# “Keeping The Sabbath In A Walmart World”

## *Exodus 31:12-17*

Let’s begin this morning with a brief pop quiz to test your biblical knowledge.

ASK: What’s the first thing in the Bible that God ever declares “holy?” (the

seventh day; Genesis 2:3)

**ASK: Which of the Ten Commandments is the longest in terms of words it contains? *(the fourth—remember the Sabbath day; Exodus 20:8)***

We’ve heard about the Sabbath day all our lives. But what does it mean for us in the 21st century? ***Ages ago, nothing was open on Sundays. I’ve even heard of parents who wouldn’t let their children play outside on Sundays for fear of breaking the Sabbath. On Sundays, you went to church and then most likely to Grandma’s house for lunch together as a family (and Grandma had done all her baking and cooking on Saturday).*** But Sabbath keeping is a Jewish ritual, isn’t it? We aren’t Jewish, and Jesus fulfilled all the law through his perfect life and death. Do we still need to keep the Sabbath or can it be set aside?

Let’s turn to our Scripture reading for today, Exodus 31:12-17

Despite being a Jewish ritual and law, Christians still need the Sabbath. We still need to set aside a day of rest. But how do we do that in a Walmart world that is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? How do we do it in a culture of instant online shopping and where we’re constantly connected to our workplaces?

***One year during my youth ministry days, we held a lock-in just as the youth were beginning their Christmas break. We’d asked each youth to bring $5.00 to put towards Christmas presents for the children of a family the group had adopted. I can still remember loading a group of about a dozen youth into the church van and hitting Walmart at 3:00 in the morning. They separated into groups and picked out the clothes and toys for the children in the family. If you really want to avoid the crowds at Walmart, 3:00 in the morning is a great time to shop!***

*12-17God spoke to Moses: “Tell the Israelites, ‘Above all, keep my Sabbaths, the sign between me and you, generation after generation, to keep the knowledge alive that I am the God who makes you holy. Keep the Sabbath; it’s holy to you. Whoever profanes it will most certainly be put to death. Whoever works on it will be excommunicated from the people. There are six days for work but the seventh day is Sabbath, pure rest, holy to God. Anyone who works on the Sabbath will most certainly be put to death. The Israelites will keep the Sabbath, observe Sabbath-keeping down through the generations, as a standing covenant. It’s a fixed sign between me and the Israelites. Yes, because in six days God made the Heavens and the Earth and on the seventh day he stopped and took a long, deep breath.’”*

The Sabbath was given by God for our benefit. It’s a visible sign that we are set apart--*the sign between me and you, generation after generation, to keep the knowledge alive that I am the God who makes you holy.* The Pharisees of Jesus’s day had plenty of laws and rules about Sabbath keeping. They had taken every single thing that could possibly be done and restricted or legislated it. ***For example, the Pharisees taught that you should not look in a mirror on the Sabbath because you might be tempted to pluck out a gray hair, and that would be considered reaping. It was unlawful to wear jewelry on the Sabbath, since this might be construed as carrying a burden. It was fine to spit on a rock on the Sabbath but you couldn’t spit on the ground because that made mud, and mud was mortar, and that was work. You were allowed to eat radishes on the Sabbath--but you were warned against dipping them into salt because you might leave them in the salt too long and pickle them--and that was considered to be Sabbath-breaking. The Pharisees actually had lengthy discourses on how long it took to pickle a radish.***

Jesus stayed in trouble with the Pharisees because he didn’t bother himself with all of the Pharisees’ nitpicky rules. They once harassed him for allowing his disciples to take grain in their hands, sift and it eat. Mark 2:27 says, *Then Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.”* In other words, God gave the Sabbath for our benefit and not for our guilt or oppression. The Sabbath was a time for three things: ceasing, resting and feasting.

**The first thing we should do on the Sabbath is *cease*.** The Hebrew word that we translate as ‘sabbath’ means *‘to cease or desist.’* To keep a Sabbath—and it doesn’t have to be Sundays, a Sabbath can be any day we set apart and focus on these three things—means that we cease our work. We stop all our efforts at productivity. *There are six days for work but the seventh day is Sabbath, pure rest, holy to God.* By doing so, we pause to recognize that it is God alone who provides for our needs. Ceasing takes the emphasis off of what we do--which is based in achievement--and puts the focus on what God does.

Ceasing also means we stop worrying. We cease being anxious. We put aside the stresses and pressures, and relax in the Father’s arms. We trust that he is working everything out. We trust that his plans and purposes are greater than our worry and anxiety.

***“But,” some might ask, “What can I do on the Sabbath?”*** Activity that is enjoyable and freeing—activity that brings pleasure and a sense of fulfillment or wholeness—is acceptable. ***If you want to make a quilt on the Sabbath, go for it—as long as you’re not thinking “I’ve got to get this silly thing done so I can sell it next month.” If you want to take a hike, have fun!***

But if you’re going into the office to get more stuff accomplished—if you’re worrying over that product or presentation—that’s work. You’re too focused on what you need to achieve or accomplish, and not relying on the God who alone is our sole provider and strength.

**The second thing we should do on the Sabbath is *rest*.** Resting is taking it easy, putting your feet up, sitting in the swing. Resting is taking a nap. It’s relaxing and unwinding. It gives our spiritual, emotional, mental and physical selves the chance to ease back.

***Scientific research has been done on the necessity of rest. Take a guess at how long the human body can go without needing rest: six days. Research has shown that biologically we need rest one day out of every seven. Imagine that: science has discovered what God knew all along. When we do not allow ourselves a day of rest, we experience insomnia, fatigue, hormonal imbalances, irritability, organ stress, high blood pressure, and other symptoms.***

As we engage in rest, we focus on our relationship with God. Our bodies recover and recharge for the tasks that lie ahead of us. Resting is a powerful reminder that we do not have to *do* anything for God to love us. His love for us is not based on performance or achievement. When you take your Sabbath nap, as you close your eyes, reflect on your relationship with God and his immeasurable love for you.

**The third thing we should do on the Sabbath is *feast*.** Feasting isn’t just eating, but it certainly can include that. Feasting is another way of saying celebrating. We’re to find joy and pleasure in what surrounds us.

When we feast on the Sabbath, we surround ourselves with reminders of God’s love for us. Maybe it’s painting or a garden; maybe it’s the sound of birdsong or the falling snow. Whatever it is, we take it in. We absorb it into our being. We breathe it in and celebrate it.

When we pause once a week and shift the focus off ourselves—away from our achievements, tasks and anxieties—and we turn to God, we rediscover the meaning, purpose and excitement in the relationships that surround us. We recognize the value of the relationships we’re part of, and how they’re infinitely more important than how much money we make on Monday or whether we got all the garage cleaned out on Saturday.

Feasting on the Sabbath day allows us to embrace and rejoice in the goodness that surrounds us. It may be a good meal or good company. It may be a relaxing hike or a road trip through the mountains. It may be a nap or planting flowers. Whatever we engage in on the Sabbath, it’s for the purpose of slowing down, taking inventory of our relationship with God and with others, and appreciating the vast wonders of God’s grace all around us.

God never intended the Sabbath to be a burden. But he did intend his people to take it seriously and to honor it. It was a time for rest, reflection and recreation—to remember and be grateful for God’s presence, provision and guidance. In a world that runs around the clock and never slows down, keeping a Sabbath remains vital to us. It’s crucial for our health and well-being. It’s crucial for deepening and improving our relationship with the Father. We need a time apart so we can focus on our own spiritual growth and holiness.

***A number of years ago I attempted to keep a deeper, more intentional Sabbath. At that time my day off was Tuesdays and I decided that I would begin my Sabbath on Monday at sundown and conclude it on Tuesday at sundown. I tried not to engage in any commerce during that time—although there were unavoidable times when I had to. We might’ve needed a perscription or something for the boys’ school, but that was different than me running out to buy another DVD or book.***

***During my Sabbath time I tried to refocus my heart and thoughts on God. I tried to keep him at the forefront of my mind. Sometimes I did good; other times I didn’t. But I wouldn’t let myself become legalistic about it, nor did I beat myself up when I forgot.***

***One of the hardest aspects of Sabbath keeping was my workload at the church. I was the youth pastor and the associate pastor. There was always another email to check, another youth devotion to prepare, a children’s message to cobble together, a prayer to write, a meeting to attend. I panicked over how I was going to get it all done! “Maybe I can prepare my children’s message on my day off,” I’d think to myself, “and that way I won’t have to do it on Wednesday when I get back in the office.” I quickly realized that if I took work home with me I wasn’t really taking a Sabbath. I was worried that if I took a whole day off—without working on any of it—I’d get behind. Or I’d rush through it and do a poor job.***

***When I let go of the need to be productive—of the pressure to achieve—and took a Sabbath on my day off, I discovered that my creativity and energy and enthusiasm was improved. What I feared wouldn’t get done was accomplished with more and better focus. It wasn’t* harder *to get things done; it was easier because I’d taken time for a Sabbath.***

So when you leave here today, continue to honor the Sabbath by ceasing your attempts at productivity and achievement. Rest and take it easy. And celebrate God’s goodness throughout the remainder of this day. You’ll find out that some things can wait. And some things—like our relationship with God—can’t.

Let’s pause for a moment and listen to what our hearts are saying. Let us pray:

*Lord God Almighty, in your wisdom you created us to need rest. You knew that not only our bodies, but our minds and spirits, need time to unwind and recharge. So you set apart one day out of every seven for us to cease, to rest, and to feast. For many of us that day is today, and we begin it in worship and fellowship. For others, Sunday is another day of work and they must find a different day for reflecting on their relationship with you. We thank you for the medical professionals, police officers, and emergency responders who work this day. We thank you for those who take our order at the restaurants, and we ask that you will grant to all of them good rest and renewal on their days off.*

*Let our thoughts this day remain on you. Let our joy be found in knowing that we are loved simply because of who we are, and not because of what we produce. Renew our creativity; strengthen our bodies; purify our minds; lift up our spirits as we honor your command to keep this day holy. We pray this according to the will and grace of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*