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The National Presbyterian Church

Ten Commandments: Remember the Sabbath Day Time to Remember

Matthew 12:1-4; Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

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Through the fall we have been following a series of sermons in which we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the Commandments given by God to his servant Moses and through Moses to his ancient people Israel some 3000, 3,500 years ago when they escaped from slavery in Egypt and were heading on their way to the land that God had promised them. They'd had no control over their lives. They had been slaves. They needed to know how to live together in community with each other. Not only to become the people that God wanted them to be individually but to become the people God wanted them to be as a community. And through Moses God gives to his ancient people these Commandments which have been recorded for us in Holy Scripture in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, and have stood the test of time. They were passed down from generation to generation, embraced by our Lord Jesus Christ, adopted by the early Church and have functioned as the foundation of every society and civilization that in any sense has called itself Christian from that time to this.

So far in our series we have looked at eight of the Commandment. Only two to go! One of the remaining Commandments we're leaving until after Christmas: the Sunday after New Year, God willing, we'll be looking at the third Commandment which tells us that we're not to take God's name in vain. You may or may not realize it but every Sunday you repeat this Commandment on your lips in its 'positive form' when you pray the Lord's Prayer – "hallowed be thy name." We'll be looking at that Commandment in a sense as a word which I hope will take us through the year to come.

Today we come to the other Commandment that we haven't considered so far – the fourth Commandment, which tells us, as we just heard to remember the Sabbath Day and to keep it holy. To make time for God one day in seven. The Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Not to work but to rest.

We haven't been following the Commandments in order. We've been using specific commandments on specific Sundays that might in some sense relate to the commandment (so, for example, we thought about honoring parents on All Saints Sunday). This is the case with our commandment today – when we are about to enter into a period of time in which there are all kinds of "holy days" or "holidays." Ahead of us is Thanksgiving Day. Just before Thanksgiving

Wednesday, for Jewish people Chanukah begins. Next Sunday Advent begins, looking forward to the time of Christ's coming and his return. That leads on to Christmas. That then leads us on to New Year's – so we think about the birth of Jesus, we think about time passing by and a new year coming, and beyond New Year we look on to what, for many people is the "holiest day" of all: Super Bowl Sunday! So if you don't believe that liturgy affects both the religious and the secular, think again! Some special "times" are religious, but some "times" that are secular or patriotic are observed just as religiously! So here's a Commandment about that: about special time. This is about a particular day, the Sabbath Day: "*Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy*" . . .

Hard to Practice. Of all the Commandments this is surely one of the hardest Commandments to know how best to practice, at least literally. It leaves people scratching their heads and saying "*Well, how exactly do I do this? What is work and what is not work? What can I do? What can I not do on the Sabbath Day?*" So there are many people who are confused about questions like these. It's a hard Commandment at times to understand and to know how best to practice.

More Ignored. It also seems to me to be the Commandment which of all the Commandments is perhaps more ignored than just about any other in our society today. What I mean is this – that every day seems to blend in to every other day. We do have this season of the year the "holidays" which is different in some respects from the rest of the year, but most of the time one day blends into another all week long, week after week.

Some of you may have seen a report in the papers recently (Washington Post, November 10, 2013), saying that Amazon is going to begin delivering regularly on a Sunday as well – that they've struck up an agreement I think it's with the US Postal System to deliver on a Sunday. Weekends are fast disappearing!

So every day seems to blend into every other day in our society. And this idea of "one day out of seven" seems to be slipping away in our culture. If you're a parent and if you have children and if they're involved in sports you know what this is like.

Caused Great Controversy. It's also a Commandment which created the greatest controversy of all in Jesus' life as he lived his life of faith in the presence of other people, especially other religious people. We heard of that controversy in our scripture reading in Matthew 12 – so that when Jesus acts in one way or another on the Sabbath Day there are people who get annoyed with him because he does not observe the Sabbath Day *in the way that they want him to*. Indeed, so annoyed that they not only disagree with him but they want to (do you remember the word in the scripture reading? They want to) *destroy him*. This Commandment was so seriously taken in the days in which Jesus lived that people when they saw Jesus' attitude to it wanted to destroy him, to kill him.

So, today I'd like to begin thinking about the Commandment by thinking why this was the case? *Why was the 4th Commandment taken so seriously in Jesus' day?*

Seriousness of the 4th Commandment – God’s Word! One reason of course is quite simply that it was part of the Ten Commandments and people wanted to take it seriously because of that. And that, in some sense, should be enough.

Seriousness of the 4th Commandment – History and Identity! But there was another reason as well and that was this that there were incidents relating to the Sabbath Day and one in particular which had worked its way into the Jewish psyche from 150 years or more before the time of Jesus and so it was embedded in their sense of history, and who they were as a people. And it was with this attachment born of history and identity with which that Jesus had to wrestle with his contemporaries.

167 years before Jesus was born something happened in Palestine which was deemed to be devastating. The king of Syria, a man by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes, a fairly nasty piece of work, decided to invade Palestine. And not only to invade Palestine but to invade Jerusalem. And not only to invade Jerusalem but to invade the temple at the heart of Jerusalem – the core and the heart of the religious faith of the people of Israel. And there in the temple set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus.

This is an act of cultural domination; a powerful person demonstrating that his culture (the ‘modern’ Hellenistic culture of Greece and Rome) is superior to the backward cultural and religious practices of the Hebrew people. This man is saying we’re the powerful people, we’re on the right side of history, our culture wins, you belong to an old age which is passing –and I can do whatever I want with you and get away with it! I can trample on those things you think of as sacred and nothing will happen.

But Antiochus Epiphanes was wrong. This was the last straw for the people of Israel and though in stature they were as small as David in his struggle with Goliath, the people of Israel rebelled. A revolt broke out against Antiochus which ultimately, miraculously, was successful. Three years after the revolt started, the Jewish resistance (some people would call them terrorists, they weren’t exactly an army) was successful, and managed to throw the Syrians out of Jerusalem, out of the temple; and the temple was cleansed and restored.

And that was the beginning of Chanukah. That’s where it comes from. The restoration of the temple at this particular time, the ability to restore and to revert to the culture that they had been given by God.

And then 20 years later, seventeen years after the restoration of the temple, once again seemingly miraculously, under the leadership of a man called Judas Maccabeus the people of Judah were freed from all foreign tyranny, the Syrian army was thrown out, the land was free again. It was an enormous victory.

But along the way there were some days in which it didn't seem as if there would be any victory at all. And there was one day in particular which left its mark on the Jewish people. On this particular day there were some men and some women and some children who were hiding in a cave and they were all slaughtered – Jewish men, women and children were slaughtered in a cave. The story recorded for us in the 1st book of Maccabees tells us that on this day the men didn't lift a finger to defend their wives or their children. When the enemy came they simply did nothing; even in the face of death.

And the question is why? Why did they do nothing? Well, the answer as you may have guessed, is quite simply *that that day was the Sabbath Day, and rather than defend their lives, rather than “work” by picking up a sword, they were willing to die, all of them and their families on that day to observe the Sabbath Day. That was how critical it was to them.*

From that point on, however, questions were raised as to whether or not you could pick up a sword or fight on the Sabbath Day – and the answer came that you could in fact fight in self-defense; that was okay. And this redefinition of work on the Sabbath was probably the only reason why the people of Judah won their battle of resistance: modifying the Commandment so that you could pick up a sword and fight in self-defense. But while this aspect of the Sabbath law became more lax, from that time on, other rules and regulations and interpretations surrounding the Commandment seemed to become more firm, more solid, more detailed than ever before.

So not only was the observance of the Sabbath a God-given Commandment, but this story and others like it were wedged in the mind and the psyche of the Jewish people all the way down to Jesus. And indeed, despite the fact that Jesus questioned some of the issues raised by the strict Jewish interpretation of the fourth Commandment, this kind of attention to the commandment was passed on to the early Christian church and through the early Christian church to many branches of the Christian church, including our branch of the Christian church, the Presbyterian and Reformed branch of the Christian church.

So that at the core of Presbyterian faith, for generations, there was this call to mark ourselves out as different from all people by the strictness of our observance of the Sabbath Day. This strict observance was enshrined in one of our key doctrinal statements, the Westminster Standards from the 1600s, and enshrined, in particular, in the life of my people, the Scottish people, most of whom were Presbyterians, for generations – this idea, that “you will observe the Sabbath day, in this detail or in that detail, as strictly as you can.

So you can well imagine the consternation that filled the Presbyterians in my country of Scotland back in the 1800s when it was decided that on Sundays, the Christian Sabbath (moved from Saturday to Sunday, the day of Christ's Resurrection), trains could begin to operate from the city of Glasgow to the city of Edinburgh and back. There was uproar. Professor William Barclay describes the situation like this, quoting a journalist of the day, Maurice Lindsay:

The first Sunday train from Glasgow to Edinburgh ran on the 13th of March 1842. It was filled with peaceful and respectable persons gliding quietly away on its mission. The Presbytery of Glasgow denounced the running of Sunday trains as a flagrant violation of the Law of God as expressed in the 4th Commandment, a grievous outrage on the religious feelings of the people of Scotland, a powerful temptation to the careless and indifferent who abandon the public ordinances of grace. [And then he goes on to say that this was the scene when the train arrived in Edinburgh.] In Edinburgh a threatening battery of ministers, [DR: all Presbyterian ministers – just picture this!] lined the platforms and informed the detraining passengers that they had bought tickets to hell. [DR: Well you know, as a person who grew up in Edinburgh I could understand that sentiment if the train was going to Glasgow . . . but this train was going up to Glasgow but to Edinburgh!] . . . a claim which does not seem to have deterred many of them from making their way from Waverly station toward Princess Street Gardens. (Barclay, *Ten Commandments*, p.28)

So that was 1842. When I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s much of this ethos still remained. Things of course had softened along the way; considerably softened along the way. But the ethos of Sunday being the Sabbath Day was still very strong. So you can well imagine my shock and my horror when as a 19-year old I came to this country. And I find my Christian friends on a Sunday going to church (which was all well and good) and then going home and turning on their televisions. Could you imagine this? Turning on their televisions and watching football on a Sunday?! Oh, my heart just about broke! There were no professional sports back in the 1950s and '60s in Britain on a Sunday. They were all on Saturday. Indeed, to this very day the most famous golf course of all, the Old Course in Saint Andrews (except for a competition here or there) is just like Chick-fil-A, it's closed on a Sunday! The most famous golf course of all! Closed on a Sunday! It's a public park to go and walk on, to your heart's content.

- So what was I to do? What was I to do trying to follow faithfully my Lord and my Savior?
- Was I to join in with my friends and abandon my conscience?
- Was I to denounce my friends as heretics along the way?
- Or was I quietly just to do my own thing? (Rather like Eric Liddell, in that movie which many of you have seen *Chariots of Fire*, who would not run in the 1924 Olympic Games on a Sunday, even though he was probably going to get a gold medal.) How was I going to handle this?

Well what happened (not overnight but bit by bit) was this. I asked what many people ask, and what we ought to ask as Christians:

What would Jesus do on the Sabbath? How did he treat the Sabbath? And more than what he did, "How did he think about the Sabbath?" What was the Sabbath about to him? Behind all those rules, regulations and interpretations, why did God give us this Commandment?

What's the purpose of it all? What can we learn from Jesus' words, his actions, his life, his deeds?

Well, one observation came to my mind pretty quickly, and still comes to my mind as I read the gospel accounts of Jesus and the things that he did or did not do on the Sabbath Day. And that is this: That when we look at Jesus in the Gospel accounts, consistently throughout his ministry, what we see is that *he is really not that interested in all the legal details of the Sabbath Day*. He is really not that interested in all the 'dos' and the 'don'ts'. Can you do this or can you do that? You mustn't do this, you mustn't do that. His opponents are fascinated by these details, but Jesus stands in clear contrast to his opponents. They're the ones who are saying

"You're breaking this rule, you're breaking that rule. We don't like the way you walk, we don't like the way you talk. We don't like the way you eat. We don't like the way you heal. We have our ways of understanding this and you just don't seem to be concerned about this, Jesus. You seem to be pretty callous when it comes to the details."

And I would say that that observation is consistent with the gospel portrait of Jesus. He really does seem to be callous about the details of this Commandment. To put it another way, *it's not the details that bother him; it's the significance that he's interested in*. In other words, he drives us back to the original reason for the Commandment; why did God give this Commandment in the first place? What is its ultimate purpose? If it's hard to understand exactly how we're to implement it (and it is), can we gain some clarity by asking "what's the original purpose? What's in God's mind?"

Is there any way we can find that out? And I would say "Yes!" Indeed, looking at scripture and looking at Jesus, two ideas emerge which are not too complicated, not too complex, and that I think all of us can understand.

First, this Commandment over all is first of all about time. It's about time. It's about the God who creates time and to whom all of our time belongs. We sometimes focus on our possessions and we say "all of our possessions belong to God and we need to give back to God some of our possessions as a reflection of the fact that we know that what we have belongs to God" – and that is true. It's true of possessions but it's also true of time. In a busy world in which we sometimes hold on to our time as the most precious thing in the world, God says "Let it go and give it back to me."

So the first thing is this, that the Sabbath Day was given to us so that we would make time for God: so that we would make time to remember God, that we would make time to serve God, that we would make time to worship God. Specific time, not just "time in general." When "all of time is God's" unless we take the next step and mark out specific time, then, experience shows that nothing, no time, becomes his. So that's what the commandment calls for: specific time set apart for God, dedicated time for God, in which we stop whatever it is that's most important to us and hand time over, back to the one who made time in the first place.

Unless we can do that we will never be the people that God wants us to be individually or corporately as the body of Christ. We offer our time to God. Of course, it needs to be said, that in some senses I'm preaching to the choir: you all are here today! You all made a decision to set aside time, this time to God – and this is of course a very valid and critical response to this Commandment: weekly worship. This is far from trivial. This is critical for our lives that we do this. And it can be hard. I know it's hard in this day and age in which we live.

It used to be the church used to be the only show in town but now there's all kind of competition out there seeking our time for this, that or the next thing.

And time itself (even though we're entering a season which is set apart from other time) is much less ordered and regimented than it used to be. It's harder to carve out time for God than it used to be.

But we must do it because it doesn't belong to us – and it's when we acknowledge that truth that time is God's that we find ourselves being blessed in the process. I think we actually need the Commandment to help us deliberately reflect on time, or it will slip away, wasted: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." And then to pray, "*Lord, I don't know how exactly to keep this commandment, I don't know the details, but let me remember this: that my time is not mine it is yours and this is your command.*" And we need Jesus' example as well. Did you know that Jesus himself worshipped in the synagogue every Sabbath day? This was his custom (see Luke 4). This was his routine: to set aside time for God – part and parcel of his life. And not only on the Sabbath but at other times too, Jesus would go off by himself with God: sometimes a great while before the day; sometimes late at night; and sometimes through the night. Time alone with God: specific time, dedicated time, disciplined time for God. It's commanded for us. It's in Jesus' example but it also I think it is common sense!

Some of you may have read a book which was a *NY Times* best seller, called *Outliers*. In his book *Outliers* one of the things Malcolm Gladwell points out is this: that if you want to be an expert in anything you need to spend 10,000 hours dedicated to pursue it. 10,000 hours will make you an expert in just about anything. Well I read that, and said to myself, "How does it apply to becoming a Christian, an expert Christian? We all want to be expert Christians don't we? Expert followers of our Lord Jesus Christ – 10,000 hours.

So, I said, if we're going to live "three score years and ten" and want to be an expert Christian before we die, we need to divide the 10,000 into the 70 years. Do that and you get 142 hours per year. And then there are 52 weeks in the year, right? So that means if you're going to live to 70 (if you plan to live shorter than that, or want to become an expert younger! all you have to is put in more hours sooner; do the math!) then you divide 142 by 52, which leaves us with two to three hours per week . . . to become a dedicated Christian. How strange is that? Two to three hours per week? It almost fits perfectly with time for worship and time for a small group or class that meets weekly in which we can study God's word together. Two to three hours. That's

it. Skip it (and this is perhaps the more important point) don't invest that time, cut it in half, *and you will not be, and will never become an expert Christian! And furthermore, you will not have the power for yourself or for your children to live faithfully for Christ in a society which no longer bolsters our Christian faith.* According to Malcolm Gladwell, you have to put in the time or it simply will not happen.

So, for Jesus, the significance of this Commandment is about time. The details will follow and we certainly have to wrestle with that. But time, first of all for God (and he showed this in his life). But more than that, in his life Jesus also showed that the Commandment was about time for others. Time for others.

So when Jesus healed somebody on the Sabbath or he allows his disciples to eat on the Sabbath Day he is caring for them in exactly the way that the book of Deuteronomy says that the Commandment is to be kept: time for others. Listen to the words again.

The Seventh Day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God you shall not do any work on it. You, and then it goes on to say, or your son or your daughter, this is about your family, or your male or female slave or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock or the resident alien in your town, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Not only (1) take time for God and, (2) for yourself, but also (3) take time to notice others who do not have the power that you have: your slaves (or employees), your animals, the people in society who have no rights or power).

If you don't make time for that then they will slip under the radar. But we're not allowed as Christians to allow other people to slip under the radar – because we didn't slip under God's radar. The Commandment goes on, “*remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there.*” God didn't leave you there to wallow, but God took time to “save you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day: Time for God, time to remember others -- specifically to know that we are our brother's keeper. If you don't make the time it will not happen, and we will end up living lives of regret, where time slips away, and we simply say “I never had time to do it” – which is, of course, a lie. We all have time; it's just that there are some people who make the time and there are some who don't, and the Commandment says to us:

- “Make the time!” It's not ours in the first place, it's God's.
- Make the time for God!
- Make the time for others! Then we too will be blessed.

This is God's word. This is God's Commandment, from the maker of time. For your blessing and mine.

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