

**“Work and Rest”**  
**Deuteronomy 5:12-15**  
**June 19, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We can't talk about a biblical theology of work without also talking about rest. The reason for this is simply the fact that the Bible talks about these two things together. We saw that in Genesis 1-2, where we read that God worked six days to create the heavens and the earth, followed by his rest on the seventh day. The same pattern appears in the fourth of the Ten Commandments. According to the Bible, there are boundaries that are to be maintained between work and rest. A biblical approach to work will also require of us a biblical approach to rest.

When we consider the Bible's teaching about work and rest and the boundaries that are to be maintained between them, at least two problems emerge for us. The first problem is the blurring of these boundaries, with the result that we play at work and work at play. In other words, we don't fully engage in work when we're supposed to be working, and we don't fully leave behind our work when we're supposed to be resting. Consider the challenges that come with modern communication technology. Through our smartphones, laptops, and the internet, we are able to communicate with almost anyone on the planet at any time. While there are clear advantages to this, there are some downsides. One of those is to blur the boundary between work and rest. As someone has said, "Being 'on the clock' has been replaced by never leaving it."

A second problem that emerges in the areas of work and rest is to overvalue one and undervalue the other. Some give to rest the highest value and see work only as a means to fund one's leisure pursuits. Others, and this one seems to me to be more common in American culture, overvalue work to the point of finding their identity in their work productivity. When my wife asks me how my day was when I arrive home at the end of the day, my instinct is to evaluate my day based on how much I got done. How efficient was I? How many people did I talk to? How much progress did I make on my sermon prep that day? On the other hand, do we even know how to evaluate what constitutes a good day of rest? Let's explore these issues more carefully as we ask two important questions.

**I. Is There a New Testament Sabbath Obligation?**

American Presbyterianism has historically answered this question in the affirmative. This view is that the obligations of the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy are pretty much carried over intact from the Old

Testament. The only difference is that the day has been changed from the last day of the week, Saturday, to the first day, Sunday, because that was the day of Jesus' resurrection. So this is a day that is to be spent wholly in public and private worship. No work is permitted, either by us or by our servants. According to this view, watching an NFL game on Sunday would be impermissible because it is requiring your servants to work, your servants being NFL football players and everyone else needed to make such a game happen.

Another way of asking this question is to ask if the Sabbath requirement is a creation ordinance or a Mosaic ordinance. If it is a creation ordinance, like marriage and labor, then it is binding upon all people, Christian and non-Christian alike, and at all times. If it is part of the Mosaic ceremonial law, then it is fulfilled in Christ and therefore no longer binding upon us today. My conclusion on this question is that the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament were part of the Mosaic ceremonial law that is fulfilled in Christ. I have two reasons for saying this.

First, the New Testament repeats and reaffirms every one of the Ten Commandments except the fourth one regarding Sabbath observance. Second, in Colossians 2:16-17, Paul wrote these words. **“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”** He specifically calls the Sabbath a shadow, with Jesus being the substance. In other words, the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ. As a shadow, they are like the sacrificial laws of the Old Testament, meaning that our obedience to them is to be expressed by our faith in Christ.

Does this mean that there is no Sabbath obligation remaining for God's people in the New Testament? Not completely. One more verse from the New Testament is important here. Hebrews 4:9 says **“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.”** Here's how I would summarize this. We still have an obligation to rest. The Old Testament command to rest looked forward to the rest God would give in Jesus. Our rest now looks back to Jesus and the rest he has earned for us. He has succeeded where the first Adam failed. The first Adam, upon his obedience to God's commands, would have brought the entire human race into the rest of God. The last Adam, Jesus, now brings the human race into God's rest. He both forgives us for our rebellion and earns rest for our entire race. Our need is to rest in him.

Earlier in our service, we read a statement from the Heidelberg Catechism that I think does a marvelous job of answering the question we are asking here

about the New Testament Sabbath obligation. After asking, “What is God’s will for us in the fourth commandment”? (Q 103), it gives the following answer:

First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God’s people to learn what God’s Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

## II. Are There New Testament Sabbath Principles?

The short answer to this question is “Yes,” and I will mention four principles. First, the Sabbath reminds us that we are finite creatures. One of the lies our culture tells us is that we should be able to do everything we set our minds to. Those who believe this lie will often just keep adding things to their schedule. They will make an effort to squeeze as much efficiency out of their time as possible, but in the end will experience failure and burnout. The Sabbath principle teaches us the same thing as our need for sleep. You are not God. To sleep is to give up control, and as Christians we give up control willingly and gladly to the One who never sleeps and who loves us and cares for us even when we sleep and even when we take time off for rest.

C. T. Studd was a famous missionary serving in China, India and Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He gave up financial and educational privilege to pour himself into his work, practicing what he referred to as “reckless Christianity.” Sadly, he seemed to forget the Sabbath principle that he was a finite creature. In his book, *You’re Only Human*, Kelly Kopic describes the sad result.

His untiring devotion to the work became somewhat fanatical...: for example, by the end of his life he was working eighteen hours a day and addicted to morphine. During the last thirteen years of their marriage, he only saw his wife for two weeks despite her struggling health, and he even dismissed his daughter and son-in-law from the mission because they did not show the same level of commitment that he did... At one point he admitted, ‘My heart seems worn out and bruised beyond repair, and in my deep loneliness I often wish to be gone.’” (p. 176).

The Sabbath, then, reminds us of our finitude, and that’s the first principle. Here’s the second: Don’t neglect the advantages of Sunday. Jesus taught, **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”** (Mark 2:27). He means that the Sabbath, even in its New Testament form, is a gift to God’s people. While we are not under Mosaic Sabbath obligations, as the Heidelberg Catechism indicated, there are Sabbath principles that are made obligatory in the New Testament. One of those is the obligation of corporate worship, which we are commanded not to neglect (Heb. 10:25). While this is an obligation, it is also a gift and privilege given for our benefit. We need to be strengthened by

God's grace, and coming together for worship and to hear God's word preached and to enjoy the sacraments are all intended to refresh our souls. They are intended to remind us that God's love for us does not depend on our productivity. It is as if God is saying to us every Sunday, "I love you, not because of your work, your efficiency, or your productivity. I love you because I love you. Stop what you're doing and just enjoy this." In his book on the Ten Commandments, Michael Horton makes a statement that I have also found to be true. "As a pastor, I could come up with a long list of people I have known who thought they could get by on irregular church attendance. Sadly, most of them are no longer active church members, and many have left the church altogether."

A third advantage of taking a day for Sabbath rest can be found in the language of the fourth commandment in Exodus 20. A reason given for Sabbath observance there is, "**For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day**" (Ex. 20:11). Our observance of the Sabbath is to follow the pattern of God's rest. We see in Genesis 1-2 that God rested by celebrating the goodness and beauty of creation. This is not intended to be a substitute for corporate public worship, but it is a glorious addition. When we take the time to notice God's creation, we see that much that he created was simply for the sake of beauty and delight. God did not have to create a world with color, or with trees that change colors with the seasons. But he did. In Genesis 2:9, we read that God "**made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.**" Part of the rest God intends for us is to enjoy what he has created.

The final Sabbath principle is the most important. Resting in Christ is more fundamental than any work we will ever do. If the Sabbath is about rest, and if the sabbath laws are fulfilled in Christ, and they are, then rest in Christ is the central truth being taught. Do you remember what Jesus said about Mary and Martha? Martha was working tirelessly to serve Jesus and his disciples, while Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. Jesus said to Martha, "**Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her**" (Luke 10:41-42). In a sermon series on work, we are saying that there is something more important than work, and that is to trust in Jesus and rest in him.

We can see this principle as well in the Old Testament penalty for Sabbath violation. Exodus 31:15 says, "**Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.**" What is the outcome of laziness, according to the Bible? Proverbs 10:4 says, "**A slack hand causes poverty.**"

To rest in the Lord is to trust him, and such trust is the central feature of being a Christian. Since this is a sermon in a series on work, and since work

often involves stress, let me make an important distinction between stress and anxiety. The two are different. Anxiety is a sin of not trusting God, while stress is a natural part of life that can be a gift. Just as the weightlifter grows stronger by adding stress to his muscles, and like a spring under tension, stress can be a positive force in our lives. For many decades I have labored under the stress of needing to have a sermon ready to preach on Sunday. That stress is motivating for me, focusing my mind and keeping me at the task that needs doing. When it comes to your work life, stress is not your enemy—anxiety is. Anxiety is a practical atheism that fails to rest and trust in God.

The Old Testament Sabbath laws illustrate the central importance of trusting God. They not only had a Sabbath day every week, but also a Sabbath year every seven years. And then there was also a Sabbath year of Sabbath years on the fiftieth year called the Year of Jubilee. On these Sabbath years, the Israelites were to let their land lie fallow. This was a command that would have required them to trust God for his provision for three years during the forty-eighth year of this cycle. That harvest would be enough for the regular sabbatical year, year 49, as well as the coming year, the Year of Jubilee. And it would also need to be enough for the fifty-first year until the crops could be harvested.

### **CONCLUSION:**

God invites us into the joy of rest and trust. What would it look like for you to make your Sunday a day of joyful trust in God? What would it do for you to be reminded that your value is not dependent on what you accomplish, but on what God has accomplished for you through Jesus? That is the rest we need not just on Sundays, but every day.