

Christ Community Covenant Church
What does it mean to sabbatical well? - Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep It Holy
Pastor Dave Scherrer - June 25, 2017

As you remember, I will be taking a sabbatical leave this summer. I begin July 15th and I return to the pulpit on October 16th. I'm looking forward to it. Not for the reasons you might think though. I like to work, I love this church and I find my friendships and service here very fulfilling.

Let's talk just between us for a bit. Some people see me as a micro-manager. You'd have to ask the staff if they see me that way. I don't see that in me. I do expect best efforts and that our work here be excellent, so sometimes I think that desire for a work that honors Christ appears like micro-managing. But the reality is I trust the staff very much. They work hard and they work inspired. I do not fear being away from the church and that things are going to fall apart. The Council is a gifted and called group of men and women who serve you well and they are as engaged in the life of the church as any past Council that I have worked with here at 4Cs.

But with all that said, you may have figured out that taking a leave of absence from 4Cs is a bit of a push pull for me. However I am truly looking forward to the rest and refreshment for Susan and me and for a freshening and re-envisioning season for the church.

Maybe you see it that way as a push pull too. I know of churches and pastors that have had bad experiences. There is a story out there that while one pastor was on sabbatical leave, they fired him, moved the things out of his office and put it on his front door porch. Not so much as a thanks see you later. That seems a bit harsh to me. My hope for me and 4Cs is that we will all experience the sustaining grace and power of Christ in these next several weeks and will all find ourselves the better for this season of rest and refreshment and recalibrating.

With these questions and hopes I have set about a three week series beginning this morning on what it means for you and me to sabbatical well. So let's get after it and let's begin with prayer:

Prayer

Let's take a step back this morning before we dive into the deep end of sabbatical-ing well. The root word for sabbatical is 'Sabbath,' Hebrew for "to cease from work" or "to rest." You remember it as one of the Ten Commandments. Let's look at it together.

Exodus 20:8-11 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.

The Sabbath is a command

They don't call them the 10 Suggestions. Now, just to be theologically fair, there are many theologians who believe that these Mosaic Covenant laws have been made obsolete so to speak by the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. The Law has been fully justified in Christ – agreed!

I have read these scholarly arguments and agree generally with them but the Ten Commandments in my mind have not so much been made obsolete but have been empowered by Christ. Set free by Christ. These powerful non-negotiables continue to be non-negotiable, but the attitude behind them has been refocused by Christ. Now we obey not out of law and duty but out of love – but we still obey!

Let's look at this in **Matthew 12:1-12** for instance:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." ³ He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

So Jesus didn't come to abolish the Sabbath but to dig it out from under the mountain of legalistic sediment, and give it to us again as a blessing rather than a burden. It is a day for showing mercy and a day for doing good (vs 12). It should not be governed rigidly by narrow definitions of what is work and what is not. It is a day to focus on the Lord. And now Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath (vs 8), so it is a day to focus on Jesus. So here are 5 things to think about from our Exodus passage:

1. Remembering

First, Israel is to remember the rest day. Sabbath means rest. "Remember the Sabbath day," means, "Don't forget to take a day off."

2. Keep It Holy

The Fourth Commandment is not just a requirement to "keep the Sabbath," but more than this is the instruction to "keep the Sabbath holy." The Sabbath day is commemorated as a holy day, one designated such by the Lord. Keeping the Sabbath involves much more than abstinence from labor; it requires the acknowledgment of the sacredness, the sanctity, of this day because of God's deeds and declaration. In other words, the rest is not to be aimless rest, but God-centered rest. Attention is to be directed to God in a way that is more concentrated and steady than on ordinary days. Keep the day holy by keeping the focus on the holy God.

3. One Out of Every Seven

The holy rest day should be one out of every seven. Verse 9: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God." Work six, rest one. Work six, rest one. That's the pattern prescribed in the Ten Commandments. ¹ Note it does not say that the Sabbath ("rest day") has to be the last day of the week or the first day of the week. The concept of weeks is not even mentioned. The command is simply work six, rest one. Every seventh day should be a Sabbath. The reason why men do not wish to stop what they are doing is most often that they have not finished. The Fourth Commandment deals with this problem by instructing the Israelites to *plan to be finished by the end of the sixth day, and to see to it that they do finish.*

The commandment here is broadened from the command given in Exodus chapter 16. In that passage, God specifically prohibited the Israelites from gathering manna on the seventh day of the week. Now, all labor is prohibited. This command is now so general it will require further clarification. We are thus prepared for the next revelation God will give the Israelites. Also, the number of those prohibited to work is significantly increased to include the Israelites' servants and their beasts. Not only was rest guaranteed for all, but this would constitute a nation-wide shut down, which would make it more difficult for any who might be tempted to overlook this commandment.

4. No Fudging

Fourth, no fudging on the commandment by saying, "Well, I will keep it, but I will put my maid to work, or set my ox to threshing with a carrot in front of his nose at 6 PM the evening of the Sabbath so that it will thresh the grain all day while I rest." God says, no. You miss the point if you try to keep the business running by using servants or animals or relatives.

5. God's Rest After Creation

Finally verse 11 leads us to the basic point of the commandment. It is based on God's rest after creation: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

This commandment in verse 11 we are reminded that the Lord "made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them." Previously in the Commandments, God had forbidden the worship of other gods and the use of idols and images. Specifically, God said, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). We find that the Israelites would be tempted to make images of those things which God created, either in the heavens above, on the earth, or in the sea. After they were forbidden to fashion any images in the form of any creatures in these three spheres, God then refers to the fact that He rested after having finished creating everything in the heavens above, on the earth, and in the sea (Exodus 20:11). Is there any significance to the repetition of these three spheres? I believe so. I believe that God is teaching a very important lesson about worship: Israel would be wrong to try to worship God by imitating his creatures (making idols) but they would be wise to worship God by imitating his actions in creation by resting after as He did!

The Sabbath is a sign

It is a sign pointing to Christ. God providing His Son as the source of salvation.

It would be a mistake to conclude from these two texts that the only blessings we should focus on during our Sabbath observance were the blessings of creation. Deuteronomy 5 gives us a second version of the Ten Commandments. Here the basis of the Sabbath observance is different. Verse 15:

Deuteronomy 5:15 You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

In other words the mighty hand and the outstretched arm of God were not wearied by the work of creation. They are full of strength. God's rest was not for recuperation, but for exultation. Now the same God has shown his power not just to create but also to save. So the focus of the Sabbath is on God not only as the source of creation, but also as the source of salvation. "Your God brought you up out of the land of Egypt . . . THEREFORE he commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." One day of rest in every seven, kept holy to the Lord, reminds us and shows the world that GOD is our creator and our deliverer—we did not make ourselves, we cannot sustain or save ourselves without his grace. Be still and know that he is God.

What did the Lord say at the Exodus from Egypt?

Exodus 31:12-13 Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.

The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still. This stresses again the truth that the Sabbath signifies our utter reliance on God's grace.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you." The Sabbath is a sign. And it is also a gift...

The Sabbath is a gift

God's purpose for us on the Sabbath is that we experience the highest and most intense joy that can be experienced, namely, that we "take delight in the Lord." And yet what he finds again and again is professing Christians who prefer little human-sized pleasures from things that have no close relation to God at all.

If you worked seven days a week in the hot sun to keep life and limb together, with scarcely any time for leisure and reflection, would you consider it burdensome if your God came to you with omnipotent authority and said, "I don't want you to have to work so much. I want you to have a day a week to rest and enjoy what really counts in life. I promise to meet your needs with just six days of work"? That is not a cruel command. It is a gracious gift.

Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Isaiah 26:3 (KJV) ³ **Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee**

Is your mind stayed on God or is it starved? Starvation of the mind, caused by neglect, is one of the chief sources of exhaustion and weakness in a servant's life. If you have never used your mind to place yourself before God, begin to do it now. There is no reason to wait for God to come to you. ~ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

The reason that so many people feel it as a burden is partly that we have so much leisure, we don't feel the need for the Sabbath rest; but more important, I think, is the fact that not many people really enjoy what God intended us to enjoy on the Sabbath, namely, Himself. Many professing Christians enjoy sports and television and secular books and magazines and recreation and hobbies and games far more than they enjoy direct interaction with God in his Word or in worship or in reading Christian books or in meditative strolls. Therefore, inevitably people whose hearts are set more on the pleasures of the world than on the enjoyment of God will feel the Sabbath command as a burden not a blessing. This is what John says in 1 John 5:3, "**For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.**" The measure of your love for God is the measure of the joy you get in focusing on him on the day of rest. For most people the Sabbath command is really a demand to repent. It invites us to enjoy what we don't enjoy and therefore shows us the evil of hearts, and our need to repent and be changed.

Sabbath time shapes the way you begin and end each day. In the Bible (Genesis 1), each new day begins at sundown. The first part of each day begins in restful darkness, preparing for the gift of light and activity. As Eugene Peterson notes, "I go to sleep to get out of the way for a while." God and nature go on without us, and we join the work in the morning. The Jewish Shabbat observance, which begins on Friday evening, honors this biblical view of time. If you were to ask an observant Jew to explain how his or her family keeps Sabbath and what this practice means to them, they would say that there are Shabbat prayers to welcome the Sabbath on Saturday evening. Jews bless the ending of Shabbat by giving children something sweet so the taste of Sabbath peace will linger on the tongue.

What's good to say "yes" to on the Sabbath?

- Joyful worship.
- Feasting, playing, taking delight in nature and in one another.
- Freedom that contributes to the freedom of others and to the well-being of the natural world.
- Something different from what you do regularly all other days.

What's good to say no to?

- Committee meetings, even for church. Schedule meetings on other days.
- The marketplace. Try not to spend money on the Sabbath. Refuse to let the marketplace govern life this day.
- Sadness and mourning. Pinchas H. Peli in *The Jewish Sabbath* says, "The Sabbath does not 'do away' with sadness and sorrow," it merely requires that all sadness be 'tabled' for one day so that we may not forget that there is also joy and happiness in the world and acquire a more balanced and hopeful picture of life." Sadness is suspended in order to rejoin the community for Sabbath. "The Sabbath, by its very being, comforts and heals."
- Rest from commerce. Name 3 things you might do to "rest" from commerce on the Sabbath.

- Rest from worry. What activities summon worry or anger in you - paying bills, doing tax returns, making "to do" lists for coming week, thinking of things or people who irritate you? If you knew you could refrain from those worrisome activities for 24 hours every week, how would it change your week?
- Rest from work. What would this mean for you and for your friends and family? Do you know anyone who is required to work on Sundays? Name what Sabbath might mean in this person's situation. How can you help him/her find joy in Sabbath?
- Rest for creation. How can we spend Sabbath practicing a way of life that is good for creation? What might this do to us during the other six days?

The Bible teaches us that the Sabbath is a way of remembering and expressing the truth that God is our creator and deliverer and sanctifier. We are dependent on him for all we have in the world, for our deliverance from enemies, and for our holiness. He has indeed designed that we work. But our work neither creates, nor saves, nor sanctifies. For these we depend on the blessing of God. All things are from him and through him and to him. Lest we ever forget this and begin to take our strength and thought and work too seriously, we should keep one day in seven to cease from our labors and focus on God as the source of all blessing.

¹ "Their sojourn in Egypt had taught them the ten-day 'week.'" Ibid, p. 24. Dressler quotes here from Richard Parker, "The Calendars and Chronology," *Legacy of Egypt* (Oxford: University Press, 1971), p. 17.