mercy. Make the day holy by resting and worshiping. God is not kidding. Even the NBER has found that suicides increase in states where blue laws are repealed. You not only love God but love your neighbor by respecting the holiness of this day. So do it.

In case you've forgotten, the passage closes with a reminder that the tablets of the testimony were written with the finger of God. Thus ends Moses' time on Sinai. Certain things are not written in stone — the BCO, for instance. But God's Sabbath command is written in stone. Keep it, and you will be blessed. Amen.