

5 March 2023

Spiritual Disciplines for the 21st Century: Rest Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Some of the Ten Commandments get one line – “Don’t kill” for instance – but one of them gets a full explanation and justification. We read Deuteronomy 5, verses 12-15:

¹²Observe the Sabbath Day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day.

It's not always easy to know what to do with the Old Testament laws. Some of them are weirdly specific about things that don't seem important; others are just offensive – like laws regulating slavery or placing a lower monetary value on women than men. Huh? These laws were handed down to Moses directly from eternal God? To complicate things further, we learn from ancient Near Eastern archeology that many of the laws in the Bible appear in substantially the same form in laws from other nations near Israel, and that many of those law codes date from hundreds of years *before* Moses. On the one hand, that's nice, because all that cringy stuff about slaves and women can also be found in the laws of Hammurabi and Esh-nunna, so we can say, “Oh, so that wasn't necessarily from God; Israel might have borrowed that from their neighbors.” But that leads to another question: So why do we say that *any* of it is from God?

One thing that we can do is pay close attention to those laws in the Hebrew Bible that have no counterpart in the laws of neighboring nations. For instance, there's an emphasis throughout the Old Testament laws on caring for the helpless – widows, orphans, and immigrants – and those laws are *not* found in the other Near Eastern laws. Or the law requiring Israelite farmers to leave some of their annual harvest for the poor every year. Or the laws against predatory lending. These laws defending the poor and helpless are unique to the Hebrew Bible, and they say a lot about the mind of God. It shouldn't surprise us that Israel's laws sometimes look like the laws of their neighbors; but it is both surprising and significant that sometimes they look very different indeed.

One more example of a unique law among the Hebrews is the one establishing Sabbath. Israelites are sternly commanded that they are to work six days, but on the seventh day they are to do no work at all. And this applies to everybody. The law does not say, “On the seventh day, you are to put your feet up and let the servants do the work.” No, the servants get Sabbath, too. Even the females. In fact, so do the farm animals. Your oxen get a Sabbath. And lest you try to find a loophole, this applies also to any foreigners who live among you. The day is sacred for everyone, whether they're part of the Chosen People or not.

There is a huge difference between this law and the laws of other nations. All the other ancient law codes were established by rulers and clearly were imposed with the goal of maintaining the social order and preserving the power and privileges of the king and his nobles. But this Sabbath law knows no caste or nation or sex or species. It applies to everyone, from the

top of the heap to the bottom. And why does it say to include the slaves? “Remember that you, too, used to be slaves, having to work every day without rest at the command of your masters. You will *not* treat others like that.” This is a law given simply for the sake of human beings. Rest is necessary for our physical and emotional health, as well as for our spiritual health, because (as we talked about last week) it is only when we are still that our easily distracted minds can rest on God. As Psalm 46 says, “cease striving, and know that I am God.” Sabbath is a gift from God.

Unfortunately, we can’t talk about the Sabbath without acknowledging how that commandment can be and has been abused. We humans are good at that: there is nothing precious that we cannot turn into dross, nothing good that we cannot corrupt, no gift that we cannot turn into a burden. By Jesus’ time, this commandment had been refined and codified and expanded until it took a full panel of scribes to keep track of it all. You couldn’t walk more than a certain number of steps on the Sabbath. You couldn’t prepare food in any way, even peeling an orange. You were allowed to eat food that had already been prepared, but you couldn’t wear false teeth to chew it. That counted as a burden. Jesus repeatedly got in trouble for healing people on the Sabbath, because that, too, was work – doctor’s work. He should have let those sick people suffer until the next day, apparently, the way God intended. Finally Jesus said, “You people are nuts. The Sabbath is a gift of God, given to set people free from the slavery of work; but you’ve just made them slaves of the Sabbath. Talk about missing the point!” And, we should add, in subsequent history, Christians too have at different times over-legalized Sabbath to the point of making it a burden rather than a blessing. So, yes. Sabbath has been made into a burden. But the fact that a blessing can be corrupted does not make it bad. All it means is that we need to peel back the layers to find the blessing again at the core. Sabbath rest is just as necessary now as it ever was.

In fact we may need it now more than ever. The commandment says that one reason the Hebrews were to observe the Sabbath is that they were no longer slaves, implying that working all the time without rest is just another form of slavery. But that exactly what more and more of us are doing in 21st century America. Many Americans have to work two or three jobs just to make ends meet; inadequate pay is a form of work slavery. But even many who are adequately compensated are slaves to their work. No nation of workers gets fewer days of vacation than Americans, which is already a problem, but Americans frequently don’t even take all the days that they are given, because they feel guilty leaving work. The writer Derek Thompson calls this “workism.” Workism “is the belief that work is . . . the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose.” To put that more simply, for many work is their religion. Thompson suggests that as traditional religious belief declines, workism is one of the new quasi-religions vying to replace it. Curiously, workism is *especially* common among the most highly-paid, especially men. Isn’t that counter-intuitive? Isn’t the point of achieving material success to be able to step back and enjoy life more? Apparently not. The richest ten percent of married men have the *longest* average work week of any group in America. Why? It’s their faith. Work has become the primary source of meaning in their lives.

We don’t have to look far for examples of this cultural sickness. In my previous appointment, I had a CEO in the congregation who told me once that he had a strict rule to guard his personal life. He did not read anything for the office after 9 pm. Well, kudos to him for recognizing the need for boundaries on work, but still . . . really? Elon Musk, in his role as CEO of Twitter, says he’s only interested in “hard-core” employees, which he defines as people willing to set up a cot at the office and work into the night, take a nap, and then resume at dawn.

You may have heard the sneering term “quiet quitting,” which refers to doing the things at your job that you were hired to do, then going home on time. How is doing exactly what you’re paid to do *quitting*? Why is that somehow a bad thing? Because to the American mind it’s sacrilege. Those people are treating their work as if it were a job, not a religion, which is unacceptable to the high priest in the corner office. This out-of-balance work ethic has only gotten worse with technology. Twenty years ago, the only people who carried pagers were emergency workers, drug dealers, and pompous people, but now we all carry a pager with us everywhere, and bosses know it. With our cell phones, all of us are on call all the time. And now, since the pandemic, with Zoom and Google Meet and Slack and all the other online work platforms, it is possible for many of us to work from anywhere, anytime, which means that we are now expected to.

We need to rediscover the Sabbath. According to Deuteronomy 5, God commanded it as a protection against the slavery of unceasing work. To that, we should add that we also need Sabbath as a protection against the idolatry of making work our God. But it’s not that easy, is it? Maybe in the agricultural society of ancient Israel it was possible to choose one day each week and set it aside as a day when everyone rested, but that’s not our society, is it? And our jobs don’t always work that way. If you can take a full day off and separate yourself from work, do it. But what if we can’t? Are there ways to separate ourselves from the false god of work and maintain the spirit of Sabbath at least to some degree?

A few humble suggestions. First, put times of rest on your calendar. Don’t let Sabbath become whatever’s left after all the other commitments. Second, turn off the phone sometimes – or at least silence all notifications. Every one of my ministerial colleagues that I know, has their church email address synced to their personal cell phones, which means that they are never more than one beep away from the next mass-email from the conference office or promotional offer from Cokesbury. That’s crazy. Third, nourish the parts of you that are not connected to your job. Feed things that feed your soul. Often these are creative: woodworking, sewing, painting, gardening, knitting, baking, making music. Last, and most importantly, practice doing nothing at all. And *stop feeling guilty about it*. You do, don’t you? Even when we aren’t at our jobs, even after we have retired, we are so wired to always be productive that just sitting somewhere doing nothing makes us feel vaguely ashamed of ourselves, and if anyone sees us doing nothing, we jump up and make excuses. Don’t.

God established one day a week for doing nothing productive. We’re so bad at it that some of us can’t even do ten minutes. So this week, practice. Make it a spiritual discipline. Extend your times of doing nothing bit by bit. And if anyone comes on you while you are practicing nothing and asks, “What are you doing?” just say, “Obeying God.” It’s nothing less than the truth.

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The Atlantic Monthly ran an article just a week or two back entitled, “How My Wife and I Took Back Our Sundays.” It was all about this new idea they had: to set aside one day a week to do no work at all. The author said it was hard, but that it was a good experiment, and people ought to try it. Deep sigh. You want to say, “My goodness! That *does* sound like a good idea. Wherever did that notion come from?”

But that leads to a sobering thought. Maybe the reason that the secular world is having to re-discover Sabbath on their own is because the people who were entrusted with it thousands of years ago haven't been doing it. Do Sabbath. It's an idea whose time has come. Again. Still.