

Living the Story

A Study through Scripture

Introduction:

Once again we are covering a text that contains stories we are familiar with if we have spent time growing up in Sunday School. Many of us may have memorized the Ten Commandments when we were children (can you still list them?) or perhaps learned the song along with the hand motions (1 God...). As I reflected on this passage, I began to wonder which command I—and others—have the most problem following today. Murder? Check. Stealing? Check. No other idols? Your getting warmer. Sabbath? Ouch.

In the midst of this preparation, I heard Randy Harris speak at LCU's Moser Ministry Conference. Randy is a man I greatly respect and he "gets" what it means and what it takes to grow spiritually. In one of his presentations, he was asked to address the topic of "The Biggest Threat to Mature Christians." His answer: the biggest threat to mature Christians is distractions. He went on to say that we cannot be fully present with one another, not can we be fully present with God, which is what Sabbath keeping is all about.

Today, I want to encourage each of us individually and us collectively in groups, to slow down, to pause, to celebrate the life God has created for us, because, as he says in Genesis 1: It is good.

Summary of the Text:

To understand the Sabbath, I think you have to go back to the first Sabbath, the one God created on the seventh day of creation. We might be tempted to think that after six days of making the world, God was tired and needed a little break. That's the way we work, not God. At the end of his sixth day of creation, God sees human kind and proclaims, "It is very good." This after having concluded the previous five days with an observation of the goodness of creation up to that point. It is the goodness of God's creation in which we rest. It is a reminder that it is God who is Sovereign. We are here because of God, not because we work really, really hard and make things happen. (I am always reminded of Charlie Anderson, Jimmy Stewart's character in the movie *Shenandoah*, who lists all of the things they did to raise/grow/harvest the crop they are about to eat, but they thank you God anyway.)

We come by this busyness honestly, by the way. As Wayne Muller has said in his book *Sabbath*: "Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something—anything—is better than doing nothing." (Muller, 1) When was the last time your employer rewarded you for doing nothing? Very few of us work at a place where taking off any hour early to spend some time in reflection and renewal is rewarded. The ones who get promoted are the ones who stay until 6:00 or later, right?

So in the middle of the Ten Commandments, we find the instruction to remember the Sabbath. I can understand the "Do not steal" or "Do not kill," but taking a time of rest seems out of place, unless we understand how crucial this is to our being able to fully rely on God and his grace. We find it impossible to follow God when we do not stop to remember who he is ... and who we are not. So, given just as much as importance as the other nine words of God, we have the command to remember the Sabbath.

Just a quick word about Sabbath in the New Testament. I am aware that the Ten Commandments are in the Old Testament and we live under a new covenant through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. I realize the Jewish people observed Sabbath from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. I recognize Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount that point to a new reality about things like hating and committing adultery. I am not, however, willing to

LESSON #5

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Text: Exodus 20.1-21

The Big Picture: Within the Ten Commandments is a command to remember the Sabbath. We are to rest because God rested. We are to rest because God is the one who is in control, not us in the midst of our hurried busyness. If ever a command is needs to be practiced and a part of our spiritual walk, this one is the one

Materials Needed: none

place this command in the category of “things they did back then” and ignore what I believe are implications for our lives. I think this may be the reason Jesus tells his followers that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. We do not keep the Sabbath, as Muller will later say, the Sabbath keeps us.

Preparing for the Group Time:

For our group time, I am going to encourage your group to think about ways they can celebrate a Sabbath rest with their family or perhaps even with another family or two. (Sabbath is not a self-indulgent discipline and if you live within a family unit, you almost *have* to celebrate Sabbath with them. This is true not just from the standpoint of your family lives together, but also from the perspective that you have a responsibility as a community (family, in this case) to share a spiritual life together.)

As we think about Sabbath, we most move away from thinking that Sabbath is simply a time where we do no work. It is not a day off, in fact, it may not even be a day at all—it may be a few hours. I am not sure what you visualize when you think of the Israelites observing the Sabbath. I for a long time thought of a bunch of people sitting around staring at one another because they could not work, they could not go out, they could not have fun, etc. If Sabbath is a celebration of the reign of God in this world and in our lives, I think Sabbath may actually be a time of much joy and celebration, even as we pause from the regular routine of work.

Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is not just a day off, when we catch up on television or errands. It is the presence of something that arises when we consecrate a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true. It is time consecrated with our attention, our mindfulness, honoring those quiet forces of grace and spirit that sustain and heal us. (Muller, 8)

Another thing to think about as you think about observing a Sabbath rest is you must plan a day for Sabbath long before the day actually comes. Keeping a Sabbath time is not the same thing as suddenly discovering you have a couple of hours free today due to a cancelled appointment. It may be good, productive, even spiritually enriching time, but it is not Sabbath. As Ruth Haley Barton says:

The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship and delighting in God, but the rest of the week must be lived in such a way as to make Sabbath possible. Paid work needs to be contained to five days of the week. Household chores, shopping and errand-running need to be complete before the Sabbath comes, or they must wait. Courageous decisions need to be made about work and athletics, church and community involvement. (Barton, 134-135)

I will suggest below ways we can do that. You, as a group leader, be willing to lead by example. Think about it before you gather together with your group and come prepared to say: Here is my plan for a Sabbath this week. I cannot wait to tell about how the experience went next week!

NOTE: I recognize that we have done a cursory overview of the Sabbath and one could spend hours upon hours studying this and still not feel like they have a full understanding, but as your group discusses the idea of a Sabbath, be sure they do not simply see and describe it as a day off. The point of the Sabbath is not that we do not work; it is that we revel in the goodness of who God is and do not have to work, because we rest (resting implies trust, by the way) in him. If a recognition of God is not a part of how we describe Sabbath, we are simply discussing a vacation.

Resources:

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2006.

Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2009.

Living the Story

Lesson #5
Text: Exodus 20.1-21

Lesson Outline:

As you begin, recount the ways last week your group determined they would celebrate a remembrance of God's work in your lives together. If you made plans to do something in the future, be sure everything is in place for that to happen at some point down the road. If you have already had a chance to do so, share your experiences together.

Ask your group to describe a rule they had in their household growing up that was THE unbreakable rule. One of those rules that was a "We NEVER (or ALWAYS) do..." How does that rule continue to affect your life now, if you have grown up and moved away or begun your own family?

Go through the discussion questions listed below.

Spend some time going over the Living the Story section—you might even want to read this to your group.

Close with the prayer exercise as listed below.

Discussion Questions:

How many of the Ten Commandments do you know?

Which, if any, of the Ten Commandments do you consciously think about as you go through your life today?

Read through the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20.

Which of the Ten Commandments do you think you—or others you know—struggle with keeping?

A theologian and Bible professor at ACU by the name of Randy Harris has said: The biggest threat to us maturing as followers of Jesus is distractions. In what ways do you agree with Randy? In what ways have you seen examples of this to be true in your own life?

How does keeping a time of Sabbath eliminate the distractions Randy warns us about?

What is Sabbath? How would you describe it to someone who is not a follower of Jesus?

In what ways do you keep a time of Sabbath in your own life?

In what ways CAN/WILL you keep a time of Sabbath in your own life?

For the Children:

Your children probably have spent time learning the Ten Commandments, so take the time to allow them to tell you about what the commandments are and what they mean. Some of your children, depending on their age, may be too young to realize the distractions they face and to be able to understand an extended silent prayer time, so use your discretion as to whether or not to include them in this section of the lesson.

Living the Story:

To live out the story of the Ten Commandments this week, we are going to practice a time of Sabbath rest. We have done this in the past, but it is worth repeating here, simply because it is a practice that is difficult for us to remember to do and also such a key part of trusting in the provisions and goodness of God.

Your assignment, then, is to practice a time of Sabbath this week with your family or perhaps a couple of families from your group. This is to be a time of rest and a time of recognition of the power of God and the goodness of what he has created.

Ruth Haley Barton says that as we enter a time of Sabbath, exclude the following during that day: work, buying and selling (Buying and selling, she says, causes someone else to work and it also puts our focus on the things we think we need, rather than trusting in God to provide.), and worry. She goes on to say you should include: resting the body, replenishing the spirit, and restoring the soul. (Barton, 142-144)

James Bryan Smith, in his work *The Good and Beautiful Life*, which we looked at in groups this past spring, instructs us to observe Sabbath through the following (found on pages 82-83):

- Take some time to plan your Sabbath. Which day will you do it? What will you do? What will you eat?
- Start in the evening with a special meal for you, your family, and friends.
- Light a candle or two at the center of the table when everyone has come to the table. You might want to use this ancient Jewish prayer, typically said by the woman of the home: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights."
- During the meal it is customary for the man of the house (the father, if there are children) to bless everyone at the table. Smith suggests keeping this time informal and simply telling those present that they are loved and how much they mean to the one doing the blessing.
- Play games.
- Eat great food you love.
- Go to church together if you are planning your Sabbath for a Sunday.
- Try not to eat out (it makes others work), which will mean having food prepared by you for the next day.
- Nap!
- Set aside time for private prayer.
- Read a good devotional book or write in a journal.
- Spend some time reading the Bible—not a study, just reading.
- Practice hospitality—invite friends to eat with you.

Prayer Time:

One of the ways that might help us focus on a time of Sabbath is to spend some time in silent prayer. Rather than go through a list of requests and then praying through that list, perhaps start with silent prayer, then have a leader say: God, we pray for those who are ill. Allow for a minute or two of silent prayer for those who we know that are ill, and then add another prayer thought, and so on. I would include: those who are ill, those who are struggling with family situations, those who are seeking peace in their lives, those who do not know God, those who are seeking God, those who need to find Sabbath in their lives. You may think of other things to add to this list.

What's Next:

Next week we look at Deuteronomy 28-34 or *The Story* chapter 6. We will be looking specifically in our group time at Deuteronomy 30.11-20; 31.9-13.