

Practices that create space for Christ to Transform: Sabbath

1. Its importance: Why do we find it so easy to break this commandment?

- (i) It is the only positively stated of the Ten Commandments.
- (ii) It is two commandments in one. It represents a theology and ethic of work as well as rest or leisure. Notice that verse 9 says, “Six days you shall labour and do all your work” and then, and only then, “but the seventh day is a Sabbath.” The Primary Analogue: “*By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from his work.*” God rested because He had first worked, and worked to completion.
- (iii) The lexical meaning of the term ‘Sabbath’ reveals that establishes its relevance in all time, its transcendence of the dispensational eras. The meaning of the word is not Saturday or Sunday. It comes from the Hebrew verb ‘**to rest.**’ It means to stop doing what one up to that point has been doing. It means ‘take a break.’ As God rested, so must humans rest. The word for Sabbath is related to the Hebrew term ‘*nephesh*’, ‘to breathe’ which is the root word for soul. The Sabbath is a time to catch your breath, to take a breather. Sabbath is **re-creation** in the sense that as God initially breathed into man the breath of life to make him a living soul, so Sabbath is the re-creating as we take a breath again. Thus it is recreation! And with this, of course comes refreshment. Exodus 23:12, where the Sabbath commandment is repeated in the Book of the Covenant, its purpose is defined in this way: “*so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.*” This is directly connected with the issue of labour laws, the treatment of labourers and the economically disadvantaged. This transcends the era of the Old Covenant. Rest is needed in all historical seasons and humans have been created in a cyclical fashion ... to work and create and then to rest and recreate in order to be able to re-create. **This is creational in its origin, not merely covenantal.** It is part of being human, not just being Jewish or even Christian.
- (iv) But the fact that, of course, God did not need to rest, in that He has inexhaustible resources of strength, adds further meaning to ‘Sabbath’. It is not just the mere cessation of labour that is mandated for humans, because they are built to need restoration of strength. It is reflection and enjoyment of what the work that has been accomplished. What has been created. So Sabbath is rest for **recreation and reflection.** God certainly looked over all He made on each creation day But at the end of 6 days He reflected for a day. He took delight in all that He had created. The Israelite Sabbath, far from being a day of dark dirges and rules, was in its inception and as properly practised, a day of refreshment, and revitalisation and joy! It was intended to be “a delight” according to Isaiah 58:13. It was ‘gift’. There is an apocryphal reference to Judith who broke her fasting for the joy of the Sabbath (Judith 8:6). A Jewish folksong says, “On the Sabbath, every Jew is a king and he feels like a new man.” The Jewish Sabbath began with a joyful fellowship meal. Of course, when Sabbath appears to change from Saturday to Sunday as resurrection day, then of course, the joy theme is even more prominent.
- (v) Sabbath has a worship orientation ... is not just rest and reflection with a purely human horizon, it is worship. Note the orientation of the Sabbath suggested in Exodus 20: 10: *but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.* Rationale? See verse 11: “*For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them....*”

The first rationale is related to the first set of meanings of Sabbath in a purely creational context. This God perspective is critical to Sabbath-keeping in that taking Sabbath requires faith. Faith that leaving our work for a day will not cause our work and our profits to suffer.

But there is another aspect of this rationale that compels us to Sabbath-keeping. It is reflection on the Divine redemptive work. The second is very much in the redemption context. The Deuteronomistic passage provides the second rationale for the Sabbath. Deut 5. 15 *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.*

Sabbath is not just rest in order for reflection and physical and emotional refreshment to occur. It is also reflection on the creative and redeeming activity of God ... it is about liberation! .

Sabbath is the symbol of and a means for the returning of humanity into the freedom and dignity of paradise ... that which was lost and has now been recovered in Christ the obedient Man for us. Sabbath is therefore spiritual ... it is a call for humans to participate in God's rest. And it is missional because those who are brought into redemption and re-creation are called upon, in participation with Christ, to be agents of redemption for others in every aspect of life.

2. Its interiority: Sabbath is a test as well as a gift

The negative statement and reinforcing of the commandment tell us a story that there is more to this commandment than meets the eye. Failure to observe the Sabbath was treated very seriously ... in fact the death penalty was invoked (Exodus 31:14, 15; 35:2,3; Num.15:32-26).

And so the Sabbath was not just gift, it was a test. It was a life and death matter. It was a "holy" day to be set apart in respect of God's setting it apart. This signals the seriousness of Imago Dei violations to be sure. It suggests that there is something deeper at stake here, however. It is a 'faith' issue that marks out those in covenant relationship with God, the redeemed from those that are not. That's why Sabbath-keeping along with circumcision become the primary signs of the covenant people of God in the OT. There are two good lines of evidence for this in the OT:

- (i) It is a primary burden of the major and minor prophets is the business of Sabbath ... and the spiritual and service aspects of it come out there ... Isaiah 1, Isaiah 58:13-14
- (ii) the highest eschatological promises are related to keeping the Sabbath. In fact, if Sabbath was honoured in its fullest sense as we have expounded it (rest, reflection, worship, service), Isaiah 58:13

A belief within later Judaism is very understandable: "If Israel would only keep Sabbath once, the kingdom of God would come instantaneously."

3. Its Implementation: see Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, ch. 8, 130-145.

Let us keep Sabbath ... as principle not rule, but as principle nevertheless. This means entering into God's rest in our souls as a spiritual pursuit. It also means taking a Sabbath day seriously (that is, Sunday, for most people) because of the creational rootedness of this command. What we do with that day should reflect what has been shared above about re-creation through reflection and worship. Recreational activities for the body should also be included. The old stringencies associated with Sabbath under the ceremonial law need to be adhered to.

1. **Creational** – Sabbath keeping as gift (Luther, piece of Natural Law)
2. **Redemptional** – Sabbath as test ... spiritual Sabbath ... critique of our faith Faith is that spiritual rest Hebrews 4 *For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. 3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, 11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*
3. **Redemptive** - Sabbath is gift, test and task... demonstrating the reality of faith and spiritual rest by practising Sabbath in all its aspects ... rest, recreation, reflection, reflection on God (worship), redemptiveness in service to fellow humans as we bring rest and recreation and liberation to them. (Calvin) Matthew 11:29-30 reflects the easy yoke of practising Sabbath and all other spiritual disciplines in union and communion with Christ who is our rest.

Pliny, governor of Pontus and Bithynia, to the Emperor Trajan, writes about early Christian observance of "Sunday Sabbath": "The Christians rose early to worship, held a holy meal, and promised each other to lead holy lives." (Klaus Bockmuehl, *The Christian Way of Living*, 77) Sunday was a festive, purifying and liberating experience for the early church. Its horizon is eschatological ... anticipates the day when recovery and replenishment and healing will no longer be needed, and when then celebrations of worship will give way to an unending celebration "which our best Sunday services are but a taste of." (Bockmuehl, *The Christian Way of Living*, 78).

Barton: What activities will I refuse to engage so the day is one of rest, worship and delight?
What activities bring me delight and how will I incorporate them?