

Exodus 20:1–11 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Exodus 31:12–17 (NRSV)

¹²The LORD said to Moses: ¹³You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. ¹⁴You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ¹⁵Six 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. ¹⁶Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”

Sabbath. A day not merely of rest, but of reconnecting and renewal.

This week, we remain at Mt. Sinai with Moses and the Israelites, as they come to know the God freed them from slavery to Pharaoh and has formed them into God’s “treasured possession,” a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). Importantly, the Israelites had freely entered into covenant with God, promising their obedience to the One who had saved them (19:8).

So God proceeded to teach them what it meant to live as they were created to live, beginning with a series of over-arching commandments, unnumbered but typically counted as ten. God’s instruction to them was the Law¹ and the heart of the Law was inscribed by God on two tablets. The first tablet spoke to the people’s relationship with God and the second tablet spoke to their relationship with one another.

To reiterate, The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don’t make idols, don’t abuse God’s name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t testify falsely against your neighbor, and don’t covet other people’s possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

¹ These teachings came to be known as the Law or the Law of Moses, but the underlying Hebrew word *torah* can be translated also as “teaching” or “instruction.” If you think of the Law as God’s teachings about how we are created to live, you will probably more easily grasp the deeper meaning and purpose of the Law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet) and to love neighbor (the second tablet). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments – for an ancient people.

A slender volume on my shelves is entitled, *Smart Choices*. It is an excellent introduction to decision analysis (which is a fancy way of saying deciding among choices). The authors take the reader through a straightforward presentation of how to

state the problem, define objectives, create alternatives, evaluate tradeoffs and so on. They are business school types who want to help managers make better choices.

But for Christians, any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must *first* begin with God. This isn't to say that sound analysis is unimportant, but that the analysis must start with God. It is God who is good. It is God who made this world. It is God who made us in his image (*the imago Dei*). Thus, it must be God who points us toward the better choices. It is God who establishes what a really smart choice is. It is God who takes away our blindness and enables us to see the life that we seek and the life that God desires for us.

This is what the Law of Moses does for us, When we learn in Exodus 22:21-22 that “you shall nor wrong or oppress a resident alien . . . you shall not abuse any widow or orphan,” it speaks volumes to us about how to live and what God values, i.e., the character of God.

And so we turn to the fourth commandment, which teaches us that we were made for Sabbath. God rested on the seventh day of creation and we are made for the same rhythm, the rhythm of Sabbath.

Sabbath

Of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to practice Sabbath is the most richly detailed (Exodus 20:8-11, 31:12-17, & Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Out of his love and genuine concern for his people, God commands that they rest on one day out of seven. His rest is to be extended to all – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (see Galatians 3:28 for a thought-provoking parallel) – even the livestock! Further, this rest is explicitly tied to God's redemption of his people from bondage in Egypt. Sabbath is to be a holy time, set apart for God, in whom we find true rest.

Sabbath Law

The Jews didn't eat what everyone else ate – no pork, no shellfish. They didn't even work like everyone else. They took off an entire day each week! From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday not one bit of work happened among the Jews. How odd these people must have seemed to men like Pontius Pilate, sent from Rome to be the face of Caesar before the Jews.

In the eyes of the Jews, all these “peculiarities” set them apart as God's people. Sabbath, food laws, and the rest were boundary markers, badges of membership as it were, in the people of God. In a world dominated by Greco-Roman language, culture, and religion, there was always pressure on the Jews to assimilate, to be more like everyone else. In response, the Jews, led by the Pharisees, clung evermore tightly to these boundary markers, such as the keeping of the Sabbath.

All this helps us to understand the vehemence with which the Pharisees attacked Jesus over perceived Sabbath violations. Jesus' hope was that the Pharisees and all the Jews would see that their fixation on these boundary markers had not led them toward God, but away from God. The problem was not with the Law of Moses, which is grounded in love of God and neighbor, but on the all-too-human tendency to fixate on the wrong things, usually the easy stuff. After all, is it easier to keep Sabbath law or to genuinely love God and neighbor?

Jews marked observed Sabbath on Saturday but marked days from sunset to sunset. Thus, the Jewish Sabbath began about 6pm on Friday. Because Jesus was resurrected on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, Christians came to adopt Sunday as the principal day for worship and Sabbath. But Sabbath is really about resting in God, not a calendar or a clock.

But the rhythm of Sabbath doesn't come easily to us, just as it probably didn't come easily to the ancient Israelites. Perhaps that is why God spent more time spelling out Sabbath than any of the other commandments.

Hard work

Not only are our lives pretty frantic, even in this pandemic, we are hard workers, achievement-focused Type A's. Hard work is a good thing; after all, Adam and Eve were given the Garden of Eden to work *before* their rejection of God. Nonetheless, we have a tendency to turn work into an idol, just as we do most else in life.

It is hard for us to pay anything more than lip service to the God's teaching on Sabbath. Worse, we are tempted to turn it into a relic of the past that just isn't realistic in this 24/7 world we've made for ourselves. Instead, we ought to recapture the notion of Sabbath and see it as more than the mere absence of work, as blessed a time as that may be.

In their book, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon² urge us to see that the Sabbath is not merely about resting, it is about time spent focusing on God and his work, rather than our own.

Sabbath is much more than doing nothing. We are enjoined this day to remember, recall, recollect, and re-create. We are not simply to remember that we ought to keep the Sabbath, but we are to remember who God is – active and loving, resourceful beyond our actions and resources. We are to remember who we are – gifted, sustained and blessed beyond our striving and achieving. . . .

At the last, Sabbath ought to be an occasion when we avoid making unnecessary demands upon others. Sabbath keeping is a defense against the exploitive, purely pragmatic, and ruthlessly utilitarian tendencies of the world. Like the Jubilee year in which Israel was to free slaves and land, so the Sabbath ought to be our time to enjoy one another. We know a family who for years has kept the Sabbath. Their rule is you can do no work on the Sabbath unless it is a joy. If planting bulbs in the yard is work, then it must wait until Monday. If it is a joy, then it is Sabbath work.

Embracing Sabbath

Many years ago, I came across some work done by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA urging its clergy and congregations to rediscover the gift of Sabbath. Calling on both scriptural teachings and centuries-old Christian traditions, the Presbyterians articulated well the larger sense of Sabbath among God's people. They noted that the "gift of Sabbath" serves many purposes:³

- "Sabbath is for our joy and our rest." As God rested on the seventh day to rejoice in the goodness of his creation, Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is! Hauerwas and Willimon noted they knew a family whose Sabbath rule was to only do work that brought them joy on the Sabbath. If planting bulbs was joyful for them, then they would plant bulbs on the Sabbath. If planting bulbs was drudgery, then the task would have to wait for Monday.

² p. 57 and 64.

³The quotations and much of this section are taken from "An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift," written by the Sabbath Keeping Work Group of the PCUSA General Assembly in 2000.

- “*Sabbath is for deepened communion with the Living God.*” Sabbath is a time that we set aside for God to shape us within.
- “*Sabbath draws us into the sacred rhythm God has woven into all of life and all creation.*” In addition to a Sabbath day, God commanded that his people honor a Sabbath year. Every seventh year the fields were not to be sown and the vines were not to be pruned. The land itself was to have a Sabbath to God. After seven Sabbath years there was to be a year of Jubilee, when land was to be returned to its original family, for it was God’s land, not the Israelites’ (Leviticus 25). In the Jubilee year, slaves were to be freed, just as God had redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. The Sabbath is about the need for and goodness of rest, redemption, and renewal.
- “*Sabbath is profoundly prophetic.*” John Calvin: “Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God.”
- “*Sabbath is for our life in community.*” Sabbath is not a private gift from God. The Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as the entire community of God’s people . . . and so it is given to us as the Church, the world-wide community of God’s people.

In closing, let us pray that we all come to know that Sabbath is about much more than simply leisure. It is about knowing God, and about community, and about reconnecting with God and one another as we pull ourselves away from the craziness of our daily lives. We do need to rediscover the gift of Sabbath -- at least I do.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew’s Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj’s.-- we’re on-line now so who’d even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, “Scott Engle”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

We will not meet this Sunday, October 11.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.