

I. Quotes

- A. Our duty is to play as well as we pray.
- B. Weekends are like rainbows. They look good from a distance, but when you get there, there is nothing to them. Jay Trachman
- C. Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. Thomas Merton in *The Silent Life*.
- D. The Sabbath is a day to be rather than to do. J.D. Greear
- E. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Hebrews 4:9.
- F. Work is good, but it's a rotten god.
- G. We don't take a day of rest because there is nothing else to do but because we trust God to be our provider and our security. Sabbath is just as much about our declaration of God's strength as it is about our weakness. J.D. Greear.
- H. I work almost constantly. For a novelist without hobbies, weekends don't make much difference. Most people don't enjoy weekends anyway; they don't know what to do with Sundays. Joseph Heller, Author of *Catch 22*

II. Set Up

- A. According to all the reports, something weird is happening. Today we have more laborsaving devices than ever before. We live longer, retire earlier, have a huge leisure industry and have more vacation days. And yet, we are working more hours and are more stressed out. It's not entirely clear all that is behind this. But we know that many are answering email all day long and taking phone calls at home and on vacation. And then there is this stat: the average German gets 20 days of paid vacation, the average Brit, 28, the average Finn – 30. The average American gets 15 and doesn't use them all.
- B. It is not surprising to read that we report being tired, even exhausted, because of this busyness – which most people are proud of. Enter the fourth commandment, a disruptive gift from God. Exodus 20:8 reads: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

III. Worship Segue

- A. It has been said that this is a day for rest and reflection and for working at worship not worshipping work. We are focused on the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, about the Sabbath – a holy day, God's day, a day of rest, right now...

IV. Intro

A. Many of you are tired and behind - and you've been that way for some time. You've tried to catch up, but no matter how fast you peddle, you cannot. Your to-do list goes on and on and on. There are always things to do, places to go, people to see. You keep hoping that one day things will be different, but for now you just resign yourself to lots of coffee and checking email on vacation.

B. There are explanations for this. Globalization has squeezed most of the margin out of most business – meaning you likely have to do two people's jobs; and technology has altered expectations in some unhealthy ways. But... much of this is on you.

C. I've got bad news and good news. The bad news is, this is your fault. Though you might not be able to tell by looking at your life, you are not a slave. You have choices.<sup>1</sup> The good news is, God has a gift for you. But you have to embrace it.

D. Today we look at the fourth commandment. It's found in Exodus 20:8f - which reads: **Remember the Sabbath** – the Hebrew word is Shabbat. The term means “cease and desist” and “rest.”<sup>2</sup> In this context it is referring to the seventh day of the week, Saturday, although most Christians equate it with Sunday – **Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy** – which means “separate.” **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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**

E. This passage is bigger than you likely remember: 1) for starters, it includes instruction for us to work for six days.<sup>3</sup> Work is good thing. It's not punishment. I could preach an entire sermon on the importance of work, which is what all the Boomers want the Millennials to hear. Perhaps there are some here who need to hear this. But most people living north of Chicago need to hear the rest part, both because you are not resting at all, but also because you do not understand that rest is supposed to look like; 2) the second reason this is bigger than you remember is because the fourth commandment does not simply address how we live our lives, but how we care for those we have power and influence over; and 3) there are some justice and even ecology issues in play here.<sup>4</sup>

F. It's a big commandment, and one some think pastors are unqualified to speak on. A number of my college friends make it a point to ask me what I do the other six days a week – the argument is I only work a half day a week. The joke is, for six days pastors are invisible and then on the seventh they are incompressible.

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<sup>1</sup> In his treatment of this commandment, Earl Palmer notes that we are expected to be proactive when it comes to finding work and making time for rest. We are not victims.

<sup>2</sup> Some say Shabbat also means “seven,” but some say it does not.

<sup>3</sup> Some say we work to live, and some say we live to work. Neither is all right or all wrong.

<sup>4</sup> Some argue that the rules governing the Sabbath undergird ecological conservation.

G. That could happen today because this is a topic around which I have both limited personal experience and it is also a topic I have avoided. I've been leading Bible Studies and giving sermons for thirty-five years. I have only talked about the Sabbath once. (I thought I never had, been in my prep this week, I found notes from a talk I gave thirty years ago). I have been silent on this commandment because I've done a pretty poor job of observing it, and I was pretty sure if I said much about it, Sheri would stand up and say, "Fraud. Liar."<sup>5</sup>

H. I was not planning on speaking on the fourth commandment in this series. When we started talking about something on the Ten Commandments two years ago, I made plans to be out of town on this week. Syler kept saying, "No, you need to take this topic." I said, "I can't." He said, "You must. This place is full of type A workaholics, they need to hear from one of their own." I said, "Not going to happen."<sup>6</sup>

I. Let me be clear about a few things:

1. I am no longer proud about not taking a day off, or taking one but working through it. I knew there were downsides, but working a lot is rewarded, and it suggests being important – or at the very least, it fuels thinking you are important. I now regret this. There are few topics where I do not step back and wonder, "What if I had kept this?" more than here.

2. Though I've not had the best track record of keeping it, I have thought more, read more and had more conversations about this commandment than any others. I have files for each of them. My file for the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is five times thicker than any of the others. In part because other pastors are in the same spot and increasingly because the business world is now talking a lot about pace and the upside of downtime and our desperate need for reflection.

3. Finally, several months ago, when it became obvious that I was going to preach on this, I rearranged my schedule in an effort to try again. My goal was that I would take Sunday afternoons and evenings off. As efforts go, it seemed like something Eugene Peterson would wince at. But walk before you run.

V. The Development of The Sabbath:

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<sup>5</sup> I am not alone in this. Eugene Peterson talks about his struggle with the Sabbath early on, and in 1988, Christianity Today reported that in their survey, more of their readers wanted help with the Sabbath than any other topic. (Eugene Peterson, "Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker," Christianity Today, Sept. 2, 1988, p. 25f.

<sup>6</sup> I kept shooting down their suggestions of outside speakers, saying, "I know that guy. He's more of a workaholic than I am." I eventually mentioned to Sheri that I was thinking about doing this, and she had no objections. I believe her comment was, "It's not like you've got a perfect record of keeping the other nine."

A. The idea of setting aside one day a week as unique – as holy – shows up early in the Bible – Genesis 2. There we are told that after God created the world, He rested. Not because He was tired, but in order to admire what he had done, and to set a pattern for us to follow.<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:1 reads: **By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. <sup>3</sup>Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.**

B. The second time we see the word sabbath is in Exodus 16. After escaping from Egypt, the Jews end up in the desert without provisions. To keep them alive, God sends mana each morning, but not on the Sabbath. He tells them that because one day a week is special, he will send twice the food they need the day before and none on the Sabbath.

C. Four chapters later they arrive at Mount Sinai and God establishes the Mosaic Covenant with the Jews. The Ten Commandments are the basis, with number four being the first to be stated positively – which is a bigger deal in some ways. And it is the longest and most developed of the ten.

D. Later in Exodus – chapter 31 – God explains that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant. They are different than everyone else. No other nation at that time had a day off every seven. They were too busy trying to stay alive. They Jews were going to be different because of God and part of that would be advertised by their bold, daring, reckless patterns of taking one day off every seven, just they are going to follow the example God modeled.

E. In Deuteronomy – where the Ten Commandments are repeated – a different justification is given. Here it says that they are to take one day off every seven as a reminder that God delivered them from slavery – which had been their condition for 400 years.

F. The next development comes in Leviticus 23, where the people are told that they are to use the time they are given to gather for worship, instruction, prayer and rest

G. Also found in the Pentateuch are a few other Sabbath ideas. For instance, in Numbers 15 there is a reminder that breaking the Sabbath is a capital offense, because it amounts to telling God to take a hike; and we get some information about a Sabbath year – the year of Jubilee – which happens once every ???

H. As we move out of the Pentateuch, we discover that though God had given them a Sabbath and spelled out a steep punishment for those who violated it – the people often ignored his counsel. Consequently, when we come to the Prophetic books we find the prophets ranting about the fact that the people were not keeping the Sabbath, or that they were going through the motions but not really leaning in: 1) Isaiah is mad because although they were technically keeping it, they did not truly lean into it; 2) Jeremiah tells them that Jerusalem will fall, and that God was allowing this in large part because they are not keeping the Sabbath; 3) Hosea says, “use it or lose it.” Amos and others also chime in. It’s an ongoing theme.

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<sup>7</sup> It’s worth noting that the pattern was set up before the fall – i.e., before work got hard - so it was not simply because we need to pace ourselves. It’s also interesting that he didn’t celebrate the day his work was done – which is probably what we’d do.

I. During the intertestamental period – the 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and beginning of the New - the Pharisees really double down on the Sabbath. With good intentions – misguided but good - they write laws designed to help people steer clear of violating the fourth commandment.

1. They created buffers – where if the law said, the speed limit is 30, they said it's 20, so no one would get close to 30.

2. They also developed very specific rules around 39 different categories of work.<sup>8</sup> For instance, they said that tying a knot was work, but in a world before zippers or buttons, this meant no one could keep their clothes on. So they said, “you can tie a knot, but only one you can untie with one hand. In hindsight, many of their rules are inane exercises in missing the point. There is a discussion about whether a man with a wooden leg can carry his leg out of his house if it's on fire. There is another one where they debate whether or not you can help an elderly up after she has fallen – and they decide no, unless you think she will die before the end of the Sabbath.

3. As I said, they had good intentions, but it becomes a big exercise in missing the point.<sup>9</sup> And it turns what should be a gift into a burden.

J. Consequently, when Jesus shows up, this is one of the two areas where he mixes it up with the Pharisees. They have dustups in two areas: 1) they do not like his claim to be the Messiah; 2) nor can they agree on the Sabbath.<sup>10</sup> Jesus doesn't like all of the weird rules they have made up, and seems to go out of his way to violate them. To be clear, He didn't ignore the Sabbath – in all three Synoptics He calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath and in Luke 4:16 we see that it was his custom to go to the Synagogue on the Sabbath. But He taught that man wasn't made for the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath was made for man and he goes out of his way to heal the sick, perform other miracles and otherwise do good on the Sabbath.

1. He doesn't repeal the fourth commandment, nor does he violate any of its provisions, so much as he says to the Pharisees and those following them, “you got this all wrong.” And then he fills it with real meaning.

K. Since the ending of the New Testament, there have been a few modifications of note:

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<sup>8</sup> In the Talmud there were two big essays on the Sabbath, that spelled out 39 different categories of restrictions. These were things like: cooking, baking, tying knots, fires. And some of this got comically bizarre.

<sup>9</sup> A few examples: 1) there is a discussion about whether or not a man with a wooden leg could carry the wooden leg out of his house if it's on fire; 2) for a while, the Jews refused to fight on Sunday. But after they suffered a horrible defeat during the Maccabean War, they decided they could act in self-defense. And the rules said that they couldn't destroy the offensive weapons of others, so Pompey was able to use his battering ram against the city of Jerusalem without interference from the Jews. (Jos, Antiq. XIV, 4,2-3)

<sup>10</sup> For instance, see Matt. 12:2f.

1. After Christ dies, Jewish Christians gradually shift their holy day from Saturday – the Jewish Sabbath – to Sunday, because of the resurrection.<sup>11</sup>
2. There are two efforts to adjust from a seven-day week to something else: 1) the first happens when Napoleon leads France to adopt the metric system. They move from one day off in seven to one day off in ten, but it doesn't work. The people can't do it; 2) the second happens in the 1920s. The Soviets rejected the seven-day week because of its Christian roots. They go to a five-day week – work four and then take one off, with the one off being different for everyone, that way they could keep their shops running. It also didn't work. So in the 30s they went to six day week – and it didn't work. So in the 40s they went back to a seven day week.
3. A third development happens in the West as Sunday undergoes several transitions.<sup>12</sup>
  - a) As we enter the twentieth century, Sunday is called the Holy Sabbath. At some point, it becomes just the Sabbath, but it remains a “holy day.” The general view is, it's a day set aside to worship God and for the restoration of our soul. And restoration doesn't simply mean “rest,” as in, take a nap. It was for re-alignment. It was a day set aside to worship God and think about life – am I doing it right?
  - b) At some point around the fifties, the Sabbath becomes Sunday. Stores start to stay open and people start to do different things. Church was still an expected part of the drill, but Sunday becomes more about amusement than restoration. (To “muse” means to “not think.” It was a time to relax and not work – rather than ask questions, such as, “Am I doing the right things? Are my priorities right? Do I have ambition in check?” – it's now time to not think about work.
  - c) About fifteen years ago, Sunday becomes “the weekend,” and this is where we really make the Faustian Bargain. The new line was, “weekends were made for Michelob.” As a rule, what weekends became was time to catch up. Time to do more. It became just another day.

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<sup>11</sup> As Justo Gonzalez shows in *A Brief History of Sunday* (Eerdmans, 2017), this topic is more complicated than most moderns realize. There appears to be very little effort by the early church to call Sunday the Sabbath, and Gonzalez argues that there is little theological justification for doing so. He also notes that it was not until much later (with the Middle Ages and then under the Puritans) that The Lord's Day became the day people took off from work for worship. I have what appear to be seminary notes that document that the Sabbath has been among the most contentious of the Ten Commandment among Christians. It lists a few views: 1) antinomian – which says that grace abolishes the law; 2) Seven Day Adventists which retains Saturday as the Sabbath in the New Covenant; 3) dominical view – which says The Lord's Day does not depend on the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment; 4) the Sabbath as Sunday approach developed in the Westminster Confession.

At some point in Western History, people are unable to decide whether Saturday or Sunday should be the right day off, and so we end up with both!

<sup>12</sup>

d) I would say we are now getting some push back against this – against what one writer called, “the witless art of living fast.” I have a collection of articles from *HBR*, *NYT*, *WP*, *Atlantic*, *USA Today* and other popular, secular publications talking about the need for downtime – need for time to think and reflect. They do not all use the word “sabbath,” they are about sleep, limits, margins, boundaries, rhythm and the like. But what they end up arguing for is close to a Sabbath.

VI. I realize that a flyover like that may raise more questions than it answers. I want to drill down on two: Why should I have a Sabbath? and What should that look like?

A. There are other issues in play. Some want to debate whether the fourth commandment is still in effect? Those in a dispensational camp argue that the Law was for a different time and we should move on. Others argue that Jesus fulfilled the Law and point out that the fourth commandment is the only one of the Ten that is not repeated in the New Testament. My quick answer is, the Sabbath is not just part of the Mosaic Law, it’s part of the Creation ordinance. We would be fools to walk away from God’s counsel here.

B. A second big question focuses on what day of the week is the true Sabbath, and does this matter? Not to me. The Seventh Day Adventists say it does. They argue that we shouldn’t have moved church from Saturday to Sunday. In his book, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, D.A. Carson unpacks this debate, arguing for Sunday. I do not have a dog in this fight. There was a time when these questions held some interest to me, not today. I want to focus on two big questions. Why you should have a sabbath and what that might look like.

VII. Let me offer four reasons why you should embrace the Sabbath.

A. First, because it’s a gift.

1. The Sabbath is a gift from a God who loves you, knows what is best for you and wants it for you.

2. Christianity can feel like just more stuff to do. But according to Jesus, the core of the Christian experience is rest. **“Come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”** Those most mature in Jesus are not those working the hardest for him but those resting best in him.<sup>13</sup> God didn’t create us to accomplish tasks, but to be in a relationship with him. He wants that for us – a life of peace and joy.

3. The Sabbath is designed as a break in the routine so we can reflect and realign our lives. We need time to stop and remember that Christ died for us. We’re good. We need to be reminded to focus on God’s love and grace. We need to be reminded of eternity – these things change everything.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J.D. Greear, *Three Reasons God Gives Us the Sabbath*.

<sup>14</sup> It is about more than external rest – it’s about inner rest of the soul. We need to stop trying to justify ourselves – to gain the money or status or reputation that we think we need. Avoiding overwork requires deep rest in Christ’s unfinished work for our salvation.

- B. If we do Sabbath right, it changes everything.
1. The goal isn't that we change Sundays, it's that we change our life. It's designed to shape how we think and what we do all week long. One writer said, the Sabbath is a gift from God designed to help us re-order all of life and time.
- C. If we work nonstop something will go wrong – principally in one of two ways:
1. We may break or get stressed. A few weeks ago I wrote about Moral Residue. According to some, eight of ten illnesses in the US are stress related.<sup>15</sup>
  2. It may be that we do not break, we simply race down the wrong path. The good life requires reflection – on life, on God on what matters. We desperately need time: to look back at where we've been, look around at what is happening and look ahead.
  3. And the busier you are, the more you need a consistent Sabbath.
- D. Taking a Sabbath helps us embrace limits and grow in faith.
1. One of the themes that has emerged in the business literature in the last ten years, is the argument that if you take a break you will get more done. It attacks the idea that rest = greater productivity = more money = more happiness. There is some truth in this. In some settings we actually are more productive if we limit our hours at work.<sup>16</sup> Read about Pareto or the Law that Work Expands to fit time allotted. Pick up Tim Ferris's book, *The Four Hour Workweek*. But that is not the purpose of the Sabbath. At its core we have to learn to trust our Creator – it's about a deep state of peace that God is sufficient.
  2. Not quite a year ago, I decided that who I am was going to be more important than what I do, and I needed to expand my devotional practices. I added about an hour to my morning routine – which left me an hour behind. Sermons normally done by Tuesday do not get done until much later. I have had to adjust expectations.<sup>17</sup> This is not what I expected. But I have come to see, part of what the Sabbath is designed to do is teach limits and force faith. Taking a day off is a way of declaring that God is god and we are not. Ultimately, our ability (of inability) to rest shows how much we trust (or do not trust) that God is in control. If we struggle to not check email or work on an assignment, we are showing a bit about our own soul.
- E. There are other reasons, such as the idea, developed in Hebrew 4:8f, that Sabbath rest points ahead to heaven, but let me move on.

#### VIII. Question Two: How do we take a sabbath?

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<sup>15</sup> This has led some to say, “violating the Ten Commandments is still a capital offense.

<sup>16</sup> There are lots of books on this, such as *The Four Hour Work Week* by Tim Ferris.

<sup>17</sup> In discussion about Sabbath rest, Keller noted that this has been the hardest thing for him to accept, and that he has had to set fewer goals. He cannot harvest to the edges.



A. It turns out that not working is hard work – a lot harder than you might think. Don't think you can just do it. In a 2003 article in *The New York Times*, entitled, "Bring Back the Sabbath," Judith Shulevitz writes:

1. Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily, the way you might slip into bed at the end of a long day. As the Cat in the Hat says, "It is fun to have fun but you have to know how." This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactingly intentional, requiring extensive advance preparation - - at the very least a scrubbed house, a full larder and a bath. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. They were meant to communicate the insight that interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.

B. I have had lots of failed attempts.<sup>18</sup> I would resolve that I was going to figure this out, and I would design a Sunday that was about reading or walking or journaling or actively not doing anything. Mostly because there was work to do, and I hate having work to do that is not getting done. I have had to accept that the work will never be done and that there will always be reasons not to take it. And I need to understand that some of those are OK.

C. Let me make four brief suggestions. The short hand here is pray and play. I want to be so careful here because this is an area where people have gone to extremes to write rules – I am thinking of the Pharisees but to some extent the Puritans, who I generally appreciate, but not here. Also, the prophets make it clear that people can keep technical rules but miss the point, and Jesus makes it clear that he will do the right thing, whatever that is.

1. First, what you do on Sunday depends a on your work ethic through the week – we simply let work expand to fill every moment, in large part by being inefficient or lazy.

2. Second, make it personal. I have a job that involves reading and writing and Bible study and prayer, and when I tried to make the sabbath about more of that, I have crashed. If you work with your hands, your Sabbath probably needs to be more thinking and reading. If you think and read, your sabbath probably needs to be more working with your hands. If you are an extrovert you may recharge best with others. If you are an introvert you may need more time alone.

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<sup>18</sup> I have had lots of failed attempts: reading, walking, walking on beach, journaling, actively not doing anything.

3. Third, do not be afraid to do nothing. Rest can mean rest, although TV is generally not rest – it is not the kind of down time that restores. 1) Keller wrote, the goal is play and pray, and just about anything that leads to that is a win. Working out, going for a long walk, taking a nap. The purpose is to enjoy: God, life in general, what you have accomplished and the freedom we have in Christ. Anything that delights and replenishes you is likely a win; 2) Gordon MacDonald told me the same thing. Years ago I wrote to him here about my struggles, asking for advice. He said “don’t try to follow a script or strict menu. At the end of the Sabbath day you should ask, “How do I feel about God, about myself, about my personal relationships, about my physical self? Whatever it takes to renew these things is in bounds.”<sup>19</sup>
4. Finally, put some sabbath in every day. This has been where I’ve taken the most ground.

IX. Conclusion: Men and women, God loves you. And his goal for you is not a frenetic, shallow life. There is more for you than what one writer called, “the witless art of living fast.” Embrace the gift.

X. Extra

- A. One of the best pictures of Sabbath rest is Christ’s crucifixion. After Jesus said, “It is finished,” the next day was the Sabbath. That is not an accident

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<sup>19</sup> MacDonald also recommended Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *Seventh Day of Creation*.