

“The Sabbath a Sign”
Exodus 31:12-18
(Preached at Trinity, March 15, 2009)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we come to the end of **Chapter 31** we find a familiar subject – the Sabbath. Someone might quietly say in his heart, “Not again.” Indeed this subject comes up often in Scripture? It’s spoken of five times in the Book of Exodus. Why would God speak on this subject again? And why is it necessary for us to broach the subject again?
2. God doesn’t speak without purpose. He presses us often with subjects of which we are prone to forget.
3. We know that God has written His Law upon the hearts of all men.
 - A. All men have received the law of God by general revelation
Romans 2:14 – “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves:”
 1. We know that all men will be judged by the Law of God. The Gentiles might complain, “How can we be condemned for breaking a law we never received?” The answer is, you *did* receive it.
 2. Even though they did not have the written law given to the Jews they had the law written upon their hearts.
 3. Our consciences prove that there is a law written upon our hearts
Romans 2:15 – “Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and *their* thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)”
 - B. This is demonstrated clearly by the universal morality of men
 1. All men instinctively know the law.
 2. All men have an understanding of right and wrong and our consciences serve as the gatekeeper—it controls the behavior of men.
 3. Where do they get their concepts of justice? Why do people feel it’s wrong for someone to break into their house and steal their TV? Why do we feel such indignation when we are mistreated?
 - C. That being said, natural law doesn’t speak as clearly as the written Ten Commandments given by God to Israel. While all men may know instinctively that murder is wrong (though our consciences can become hardened beyond feeling) understanding the Sabbath is not as clear.
4. Today few honor the Sabbath. Few recognize it at all. There was a day in our nation when the Lord’s Day was universally recognized. Even many professing Christians, who have a clear understanding of the Ten Commandments, find it easy to disregard this day. While they may try to obey the other nine commandments they consider this the least of the commandments. Those who would never consider committing adultery find it easy to disregard the fourth commandment.

5. Could it be that this is one of the most important Commandments?
Matthew Henry: “the observance of the sabbath is indeed the hem and hedge of the whole law; where no conscience is made of that, farewell both godliness and honesty; for, in the moral law, it stands in the midst between the two tables.”
6. This commandment which people find it so easy to dismiss is of great importance. God is not pleased when men openly disregard His Law
Because of its importance God repeats His command on the Sabbath often. As I said earlier we find the Sabbath mentioned five times in the Book of Exodus
 1. In **Exodus 16** it was given as a part of God’s orders concerning manna.
Exodus 16:23 – “And he said unto them, This *is that* which the LORD hath said, To morrow *is* the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake *that* which ye will bake *to day*, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning.”
 2. In **Exodus 20** when God gave the fourth commandment as a part of the moral law.
Exodus 20:8-11 – “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: ¹⁰ But the seventh day *is* the sabbath of the LORD thy God: *in it* thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that *is* within thy gates: ¹¹ For *in* six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them *is*, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.
 3. When God gave the Book of the Covenant in **Chapter 23** where it became a part of the judicial law.
Exodus 23:12 – “Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.”
 4. Here in **Chapter 31** – which in **Verse 13** speaks of the Ceremonial Law
 5. At the beginning of **Chapter 35**.
Exodus 35:2 – “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD: whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death.”
7. God may be repetitive in these passages but He isn’t redundant. Each one is different and God has something particular to teach in each one. There are several things God was teaching His people about the Sabbath here.
 - I. God was introducing the Sabbath as a sign that He was their covenant God
Exodus 31:13 – “for it *is* a sign between me and you throughout your generations”
 - A. Some argue that since this was a covenant sign to Israel it applies to Israel alone as a part of the Old Covenant and is no longer valid under the New Covenant
 1. In this passage God is speaking of both ceremonial Sabbaths and the seventh day Sabbath. **Verse 13** is ceremonial – “Sabbaths”
But Moses is also speaking of the Moral Law – **Verses 14, 18**
 2. As a part of the Decalogue we have no authority to exclude it as God’s standard of obedience.

3. The Fourth Commandment is unique because it also carried certain ceremonial aspects which were fulfilled in Christ.
- a. Numerous Sabbaths were established apart from the seventh day Sabbath.
 - b. There were festival Sabbaths that were not necessarily tied to the seventh day Sabbath.
 - The first day of Passover week
Leviticus 23:7 – “In the first day ye shall have an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein.”
 - The seventh day of Passover week
Leviticus 23:8 – “But ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD seven days: in the seventh day *is* an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work *therein*.”
 - On Pentecost
Leviticus 23:21 – “And ye shall proclaim on the selfsame day, *that* it may be an holy convocation unto you: ye shall do no servile work *therein*: *it shall be* a statute for ever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.”
 - c. These ceremonial days were fulfilled in Christ
This, by the way, is the meaning of Colossians 2:16
Colossians 2:16 – “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*.”
Romans 14:5-6 – “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day *alike*. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. ⁶ He that regardeth the day, regardeth *it* unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard *it*. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.”
Galatians 4:9-10 – “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? ¹⁰ Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.”

- B. Let me illustrate this as it applies to this time of the year – Easter
This also explains the problem of the days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.
1. We usually point out that the Jews counted each portion of a day as full day. This accounts for the days but not the nights
Matthew 12:39-40 – “But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: ⁴⁰ For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

2. When Jesus was crucified, with Passover being on Friday there would have been two Sabbaths during this Passover week—the regular Saturday Sabbath and the special Passover Sabbath. In Matthew 28:1 recognizes this although most translations do not reflect it. The word for Sabbath is genitive, neuter, plural.
Matthew 28:1 – "In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre."
3. This would be consistent with John's Gospel
John 19:31 – "The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away."
 - a. They could not leave the bodies on the cross on the Sabbath – this was a high sabbath day.
 - b. Jesus was removed from the cross before the Passover Sabbath, which was on Friday
4. In the Biblical account of the week of Christ's Crucifixion there are details of each day except one. Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday were chronicled in detail but Scripture is silent about Wednesday. If the Crucifixion was on Thursday Wednesday was busy as well with the preparation for the Passover, the Last Supper, the washing of feet, His betrayal and arrest . . .
5. You might ask, what difference does it make. Granted it doesn't make any important doctrinal difference. It doesn't effect the important Sunday resurrection. But it does have great meaning as we look at Jesus as the Lamb of God.
 The crucifixion occurred on the fourteen of Nisan. If this happened on Thursday then counting backward this made Palm Sunday the tenth of Nisan. This is important because it was on this day that thousands of sheep that were to be sacrificed for the Passover were to be taken up to Jerusalem to be kept in people's homes for the three days stipulated in the Law of Moses.
Exodus 12:3 – "Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying, In the tenth *day* of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to the house of *their* fathers, a lamb for an house:"
Exodus 12:6 – "And ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month: and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening."
6. Josephus, the Jewish historian wrote that when a census of the number of sheep killed for this Passover was taken the figure numbered 256,500. With the magnitude of this number of sheep they would have been herded into the city the entire day.
7. When Jesus entered into the city on this Palm Sunday He must have been surrounded by lambs. The true Lamb of God standing forth among the lambs to be slain. Four days later at the very time the lambs were killed Jesus Himself was killed thus becoming the true Passover Lamb.

1 Corinthians 5:7 – "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:"

John 1:29 – ". . . Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

- C. The Sabbath fulfills every aspect of God's Law
1. The Jewish law was divided into three types:
Moral, Judicial, and Ceremonial
 - a. It was given before any other law as they were forbidden to gather Manna on the Sabbath. Over and over we are reminded that it is a Creation Ordinance
 - b. It was inserted into the Moral Law as the Fourth Commandment in **Exodus 20**
 - c. It was added to the Judicial Law in **Exodus 23**
 - d. It is added to the Ceremonial Law here in **Verse 23**
 2. This is what Matthew Henry meant when he said: "The observance of the Sabbath is indeed the hem and hedge of the whole law"
- D. Through the Sabbath God is teaching that He is God
Exodus 31:13 – "that ye may know that I *am* the LORD"
1. This was a day set apart for Israel to know God more – a day when toil would be set aside and time would be spent in the worship of God
 2. To break the Sabbath was testimony that one was not interested in knowing God – that a relationship with Him was not important.
 3. Israel was reminded through the Sabbath that God is God
 - a. He is sovereign over time. God created the week – seven days
And then said, "Remember the seventh day"
 - b. He is sovereign over our lives. God commanded that this day is holy. Their activities were limited. Their autonomy was set aside.
 4. Human beings have a sinful desire for autonomy
People today are continually talking about their rights
What about God's rights?
 5. God declares this day to be holy. We must not take that which is holy and defile it with that which is common.
- E. It was also a sign that God is a covenant keeping God
Exodus 31:16-17 – "Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, *for* a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷ It *is* a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever
1. The Sabbath was a sign of perpetual covenant. In essence, to break the Sabbath was to break covenant with God.
 2. The Sabbath is a reminder to us that we are God's particular people
 3. All people are required to honor this day, but how much more God's people
 4. What a testimony to your children when you honor this day
 5. What a testimony to visiting relatives when you honor this day

- II. No matter how important our work is we must not disregard the Sabbath
- A. This is given in the context of God's enlisting of Bezalel and Aholiab
1. They were to begin work on the Tabernacle immediately
 2. It was important work. They would have felt a sense of urgency. They were about to build the house of God. Can you imagine building the Ark of the Covenant?
 3. God is telling them, "Yes, this is important work. But do not defile yourselves by working on the Sabbath. If their work was to be blessed it was essential that they work in accordance with God's commands.
- B. How important is this for us to hear?
1. For some the Sabbath is broken for the love of pleasure
Our generation is characterized as being lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.
 2. For others they allow the love of money to cause them to profane the Sabbath
How many business are open simply because they love the dollar. And how many Christians support their greed?
 3. For still others, they allow their work to run into Sunday
 - a. Students study on Sunday. Others prepare reports and do other paper work
 - b. Some do yard work on Sunday or wash the car
 - c. Are any of these things more important than the Tabernacle, yet God told them, "my Sabbaths ye shall keep"
 - d. J.C. Penny – If a man's business requires so much of his time that he cannot attend the Sunday morning and evening services, and Wednesday night prayer meeting, then that man has more business than God intended him to have."
- III. In sanctifying the Sabbath God sanctifies us
- Exodus 31:13-14** – "that ye may know that I *am* the LORD that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it *is* holy unto you"
- A. God had set Israel apart as His people
1. The Sabbath was one thing that distinguished them
 2. All was quiet within the Israelite camp on the Sabbath
 3. Every week they were reminded that they were separate
- B. God uses the Sabbath as a means of our own sanctification
1. It is a day that reminds us of God's sovereignty
His sovereignty over time, over work and leisure
 2. It is a day set apart for God's worship
 3. It is a day set apart for those things beneficial to our soul
Prayer, study, rest
- C. The disregard of the Lord's Day is having a detrimental effect upon the holiness and influence of the church today.
1. So many today disregard this day
 2. Many worship on Sunday morning and then treat the rest of the day like another day – they take that which is holy and treat it like a common day
God says, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy"

3. Our profaning of the Lord's day is having a detrimental effect upon our holiness
Walter Chantry - "There have been local, denominational, and national advances in life, truth, and righteousness during this century that can only be attributed to the Spirit of God. However, they are in imminent danger of being utterly overwhelmed and reversed as the Sabbath and thus worship are neglected"
4. John Currid – "I would suggest that if we kept the Sabbath as Christians then our lives would improve dramatically. How many of us never do an in-depth study of God's Word for lack of time? How many of us never visit the lonely or sick for lack of time? How many of us begin the week exhausted for lack of rest? How much time do we spend in prayer and evangelism? The Lord Jesus has made provision for these things by giving a Sabbath to his people."

IV. God stressed the importance of the Sabbath

Exodus 31:14 – "every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death"

- A. The word for "defileth" is qālal (קָלַל) which means to profane
 1. qālal is the antonym of qodesh (קֹדֶשׁ) which is translated holy
 2. In other words qodesh means to take something common and set it apart for sacred use. qālal signifies taking something holy and using it in everyday, common use.
 3. Profaning the Sabbath meant treating like any other day
- B. It carried the sanction of death
 1. In the Hebrew words are repeated for emphasis sake. The word for die is here twice. "dying you will die" Death will come quickly and surely.
 2. It is the exact same sanction that was place with eating the forbidden fruit in the garden.
 3. There was an additional sanction
Exodus 31:14 – "for whosoever doeth *any* work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people."
 - a. Such a person would be removed from the Covenant
 - b. Not only would they die – they would be utterly removed.
- C. I'm not suggesting that Sabbath breakers should be put to death
The OT Sabbath contained elements of the Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil law.
 1. The Civil penalties applied to the nation Israel and are no longer in force. The death penalty was a matter of civil justice
 2. There were also Ceremonial aspects.
 - a. The fact that the Sabbath is being repeated here with the construction of the Tabernacle points to its place in Israel's ceremonial worship.
 - b. The ceremonial law pointed to salvation in Christ and has been fulfilled.

- c. There were many ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath that are no longer binding. There were Sabbath days that were ceremonial. There were activities on the Sabbath that were ceremonial – such as the prohibition of travel. What remains is the principle of one day in seven.
 - 3. There remains a perpetual moral command that will never end.
- D. Why was the sanction so severe
 - 1. Because to break the Sabbath was an indication that the person rejected God. That he was not interested in knowing God
 - 2. How important is this for us?

Conclusion:

1. There are positive blessings that flow from obedience to the Sabbath
Isaiah 58:13-14 – “If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from* doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking *thine own* words: ¹⁴ Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.”
2. As God’s people we should call the Sabbath a delight. The problem is this a difficult commandment to keep.
 - a. Many would rather strive to obey the sixth or seventh commandment than this one.
 - b. This commandment demands total submission to God. It keeps us from fulfilling the desires of our flesh. Many people will not submit to such inconvenience.
 - c. Keeping this command will sometimes be painful such as Eric Liddell refusing to run in the Olympics. You may not be able to eat at a restaurant on Sunday. You may not be able to watch the Super Bowl or some other sporting event. You may be ridiculed by family members who don’t honor the Sabbath.
3. Most people have difficulty with the Sabbath because they have difficulty finding delight in Christ. They find it easy to find delight in the world’s pleasures but hard to find delight in God. If we will learn to delight in Christ then we will seek to spend time in activities that will enhance our relationship with Him. We will avoid work or worldly pleasures for the sake of Christ.
4. God says, “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” Will you do whatever is necessary to obey the commandments of God?