

# LORD

Our fall discipleship series focuses on the Ten Commandments. Not only what they teach us not to do, but what to do. Jesus is Savior and Lord. Once we know Him as Savior, it's time to begin to allow His lordship in every corner of our lives. I can easily recognize Jesus as "Lord" in some abstract way. He's Lord of the universe. He's Lord of all history. But it gets harder when I think about His lordship in my own life. Is He really my master when I'm thinking about my relationships with my family? Is Jesus my first consult and guide when I'm arranging my finances? So much of discipleship is simply about loving Jesus more—more than desires of the flesh, more than money, more than what my neighbor has. The Ten Commandments are a great measure of our hearts. Do we love Jesus more than these? Jesus is Lord.

"You can live a life without limits!" That sounds pretty good to most of us, doesn't it? To be limitless? We say with hearts filled with optimism, "The sky's the limit!" Which is another way of saying that there is no limit to what we can do. Some people even feel limited by that expression. I found this the other day: "Don't tell me the sky's the limit when there are footprints on the moon." No limits... I have to say that I like the idea of having an "unlimited data plan" on my phone. Red Robin offers us "bottomless steak fries." No limits. But while we tend to like the idea that there are no limits, I am here to speak in favor of limits.

When you think about it, there are many things in life that have limits, because limits bring definition to our lives. For example: We have speed limits to govern how fast we can drive and lane markers on our roads to help us safely get to where we need to go. And stop signs that suggest that it might be a good idea for us to stop. You know, it can be downright scary to think about how much we have to trust each other on our busy highways, to stay within limits. There are limits and laws and rules that govern many aspects of our lives—mostly for good reason. In the sports world, we have limits to the size of a football field, or to the infield in baseball, four downs, three outs, time limits. And I'm sure that most of us would agree that there would be great value in putting term limits on how long politicians can stay in office!

Limits can be a good thing. We are in this series based on the Ten Commandments. We are calling it **Lord**. Each week we are studying and reflecting on what it means to follow Jesus, to truly trust God as the Lord of our lives. Today we are looking at the fourth commandment and considering what it means for Jesus to be the *Lord of our Limits*.

Look again at Exodus 20:8–11. It is right there. God commands us to "*Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it Holy*." This isn't a suggestion. It's a command. It's one of the big ten—right up there with "Thou shalt not kill!" But what's the big deal about keeping one day out of every seven as a Sabbath day. I think it has everything to do with who we are and how God made us. And it has everything to do with limits. Let's explore this command for a few minutes and look at three important reasons for keeping the Sabbath.

First, Keeping the Sabbath shows us that *our work is not what defines us*. The rules of our culture would tell us that our value comes solely from what we produce. Those rules tell us that the fuller our calendars are with appointments, the more indispensable we are. Those rules tell us that the longer our "to do" lists are, the more important we are.

Did you enjoy Labor Day last week? A day, really a whole weekend, that we set aside to refrain from work-

ing in order to celebrate work! Now it's great to take time off to celebrate work, but we struggle with work, don't we? We work a lot. In the United States, people who are employed full time are working longer and longer hours. A recent Gallup Poll indicated that Americans who work full-time jobs are working on average 47 hours per week. 25% of salaried employees reported working between 50 and 59 hours per week and another 25% work 60 hours per week or more. For those who do take vacations, many of us still stay in constant touch with the office through our cell phones and laptops.

Most of us remember the story of *The Little Red Hen* with its moral being that the one who works gets to enjoy the fruit of her labors. This fable shows the importance of hard work. I think working hard is a Biblical concept. And I struggle, like most of you probably do, when I see an able-bodied adult who won't work. But how do we look at work as people who are trying to live as God wants us to live? Are you working to make a living, or is your work your whole life? How much work is enough work? Where are the limits?

Karl Barth made this observation regarding the Sabbath and our work. He said, "The first thing that Adam and Eve saw when God breathed life into them was their Creator, waiting to embrace them, willing to spend time with them so that they would know who they were and to whom they belonged and owed their allegiance. Sabbath tells us that we belong to God, not to our work."

No, our work is not what defines us. God defines us. And God wants us to know who He is and who we are created to be. Our work doesn't do that. God does. And when we begin to acknowledge that with keeping the Sabbath, we find that God leads our lives and our work, so much better than we ever could. I came across this article the other day that reported that Chick-fil-A, which we know, sometimes to our disappointment on Sunday afternoons, is open only six days a week, receives the most revenue per restaurant of any restaurant in the US—far outperforming the competition. Could there be a connection between Chick-fil-A's honoring of the Sabbath by refraining from work and allowing its employees time to rest and worship on Sundays—and its commercial success? Something to ponder.

The point is that God limits us to show us that we are not defined by our work, but by God—who is the Lord of everything. I like what Christian writer, Marva Dawn says about it, "Sabbath ceasing means to cease not only from work itself, but also from the need to accomplish and be productive, from the worry and tension that accompany our modern criterion of efficiency, from our efforts to be in control of our lives as if we were God, from our possessiveness and our enculturation, and, finally, from the



humdrum and meaninglessness that result when life is pursued without the Lord at the center of it all."

If you find that you are working a lot and are not keeping the Sabbath command, I encourage you to take these words to heart. Our Lord is limiting you because He loves you and He wants you to know the fullness of life as He has created you to experience it.

That points us to our second reason for keeping the Sabbath: keeping the Sabbath *allows us to attend to God*. Keeping the Sabbath limits us from working and it provides uncluttered time and space where we can step away from what we do the rest of the week and pay attention to God. One of the clearest examples of this in the Bible is an account of a visit that Jesus made to the home of his friends, Martha and Mary. We find it in Luke's gospel. "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed - or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

We don't have time this morning to go through all of what this passage has to tell us, but what I'd like us to see here is that God limits us so that we can attend to Him. It was more important to Jesus that Mary was spending time with Him, rather than busily working for Him as Martha was doing. Martha was so caught up in her well-intentioned work that she even tells Jesus what He should do. Did you hear that? "Jesus, tell Mary to help me!" Could it be that when we don't keep the Sabbath we are actually presuming to tell Jesus what to do? Is your striving and busyness a way of pressing your own plans upon God? Do you go at it, and then feel impatient because Jesus isn't working at your pace? Do you sometimes wish that Jesus would just "get with the program?" This can be a trap for all of us—even for pastors and church leaders. We get so busy working for God that we forget about God. We can even become angry (as Martha was) with those around whom we perceive as not working for God as much as we think they should.

It might be helpful for us to think about our Sabbath keeping by considering two similar words: **vacation** and **vocation**. What do you think of when you hear the word, "Vacation?" The word, "vacation" comes from the same word as the word, "vacate," right? To vacate means "to leave." It means to abandon our place for a while. I believe that is what Sabbath

keeping allows us to do—stepping away from work to better focus on God. So our sabbatical vacations can allow us to be better at our vocation. In Psalm 46 we are told, even in the midst of the tumult and trouble all around us, to "Be still, and know that He is God." Another translation has it as "Cease striving, and know that I am God." Do you hear that? When we vacation with the Lord, we come to know Him.

I think it was a wise person who first turned our well-worn expression around to make this point. I'm sure you've heard, or maybe even been told to, "Don't just *stand* there, *do* something." I have echoes of that from my own father and from some previous employers of mine when I was working construction. "Don't just stand there, do something!" Oftentimes it was accompanied by an expletive or two. But I think what God would say to us about the right perspective on work is, "Don't just *do* something, *stand* there!" Stand there and listen for God. Sit there at feet of Jesus—before you go and do something. That is a lot of what the Sabbath commandment is about.

I remember some of my earlier experiences in doing mission work in Central and South America. We North Americans would be all caught up in the task at hand and getting the project done, while our Honduran or Brazilian brothers and sisters would have a much more relaxed attitude. Drove me crazy sometimes! We would even light-heartedly joke about things having to happen on Brazilian time. Sometimes, we can even view this as laziness, which I am sure is part of how Martha was looking at her sister, Mary. And yet, our mission partners were actually, like Mary, choosing what was better. There is a lot of truth to that old expression, "Work like the devil." The enemy would like nothing better than to keep us distracted and busy, actually striving and unwittingly seeking independence *from* God, than to step back and spend time *with* God.

And this is where I think the word "vocation" is important. And that is our third reason of keeping the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath *equips us for the work that God wants us to do in the world*. Let me ask you, as a follower of Jesus, what is our vocation? Literally, the word, "vocation" means your "calling." What does God call us to do? Well, I'm sure that our calling from God includes a lot of serving and hard work. Jesus has a mission for us in this world and we need to be diligently engaging in that mission to reach to the world with the Good News of Jesus. We are not to be sitting around idly and disengaged. But at the same time, our vocation is based on our relationship with Jesus. And in order for us to maintain this vital relationship we need to spend a good bit of time sitting at the feet of Jesus. It is only there that we can begin to know this One whom we serve and begin to understand what brings Him delight. It is only by choosing to be still

and listen to the Lord that we can hear where He wants us to serve and what He wants us to do. At the feet of Jesus, we are in the position to receive insight into the kind of service that is most pleasing to Him.

You know that some of your neighbors and work associates would say that gathering here together every Sunday is a waste of time. But it is here, in worship on the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath, where we praise God together, pray together, study God's Word together, enjoy fellowship and care for each other at the feet of Jesus—and it is the better choice. Because the Sabbath is more than just a day off. Yes, physical rest is important, but have you ever thought of Sabbath as, not a day *off*, but a day *on*? That Sabbath is actually something that we should prepare for? The church I pastored in Atlanta was right around the corner from a Jewish synagogue. I used to marvel at how intentional my neighbors were when it came to sabbath-keeping. The Jewish Sabbath goes from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. So on Friday, they would spend time getting ready; cooking meals, cleaning house, doing yard work—whatever they needed to prepare to be fully available to God when the sun set on Friday. They even bought houses close to the synagogue so that they wouldn't have to drive their car on the Sabbath. Ultimately when we keep the Sabbath, we are tapping in to the foundations of our faith. And we do it in obedience to God. In a sense keeping the Sabbath is both passive and active. Pastor and author, Eugene Peterson says, "Sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us; it is about God, and how God forms us. It is not, in the first place, about what we do or don't do; it is about God—completing and resting and blessing and sanctifying. These are all things that we don't know much about ... But it does mean stopping and being quiet long enough to see—open-mouthed—with wonder—resurrection wonder ... we cultivate the "fear of the Lord." Our souls are formed by what we cannot work up or take charge of. We respond and enter into what the resurrection of Jesus continues to do."

Know your limits—and be grateful for them. Jesus is the Lord of your limits. Enjoy the freedom that comes from being limited. To be fully human, to truly live out what it means to be created in God's image, means that we gladly keep the Sabbath. Because this is what it means to be fully human—living in the rhythm of Sabbath rest and worship—intentionally showing that we are dependent on our Creator. Keeping the Sabbath is essential for living a God-dependent, limited life. Yet that life is always abundant!

## STUDY GUIDE

### LORD • EXODUS 20:8-11

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read aloud the passages for the week: Exodus 20:8-11. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- Re-read Exodus 20:8-11. The Israelites eventually established extra laws so no one would accidentally "work" on the Sabbath. These included baking, sewing, woodwork, cooking, writing two or more letters, lighting/extinguishing a fire, etc. Today, observant Jews don't drive, flip light switches or even chew gum outside as it is considered carrying something. How could these laws be life-giving?
- The sabbath is to be a day filled with worship, life-giving practices and renewal. What activities would you identify as "life-giving" for you? What activities would you abstain from in pursuit of "renewal?"
- One reason we neglect the Sabbath is that we believe *our* activity is the only determining factor in our success. What does it look like when people trust the Lord to be their provider, sustainer, deliverer and savior? Is this appealing or irresponsible?
- This commandment reminds us that Jesus is the Lord of our limits. You are not God, and ceaseless activity does not determine your value. Where in your life are you dangerously close to your limits or on the verge of "burnout" right now?
- Are there any practices you hope to adopt in the coming weeks to recharge and draw close to Christ?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Last week you named a person who you want to share Christ with this fall. Reflect on recent interactions you've had with this person. Then pray for them.

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Pray for those in our congregation who are especially burdened. Those with an illness. Those caring for loved-ones with illnesses. The unemployed. Those in mourning, etc.