**Exodus 20:8-11**

**Crown Him the Lord of weeks**

One of the things that we were glad that Jenny’s Dad discovered in his last year was **ITV3**. I don’t know if this is a channel that you’re particularly familiar with, but in the evenings they seem to major in some of the quality repeats, particularly of series like **Inspector Morse** and the various **spin-offs**. Dad really liked seeing those again - even if two hours continuous viewing in the evening was becoming a bit more of a challenge for him.

Jenny and I recently noticed that ITV3 was doing a re-run of the series **Wycliffe**. Not the Wycliffe of church history, but the detective series set in Cornwall. When we were living out of county we used to hear of how people down here were watching it avidly every Sunday evening, I think it was, trying to spot all the various Cornish locations.

So we’ve recorded some of these. But the one we watched most recently, I honestly found myself a bit annoyed by some rather offensive stereotypes. You know how it is, don’t you? No matter how superior the drama is supposed to be, the religious characters are just about entirely one or other of two types: **pathetic nitwits** or **self-righteous bigots**. Series One, Episode Five was chock full of the latter.

Mind you, it probably is fair to say that hypocrisy, and perhaps particularly *religious* hypocrisy, is necessary to point out. We had various stories during the **Lockdowns** of various government high-ups arguably or clearly flouting the rules they were advocating, and only too right that they make the newspaper and TV news headlines when they’re caught out.

And among these **Ten Commandments** that we’re currently looking at, this one today about the **Sabbath** must be one that has occasioned particularly high levels of self-delusion and self-righteousness that can go all the way to clear what is clearly hypocrisy. It has also occasioned far more disagreement than all the others, too, because I’m not at all sure just how much of this is really supposed to carry over into the life of believers in Jesus Christ, who said,

***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”***

(Matthew 5:17)

What does that mean as regards a Sabbath nowadays? Is it relevant that this is the one Commandment that isn’t clearly re-stated in the NT? Is that because Jesus has in some way “fulfilled” that command, and that it’s now no longer applicable? Or has it all been transformed in some way? Because surely those horror stories of how people used to … and some probably still do … apply this Commandment can’t be right, can they?

I confess I cringe when I hear of how kids used to *dread* Sundays, stiff and itchy **Sunday best**, and stiff and itchy parents ready to rebuke them for their unspirituality if they want to do anything “worldly” like play a game, or somehow manage to get some dirt on their clothes.

People used to be so precise about the Sabbath starting at **midnight** on the dot. **Knitting**, for example, had to be stopped at that precise instant. But there was an older aunt in Jenny’s family, I think it was, who was supposed once to have found a **button** on her clothes had come adrift on a Sunday. And of course it wasn’t right to be anything less than fully properly dressed on a *Sabbath* … but she wasn’t allowed to sew it back on herself … but she felt she could insist someone else do it for her.

I know that’s scarcely really a “horror story”. But it grates on me, and quite possibly it does on you, too. You might well have encountered things like this yourselves over the years. Or you might just be a bit confused by all of this. You might react against obvious hypocrisies, but there are things that are just inconsistencies, too.

Take **Sunday papers**, for example. Quite apart from the fact that some of them seemed particularly to keep all the most salacious stories for the Sunday editions, best avoided anyway … but some of us over the years might have said it was not right for Christians to buy a paper on a Sunday. But if you buy a paper on a Monday, people have been working all Sunday to put it together. Why is it wrong to buy a Sunday edition, because you’re making shop-keepers and delivery people work, but it’s OK to buy a Monday edition, which is only making journalists work?

Maybe you might just want to know what the rules are, as followers of Jesus in this century.

Folks, I’m not sure I can answer all of those questions today. I am pretty sure that we should NOT be looking to just create a set of rules. But I’m also aware that some of us are really uncomfortable in NOT having a set of rules, too.

All I can promise you this morning is that we will do our level best to look at this particular little section of Scripture and try to do it justice. We might come out with more questions than answers. We might even come away with more questions than we arrived with.

But I am sure that this Word, or Commandment, is something we need to address to our *hearts*, and not just try to bypass that by writing a revised application of rules. Mere rules in time turn off our minds and chill our hearts. And I’m absolutely sure that the LORD is concerned here with something far more important than the status of our buttons, as **God sets out his people’s timetable, based on his own for the week of creation**

Let’s face the problems

Will you accept God’s pattern?

Will you accept God’s provision?

Will you accept God’s positivity?

* **Let’s face the problems**

So let’s go for it. First of all, back to read the passage itself, just to make sure we’re getting things in God’s actual terms, rather than how our memories might have massaged it. First, there’s the basic command itself:

***“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”***

(Exodus 20:8)

In fact, some people suggest that this was, all by itself, the original Fourth Commandment, and that the explanatory stuff was added afterwards. But whether that’s the case or not, what we’ve got here is God’s inspired commentary and explanation and application of what that “remembering” is going to look like - at least for his people back in the OT, and possibly on into NT times too.

There’s some debate, too, whether this means “remember” in the sense of “look back and keep on doing what you’ve been doing already” - though there’s not a lot of evidence for that in Genesis and Exodus so far. Or it could be that this is “remember” in the sense of “it’s being initiated now, and you’re to *start* doing it from now on”. I don’t think you’ve got a lot in Scripture that insists one way or the other, to be honest. Quite likely you read back in what you already want to find there, and we have to be careful about that, because circular reasoning doesn’t prove a thing.

But OK, whichever, here is how it’s going to apply:

***“Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.”***

(Exodus 20:9-10)

One specified day in every seven is going to be different. The word “seven”, by the way, is very similar in Hebrew to the word “sabbath”. There’s clearly a bit of word play going on here that we don’t see so obviously in English.

What is also not immediately obvious is precisely what counts as “labour” or “work”. You probably know that Jewish people right up to today have developed very finely nuanced *this is but this isn’t* approaches to this, and to many people it can seem nit-picking or way beyond that into total hypocrisy. So, for example, rabbis were supposed to have said that you weren’t allowed to carry a **sheaf of grain** on the Sabbath … but if there was a **spoon** on top of it, well, you’re just carrying a spoon, so that’s OK.

And even now, in modern Israel, they have developed **light switches** that will work on the Sabbath without it being “work”, in that technical religious sense. You don’t press something that makes an electrical contact - that would be work! … you just press a switch which lets something internally *fall* into a place which makes that electrical contact - and that’s *not* work, to their thinking.

But at least in the way this command is given, there’s no wriggle room on the word “you”. It’s you *and anyone for whom you are responsible*. You can’t ask family members or servants to carry on working so that you can be exempt.

***“On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.”***

(Exodus 20:10)

And finally, there’s an underlying reason given. It dates back to creation:

***“For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”***

(Exodus 20:11)

Now I recognise that people have different takes, as believers, on those six days of creation. Some of you will say they should be interpreted as literal days, and others will probably treat them as more poetic or symbolic. It’s obviously easier if you think Genesis 1 describes six literal days, but even if not, you will hopefully concede that, the way it is written here, even if those days were only symbolic, they are potent enough symbols that here in Exodus 20 they are applied literally. Maybe there is some fuzziness in the word in Genesis 1, but here all the fuzziness is gone.

And, either way, what are we to make of that word “rest”? God *rested*? We surely can’t take it that he was exhausted after all that exertion … but it looks to be saying more than simply “that was it”, “everything was done”. What was it about that seventh day, such that God didn’t just “rest”, but “blessed” the day and “made it holy”? What does it even mean that it’s “holy”, right back then?

What it does flag up, though, is that “rest” is going to be something significant through the Bible. Nowadays we might just say that after six days slogging away, we need a break … but is that “rest” in this fuller sense? Just look at these verses to get your thinking going.

The occupation of the Promised Land, that was *rest* - from just the fighting to possess it, or does it mean something more?

***But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, ..***.

(Deuteronomy 12:10)

When the Jews were deported to Babylon for 70 years (notice a number seven there again) … what kind of rest is *this* for the land?

***The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.***

(2 Chronicles 36:15-16)

***[The king of the Chaldeans] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, … to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.***

(2 Chronicles 36:20-21)

“Rest” is clearly transformed when you get into the NT. It’s not just that the Sabbath command isn’t repeated in some format, like all the others, but you get this in that key (but tricky!) chapter in Hebrews. What is the “rest” that this is talking about?

***Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, ...***

(Hebrews 4:1)

***For we who have believed enter that rest, ...***

(Hebrews 4:3)

***For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.***

(Hebrews 4:8-10)

If that rest is entered by faith … then what are the “works” that we are “resting” from? Is that the endless struggle to keep the Law, in order to be saved - when the book we call Hebrews is all about something (some-*ONE*, I should say) better than all those OT systems?

If we see “rest” introduced in Genesis, is it a surprise that we see it back again *but transformed* when we come to the end of the Bible, in Revelation?

***And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!”***

(Revelation 14:13)

And yet we do not have to wait until that day, we’re told. Jesus said that he provides rest *now*.

***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”***

(Matthew 11:28-30)

Do you think that might be because Jesus also said …

***“For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”***

(Matthew 12:8)

Folks, to be honest, I don’t think I’ve untangled all of these things yet, anywhere near. But I am absolutely convinced that this commandment about the Sabbath is much, *much* more than simply a question of whether nowadays we can buy an **ice-cream** on a Sunday afternoon.

We’ll come back to a few practical questions along those lines this evening, I’m sure. But for the rest of this morning I would like to press on with questions relating far more to principles and attitudes that the Scriptures seem to me to be pointing us to. We do differ - and I think we are *allowed* to differ - on precisely how we are to live our lives to the glory of God. Look at this, for example - though some people will insist that this has to exclude reference to the Sabbath commandment:

***One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.***

(Romans 14:5)

And, being totally frank, I’ve never been convinced *from Scripture* with any of the arguments I’ve heard that Sabbath command in the OT, Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, morphs into “the Lord’s Day”, Saturday midnight to Sunday midnight, when we come to the NT.

As far as I can see, *in the Bible* there are fairly clear suggestions that the believers in Jesus met on “the first day of the week”, Sunday, rather than Saturday, but there’s nothing suggesting a magic moment of midnight for start or finish.

I don’t see any explicit teaching *in Scripture* that we are now to regard this first day of the week as the Christian version of the Sabbath.

And the only time the phrase “the Lord’s day” is used, we are only *assuming* that that means a Sunday. There is no statement to that effect, and other suggestions are possible.

Leave those uncertainties for this evening, if you’d like to join us then. For now, I want to move on to something I am sure is much more helpful. Some *principles* from this passage in Exodus 20, formulated into three challenging questions.

* **Will you accept God’s pattern?**

***“Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, ...”***

(Exodus 20:9)

There’s one big challenge that underlies all of this: do you think that God has the right to tell us how to order our lives? Think back to the days when you were a kid, or, if that’s too far back, to when you had your own, if you did. Do you remember the **bedtime battles**? You know very well that the kid is tired, but will they accept that fact that they need rest?

And will *we* accept the fact that *we* need rest, too? We need a dose at the level that God prescribes: one day in seven. We may be able to continue to function if we ignore what God says, but the more the push things, the less we will flourish. That’s the way things are. That’s the way that it has been coded into us, right back from the start.

And probably this will apply on the individual and the societal level, although it clearly does get more complicated when you have certain types of work that cannot so easily be suspended for one day a week.

My work back in the **labs** was simple, from that point of view, so simple that we just weren’t permitted into the labs to do practical chemistry at the weekends - though there was still plenty of paper-work that could be taken home for evenings and weekends.

But one of our friends in our church there worked for a firm that made bottles. Simple enough, you might think, to stop production on Saturday afternoon. Actually, no. If those **furnaces** were allowed to cool, the molten glass would set solid, and it would take *days* to get things moving again.

And of course you have what we might call the “**caring professions**”. It just wouldn’t work for hospital staff to wave goodnight on Saturday evening and hope that the patients will keep things safely running until Monday morning.

But just contrast that with the attitude of Edison, the inventor of the **electric light bulb**, that I read this week.

*For the first time in human history, work was no longer limited to the time between sunrise and sunset. With his modern utterance of “Let there be light,” Thomas Alva Edison invited humanity into a world that never sleeps.*

*Edison himself believed sleep was a waste of time. He was known to work over one hundred hours a week, to hold job interviews at four in the morning, and to insist that his employees adhere to the same sleepless schedule he did. He adhered to and promoted a philosophy that rest was the enemy of productivity, stating in 1914 that “there is really no reason why men should go to bed at all.'*

Jen Wilkins, *Ten Words to live by*

I like Jen Wilkins’ following comment:

*The divine Creator who uttered “Let there be light” also benevolently and pointedly declares “Let there be rest.”*

What constitutes “rest”, though? I’m not sure it will be the same for everyone. Downing tools will be a minimum, I would have thought - and that makes it harder if one of your work tools nowadays is a **mobile phone**. But if we link rest with “recreation”, it would be stupid to say that we’re not allowed to do anything with any exertion in it. Or else …

**Flat walks**, like this one down at Hayle, would be OK. But don’t take the **coastal path** between Portreath and Porthtowan, because those downs and ups definitely take a bit of effort.

But there is something else in this Word or Commandment that we need to factor in, too.

***“... but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.”***

(Exodus 20:10)

It’s just a little word in English. In Hebrew it is just a single letter appended to the beginning of the next word. But I think it really must affect our thinking profoundly.

So although God insists that we need rest, that rest has to feature him in some way. So we are to rest *from* work, but *to* him. And doesn’t that seem to imply that the truest rest is not what we call **me time**, but *God* time … whatever that is. We become most ourselves when we are most fully involved with him. I think that’s how we should probably view passages like this from Isaiah:

***“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;...”***

(Isaiah 58:13-14)

It’s a bit like a **newly married couple** who are now learning to live *together*, instead of maintaining parallel lives under the same roof - a whole set of new privileges and pleasures that were not open to them when they were single.

So, folks, this is what we need to think through, I reckon. A Sabbath “to him” … what is that going to look like nowadays?

It would mean, at the very least, that if we accept that weekly pattern involving time to rest, then *God* is to be involved in those “rest” times. They are to be *to* him, not *from* him. And, just as has been the practice all the way down through the centuries of A.D., “to him” also involves a recognition that the people of Jesus Christ are meant to function not as just so many individuals, but as God’s gifts to each other. In other words, *church* is totally appropriate in this “day to the Lord”. And we can check out our New Testaments and find quite a bit about what the Lord *expects* of his people when they meet together.

***And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.***

(Hebrews 10:24-25)

But no, I’m not necessarily talking about “Sunday best”, and filling the whole day with services. More isn’t necessarily going to be better. It can get obsessive. It can get oppressive, even. But I still need to say: when else, if you’re doing six days of labour, do we have a better chance than to spend time “to him” *and* to his people? Remember Jesus’ own words, too:

***“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”***

(Matthew 25:40)

And that would include not just feeding the hungry, but sharing the words of Christ that are “spirit and life”, too.

Will we accept God’s pattern for our lives? And ...

* **Will you accept God’s provision?**

Although I said earlier that there wasn’t a whole lot of evidence for the Sabbath featuring in the life of the Jewish people prior to Exodus 20, there is one clear example, not so many chapters before - in the previous couple of months since they had left Egypt: manna.

***Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.”***

(Exodus 16:4-5)

Can you see the faith that is needed there, in relation to the Sabbath? Trust that there will enough provided on the - it would be Friday morning for them - so that you won’t need to go out and gather more on the Saturday, Sabbath morning.

If you’re employed on a Monday to Friday, nine-to-five job nowadays - that’s if there are any of them left! - but if it’s a job with reliable hours that don’t infringe on Sundays, this is relatively easy. Sunday is a day off. You do not risk losing some of your livelihood by deciding not to work on a Sunday. Exactly the same if you’re on a pension. Your attendance at a workplace, actually, on *any* specific day, is not required to maintain your income.

If you’re in a different line of work, it might well not be the same. What if you’re in a job that needs people to work on *every* day of the week? The nursing and caring professions have always drawn believers in Christ, but the working patterns haven’t always been great.

But it’s going to be similar in our society nowadays, even if you can’t argue that a particular place of work *needs* to be open every day. You could argue that we don’t *need* restaurants and supermarkets to be open on Sundays; people could just plan ahead for shopping or cook at home. But these places *will* be open, whether Christians work in them, or buy or eat in them, on Sundays.

So you could say that believers should refuse to work on Sundays, or at least minimise their working on Sundays. But, if you do this, isn’t this like old Auntie Bessie who was happy for an *un*believer to break the Sabbath on her behalf?

Or think - and this is getting nearer the mark here - of farmers, concerned that if they delay **harvesting** by not working on the Sunday … well, that **weather forecast** means they risk losing it all.

Folks, I don’t have the answers here, but I can see the question, at least. Are you prepared to trust God to provide? If you have work that can be rearranged - and that would certainly apply to study, as well - are you prepared to specify some time as being “to God”, and therefore *not* available to use to catch up on homework or any of those jobs around the house that need doing?

Are we going to accept God’s pattern for living: that we all need rest, and that the best and most refreshing rest of all is rest that is “to him”?

And are we going to trust God’s provision, that six days is, in just about all normal circumstances, *enough* time to do all the work you actually *need* to do, in order for God to provide for you?

Actually, trusting God to provide is a big thing, and it comes all the way through the Bible. It is the principle of faith. God will provide the sacrifice. Demonstrated way back by Abraham, the “Father of the faithful”.

***Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”***

(Genesis 22:8)

That is not just how Sabbath works, trusting that God will provide; that is how *salvation* works, too:

***So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.***

(Hebrews 4:9-10)

***And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ...***

(Romans 4:5)

Folks, for eternal life, will you accept God’s provision? The true manna, the Bread of life.

***Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”***

(John 6:35)

And finally for this morning ....

* **Will you accept God’s positivity?**

It still quite possible that, like me, you cringe at some of those abuses of the Sabbath that I mentioned earlier - whatever the proper term for it might be nowadays, and whatever part of the week it might be best for believers to use. And that negativity can taint for us what was meant to be a blessing. I confess that I have to work quite hard on this myself, even though Cornish Sundays back in the 60’s were not really *that* bad.

If we feel negatively, then there is clearly something wrong. It could be something wrong in us, or it could be something wrong in the way we’re doing things. We’ve got to open up both our inner attitudes and our outward behaviour to the light of the Scriptures.

Here are some brief final words to take away with you and hold onto tight. They are words that Jesus spoke, trying to correct the crushing absurdities that the Pharisees had made of that day designed to be a blessing of rest to weary people. What could be a better day than a Sabbath for doing something *good*? What better day than a Sabbath to *rejoice*?

***And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”***

(Mark 2:27-28)

If you have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ to be the Lord of your life, will you trust him to be the Lord of your *week*, too?

**Crown him the Lord of weeks**

10 days on 2 days off?