

GET IN RHYTHM

Fifth in series, Ten Commandments Revisited The Fourth Commandment

Preached by Douglas Norris at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy," is the fourth commandment. We have lost the meaning of the sabbath. Our great-grandparents referred to Sunday as the Holy Sabbath. Our grandparents called Sunday the Sabbath. Our parents just called it Sunday, and now we call it the weekend! I believe we are suffering because of the lost sabbath and need to be challenged to recapture the meaning of the fourth commandment.

Let's quickly trace the history of its observance. In the Old Testament, religion and culture were synonymous, with religion dictating cultural practices. Even today in Israel, the sabbath is strictly observed. Travelers will tell us that you can purchase nothing and go nowhere in Israel on Saturday. You can't even settle your hotel bill. In the Middle Ages, culture and catholicism were synonymous. The Anabaptists and Puritans set themselves over against the culture and lived their own ethics; but, when the Puritans came to this country and gained political power, they formed a theocracy where again religion and culture were united. Strict sabbath observance, with restrictions on Sunday business and entertainment, were imposed on the culture.

We smile at the strict prohibitions. An editorial in the Chicago Daily Herald in 1898 urged, "The bicycle is as harmless as a wheelbarrow; but the part it is being made to play in the matter of Sunday recreation is wholly and indefensibly vicious." Now we consider a bicycle ride to be an admirable way to rest and relax. We are indebted to sabbath laws for ice cream sundaes. Drugstores were prohibited from making ice cream sodas on Sunday, so an enterprising entrepreneur poured the syrup over the ice cream and called it a sundae!

In my small home town, the Methodists and the Baptists (the only two churches in town) had little to do with one another. There was a decided strain. I asked my Grandpa Norris, a strict Baptist, why this was so. He snorted, "The Methodists go fishing on Sundays!" Later I asked a Methodist why there was a strain with the Baptists. He said, "We used to get along just fine. When the Baptists built their basement, we all went over to help raise the building and dig out the basement; but, when we wanted to build the Methodist basement, the Baptists suddenly cooled the relationship!" History is fascinating, isn't it?

We smile at the strictness of some sabbath observances, but aren't we missing something? I wonder if there is a correlation between the breakdown of sabbath rest and worship, and the increase in stress, emotional breakdowns and general chaos. With stores closed on Sundays, a person had to organize to cover the Sunday food needs. Now we can just run to the store if we have forgotten something; no need to organize or plan ahead. We can even run to the bank at any time of day or night now, with the convenience of the automatic teller. When we were in Australia several years ago on a pulpit exchange, Christmas fell on Tuesday. We had been invited to use a church member's seaside condominium Christmas Day afternoon, overnight and Wednesday. What we didn't realize was that the banks, ordinarily closed on Saturday and Sunday, would also be closed on Monday, Christmas Eve; Tuesday, Christmas Day; and Wednesday, Boxing Day. Five days without banks! The stores--even shopping centers--close on Saturday noon on ordinary weekends and do not open until Monday morning. We were frantic until a helpful church member vouched for our check at his store on Monday, Christmas Eve. When the sabbath is observed, you must organize your life! We are missing that. Is there a correlation between a loss of the sabbath and mental stress? I wonder.

Let's rediscover the meaning of the fourth commandment. First, the keeping of this commandment is an important part of the covenant we have with God; the covenant where God is our God, and we are God's people, living out God's lifestyle in the world, beginning with the Ten Commandments. We are realizing these days that the church and Christians cannot be culturally accommodating. A reason for the decline of mainline denominations is that for too long we have accommodated ourselves to the culture around us. Unlike our spiritual ancestors who imposed their religion on the culture, we have allowed the culture to impose on our religious practices. We have given up our distinctive reason for being and live "just like everyone else." In the Christian Century magazine this week, Stanley Haverwas and William Willimon, both professors at United Methodist Duke University, wrote a fascinating article called, "Embarrassed by God's Presence." One of their statements: "The gospel is more than a set of interesting ideas; it is a way of life which requires the church to be holy. It is always an alternative to life in the world." The authors call for a "new moral formation."

We are called as Christians, as partners in the covenant, to live an alternative lifestyle to that of the world; not in smugness, not in a sense of superiority, and not in any way attempting to force that lifestyle on those around us. But, we are called to live God's lifestyle in humility, as a matter principle, an expression of loyalty to God, to model God's way; again, not in smugness or superiority, but in expression of gratitude for God's grace. God calls us to be models. The fourth commandment--keeping the sabbath day--is one way in which we can model an alternative lifestyle.

Secondly, keeping this commandment is just common sense. The body, the mind, the spirit all need rest. The concept of bio-rhythm is fascinating--that our body, mind, and emotions go through cycles, each at a different pace. Bernard Gittelson in Bio-Rhythm writes, "From the migrations of swallows and the feeding patterns of oysters to the levels of hormones in human blood and the patterns of sleep, life can be defined as regulated time. Countless rhythms, most of them fairly predictable, can be found in the simplest of our bodily functions." Moses discovered the rhythm method some three thousand years ago! "Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord, your God." (Exodus 20:9-10).

In Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church in Minneapolis is a beautiful Ascension window dedicated to a member of the Hugh Galbraith Harrison family. During the Gold Rush, the Harrison family, along with other families, made the trip to California by wagon train. They determined before they left that they would not travel on Sunday. Sunday would be a day of rest and worship. Of course, while they parked on Sundays, other wagon trains passed them, teasing them, laughing at them, for those in a hurry were determined to get to California first. Well, you guessed it, the sabbath-keepers eventually passed the others and arrived in California first--with animals and people fresher, healthier, and in better spirits.

This commandment is talking about rhythm, and when we get in rhythm, we are healthier and happier. This commandment, to be relevant today, needs to be broadened from not only resting from labor, but resting from activities as well. We live in a culture that frantically teaches us, "Fill up every minute. Don't let up for an instant. Even on vacation, be constantly doing something. It is sinful, says our culture, to be doing nothing!" So we fill our days with activities, programs, schedules, priorities. Frantic becomes our god. Pressure becomes our motivation. Guilt becomes our conscience. Stress becomes our lifestyle. Let's change that!

I have a challenge. Let's challenge each other--and we are on virgin ground here, untried territory--to discover new ways to observe the sabbath. How can we in 1985, in the midst of a leisure-oriented, pressure-filled, activity-worshipping culture, set

aside and observe a day of rest and worship that renews us as well as models God's lifestyle? Let's do some experimenting and report to one another. In the weeks ahead, will you try to experiment with sabbath-keeping in new ways, and when you find something that works, will you write me, drop me a note in my library box, or tell me. I will write an article for the New Outlook and/or preach another sermon on this commandment after I finish the series.

As you experiment, here are some guidelines that Jews have used for centuries. May these guidelines help us to rediscover the sabbath. The sabbath has seven meanings to the tradition-oriented Jew:

1) The sabbath is a sign of the covenant. It is something we do for God. Keeping the sabbath is a lifestyle that in our day is contrary to the culture in which we live.

2) The sabbath is a day of rest. Rest--isn't that a beautiful word! How do we best rest?

3) The sabbath is a day of thanksgiving. Give thanks, rejoice, give glory to God for all we have, all we are. Give thanks to one another.

4) The sabbath is a day of dedication, a time to renew our commitments, offer our lives and families to God, get our priorities straight so God is #1, so we are not making up a god to fit us.

5) The sabbath is a day of prophecy; a prophetic day as we look forward to inheriting the age where every day is a sabbath, every day belongs wholly to God. The sabbath is a time to look to the future, to plan for it, to live for the future.

6) The sabbath is a day of joy; not a somber, sober day as our Puritan ancestors attempted to make it; but, a day of choice meals, beautiful garments and merriment. An ancient story in the Talmud recounts that when the Jewish people on earth rejoice in festivals, adorn their tables with good food, and put on fine garments, the angels inquire, "Why do the Israelites pamper themselves so much?" And the reply, "They have a distinguished guest with them today." The sabbath is a day with God in a special way. Celebrate! Jesus was raised from the dead. Rejoice!

7) The sabbath is a day of worship, a day to come apart from the hectic, frantic activities to fellowship with God's people, rest in the quietness of a worship service, give praise and thanks to God, and let God renew us. Cultivating regular, weekly worship habits is a must in the keeping of the sabbath.

Those are guidelines. How can we observe the sabbath day? Let's try some new ways, report them, help one another, and recover the fourth commandment. Get in rhythm; acknowledge cycles. "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy."

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