

You Shall Know I AM: Keeping the Sabbath

Exodus 31:12-18; 35:1-3

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 5, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ We're back in our series through the book of Exodus, and we're revisiting an issue brought up earlier when we studied the Ten Commandments. This morning's text is about the fourth commandment – about Sabbath-keeping. Now out of the Ten, the fourth commandment has got to be the most confusing. **God tells his covenant people to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, and he says you do that by not working on that day.** But what defines “work”, God doesn't say. So the Israelites have always faced the practical challenge of determining what it looks like to keep the Sabbath. And if you know the story, you know they take it too far, begin adding layers of legalism, and eventually lose the spirit of the Law.
 - Well, as readers of Scripture today – not only are we still confused about what it looks like to keep the Sabbath – we have the added challenge of figuring out if Sabbath-keeping is even a relevant category anymore. **Is it part of our Christian obedience? Do the people of God today have to keep the Sabbath?**

- ❖ **Our society is equally confused about the Sabbath.** If you grew up in the West, up until the turn of the century, most of us experienced Sundays where there was no mail service, where you couldn't find a bank open, and no one could buy alcohol or even household appliances or a car on Sunday. It wasn't just Chick-fil-A closed. There were a number laws regulating commerce on Sundays. They were known as **blue laws**.
 - Now most of these blue laws have been repealed, but even in our secular day and age, here in Texas, you still can't buy or sell liquor on Sundays, and car dealerships are required to close at least one day of the weekend. From a secular point of view, those laws make no sense. Why can't the dealership be open both days when the mall is? These remaining blue laws are simply vestiges of our society's religious heritage back when the Sabbath was observed by Christians and non-Christians alike.

- ❖ **But today even Christians don't know what to do with the Sabbath.** We sense that it must have some relevance, and yet we're weary to avoid a strict adherence that reeks of legalism. **And so Sabbath-keeping has boiled down to "going to church" on Sundays.** That's what it means to most Christians. I keep the Sabbath holy by going to church.
 - But that alone feels hollow. **It's like we're missing something if keeping Sabbath just means showing up for a worship service and being home an hour or two later in time for kickoff.** This is the third time that Sabbath-keeping has been brought up in Exodus (16:23; 20:8), and it'll be addressed once more in chapter 35:1-3. So as God is establishing his covenant people and describing what a relationship with him will look like – Sabbath-keeping seems pretty significant.

- ❖ **So what is that significance?** What did it mean to the Israelites in their day? What did the Sabbath signify? And then we need to ask if Sabbath-keeping is still required for God's people in our day? And depending on the answer, what difference will that mean for you and me and our practical obedience? So in order to tackle all those important questions, we're going to walk through three points: (1) The purpose of the Sabbath, (2) The perpetuity of the Sabbath, and (3) The practice of the Sabbath.

The Purpose of the Sabbath

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the purpose of the Sabbath. **According to Scripture, what was it for?** We could answer in three ways. It was to refresh God's people, to remind God's people, and to reorient his people.
- ❖ **First, the Sabbath was intended to refresh God's people.** Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word for “rest” (*shabbat*). God’s instructions were for his people to carry on their labor for six days but to set apart a day of rest on the seventh. **For Israel, that meant resting from their work from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday.** Everyone in the household would rest – including servants and livestock (20:10). They wouldn’t work the fields. They wouldn’t collect the harvest. And they wouldn’t employ anyone’s services to do those things for them. They would completely rest from their labor.
 - Now in both the fourth commandment and our text, this command to rest on the seventh day is rooted in God’s created order. It’s modeled after his rest. Look at v17, “*It 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.*” **If even the LORD of all creation took one day to rest and be refreshed, then who are we to think that we don’t need it?** That’s the logic of the Sabbath.
- ❖ **Now we’ve noted before that one implication of being created in the image of a God who rested on the seventh is that all of us have a 6+1 Sabbath rhythm built in, so that we flourish and are most productive when we respect that rhythm of life.** If we disregard a Sabbath rest – if we overwork and overexert ourselves – we are working against ourselves. We’re rejecting our Creator’s design – the way he designed us to flourish.
- ❖ **In fact, even secular authorities recognize the wisdom and value of a Sabbath rest.** That’s why even though most blue laws have been repealed by state legislatures, the Supreme Court has consistently upheld their constitutionality, particularly back in 1961. There were four blue law cases decided on that year, and in each, the Supreme Court upheld the law. But, of course, on secular grounds.
 - **Chief Justice Earl Warren** recognized that, “*the State seeks to set one day apart from all others as a day of rest, repose, recreation and tranquility – a day which all members of the family and community have the opportunity to spend and enjoy together, a day on which there exists relative quiet and disassociation from the everyday intensity of commercial activities, a day on which people may visit friends and relative who are not available during working days.*” He went on to defend the promotion of those secular values through a common day of rest. Those who aren’t Christian or Jewish or even religious still recognize the value of a Sabbath rest. It’s because that 6+1 rhythm is in us all. Because the image of God imprinted on us all.
- ❖ But my whole point is this: By consciously taking a Sabbath, you’re *recognizing* your creaturely limits. You’re *respecting* your Creator’s design. And in it, you’ll find *refreshment*. You’ll find new strength for a new week.

- ❖ That's the first purpose. **Second, the Sabbath was intended to remind God's people.** It served as a sign. That's what the LORD calls the Sabbath in vv13 and 17. It's a sign. *"Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you."*
 - God had previously given them signs. **He called them signs of the covenant.** When he promised to never again flood the earth as in the days of Noah, the sign of that covenant was the rainbow (Gen 9:12-13). When he promised make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations, the sign of that covenant was circumcision (Gen 17:11). **So whenever Israel would see a rainbow in the sky or whenever they circumcised their sons, they would be starkly reminded that they are a set apart people** – a holy people living in covenant relationship with a holy God.

- ❖ The same goes for the Sabbath. Look at vv16-17. *"¹⁶Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel."* **The Sabbath was a covenant sign.** Whenever Israel saw that day on the calendar, whenever they were making their weekend plans, they were starkly reminded that they are a set apart people. The peoples of other tribes, other nations, would do work on the seventh day if called for. But not Israel.
 - **Remember, this was an agrarian society.** No one had a five-day 9 to 5 schedule because no one could predict when the fields are ripe for harvest. If it so happened that the best time to pick the harvest fell on a Sabbath, the Israelites would stay home. The Gentiles would be working their fields, shaking their heads in disbelief that their Jewish neighbors would let a good harvest spoil just because it fell on the wrong day.

- ❖ **But that's what it meant to be holy, which literally meant to be set apart.** Circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, kosher laws – they were the means by which Israel would set themselves apart from the nations. These were visible, tangible reminders (signs) that they are God's chosen people – set apart to give a distinct witness as a holy people of a holy God.
 - **Any well-functioning sign is going to point you to another reality.** You drive down the street and see a sign, and it'll remind you that you're in a school zone or there's an exit up ahead. The sign draws your attention to something.

- ❖ **For Israel, the Sabbath was a sign drawing attention – not just to God in creation – but God in redemption.** In Deuteronomy 5, Moses gives the Ten Commandments a second time to a new generation of Israel on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. And when he gets to the fourth commandment, he specifically grounds it in their redemption. Listen to Deuteronomy 5:15, *"You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."*
 - I take that to mean that, every time Israel kept Sabbath, it was a weekly reminder that their redemptive rest in the Promised Land – where they're no longer in bondage or chains – **that rest was a gift from a gracious God who saved them by his own might.** They didn't work for their redemption. They didn't earn it. They received it.

- ❖ That's what Sabbath-keeping is for – to remind you that the rest and refreshment you enjoy is a good gift that you didn't work for or deserve. The Sabbath reminds you of that. **Third, the Sabbath is intended to reorient God's people.**
 - From the beginning, God's people have been tempted and enticed to put God on the margins and center their lives on idols of this world. We're going to see a clear example of that in next week's passage on the golden calf. There will always be competing claims on our attention and our allegiance. There will always be certain people, possessions, or pursuits that we are tempted to orient our lives around.
 - The point of a Sabbath rest is not just to get a refresher from a tough week of work. **The point is to intentionally enter into a holy moment, to embrace a sacred time – where you're intentionally meeting with God, to worship him and reorient your life around him.**

- ❖ Look back at v13, *“for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.”* It ties back to the overall theme of Exodus. God is setting apart and saving a people for himself that they might know him and spread the knowledge of him through their distinctive witness.
 - **If at the heart of Sabbath-keeping is knowing the LORD and his sanctifying purposes for his people, then it explains why the penalty for Sabbath-breaking is so severe.** Why it would call for death. To profane the Sabbath is to communicate that knowing God is trivial. That it doesn't matter because he doesn't matter. That's why Sabbath-keeping was so important for Israel.

- ❖ I don't know about you, but at first glance I couldn't make sense of why a long discussion on the tabernacle and all its furnishings would suddenly shift to instructions on the Sabbath. It felt like a tangent. **But if you think about it, they go together when you consider what the tabernacle and the Sabbath were meant to symbolize.**

- ❖ **The tabernacle was a holy place and the Sabbath a holy day where God's people could uniquely meet with him and worship.** Under the Mosaic covenant, God set apart sacred space and sacred time for his people. Gather here, in this place, on this day to worship me.
 - **The pairing of sacred space and sacred time for God's sacred people fits perfectly.** It explains why instructions on the Sabbath would conclude a section on instructions for the tabernacle. And why, later in chapter 35, Sabbath regulations would come up again before jumping right back into instructions for the tabernacle.
 - There were so many distractions for God's people – so many things vying for their attention and allegiance – **that God wanted a sacred space in the middle of their camp (the tabernacle) and a sacred time at the culmination of each week (the Sabbath).** So that the attention and allegiance of his people would be brought back and reoriented around him. That's why they're called to keep Sabbath.

The Perpetuity of the Sabbath

- ❖ Now so far we've been describing a threefold purpose of the Sabbath – to refresh, to remind, and to reorient God's people. We see how the Sabbath is significant for Israel in the Old Testament era. **But of course, the big question is whether Sabbath-keeping is to be carried over into the New Testament era.** It was clearly a covenant sign for Israel, but is it still applicable for the Church today? Let's consider the perpetuity of the Sabbath – the question of whether or not it lasts forever.
 - **I say that because it is spoken of as a “sign forever”.** That's what God says in v17, *“it is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel.”* And recall how Sabbath-keeping is grounded in God's good created order. *“In six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”*
 - So because the Sabbath is called a “sign forever” and has its roots in creation, we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss Sabbath-keeping as merely a feature of the Old Covenant that has no relevance to those under the New.

- ❖ Requiring circumcision or keeping kosher is easier to understand. We know those laws are no longer binding for Christians. That's because when those instructions were given they weren't grounded in creation like it was for the Sabbath. **But at the same time, we know that just because an institution is grounded in creation, it doesn't necessarily mean it's everlasting.** Take marriage for example. It's instituted in Genesis 2:24, pre-fall, established in God's good created order, and yet we're taught that it's a temporary institution that will end in the New Creation (Mt 22:30).
 - **So to determine whether the Sabbath (or any other OT law or institution) is applicable today, we need to consider – not just the context of when it was first established – but whether it's reaffirmed in the pages of the NT.** But that's where we see NT authors describing circumcision, kosher laws, and the Sabbath as signs and shadows that find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus and his death and resurrection.

- ❖ Paul's teaching in **Colossians 2:16-17** is the most relevant for the Sabbath. **There he compares Sabbath-keeping to a shadow whose substance is Christ.** ¹⁶*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*” (cf. Gal 4:10; Rom 14:5)
 - Think of the different ways in which Christ fulfills so many OT passages and promises. **In particular, the ones that speak of OT realities in perpetuity, as if they'll last forever.** So you've got God promising to David in 2 Samuel 7:13 that he'll *“establish the throne of his kingdom forever”*. Or in 1 Kings 9:3, God says his name will be on Solomon's temple forever.
 - He speaks of “forever”, but we know that both David's throne and Solomon's temple were disrupted or destroyed during the Babylonian exile. But Christians have always insisted that God's promises didn't fail. **We would argue that those “forever promises” were fulfilled in Christ.** The throne and the temple are OT shadows that find their substance in Christ.

- ❖ Just consider the glory of Christ and how he, not only fulfills, but expands the blessings of God. **Because of Christ, the temple is no longer a holy place.** Through Christ we can meet God anywhere, in any place. Because of the cross, the walls of hostility were broken and the veil before the Holy of Holies was torn. Which meant the temple's purpose was fulfilled. There's no longer one hill, one spot, one city where we must go to be in God's presence. From now on true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23).
 - **Because of Christ, the Levites are no longer a holy tribe.** Through Christ all of God's people have immediate access, and we can mediate him to our non-Christian friends. Because Christ resurrected and ascended to the Father's right hand where he ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb 7:25) – those in Christ possess the gift and privilege of intercession. Like an OT priest, we can make holy intercession, presenting requests to the LORD on behalf of others.
 - **And because of Christ, the Sabbath is no longer a holy day.** Through Christ all days are holy and to be lived out in the presence and worship of God. Because Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath, every hour of every day of the week is sacred time when we can meet with God.

- ❖ So under the Old Covenant, there was a sacred space and a sacred time set apart for worship that was mediated by a sacred priestly class. But under the New Covenant, all spaces, all days, and all who are in Christ are sacred. **And I think that means the New Covenant people of God (Christians) are not bound to keep the Sabbath as a matter of law.**
 - So back to our question: Is Sabbath-keeping still required for God's people today? **As a matter of law-keeping, I would say No because, like circumcision, the Sabbath was a covenant sign fulfilled in Christ.**

The Practice of the Sabbath

- ❖ But at the same time, I wouldn't go so far as to say that a practice of Sabbath-keeping is irrelevant. **I sympathize with those who bemoan the fact that Christians today have, for the most part, abandoned any kind of intentional Sabbath observance.** If that's even a relevant category anymore, it's usually just equated with "going to church". So let's talk about the practice of the Sabbath today.

- ❖ **First of all, even though the corporate worship of God is no longer restricted to a holy time and place – there's still a biblical mandate for Christians to regularly assemble.** Hebrew 10:25 tells us not to neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some. And there's scriptural evidence demonstrating that early Christians chose Sundays, the first day of the week, as that day to gather (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). So even though there's no restricted day anymore, there's good reason to treat Sundays as special out of all the days of the week.
 - Think about it. **There's no restricted holy space anymore,** but we know there's something special that happens when two or more gather in Jesus's name (Mt 18:20). Christ is present among us in a distinct way that doesn't compare to private worship.

- ❖ **And even though there's no set apart priestly class anymore**, we recognize the importance of elders among us – of those called by God to preach and teach – and we try to show them double honor (1 Tim 5:17).
 - **So in the same way, even though there's no holy day or sacred time anymore, we can still recognize the importance of treating one day of the week as special** – as that day the Church assembles to worship our Risen Lord and Savior. And that's why Sunday was chosen from the start. It was to remember the Resurrection.

- ❖ So we should at least start there. I know I'm probably speaking to the choir, but this means we should make it a priority to be at church *every* Sunday to worship with the people of God, to sit under biblical preaching, and to practice the ordinances of baptism and Lord's Supper.
 - **But if Sabbath-keeping is simply equated with going to church for a couple of hours, then I'm afraid we've lost something.** If it's true that the idea of a Sabbath is rooted in creation – if we're designed to operate within a 6+1 rhythm of life – then a Sabbath rest would involve an *entire* day.

- ❖ Now again, it's not a matter of law. **But it would be a matter of God-honoring wisdom to respect the way he designed us to flourish.** So I wouldn't label you a law-breaker if your job or rotation requires you to occasionally work on Sunday. I wouldn't call it sin or disobedience if you checked your work email later today or cracked open a book to study.
 - But I think it would be good to ask *why* – why do you feel the need to do that? **Why do you find it hard (practically impossible) to pull away from your labor for just one day out of the week?** Could you have worked more efficiently and prepared earlier in the week, so that you're not under such pressure on the Lord's day? If you're consistently using the Lord's day to do your own work – and you haven't chosen an alternative day to rest – then what does that say about how you view yourself and how you view God? **If God rested, why won't you?**

- ❖ **So if you're a student or you're employed, you know there will always be more work you could've done.** It'll never be enough. If you orient your life around meeting the demands of others at work or school, you know they'll never be satisfied. There's always more you could do. Why not reorient your life around an all-sufficient God, who is absolutely sovereign, who has no needs for you to meet – yet who graciously invites you into relationship with him through faith in his Son?
 - **I encourage you to set aside a full day out of the week to rest in God and with God's people. To rest from your work or your studies – not as a matter of law – but a matter of witness.** By keeping a Sabbath rest, you're giving a witness to yourself, to family, to colleagues and classmates that the most important thing in life is not school or work but God – your life in God and with God's people.
 - **As your colleagues and classmates push on ahead while you keep Sabbath, they may not understand why you would “waste” such precious hours.** But they can't deny that God is more value to you than whatever it is they're chasing. That's a compelling witness!

- ❖ **But Sabbath-keeping is about more than just *not* working or studying.** Otherwise it wouldn't be all that applicable to those who are retired or unemployed or those staying at home caring for children or elderly parents. **So don't just focus on what you shouldn't do on the Sabbath – focus on what you *can* do intentionally.** What can you do to be refreshed; to remember that we're a set apart people, holy to the Lord; to reorient our hearts and schedules around the worship of God with God's people.

- ❖ **Let's think of what a family can do to keep a Sabbath together.** We often go home after church and family members just spend the remainder of the Lord's day doing their own thing – exercising, reading, gaming, watching shows, etc. So what about going on a walk together; reading a book out loud together; playing a board game together; watching something together and then talking about it? Take a Sabbath rest together.
 - **Parents, what will you do to set apart Sunday for your family, that makes that day distinct (holy) from every other day of the week?** I don't mean less than going to church in the morning, but is there more? Is there anything more you can do together to truly make it a *full day* of rest? Is there a healthy routine or tradition that you can introduce to refresh your family members, to help each other remember that you're a family set apart for the LORD, and to reorient everyone in the home around the presence and worship of God?

- ❖ **And for those of you living on your own, away from family, what can you do with the remainder of your Sunday that sets you apart – as a member of holy people wholly devoted to the LORD?** I have no interest in making a list of approved activities. I'd rather challenge you to *not* be satisfied with the remainder of your Sabbath (after you get home from church), looking and feeling like every other day of the week. What will make it holy? What will set it apart? What can you and fellow believers do to remind yourselves that you are chosen people, holy and beloved, and to reorient yourselves around your God?
 - **If it's the Lord's day, can you honestly say you're spending it like it belongs to him?** Let's honor him by keeping a Sabbath – not because we have to – but because we get to. Because we love him and love his people.