

“Blue Laws or Blue Skies?”

Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:23-28 ¹

Teilhard de Chardin, the 20th century Jesuit priest, visionary, philosopher and biologist, once wrote that “**Joy is the most certain sign of the Presence of God.**”² So, on a scale of 1-10, how close would you say you are right this moment to being “joyful”? How do you think people who know you well would answer that question for you? Wherever you find yourself right now, today’s study has the potential to move you deeper into joy . . . which may seem surprising, given what we’re studying.

We come this morning to the Fourth Commandment, which is the longest of the Ten. It’s found in Exodus 20:8-11:

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.”³

So what comes to mind when you think about this Commandment? Is this a morose pronouncement that forbids going to ball games, eating out, going to the movies, going fishing, playing golf, mowing the yard, gardening, or anything else that’s *fun*? I mean, what’s the point?

The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew “Shabbat,” which means “to cease” or “to desist,” and God spoke to Moses quite often about the Sabbath. I’m most impressed by what God told Moses in Exodus 34:21: “*Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest.*” In other words, God expects us to observe the Sabbath even when crops are in the field and not working the fields is going to cost us money.

More than even this, it’s shocking to read that God prescribed the death penalty for breaking the Sabbath,⁴ and the prophets later stated that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed at least in part because of Israel’s failure to observe the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:27).

Although Israel’s Sabbath observance prior to the Babylonian Exile was spotty at best, after the Exile, the Jews decided that God really was serious about this and the other commandments, and they became much more intense and much more intentional in their Sabbath observance. By Jesus’ time, the Jewish leaders had become so rigorous in their efforts to prevent Sabbath-breaking that Jesus had to remind them that “*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27).

Before we come down too hard on those leaders, though, we need to remember that they saw themselves, in effect, as the Department of Homeland Security of their day. They were guarding the borders, guarding the boundaries, doing everything in their power to sniff out Sabbath-breaking so as to avoid another national cataclysm such as the Babylonian Exile. Jesus knew that, of course. He also knew that they were missing God’s point in the Fourth Commandment entirely.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 12, 2015.

² <http://americamagazine.org/issue/609/article/most-infallible-sign>

³ See also Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

⁴ Exodus 31:14-15, 35:2

Like the Pharisees of old, we have our own “Blue Laws” today that are—or were—intended to protect the Sabbath. And like the Pharisees, our efforts to protect the Sabbath frequently cause us to miss the blessing the Sabbath is intended to bring.

Before we look at ourselves, though, we need to remember that God’s purpose in giving the Ten Commandments was—and still is—to enrich our lives, not to constrict them. It is God’s clearly-stated purpose that we experience “*abundant life*” (John 10:10), and we’ll understand the Fourth Commandment more fully if we remember that it is intended for our benefit and blessing.

In the first place, as I’m sure you know, Sunday is not the Sabbath. The Sabbath is Saturday, the seventh day of the week. But from Resurrection Day until now, most Christians have met for worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, in celebration of our redemption. Christians don’t work toward rest at the end of the week; we worship first, and then we offer our daily work as glad participation in God’s redemption of creation!

Given this understanding, it seems to me that what we Christians need to recover is not the Sabbath *per se*, but *the Sabbath Principle*; and we really need it today far more than did the Jews of old. You and I live in a 24/7/365 world in which we try to live faster and faster all the time. Our communication is instant, the Internet is everywhere, and as globalization accelerates, “the sun never sets” . . . on anything. The flagship store of L.L. Bean in Freeport, Maine doesn’t even have locks on the doors, because the store has never closed—even once—since the building was built some fifty years ago!

But there are problems with this approach, as you’ve probably discovered. In *The Twenty Four Hour Society: Understanding Human Limits in a World that Never Stops*,⁵ Martin Moore-Ede pointed out that the most notorious industrial accidents in the years prior to the book’s publication—the Exxon Valdez, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the fatal navigational error of Korean Air Lines flight 007—all occurred in the middle of the night, when operators were exhausted. The *Challenger* space shuttle disaster happened when key NASA officials made the decision to go ahead with the launch after working twenty hours straight and getting only two to three hours of sleep the night before that.

So why do we try to do so many things? Why do we spend so much of our lives running “on afterburners”? To some extent, I think we do it just because we *can*. None of us had cell phones twenty years ago, and yet at this moment I’ll bet nearly every person in this room has one in pocket or purse. Cell phones help us do many things, but has yours made your life more rested, or less?

Computers are touted as labor-saving devices, and they do indeed make it possible to do many things much faster than we could ever do them before. They also make possible lots of things that were never possible before, and as we do those new things, we lose all the time that was saved by doing the old things faster.

Unfortunately, one of the things technological advances do for us is they allow us to entertain the delusion that we have the ability to control the outcome of every aspect of our lives.⁶ Maybe we work so long and so hard because we want more money and nicer stuff. Maybe we work so long and so hard because we want more power and influence. Maybe we’re just

⁵ Addison-Wesley, 1994.

⁶ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers: An Updated Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (W.H. Freeman and Co., 1998), pp. 332–333.

addicted to adrenaline, but we pay a huge physical, mental, relational, and spiritual price when we try to do it.

I'm noticing that Thomas Merton's name is coming up a good bit in things I read lately, since this year is the centennial of his birth. As you may know, Merton was a Trappist monk, and I've made retreat a number of times at the Monastery of Gethsemani outside Bardstown, Kentucky where he lived and is buried. One of many wonderful quotes from Merton is this one: "The sin of overwork kills the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful." Let me say that again: "**The sin of overwork kills the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful.**" Do you believe that? I believe it. It's a powerful way of restating the Fourth Commandment.

God told Moses that even the land itself needed a Sabbath. Every seventh year, the land was to lie fallow so that it could enjoy "*sabbath rest*" (Leviticus 25:4). Israel didn't observe the Sabbath in that sense either—it costs money to do that—but they paid a heavy price for not doing it.

The truth of the matter is that if you and I consistently dishonor the Sabbath principle in our lives, somewhere along the line those bills are going to come due. We have been so created that Sabbath time truly is necessary. Sabbath time works like this: "You can pay me now or you can pay me later, but 'pay me later' means 'pay me more.'" Eventually, we "crash and burn."

Without a Sabbath, things will eventually begin to break down in your life. Your ability to cope will erode. Your spiritual life will atrophy. Your relationships will wither. Your body will collapse. Does that sound like a good deal to you?

My very favorite definition of what we've come to call "burnout" is Brooks Faulkner's affirmation that "**Burnout is caused by a major miscalculation about how much I can affect the world.**"⁷ We Christians are sometimes among the greatest offenders in this regard, and we need to remind ourselves that God will never call us to a lifestyle that will kill us all by itself.

Remember for a moment the beginning of the Twenty-Third Psalm. Here's how it goes in the King James Version: *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul* (vv. 1-3). Notice that "*he maketh me to lie down*" comes before "*he restoreth my soul.*" That's another way of stating unchanging reality of the Fourth Commandment, and it reaffirms that God's purpose in giving the Commandment is our rest, renewal, restoration, and righteousness.

Think again about that cell phone in your pocket or purse. If yours is like mine, you have to pay attention to your phone's state of charge off and on all day long, and it is frequently necessary to charge it once or twice during the day. We don't like to admit it, but you and I actually have a great deal in common with the recharging requirements of lithium ion batteries, and if we don't pay attention to those requirements, we, too, will go "dark."

God's purpose in the Sabbath Principle is that you and I spend one day each week diverting the bulk of our energies away from creative activities and directing our energies toward recognizing, exploring, renewing, and ultimately sanctifying our inner selves. God told us to "*keep the Sabbath day holy,*" and to make something holy is to regard it as separate and different from other things.

So how does one keep a day holy? Do we make the Sabbath holy by making it unpleasant, restrictive, and boring – or do we make the Sabbath holy by making it joyous? Do we make the

⁷ Brooks Faulkner, *Burnout in Ministry: How to Recognize It, How to Avoid It* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981).

Sabbath holy by making it as much as possible like hell, or by making it as much as possible like heaven?⁸

Living the Sabbath Principle doesn't mean taking a day to mow the yard, clean out the garage, and paint the house. Those things have to be done, but for most of us, that's not Sabbath time. Sabbath time is time in which we lay aside the tools of our crafts and the responsibilities of our chores and enter into deeper relationship with God. Sabbath time is time in which we renew the balance in our lives between the strength that comes from the earth and the strength that comes from heaven.

We Christians sometimes rail against all of the ways in which we think non-churchgoers fail to observe the Lord's Day.⁹ But it just might be that many of those activities may be an attempt, however misguided, to restore to the Sabbath some of the holy gladness that it had before overzealous reformers turned the Fourth Commandment's "thou shalt" into a long list of "thou shalt not's."¹⁰

C. S. Lewis pointed out that if we look around and pay attention, we probably already know some people who are observing the Sabbath Principle in the way God intends, though they may never have mentioned it to us. "These new persons," he wrote, "are dotted here and there all over the earth. Some are hardly recognizable, but others can be recognized.

"Every now and then one meets them. Their very voices and faces are different from ours: stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant. They begin where most of us leave off. They are, I say, recognizable; but you must know what to look for.

"They will not be very like the idea of 'religious people' which you have formed from your general reading. They do not draw attention to themselves. You tend to think that you are being kind to them when they are really being kind to you. They *love* you more than other [persons] do, but they *need* you less. . . .

"They will usually seem to have a lot of time: you will wonder where it comes from. When you have recognized one of them, you will recognize the next one much more easily. And I strongly suspect (but how should I know?) that they recognize one another immediately and infallibly, across every barrier of color, sex, class, age, and even of creeds. In that way, to become holy is rather like joining a secret society. It must be a great deal of *fun*."¹¹

The question naturally arises at this point about how you and I might occupy ourselves in our Sabbath time, no matter which day of the week we use to observe it. Because the biblical principles that underlie Sabbath have to do with rest, relationships, and joy, it seems to me that our Sabbath observance should include those things.

It seems to me that, beyond private and corporate worship, which are clearly part of God's Sabbath intent, our Sabbath activities should include things that we ourselves experience as restful or playful, whether others experience these activities that way or not. Sabbath activities need not be overtly religious, but they should be things that honor God.

⁸ Joy Davidman (wife of C. S. Lewis), *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), p. 52.

⁹ And Christians seldom, if ever, stop to realize that in trying to require the entire nation to enact laws to protect OUR holy day, we are desecrating the holy days of the Jews (Saturday), just to name one example.

¹⁰ Davidman, p. 53.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1944), p. 223.

And, while our Sabbath time doesn't have to be on Sunday, we do need to realize that unless we block out Sabbath time on our calendars and guard it vigorously as "a previous commitment," the world will quickly swallow that time. It doesn't matter who you are or what you do. The work of life will never be "done," and if you wait for Sabbath until you're "caught up," it will never happen.

Furthermore, the path to Sabbath time will always be a contested path. Our enemy knows that the path to Sabbath time will lead us to rest and righteousness and perspective, reordering and renewal and joy, and he will do all he can to keep us off that path.¹²

I like Roy Oswald's definition of Sabbath time: "Six days a week we work to manipulate the world for the better. On the seventh day we enjoy everything just as it is."¹³

So how's *your* Joy Meter?

¹² Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father's Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), p. 122.

¹³ Roy M. Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991), p. 124.