

Sabbath-keeping

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Is really talking about Sabbath a little bit this morning and it's almost the morning is almost gone. So this day we're talking about the Sabbath I thought it would be good to start out with an amusing tweet. It's always good to start a sermon with an amusing tweet isn't it? This is by a Alissa Wilkinson who was a former film critic for Christianity Today and who now writes for Vox Media. She wrote this a few weeks ago: "On a Sunday after church I'm helping a friend build Ikea furniture while partaking in cocktails and this is absolutely how I Sabbath!" So I thought that would resonate somewhat with with the Artisan crowd. I know that some of you have no idea what Sabbath is and you're thinking - if that's the definition of a sacred behavior well then maybe you've been wrong to be skeptical of religion all these years!

Sabbath is a word that we get from a Hebrew word. The Hebrew word - I think if we're pronouncing it hebraically - we would say Shabbat. Our Jewish friends still say Shabbat. And it's a word that just means rest. I think what's interesting about the word rest in English is that it can be both a verb an a noun. You can "rest"- that would be a verb form - or you can "take a rest" that's the noun form. Is the grammar getting to be too dense for us here? The same is actually true in Hebrew. Alissa Wilkinson used it as this is how I Sabbath - she used it as a verb. But typically we think of it as a noun. Sabbath as a thing. Sabbath is a day. Sabbath is a time. It might be interesting to think about Sabbath as a verb. As something that we do actively and on purpose.

So the commandment to keep and observe and remember Sabbath - it's one of the Ten Commandments - are you familiar with the Ten Commandments? I know that you all want to keep the Ten Commandments, so I'm curious how many of you in the room, by show of hands, observe a *true* Sabbath rest. Meaning no work, no significant travel, and no participation in commerce every week on Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, which is how Jewish people mark days, from sundown to sundown. So show of hands once again, those of you who observe Sabbath - no work, no travel, no commerce every week Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. I

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want you to put your hands up please if you observe the Sabbath. I don't see any hands up. So it looks like one hundred percent of the people of Artisan church disobeyed one of the Ten Commandments. Wow. You know, maybe those Google reviews are actually right about us!

[Laughter]

Well. Don't read those, not recommended. Let's look to two of our lectionary passages for today give us a little window into the idea of Sabbath. How it came about, and how it was observed. And so I want to look at those, and the first one is from Deuteronomy Chapter five. Now you can find this in your own Bibles if you brought one or you can search it on your phone that would probably be the first result if you search for it on Google, or you can use our red Bibles which are in the chairs here, Chapter 5: 12-15 in the red Bibles is page 142. And this is the giving of the Ten Commandments, just the part about this particular one of them. It says the following:

12 *Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 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.*

You remember the story from the children's moment, about how Jesus was being criticised about the observance of the Sabbath and he healed this man by saying to him "Stretch out your arm?" I wonder if Jesus was calling back to Deuteronomy five for all those people there, when it says that verse, they are to *remember* they were brought out of slavery in Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. I don't know for sure, but it would be really interesting if Jesus was doing that. That's some Grade A Bible trolling right there! But Jesus says therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Now some of us like to follow rules whether we know why they exist or not. How many of you are rule followers? You don't need a reason, all you need is a rule, and the more of them you have the happier you would be. There's a few of you out there. But some of us, some of us like rules, they are fine, I have anything against rules necessarily, but I would really like to know *why*. How many people are *why* people when it comes to rules? Right? Don't give us those stupid rules with no reason, I've got to know *why*! Well some of us are in the middle and I see you making the so-so sign. I'm kind of inbetween too. I don't know what I don't know why that

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is, but interestingly enough we don't get reasons for most of the Ten Commandments. It's kind of like don't do this. Simple enough, just don't do it.

But in the case of the Sabbath we do get a reason. Deuteronomy five shows us that the reason for observing Sabbath is that it helps God's people to remember that they were once enslaved. They were under the thumb of an oppressive empire, and that God had led them in an act of rebellion against it. Of rejection of that empire, and God led them into something better and healthier. Something that results in their wholeness and their human dignity and their flourishing. And I've extrapolated that a little bit, but actually not very much. You were once enslaved, working seven days a week, fifty two weeks a year, no dignity, no flourishing. You were just cogs in the machine, and now that's not who you are anymore. God has redeemed you from that and brought you out of that- so you remember Sabbath as a way of kind of rejecting the oppression of the Empire.

But the million dollar question with with the Bible, especially some of the Old Testament which is even more old than the New Testament, is how do we apply that today? What should we make of that rationale for observing the Sabbath in the twenty first century in the United States? Now America has its own very ugly and evil history with slavery, and the truth is each one of us is going to experience that history differently primarily based on the color of our skin. And so we will need to do some real work as a people trying to think about this particular reason for Sabbath keeping, in our particular context today. That's going to be complicated to figure out. But even without that rather large elephant in the room it's difficult, isn't it, to take some of these rules from the ancient literature and apply them to our modern postmodern lives? Even when that ancient literature is sacred, inspired, authoritative literature. For us it can be really hard to understand how to apply it given that some of it is clearly culturally bound, and some of it seems to be more based on principles that should be there for all time. It can be hard to apply the text of scripture in our modern day, but I don't want to be discouraged by that.

So here's what happens. Sometimes people are either raised with the Bible in a very kind of simplistic and dogmatic way, or they're not really in religious communities at all and they come to the Bible....it comes to a certain point where you read it and you go: this doesn't make any sense to me at all. This - why? What is that? Why did... why would they even? Who could possibly? Have you ever thought that way about the Bible or talked to someone who did? I think that's a normal thing to come up against, and I do think it's important at some point in your maturation as a spiritual person, as a as a follower of Christ, as a person of the book, to get beyond that place where the Bible is just an answer list. For you to get beyond that place where the answer, the Bible, is just a big long rule book or any of those things. And here's my my

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promise to you. If you will engage with with the Bible in a deeper way, and if you will do the hard work of learning how to read it and interpret it and apply it in our modern context rather than just rejecting it out of hand and saying “it's simplistic! it's contradictory!” It's all those things. If you if you will fight through it, if you will fight for it, I can promise you that on the other side of that it's it's entirely possible and probably likely that you will come out loving the Bible even more. Understanding the Bible more deeply, and having it actually create a more inspired and authoritative understanding of what the Bible is. That's very hard work to get through that process, and if some of you are in that process right now I want to encourage you keep fighting. Keep going, it's worth it.

But wait, here's something else to think about. did you know that there is not just one account of the giving of the Ten Commandments in the Bible? There's actually two different accounts in two different books of the Bible that tell the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments. Surely they must give the same reason for why you should keep the Sabbath, right? Maybe we better check just to make sure. Would you turn with me or look up or just listen to Exodus Chapter twenty verses eight through eleven. This would be page 58 in the red bibles if you're using those. By the way if you don't own a bible please take a red Bible with you, that's our gift to you. Here's what it says, it will sound very familiar and then suddenly will not.

8 *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

So whereas before the reason, the rationale, for observing Sabbath was to remember this oppressive empire that you came out of, and to to stand against it, now the reason is simply: rest. Rest because rest is good. God rested, and if you want to be more godly you should rest after your creative labors. God rested after making the whole universe - you should rest after whatever you make whatever creation you produce in your line of work. For them it might have been crops or animals or carpentry. For you it might be medicine or software code or music or art, education. When you are done making all of that good stuff and you can look and say: that's good, you should rest because that's what God did. So you rest because it's what God did, and because you need to rest after you work. This is, by the way, the much more widely taught reason, isn't it? How many of you came into the room today with some understanding of Sabbath sort of like: Sabbath is rest, we're supposed to rest because God tells us to rest, it's important to rest. Right? How many you came in saying that you should keep the Sabbath to reject the oppressive empires of the world? Maybe not so much now. That one doesn't get the

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press very much does it? The Exodus one is the the earlier text, the the rest one in Deuteronomy is the later text. And that's about the empire and slavery and being redeemed.

Oh by the way, did you notice there's a different verb in each case? Let me get it right. The Deuteronomy one says *observe* the Sabbath day, and the Exodus one says *remember* the Sabbath day. The word observe can mean like, keep, or guard, or protect. Something like you're setting this apart to be special because God set it apart to be special. Observe means to make this part of your sacredness, and remember is different. So we have two different verbs and two different rationales for observing the Sabbath. So which one is right? Both. Yes that's right. They can both be true can't they? How many of you love broccoli, show of hands? OK. How many of you did not love broccoli when you were five? I guessed so. Where are the broccoli converts among us? I'm a broccoli convert. I hated it - I mean I didn't care for it - no thank you - when I was five. And now as an adult, I really love it. Why are you all such liars? Why does it seem like there's so many contradictions in the Bible? I mean in your dietary preferences? What you see is different people, different times, thinking of the world differently and thinking of God differently - and that's normal and that's OK.

Notice also there are really not many details about how to observe, or remember, or keep the Sabbath, are there? It says don't work and nobody in your sphere of influence is to work either, but what constitutes work? I mean surely if I go in the field and harvest a whole row of wheat - that would be that would be work. But what if it only harvested a little bit? And surely, undertaking a *long* journey would be work. But what if I just want to go visit my friend? Can I do that? These questions are left open for God's people to wrestle with and find their own answers to, which more often than not is kind of the case isn't it? You have a commandment in Scripture and you want to follow it, but you don't know how. Maybe in part because of the cultural distance you have to wrestle with and figure it out. And and being obedient to the words of Scripture is not always black and white, cut and dried, but what's not in dispute in the text is how important Sabbath was.

And I don't have time to go into all the other texts that mentioned Sabbath in the Old Testament, but if you read the prophets especially the keeping of Sabbath is extremely important. I mean, failing to observe the Sabbath places places you outside of God's goodness and design in a way that you would probably equate with much more serious offenses like murder, or theft, or bearing false witness, or some of the Ten Commandments. And it's taken very seriously right up to the time of Jesus and beyond. By the time of Jesus there were lots of specific guidelines and assumptions about how Sabbath was to be observed and regulated. About how - exactly how far you could or could not travel, about the fact that you couldn't carry anything, about the fact that you could not harvest anything, and the specifics of

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observing Sabbath became a major point of contention between Jesus and many of his critics. So our other lectionary text today that I want to share with you is Mark Chapter two it's the text that the children's moment was based on this morning, but I'm not going to read the part about the healing of the man with the withered hand. I'm going to read the part that leads up to that before it.

23 One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26 He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions."

Now that's an obscure reference to another part of the Bible. You don't know that story perhaps, and you don't need to know it. All that it's saying is that David saw fit with his men to break the law because they were in need, they were hungry. And then he goes on to say to them to the Pharisees this: *27 Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."*

Now here for the second week in a row I think we have an instance where our translation of the Bible, in an effort to translate a word in a gender non-specific way, we lost a little bit of the poignancy of the meaning. I think it's a fair trade off, I think it's important for us to do those things, and we use the translation because we like it. But the word man used in this way doesn't mean male person, it means all of man. But Jesus kind of makes a little pun here saying originally the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath, so the "Son of Man" - which is a title he's appropriating for himself from the prophet Daniel - is Lord even of the Sabbath. Now that can be very confusing but the point is this: God didn't make people so that there would be somebody to follow the rules. How silly would that be? You know God's making the animals and he makes the sun, the moon, makes the plants, and the sea and the fishies and all that stuff, and then he makes all the rules and then he's like: well there's nobody here to follow the rules, I better make somebody else. No no no no no! The rules were there - including the Sabbath - for the good of the people who were already made and who God already loved. They were made in God's very image and likeness. And the Sabbath restrictions are designed to allow these human beings that he made, whom he loved, to flourish in their lives and to have dignity.

We could think of lots of other laws in the Bible and wonder about them as well, I mean with Sabbath it's pretty clear: resting one day a week is very healthy for you, right? It may be that especially in an ancient culture the laws about cleanliness were really important. We just heard

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about Del getting her surgical degree and you scrub up pretty good when you go into surgery don't you? Yeah they didn't have Purel, right, with the dietary restrictions I mean. There's a whole thing in the New Testament where these are kind of obviated, but even today when you go out to the restaurant with your friends - isn't it always the person who orders the shrimp who texts you at midnight, like, "I think I have food poisoning," right? Maybe there's more to this law than we give it credit for. It's easy for me to say because I don't care for seafood, but I mean who among us hasn't gotten a rash from wearing a garment with mixed fibers in it, right?

[Laughter]

Now maybe, maybe now that's not quite so easy to understand. Because we can't always see it, we can't always see the reason for it. And yes, sometimes culture changes. We have showers and sinks and Purel. Now we have, hopefully, good food handling methodology. And I think reclaiming the Sabbath, remembering it, if you will, or deciding to observe it, to keep it, to guard it, to make it holy - for us I think it can be a very powerful action for God's people to take. And the question of course is how do we do it. Because I don't think most of you have the margin in your life to suddenly stop doing everything from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. That's not probably in the cards for most of you right now. It's not in the cards for me right now, I don't think. Although I had a very friendly argument with my good friend Don Schieffer this week. Some of you know Don. He and his family actually do observe a Jewish style Sabbath - even though he's a Christian pastor - where they do they don't participate in commerce, they don't travel very far, they don't work on Saturdays. Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. And I admire that. I don't really understand how he can possibly do it, and he's like well the Sabbath is the Sabbath, you can't take the Sabbath any other day! It's like saying I'm going to take my Thursday on a Monday, it's a nonsensical statement. And he's right, he's right, but here's the thing. And to be fair to him, he would not set the bar that high for anybody else. That's his personal decision for his own family's life and his life but here's the thing. My wife Tracy is a personal trainer, some of you know that, right? And she is really tough. And I'm not foolish enough to engage in any thing such like a push up contest with her, or a like how-long-can-you-hold-a-plank contest with her. Because I don't like to lose and that would be guaranteed way for me to lose at a contest. But Tracey would tell you, and your personal trainers or your, you know, your classes at the gym, the instructors tell you this: you can, what, you can modify the exercise a little bit, right? If you can't do a plank on your toes, do a plank on your knees. If you can't hold it for a minute it's better to hold it for twenty seconds than not to hold it at all. If you are starting a running regimen and you can't run a mile yet without stopping it's better to run five hundred feet than not to run at all, isn't it?

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I think the same goes for trying to apply these these laws and guidelines that God provides for us in Scripture. That you probably can't get all the way there, but the lie of all the lies in spiritual life is this: If you can't do the whole thing, don't bother doing it at all. It's a lie - reject that. It is a lie. It would be much better for you to bite off a little piece that you can actually chew than to give up the opportunity to do it at all. So when it comes to Sabbath observance, you may not be able to cease all of your activity in accordance with the true Jewish of the Sabbath every week. But could you do that on a different day of the week, maybe? I do a day off that I kind of try to treat it like a sabbath on Mondays. Sorry Don, that's just how I roll. Some of you might be able to do that on a different day of the week, it might be Saturday for some if you. Might be Sunday for you. Christians observe the Lord's Day, right, that's the day of the resurrection, but we sort of conflate the two sometimes, don't we? If Sunday is your day of rest, more power to you.

There's something else that I decided to try to do this week though I have only ever thought about Sabbath in the, for the "rest" reason right? I've only ever thought, like, well I need to take care of myself, so I need to stop working, so that I can be rested, so that I can get back to work the next day and for the rest of the week. All of you want a pastor who's well rested and healthy, right? So some of you are very good about this you don't contact me on Monday. And if you don't know that, it's OK, I have ways to protect myself from that. But you know, you encourage me to take those days of rest, but I don't think any of you has ever encouraged me to take a day every weekend, every week, and do something as an act of resistance to the empire. Nobody has ever made - the pastoral relations committee has never said to me - "Are you doing any acts of resistance to the empire on a weekly basis?" They've never done that! They've never asked me that question. So I've decided I'm going to try to do some of that, and for us that might be things like choosing how and when and when not to engage in commercial activity. It's not going to make any difference to Exxon Mobil if you don't fill up your tank on Monday. Sorry Facebook people, but that whole thing, like, "don't go fill up your tank on Monday and we will put them out of business" that doesn't work, because you fill up on Sunday or Tuesday.

[Laughter]

But but as a personal act of resistance that kind of thing can be powerful for your own soul, and actually if we all did it together, it might make a big difference. Which is part of my friend's argument for why we should do it at a certain time of the week, but the point is this: I want you to do what you can, when you can, because right now you might not might not be doing anything. Your level of observance might be zero right now, and if it is I want to encourage you to make it one. You know you don't have to get to ten, or one hundred or a thousand. So would you please do this for me, think about ways - specific, maybe a little actionable ways - you can

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engage in some activity that is restful to you, or stopping engaging in other activities that are not restful to you. And think about ways that you can actively kind of protest the assumptions of empire. That's a harder and more complicated one but if you'll try to do those two things I would love to hear what your experience is, where you try that for a couple of weeks and then tell me what it is. And if you want to hear more about my Mondays I'll be happy to tell you about that as well. But please be encouraged that you don't have to do one hundred percent of it on your first try. Remember that's the great lie of spiritual life. So be blessed and be well and be rested. And be resistant. Because that's one of the Ten Commandments Let's pray.

God We give thanks for this message from scripture these words from Deuteronomy, in Exodus, in the Gospel of Mark. We pray that you would help us to understand them and to apply them. We give you thanks that Jesus shows us that people are more important than rules, that we are more important than laws, but that some of these laws really do serve us well. Help us to find ways to observe, to remember, to guard, and keep Sabbath in our lives. May it be part of the way that you restore our souls through rest. We pray through Christ our Lord Amen. I want to invite you now to come and participate in Holy Communion. We have gluten free bread and wine and juice - choose the combination that works best for you. And as the music is playing and we're singing you can come and dip the bread in the cup and receive it right at the table. May it be for you an act of remembrance. May it be the real presence of Jesus Christ, his body and blood, in this place with us. And may it be an act of unity with each other and with every other Christian who has ever taken communion. If you would like to be prayed for a member the prayer team would be happy to pray with you at the back of the room during this time as well. And so I encourage you to respond however the spirit might be leading you this morning as continue to worship God together. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com