

## **August 28** Sabbath and Family

Exodus 20:8-12

At first glance it seems as if these two commandments have nothing in common. A careful look helps us see that both of them are talking about ways to deepen relationships, one with God and the other within families. We think, with our ability to be connected 24/7, multi-tasking, multiple activities lifestyle that we are the busiest people ever to have lived. While we might be the most distracted because of all the electronics that intrude into our lives we are not the busiest. Think about when we were an agriculturally based society. Farmers got up at dawn, worked all day, and rarely got a day off. If they wanted to go to church they had to get up extra early to get the chores done first! During the summer they frequently worked a 14-hour or longer day. It was only in winter, when outside chores and crop demands decreased, that they might get down to an eight hour day. For most of our history we were an agriculturally based people. It didn't get much better when the industrial revolution began. Many work shifts were ten or twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The first labor reforms were for a six day and 60 hour work week. The ancients had these same time pressures. They realized that if they were going to give God the proper place God deserved in their lives, as the first three commandments called for them to do, they also needed to create a space in their lives to allow people to deepen their commitment to God. This call for Sabbath was one of the first times the importance of rest and renewal was enshrined in law! Also, in these commandments the ancients recalled the importance of community. That is why there was the call to honor parents. We will look at both of these now in more depth as we see how they challenge our lifestyles today.

*Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.*

It is interesting to me that we are not told what it means to keep the Sabbath Holy other than not working. This gets me to wondering if it is rest itself that hallows the day or is more required? Initially the concern of the ancients was to define what was and was not work. They knew that some human activities still had to be carried on such as care for the sick, meal preparation and the feeding and watering of livestock. Other activities could wait a day. Even now there are discussions about what constitutes

prohibited work on the Sabbath. So initially you could do simple meal preparation but not light a fire. You could add water to a trough if it ran dry but you were to fill it full the night before and it should be large enough to usually hold the animals over. The same was true with their feed. Even what was considered “required care of sick” was discussed. There were probably more additional rules created around what you could and could not do on the Sabbath than any other of the commandments. By the time of Jesus the cause for taking a Sabbath was gone. It was all about trying really hard to not work. Over time the Sabbath became the principal day for religious ceremonies. Since people were free from most of the requirements of work and they were to keep this day Holy, attending worship became a part of keeping the Sabbath.

What does Sabbath mean for us today? For me, it’s all about creating that intentional quiet space for us to connect with God. Here is a radical thought. I am not sure that a day set apart is what we want or need! In our distracted life I think we might want to consider daily Sabbath moments where we commit to an hour of quiet and we turn off the electronics and read a devotional, take a quiet walk, and pray. Or we spend 10 minutes four or five times a day in quiet meditation. Or perhaps we take that day a week but instead of trying so hard not to work, we decide to focus our activities on God. One business executive talks about how he leaves work early every Friday afternoon to volunteer at a kitchen providing food for those in need. He calls it his Sabbath. Yes he works hard that afternoon but it changes his focus from the corporate world back to God and humanity.

See, I think there is no one way to keep the Sabbath and make it holy. If it is only about a day off of work but filled with lots of other busyness that is more distracting than life-giving then we are no better off. This command was celebrating the value of rest, of focusing our lives on matters of faith, and challenging us to be connected to God.

*Honor your father and your mother.*

The same types of things can be said for the second one. Honoring parents has been used and abused from time immemorial. Too often it was seen as honoring patriarchic systems where the father was in charge and all had to follow his word no

matter what. This was what they wanted people to believe was honoring your parents. Again, we hear of additional interpretations that try to create a sense of mutuality between husbands and their wives, parents and their children.

What this commandment was trying to get people to understand is that family relationships are important and we need to do what we can to nurture them. They are an important part of building a strong community. We understand why this was especially true for the ancients whose very lives depended upon the familial support of one another. There was no Social Security and most people did not make enough to put away savings. If parents were not honored and respected, widowed mothers could be turned out and fathers ignored. But also there was the need for fathers to be kind towards their families. The stronger the familial ties the more secure the community. This would also allow them the freedom to worship and take Sabbath rest. We don't, for the most part, know what it is to live in a tribal unit where the family is more important than any one individual. But that is the way most people have always lived and many still do so to this day.

The challenge of this commandment is still here today. Honoring parents is really about honoring families. Families support us, especially during major life transitions; families encourage us and celebrate with us. It is the essential building block that all of our community is based upon. When the family unit dissolves so too does the fabric of the community. Yet in many instances people are so busy that family ties get ignored. Many families only rarely sit down to eat together or play together. We need to nourish familial ties. Family ties are so important that when someone does come from a dysfunctional family they usually try to create a better one for themselves. Even here in Sequim I see people banding together for mutual support since their children and grandchildren are far away. You create a type of family community because it is important.

What does that mean for us? I think there is a challenge for us to respect our kids and grandkids where they are in life's journey. Even when it is a journey we would not take. We also need to be as open and loving towards them as we can so they will want to reach out to us. Someone said that this commandment challenges the parents to live

in such a way that our children and grandchildren want to honor us! It also means taking time with our families. Whatever we need to create those strong bonds of community we should do because they are so essential that the ancients put it into law.

Sabbath observance forms a bridge between earth and heaven, strengthening the ties that bind the human community to God, and fellow human beings to one another. The honoring of family enables the human community to share and to deepen its relationship with each other and to provide that space to improve our relationship with God.

In closing let me share a brief story about the values of family and rest. She had to move in with her children after her stroke. They had a nice room and bath that was separate from much of the house. Her daughter, son-in-law and two children were kind but they were so busy that they rarely had time to spend much time with her. One day her daughter came home from work and found mom in the kitchen trying to fix dinner. It was a challenge because of her decreased mobility. She told her mom that she didn't have to cook. She would run out and pick something up. Mom looked at her and said, "I was hoping that if there was a home cooked meal someone might want to eat with me." She was tired of eating in her room, or at the table by herself as people ran by. Her daughter slowed down, helped mom finish dinner and made it clear all were sitting down to dinner that night even if schedules had to be rearranged. They enjoyed dinner and vowed to, as often as possible, eat together. The granddaughter started working with grandma to fix the meal. Soon dinner became a focus and as they spent time together they also began to plan their free time together. Grandma finally asked if one of them would take her to church on occasion as she missed going. They all thought about the activities they had scheduled for Sundays but realized this was important and started figuring out how to make it happen. Over time it became easier to schedule things around Sunday morning and soon the family was attending worship together.

Sabbath, rest, time spent together, and building bonds of family. They make for a strong community and worship life. That is why they were encoded into law.