

Give It A Rest

Readings: Genesis 2:1-3; Hebrews 4:7-11; Matthew 11:25-30

How restful is your life on a scale of one to ten?

We all know how important rest is. Doctors tell us to rest, the media points to the dangers of burn out and stress. There are times when it is simply right to stop what you are doing and give it a rest.

We may then want to say "Wasn't it good of God to give us a commandment that orders us to give it a rest." Well today we are going to look at what the commandment means, consider why we don't have to keep it, and lastly to consider the importance of rest for the Christian, then we'll give it a rest.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT (EXODUS 20:8-11; DEUT 5:12-15)

The fourth commandment is the first positive command. The Israelites were to remember the Sabbath, a word that seems to derive from the Hebrew word meaning "to cease." They were to remember it by keeping it holy, that is to keep it separate. The way that the Israelites were to do that was to do no work on that day, they were to stop labouring and give it a rest.

Importantly this was not a command that was given just to individuals, some were not work so that others could have a rest. Rather all were to rest, children, slaves, even animals. The command is actually addressed to the head of family households. It was their job to ensure that everyone could have that day off. It was an all encompassing command that was to be kept by the whole community.

Reasons for the command

We are then given the reason why they are to keep the Sabbath and it is grounded in the story of creation. God laboured for six days in creating and then rested. Now this is often understood to mean that God established a pattern of 6 days on and one off that his people are to follow. It reminds them that they live in a Creation, they did not make this world and they are not self made people, and that they depend ultimately on God rather their own labour. This is a good start to thinking about biblical rest although I believe there is something deeper going on.

The creation stories come to their climax with the 7th day of creation this has been what all the work has been for to bring creation to a point of completion, to bring it to rest (emphasised in the fact that the 7th day doesn't end, there is no 8th day).

Rest is the culmination not rhythm of God's work. It is right that the people of the creator remember this on a weekly basis.

Interestingly in Deuteronomy 5 when the 10 Commandments are recited again to the people a different reason is given as to why they should rest "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." (v15).

The Sabbath then was not just a way of remembering that they were the people of the creator God but also that they were saved by this God from slavery. Slaves, like



they had been in Egypt would have worked 10 day weeks with days off only at the discretion of their masters. The Sabbath was to be a perpetual reminder that the people of Israel were the saved people of God. Furthermore they looked forward to the *rest* which God would bring them in the Promised Land (Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 12:10; 25:9; Joshua 1:13; 2Samuel 7).

The day then was about looking back to creation, remembering salvation and looking forward in hope. So while there was nothing in the command about this being a day for worship, as God's people remembered their creation and their salvation it became a natural day to gather and learn of and sing the praises of their God, their creator, redeemer and hope

WHY WE DON'T HAVE TO KEEP IT

That then is the command rest on the seventh day filled with lots of good things, and this is the command that I wish to convince you that we don't have to keep, which as we shall see is just as well because most of us have probably never intentionally kept it. You may be surprised that I say this. You may like me remember before Sunday sport and trading. We went Sunday School then Church followed by a lunch of roast or steak, often with friends that stretched deep in the afternoon. We would then watch *Zoos of the World*, *Origami*, then *Countdown* desperately trying to delay Mum and Dad from taking us to the evening service before we knew what the number one for the week was. Surely that was fulfilling this commandment, Sunday was different.

Actually that is part of my point Sunday was different. Sunday is the first day of the week and the commandment clearly states that is the 7th day that is in view, Saturday is the Sabbath, that was the day that the people of Israel held to be special and they took the day very seriously. In the 2nd Century BC a group of Jewish dissidents when attacked by Hellenic authorities on the Sabbath refused to take up their arms as this would be work and so were slaughtered and they were considered heroes. This was not a day that could be moved around for convenience sake.

All this makes it all the more remarkable that the Church abandoned the Sabbath, and moved its day of remembrance to Sunday. We could look for an answer in Jesus' own attitude to the Sabbath which was certainly controversial and sources of much of the antagonism against him. He cut through the human additions to the law. He reminded people that the Sabbath was not to be about nit picking law keeping, they were not to work at not working, or remember through legalism. Rather the Sabbath was for the benefit of humanity, more than that it was a day very appropriate for doing good and showing his recreative power, for he was the Lord of the Sabbath, he was the creator God in person. (See Mark 2:23-3:6)

We could also look to how Paul powerfully taught how being part of God's people was no longer defined by the old badges of circumcision, food laws and Sabbath but rather the one badge of faith in Jesus Christ. In which case there was freedom for believers to hold days sacred or not, but they were not to be held in bondage by them.¹

But still this is not enough to explain why the early Church moved from Saturday. Jesus still kept the Sabbath, Paul didn't exactly say don't and it would take something truly monumental to have made a Jewish sect move its holy day. Something as earth shattering, mind rearranging would be needed, something like a resurrection. That the Church moved so early from Saturday to Sunday, the Lord's Day (cf Acts 20:7), is a good historic argument for the resurrection. Certainly Sunday was an appropriate day to worship our creator who came to us and died again to be our saviour and hope, and rest in all he has done for us.

¹ So Paul can say "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." (Romans 14:5). In Galatians with some irony given the meaning of the Sabbath he says that some of his readers are returning to bondage by "observing special days and months and seasons and years!" (Galatians 4:10).

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE VIEW OF REST

How then are we as Christians to think about the Sabbath keeping, or Sunday as it has become in the Christian era. Not having to keep the law does not mean being able to ignore it, there is wisdom here that must impact our thinking and our behaviour. But we need to do so without falling back into legalism, or encouraging laziness! (After all it does still speak of working for 6 days).

It's good for us

The idea of a community day of rest has been pretty much discarded, but should we so quickly abandon the idea of keeping Sunday special? God mandates rest in part because it is good for us, if that is so we should be arguing for rest for our communities sake.

A major factor that has changed Sunday from what it used to be is commerce. It is good business, it is good for the economy we are told. In the book of Amos the prophet castigates the profit mongering merchants who view the Sabbath as an annoying break from business, who long for it to be over so they can get back to the real business of life, so they thought. Well the profit mongering merchants have won the day in the last fifty years. Bishop John Taylor wrote in *The London Times* in a 1991 article *Society will pay the price* : "When the church says no to widespread Sunday trading, it is out of concern for a society that in its materialist penchant for production and consumption is losing sight of those other values that make us truly human."

We need to encourage our society to give it a rest. The command was not just for individuals to rest but to allow others to rest. Our captains of industry and political leaders may need to be reminded of this. The commandment was given to remind us that we are not ultimately producers or consumers we are human.

A finished creation

There are also good theological reasons for Christians to celebrate the idea of rest. We believe in rest. We like the people of Israel believe in a creator God, a God who finished his creation, who upholds it and we can rest within it. Is one of the reasons that we get so busy is that we think it all depends on us, we want to be the master of our own fates, we are creating our own future? Give it a rest! This is God's world, we are his creatures and we are to enjoy his good gifts to us.

A finished salvation

More particularly we believe not only in a finished creation but a finished salvation. We believe in a religion of rest not of works, Christ has done it all for us. Jesus said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29). In Jesus we find our Sabbath, we find our rest, it is in him that we cease our striving, our labour and rest in the salvation he has won for us. We are saved not by what we *do* but what he has *done*. Whenever we are tempted to work and earn our place with God the finished work of Christ says give it a rest.

A final rest

Lastly we look forward to the final Sabbath rest that is spoken of in Hebrews. Now at this point we do need to be careful of what we mean by rest. Mark Twain once said "Eternal rest sounds comforting in the pulpit; well, you try it once, and see how heavy time will hang on your hands." If you have ever had to have extended bed rest or too much time on your hands you will certainly agree with that sentiment. When the Bible speaks of rest it doesn't mean just ceasing labour but all the good that goes along with it, fellowship, worship, relaxation and of particular interest to me food. The rest that we look forward to is not boring idleness but glorious fulfilment of all that it is to be human. And on that rest should we model our earthly rest.

CONCLUSION

As Christians then we should be people who celebrate rest, for as we do so we remember God's finished creation, the finished work of Christ for our salvation and we look forward to our glorious new creation rest.

So we return to our first question, how restful is our life? Do you take time off? At this point I do need to say what I am about to say I need to hear myself. The pattern of one day a week is certainly a good model to follow. And it should be a *day* of rest. All too often our days off end up being just as busy as our work days. The commandment also reminds us of the importance of communal days off, it may be something we need to think about as families. Remember if you are not resting it is not only impacting you but those around you. So turn the devices off and spend time together, and I'm speaking not just to the workers here but the younger adults as well. Go for a walk together, watch an old Star Trek movie together and you thought I was giving my Star Trek cuff links a rest this week didn't you! I hope they will remind you of the need for recreation, re creation, a wonderful word that both points back to creation and forward to the new creation. My cuff links are one sign of this, our rest is another.

For we rest not just because it will be good for us, although it will be.

We rest not just so we spend more time concerned about people rather than worried about things and business, although we will.

Rather our rest is to be a sacrament, a symbol of our faith. For when we are too busy we toil thinking that we are making our world, that we get we earn and the future can often look bleak and a long way off.

When we rest we will have time to remember our God, our creator, our saviour and our hope and so we remember his love, his grace and that we are always in his hands and there is rest for our souls.

For God's sake give it a rest.