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Brian Morgan

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THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT: THE INVITATION TO REST

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

We come now to the fourth word which God gave to Israel at Mt Sinai. Of the Ten Words, this commandment receives the longest and most detailed instruction. It is the oldest commandment, going clear back to the creation of the world (Gen 2:1-3), and the one most often mentioned in the Old Testament. It is also the most frequently violated. This is surprising, since of all the commandments this one sounds more like a gift than a command. It is a gift so simple yet so profound that few understand it, and even fewer receive it. It is the gift of rest.

If we could truly lay hold of just one commandment that would radicalize our spiritual life, this is the one. At a time when Israel had hit rock bottom and lay bleeding in the gutter of her exile, Isaiah boldly promised that if she would just step "one foot" into this commandment, it would catapult her into the Messianic age, with untold healing:

**"If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot
From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,
And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honor-
able,**

**And honor it, desisting from your own ways,
From seeking your own pleasure
And speaking your own word,**

**Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."** (Isa 58:13-14)

Yet there is such resistance to this word, and not just within our culture that abhors all sacred boundaries, but also within our own psyche. It's as if everything within us protests against the mere mention of it. Whether we are an overworked engineer, an overburdened mother, an anxious young adult or a frazzled teenager, most of us feel that a day of complete rest is a luxury we cannot afford. Yet almost everyone testifies that "rest" is his or her greatest need. No one seems to master it, however. The few who approach it confess that the sacred boundaries they carefully construct for sacred space collapse like a house of cards in a moment of real time. As I look at my own life, not long ago my wife Emily said to me, "You never take a complete day off." So today you can rest assured that I'm not going to make any of you feel guilty by my example.

What I would like to do is awaken our imaginations to see what Sabbath-keeping was intended to be like in Israel. If our imaginations are not stirred to think in new ways and enter into new worlds, exhortations are meaningless. After our imaginations have been properly stirred we will leap ahead to the New Testament to see how Jesus functioned on the Sabbath and fulfilled it. Then we will examine how the apostles conceived of the Sabbath in light of Jesus' resurrection. Finally, I will leave us with some practical suggestions for cultivating "rest."

I. The Sabbath is a Celebration

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your

sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the 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." (Exod 20:8-11 NASB)

A. The Sabbath celebrates the Creator

The command "to remember" (Heb. *zakar*) the day signifies not just the mental process of remembering, but to reenact something in the past so that its significance is felt in the present. This commandment gives Israel the awesome privilege each week of re-enacting the role of the Creator at the climactic moment when he had perfected his creation and "rested" from all his work. This was the seventh day of creation. The day is depicted in three divine actions: God "ceased" (*shabat*), "blessed" (*barak*), and "made it holy" (*qadash*).

The reason God ceased from his labors was not that he was exhausted and in dire need of a break,¹ but rather because his work was complete, finished, perfected. There was nothing he needed to add to it. It was done. As the heavens and earth were now complete, it was only appropriate for God to take time to celebrate their beauty, to sing in their splendor, revel in their complexity, coherence and diversity, and even laugh and dance in the sheer enjoyment of the finished task. So God took a whole day to celebrate and glory in the completed product. He then blessed the day, filling it with life and fertility. Finally, he set it apart as holy, endowing it with all that is eternal. This act was the finishing touch to the creation, the architectural crown that would infuse the entire creation with the eternal rhythm of working/resting, working/resting.

By divine invitation, man is asked to join the Creator in the dance. There is one significant difference, however. While God worked six days and rested on the seventh, man's first day on earth was not a work day, but a holiday! Adam's first task as a human being was not work but celebration, not doing but seeing, not planning but celebrating with God all that he had done for him before he ever arrived on the stage. This is a clue that the fulfillment of our humanity is found in appreciation. Our value is not found in what we produce, but in receiving the gifts God has created for us. Weekly we are reminded that we contribute nothing to usher in the rain from heaven's doors, the rising of the dew from the earth, sunlight for warmth and light, fragrance and color for the rose, or that momentary pink when at sunset we observe "the east flinging nets of clouds to hold the rose light a moment longer."² Appreciation for these gifts is what makes us profoundly human. Life is a gift, a banquet table teeming with bounty, beauty and fertility. Sabbath was made for the joyous celebration of divine grace.

When we first moved into our home almost thirty years ago, I planted a redwood tree in the back yard. Unfortunately, I violated the laws of creation. First, I did not know that redwood trees should be planted in a cluster, since they need to create their own environment; and second, I placed the tree too close to the power lines. Our little tree grew, but never became lush, though I gave it constant care. After ten years it had shot up past the power lines and to my horror, PG&E came and topped the tree. My treasured tree looked terrible. Not to be beaten, I kept nurturing it with deep watering, fertilization, and even spraying the leaves with a hose to create a fog-like mist in which these trees flourish.

Each year I anxiously awaited the PG&E crew, heading them off before they went to work. I convinced them not to top the tree again, but to carefully remove just the branches that might interfere with the wires. I kept winning the little battles, but eventually lost the war when the tree was attacked by beetles and my redwood met its premature death. This spring I called a friend to remove it. It was a sad day for me. But the day following its removal, I looked out across my fence and saw something I had not seen before – not one but three beautiful redwood trees 60 feet tall, reaching toward the heavens. Three lush trees I didn't plant or nurture now fill the space left by my one meager tree. Perhaps if I had not had my head down for so long I might have been more aware of what God had been doing all along. Such a gift is cause to celebrate over something I had never worked for.

The verb which Moses uses for God, “resting” (v. 11) is different from the one in Genesis. In Genesis it is *shabat* (“to cease”), while here it is *nuah* (“to roost, land upon, settle, take a rest”).³ This word was used in Noah's story when, after the flood waters ceased, the ark “rested” on Mt Ararat and the dove was unable to find a “resting place” to set its feet on dry land (Gen 8:4, 9). The verb would have resonated with the Israelites, who had just come safely through the floodwaters of Egypt. Like the dove, they were seeking a place to land, a place of safety and security where they could be quiet and settle down.

B. The Sabbath celebrates Holy Time

The hunger of their hearts is satisfied by God who grants the gift every week. No longer is it defined in a spatial sense, but in terms of time. “The seventh day each week is removed from the mundane sphere of secular time and is endowed with a divine dimension. In a very real sense, therefore, the institution of the Sabbath day constitutes a suspension of time.”⁴ Every seventh day, man was invited to cease all his work, put down his shovel, lay aside his drill, and cross over into holy time. By doing so he would not only be blessed with physical rest, but also with a new way of seeing. Looking back on the week, he could extract the eternal from the mundane and rescue from decay the divine visitations among mankind. Abraham Heschel in his masterful book *The Sabbath*, observes that the first holy object in the history of the world was not a mountain or an altar, but *time*:

Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence... The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments... We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things... A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time. Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time... Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time... The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn.⁵

The invitation to rest was not just for Israel, but a perpetual gift for all human beings and domesticated animals. Even our milk cow and pet turtle are allowed to rest. This “is the day of the week that bears the stamp of the Lord as Creator and Sustainer of the world.”⁶ Protecting the day will of course be met with fierce opposition in a culture where the economy is driven by the narrow values of productivity and efficiency. Without intervention, these values produce egomaniacs who, like mini-pharaohs, first enlist, then enslave their workers to the tyranny of time. In extreme cases they even withhold every last vestige of “straw”

from their bricks in order to amass fortunes for themselves. But even in such conditions many workers remain, hoping to vest their interests. Sadly for many, however, “vesting” comes at the ultimate price: divestiture of all that is human.

It has always struck me as rather odd that the title that drives so much of our economy in Silicon Valley is “start-up.” This suggests the simplicity and ease of starting a lawnmower: one pull and it's done. In reality, “start-up” means “rev up your rocket engines, take off at the speed of light and never let down until you flame out.” When challenged about the duration of the tyranny, the response often is, “it's just for a season.” But in Israel, the gift of Sabbath rest could not be withheld from workers, even during harvest or plowing season when intense labor was crucial for the year's crop production (Exod 34:21). In the Creator's generosity there is always ample provision. So while the nations toiled endlessly for fear of not having enough, and never shut down their commercial enterprises, Israel anticipated the end of the week when they could step over the boundary of ordinary time, with its endless noise and anxiety, and enter into the eternal realm of holy time. Heschel describes the sweet ambiance that dominated in his home and community on Sabbath:

When all work is brought to a standstill, the candles are lit. Just as creation began with the words, “Let there be light!” so does the celebration of creation begin with the kindling of lights. It is the woman who ushers in the joy and sets up the most exquisite symbol, light, to dominate the atmosphere of the home.

And the world becomes a place of rest. An hour arrives like a guide, and raises our minds above accustomed thoughts. People assemble to welcome the wonder of the seventh day, while the Sabbath sends out its presence over the fields, into our homes, into our hearts. It is a moment of resurrection of the dormant spirit in our souls.

Refreshed and renewed, attired in festive garments, with candles nodding dreamily to unutterable expectations, to intuitions of eternity, some of us are overcome with a feeling, as if almost all they would say would be like a veil. There is not enough grandeur in our souls to be able to unravel in words the knot to time and eternity.⁷

This is the intended ambience of the Sabbath: a celebration of holy time.

C. The Sabbath celebrates our Redeemer

When the Sabbath commandment was reiterated in Deuteronomy, a second rationale was given for keeping it:

“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.” (Deut 5:15)

In Exodus, the Sabbath was given for Israel to celebrate the Creator, to be attuned to and in harmony with the breathing pulse of all that was around her. In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath was given to celebrate God as her Redeemer who broke the tyranny of 400 years of slavery. Most commentators highlight the humanitarian benefits of Deuteronomy's rationale. Eugene Peterson writes:

In Deuteronomy we are told that keeping the sabbath is a matter of simple justice; it prevents the stronger from exploiting the weaker, whether parents over children, employers over workers, even masters over horses and mules. Everyone is given a day to recover the simple dignity of being himself, herself, in the community without regard to use or function or status. [And with exquisite candor Peterson concludes] A kept sabbath keeps us out of one another's hair for a least one day a week. Sabbath breaks the stranglehold, emotional or physical, that some of us have on another, a stranglehold that prevents the spontaneities of love and sacrifice.⁸

Justice and protection of the weak were certainly the good results of Sabbath-keeping, but the primary reason was theological. Just as Israel had reason to celebrate the Creator for his finished work of creation, so now she was to celebrate God's work as her liberator. And as Israel contributed nothing to the creative process, so it was in her redemption. God used all the forces in nature to overcome Pharaoh's stranglehold and set her free. On the eve of every Sabbath, creation and salvation unite under the one flag of unearned gifts of God's grace. As if there wasn't enough to celebrate in the miracle of creation, freedom from slavery adds yet another dimension of joy and celebration to this outrageous Sabbath party. I imagine the party commencing with Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. As all creation is drawn into the dance of delight of creation's harmonies, and "hearts unfold like flowers before Thee," suddenly the door crashes open. As the dust settles we see Mel Gibson dressed as the 13th century Scottish hero, William Wallace, from the movie *Braveheart*. Charging through the doorway with his band of Scottish commoners, he cries out "FREEDOM! Let's party!"

This is what the Sabbath was meant to be. Sabbath was originally intended as a radical departure from the cares of this world into another dimension of time, where the primary focus was for God's people to celebrate the free gifts of God in creation and redemption. How legalistic, suffocating images of Sabbath-keeping crept into both Jewish and Christian circles is beyond me.

II. Israel's Refusal to Rest

When one understands the nature of the gift and the generosity of God's invitation, it is hard to imagine why Israel stubbornly refused it throughout her history. Given the choice, why would you choose to toil instead of dance? Why would you rather pant than breathe? Why keep looking down rather than looking up? Yet Israel seemed anxiously determined to be ruled by the tyranny of time.

He who said to them, "Here is rest, give rest to the weary," and, "Here is repose," but they would not listen. (Isa 28:12)

For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy of Israel, has said, "In repentance and rest you will be saved, In quietness and trust is your strength," But you were not willing." (Isa 30:15)

Why is this? Perhaps because no other commandment cuts across our pride as this one. And no other commandment brings to the surface our fear of losing control as this one. If we truly let go and let down our guard, what will happen to our jobs, our children, our image? During a Sabbath, everything we cherish is put at risk.

Before I left on our trip to Romania this summer I stayed up all night working on a slide show celebrating seventeen years of our history there. Before I got on the plane, my daughter, Katie, gave me a note to read during the flight. At 30,000 feet I opened it. "Dearest Poppa, For you on your journey...Embrace Romania for me Daddy...find a sunflower field, a mountain top, or a sunset and think of me thinking of you. Don't forget to rest Daddy and to take time to get away to hear God's voice and be embraced by His love...Don't worry about the technology, let God take care of the details and just do what you do best."

These are wonderful words from a daughter who knows her father well. But I did not heed them. I worked far too hard, got too little sleep, and never said no to any request. In the end, I never was able to process the countless moments when time was transferred into the holy: tears by the grave of a little girl, a baptism in an Austrian lake, countless poems unlocking years of buried pain, words of reconciliation between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, a wedding, a memorial service for a child who never was. On the last day I stared out at our thirty-two graduates during a three-hour graduation, some of whom I had known since they were eight years old. After dinner I tried to escape to my bal-

cony overlooking the hay fields to spend just a few moments with the Lord to thank him for this gift. Emotions began to surface, but after ten minutes there was a knock on the door: another need to be met, and then another and another. On the way to Austria I felt like something had died in me. I had been stripped of the ability to feel. There was no vibrato in my heart, no joy on my lips, but an emptiness verging on sadness, as if affection had left me at the train station. In reality, what I really needed was merely "rest."

Despite Israel's continual refusal (and ours!), God in his generosity keeps inflating the prize.

III. Jesus and Sabbath

When Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand, Israel was so weary from centuries of oppression that the word "rest" had all but lost its meaning. Within the cruel, oppressive Roman regime she found precious little place to find a "resting place." Under scores of deviant dictators, her existence in the land was carefully monitored and measured, to the point where it seemed as if even the air she breathed was rationed. Adding to the burden, her religious leaders had multiplied the regulations of the Sabbath to the point where it was no longer a celebratory rest but a weighty burden.

Jesus cut right across the Pharisaical understanding of the Sabbath. When challenged as to why he had healed a blind man on the Sabbath, his response was surprising: "My Father is working until now, and I myself am working" (John 5:16-17). He could have said, as he had on other occasions, that the law permitted saving a life on the Sabbath (Matt 12:11-12; Luke 14:3-5), but instead he agreed that they were correct in accusing him of "work" on the Sabbath. But if he was guilty, so was God. As God's unique representative, the "second" Adam, Jesus was imitating on earth the work of the Father in heaven. Though creation was complete, redemption was not yet finished. There was still plenty of work to do, and not until that work was fully accomplished would he fully "rest." It is of no little significance that Jesus' final words on the cross were, "It is finished!" And now as the resurrected Christ, with outstretched arms he pleads not only to Israel but to all the weary, "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" (Matt 11:28-29).

Jesus fulfilled and transcended the Sabbath day.

IV. The Church and the Sabbath

Considering what an identity marker the Sabbath was for Israel, it is absolutely amazing that no controversy is recorded anywhere in the New Testament over the early Christians' gathering to worship on the eighth day, not the seventh. Yet it was totally appropriate, for the eighth day was the number of resurrection. Seven is the number of perfection; eight is seven plus one, which places it in the age to come. It was on the eighth day that the Christians encountered the risen Lord. His resurrection was the signpost that the future age had burst into the present. The early church did not view Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, replacing the old, but rather it was the day to celebrate Christ's resurrection, which was ushering in the true "Sabbath rest" of the age to come, of which the seventh day was a mere shadow. As eternity broke out into the present, it was now possible for all time to be made holy, not just one day out of seven. Christian worship therefore embraced a new level of joy and celebration worthy of the Redeemer.

V. Where does this leave us as weary-worn believers today?

A. We must never judge one another

Though Sunday is the most appropriate day of worship, we must never mandate a day or judge one another in this regard. For some,

Sunday is a work day; for others, another day may be more appropriate to set aside for worship. As Paul says, “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:16-17; see also Rom 14:5).

This is good news and bad news. The good news is that the New Testament writers leave you totally free for how you implement rest. The bad news is that if you are not experiencing “rest,” you have only yourself to blame. No one else is responsible. But this new level of responsibility should spur us into action.

B. Use your freedom wisely

Though the Sabbath is no longer mandated as a day, and we are liberated from any external rules, we must remember that in this age, God’s purpose is to make *more* time holy, not *less*. To enter into that rest requires the same “letting go” of your works. If you are using your freedom to work seven days a week, I would not say that you are free. I would say that you are a pitiful slave to your work and have no faith. It is even more criminal if you are driving those under your care with no rest and creating an oppressive atmosphere at work or at home. So use your freedom to make more of time holy, not less.

C. Be pro-active and disciplined

Though all time can now be made holy, the author of Hebrews tells us that it still takes “diligence to enter that rest”:

So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience. (Heb 4:9-11)

The people I know who have cultivated a “true rest” are those who are extremely pro-active. They have set their sails against the current, knowing they will never “drift” into holiness. They plan ahead to set up holy boundaries and are ruthless in cutting off the technological tentacles that keep them yoked to their work. They think of inventive ways to create space where cell phones, email and computers have no access to them. The truly wise plan on an even larger basis and take quarterly or yearly spiritual retreats where they can be quiet and celebrate and play. I would especially encourage you men that when you enter negotiations for a job, that you consider the most important negotiating chip is not your salary or stock options but the boundaries of your time, on both a daily (dinner time) and yearly basis (vacation time), especially if you have young children.

Perhaps one of the best choices Emily and I made when our children were young was to pre-plan and invest in a two-week vacation every year. Now that our children are in their twenties, we continually go back to revel in these sacred memories.

D. Stay in community

None of us can sustain “rest” by ourselves. We need the mutuality of community to resist the ruts that run so deep. If I could be so bold, I would encourage an honest family discussion about this matter. It would be especially good if spouses could hear from each other about how they could serve one another in ways that would promote “rest.” Young mothers need a break from their children, and husbands should take the lead to help them. And don’t leave out the children. Many teenagers in this church are being driven to a frazzle by parents whose supreme goal is academic success, not spiritual sensitivity. If God was allowed a chance to breathe (Exod 31:17) after his homework was done, shouldn’t we allow our teenagers the chance to breathe? So allow your children time to play.

And while you’re at it, remember to play yourself. If you have forgotten how, your kids will show you.⁹

E. Heaven is a place nearby

Now the good news. God has never been so near, so readily available to turn profane time into holy time. As Isaiah said, all we have to do is take one step toward the Holy and the future will invade the present (Isa 58:13-14). Paul’s words to the Ephesians are simple, yet profound:

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time (lit. “redeeming the time”), because the days are evil...be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. (Eph 5:15-21)

It doesn’t take a committee to bring heaven to earth. It doesn’t take an edict from the pope, or elder approval. All it takes is one voice speaking, singing, thanking, or a humble spirit to serve, and in a moment, profane time can be transformed into holy time. The more we take time to do it, the world will wake up to the fact that the claims of Christ are true: the future has indeed invaded the present.

Heaven is right at our door. The question is, Will we answer? May it not be said of us,

He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest to the weary,” and, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen. (Isa 28:12)

1. Although Exod 31:17 does say “...on the seventh day He ceased *from* labor, and was *refreshed* (lit. ‘caught his breath’),” the use of this anthropomorphism, namely, that God took time “to breathe,” ought to serve as an encouragement for us to take time “to breathe.”

2. Denise Levertov, “The Coming Fall,” *Poems, 1960-1967* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 110.

3. The term is also used of widows, like Ruth, who need a “resting place” (Ruth 1:9; 3:1), as well as the ark of God and his people (Gen 49:15; Num 10:33; Deut 12:9; 1 Kgs 8:56; Isa 32:18; Lam 1:3).

4. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 148.

5. Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 3-10.

6. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 3:42.

7. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 66-67.

8. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 256.

9. Special thanks to Rob Bowers for this last insight.