

“God’s Rules for Living Today” (Part 4)
“Remember the Sabbath”

Today we will look at the 4th commandment in this series on the Ten Commandments. The 4th commandment is found in Exodus 20:8-11. “Remember the Sabbath day, and 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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

God told Israel to *remember* the Sabbath day and to *keep it holy*. “Holy” – means “different”, “separate” “set apart for God.” The Sabbath is to be different from the other days of the week! We can work 6 days, but the 7th day is to be a day of *rest*. The model for this is God Himself! According to the Book of Genesis, God created the world in 6 days, then rested on the 7th day!

There is another version of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, chapter 5. It’s pretty much the same wording as Exodus 20, but then it adds something: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15). The sense here is that the Sabbath is to be a day to *remember* and *reflect* on how God has delivered them. So, the Sabbath was not just a day of *rest*, but a day for *reflection* and *spiritual renewal*.

Now, if you didn’t already know, the Sabbath day is not Sunday! It is Saturday. Actually, for the Jew in the time of Jesus it was from sundown Friday night to sundown Saturday. Very early in the Christian movement, as it separated from Judaism, believers got away from observing Saturday as the Sabbath, and chose to worship on *Sunday* to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week (Sunday). Sunday came to be called “the Lord’s Day” in the New Testament. So the command to observe 1 day out of the week for rest and worship has been part of our Hebrew and Christian heritage.

This commandment is a gracious gift of God, given for our benefit! God designed us so that we can’t continue to go and go and go ...work and work and work...without taking time to rest. It’s just common sense: If we work all the time we’ll get burned out or break down. During the French Revolution the Lord’s Day was abolished in France. One day in *ten* was to be a day of rest. The experiment lasted only about 6 months. People couldn’t stand it. Even animals couldn’t cope – horses going without rest for 10 days broke down in the streets. During the pioneer days in our country there were 2 groups of settlers who started across the plains at the same time, heading west. One group, led by a spiritual man, stopped each Lord’s Day for rest and worship. The other group, led by an irreligious man, plugged on every day, anxious to get to the gold in California. Which group do you think got there first? *It was the group that stopped and rested each Lord’s Day.*

God didn’t give us this commandment (or any commandment) just to be dictatorial and demanding, but for our own good! The commandment to remember the Sabbath is one of the

great merciful commands of the Old Testament!

But *physical* rest and refraining from work is not the only thing we humans need. We also need *emotional* and *spiritual* renewing. For Hebrews and Christians, the Sabbath and the Lord's Day were meant for both *rest* and *worship*. Unless we regularly take at least 1 day out of the week to worship and seek spiritual renewal with others, we will tend to forget God the rest of the week. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy..." (Exodus 20:8).

With all of this in mind, ***let's look at what our American society is doing with the Lord's Day (Sunday)***. For those of you who are older, let me ask you: What was Sunday like when you were growing up? What was available for you to do Sunday morning? How does that compare with today?

Any of you remember the Sunday "blue laws" in Pennsylvania? Most stores had to be closed on Sunday. I remember as a kid, Phillies games on Sunday had to stop at 6 p.m. True, this was a nuisance. The game had to be stopped at 5:59 p.m., and had to be finished another time. (Some of you younger people can't imagine anything like that)! People laugh at such "antiquated laws," and the state legislature has been slowly eliminating these blue laws - but these blue laws pointed out that Sunday was to be different.

When I was growing up in Lancaster, downtown stores were closed on Sunday, and closed every night but Friday. Grocery stores were closed on Sunday. (And it's amazing – my family never went without food, and somehow people managed to get their shopping done – even Christmas shopping). Now, most grocery stores are open on Sundays. The mall is open on Sunday. Even some banks are open on Sunday. Of course, all this means people will have to work on Sundays.

Forty or fifty years ago, there wasn't much going on Sunday morning. The church didn't have much competition. Now, think of what's available for people on Sunday morning – shopping, kids' sports (soccer, baseball, hockey), charity events like walkathons, bike-a-thons, etc. Pastor Donald Shelby tells of getting a phone call from a young lady who wanted to get married. She asked if he would perform the ceremony in a nearby hotel. When he asked the date and time she said it would be on a certain Sunday in July at 11 o'clock in the morning! She asked if he was free at that time. He said he was dumbfounded into silence. Finally, she asked, "Is there a problem with that?" He said, yes, as matter of fact, he had one or two minor commitments every Sunday morning at that time! "What kind?" she wanted to know. He said by then he knew there was little use trying to explain. She asked if he knew of *any* pastor who might be available. So he suggested she try the Seventh Day Adventist church! *Is that a commentary on our culture, or what!*

This is the setting in which we have to try to keep this commandment today! The Judeo-Christian perspective that suggested that Sunday is different from other days is evaporating. Our culture is much more pluralistic, much more secular in its outlook.

I'm sure we will never go back to those days when stores were closed, activities were shut down, and Sunday was kept special as a day for rest and worship and family activities.

So, in light of all of this, ***how shall we observe this commandment?*** Our culture's disregard for the importance and sacredness of the Sabbath creates a dilemma for many people of faith: should I take a job where I have to work on Sunday? If I have a business should I keep my shop or business open? Should I buy my groceries on Sunday, shop at the mall on Sunday? What about if I have children playing sports, and they have games on Sunday morning? Should I mow the lawn on Sunday, do housework on Sunday? If I have to work on Sunday, is it OK to take another day of the week as my "Sabbath?"

It seems to me that when we look at Scripture, there are 2 extremes to avoid. ***The one extreme is to treat the observance of Sunday in a legalistic way.*** In other words, what we do on Sunday becomes governed by a whole set of rules and regulations. There are so many do's and don'ts that Sunday becomes a burden rather a blessing.

That's what happened to the Pharisees in Jesus' day. For instance, the commandment to observe the Sabbath is *general* in nature. It says not to work – but what is "work"? So the Pharisees came up with a detailed list of rules to define what constituted "work" - how far you could travel, how much you could lift, and so on. There were 39 different headings with a host of specific rules under each. This became rather ludicrous! For example if a man's *ox* fell into a ditch on the Sabbath you could pull it out – but if the *man himself* fell in, he had to be left there until the Sabbath was over. If you were bothered by a flea you had to let the flea keep annoying you. To catch it would make you guilty of hunting, and thus working on the Sabbath! The Pharisees missed the *spirit* of the Sabbath – the Sabbath was meant to *enhance life*, not be a burden and a bother!

We see Jesus' attitude towards the Sabbath in a story in Mark 2:23-28. "One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions. Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath'".

One Sabbath Jesus and His disciples were walking through grain fields, and they were hungry. So they took grain, rubbed it in their hands to separate the kernels from the husks, and then ate it. The Old Testament law in Deuteronomy 23:25 said it was OK to do that, but since Jesus did it on *the Sabbath*, the Pharisees said He was breaking God's law. Jesus reminded them of an incident in the Old Testament where David, fleeing for his life, came to the tabernacle at Nob. He was hungry, and demanded food that was supposed to be offered as a sacrifice to God. Jesus here is pointing out an Old Testament precedent to prove that *human need* comes before *laws*. Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Jesus also *healed* on the Sabbath, which infuriated the Pharisees, because according to their rules, healing was regarded as “working”. But Jesus made it plain that works of mercy and healing *enhance life*, and therefore are OK to do on the Sabbath. (If I’m in auto accident, or have a heart attack or appendicitis on Sunday, I am glad for medical personnel willing to work on Sunday)! Jesus observed the Sabbath for rest and worship – He worshipped in the synagogue, “as was his custom”. But He didn’t buy into the legalism of the Pharisees that made Sabbath observance a tedious, rule-driven proposition.

Frankly, *this* extreme – the legalistic view of the Sabbath - isn’t where most Christians are today. The greater temptation for Christians today is ***to treat Sunday like any other day of the week***. It’s so easy to simply give in to the culture and disregard the special nature of the Lord’s Day. Many Christian do their grocery shopping on Sunday. Many Christians shop at the mall on Sunday. I’d be lying if I said I’ve never shopped on Sunday. But I try not to. Now emergencies are different – if you have to go to the pharmacy for medication, or if you’re traveling and have to buy gas or stop at a restaurant to eat. But to regularly use that as our shopping day? When I think of what working on Sunday has done to disrupt family life, and interfere with worship, why do I want to support that? Perhaps if every Christian refused to shop on Sunday, maybe some stores would close.

Some of us work on Sunday. I work on Sunday! That’s a decision each of us must decide for ourselves. (But if we do work on Sunday, can we take another day of the week for rest and spiritual renewal)? Most churches don’t offer a worship service through the week. Maybe more should, in order to minister to those who must work on Sunday. In one church I served not far from Philadelphia International Airport we had a Wednesday night worship service. Sometimes a flight attendant, when she had a layover in Philly, would come to our worship service.

What about our kids’ sports activities on Sunday? I don’t think there is an easy answer. Our boys played ice hockey, and they had games on Sunday mornings. I knew if we forbid them to play that this might alienate them from the church and the Christian faith, so they played on Sunday morning. We did make our one son come to the Wednesday night service. It was not an ideal solution, but we tried.

The commandment says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it ...(what?)...***holy***”. “Holy” – separate, different, set apart for God! Note: This is a *commandment* from God (not a mere suggestion!). Yet our society, and many Christians, trivialize this commandment or disregard it. But what if we dismissed the commandment against killing, and said it’s ok to murder someone? What if we simply disregarded the commandment against stealing and said that’s ok to do? When *any* of the commandments are ignored, the quality of life is diminished. It may be wise to be asking some questions: What is our violation of this fourth commandment doing to our society – to family life, for example? What might happen further down the road if we continue to disregard this commandment?

Will you join me in doing our best to remember the Sabbath day, and to keep it holy!

