

It's Not Our Time

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We live in a society concerned about rights, privileges, and ownership. We live in houses, which we consider to be "ours," when in most cases we simply own a mortgage—our *bank* owns the house. Or, we may be the proud owner of a new car that, upon closer examination of the paperwork, turns out to be owned by some financial institution to which we make monthly payments. Or, we might consider an apartment to be "ours," yet we pay rent.

There is a human proclivity to assume ownership and dominance over most things we find within our grasp—money, for example. We speak of our salary, our wage, our earnings, our money. After all, we did the work, and we earned our pay, right? That certainly seems fair to the average individual. However, because of our citizenship within this country, suddenly not all of that money is ours. The federal government helps itself to 15, 20, and maybe as much as 40 percent of our income, and other governmental extractions significantly increase that amount. We recognize this is the price of citizenship, and we make our way with what remains of our money.

However, this picture is not accurate in the least! If we stop to consider it, we quickly realize that the percentage of our income that is actually ours is *zero*. "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1). The next verse establishes His claim on everything due to His creation of the universe, the earth, its resources, all living things, and human beings. In addition, due to His providence, God not only owns all the material wealth on this earth, but He also supplies man with the means—the skills, the knowledge, the methods, the tools—to earn a living.

I Corinthians 4:7 confirms this: "For who makes you to differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" Why do we boast or assume ownership, if it has been *given* to us? All that we have—whether material wealth, skill, or talent—has been given to us by the Creator.

Thus, the money we have in our grasp does not belong to us but to God. However, as a training tool, God allows us to be stewards over it, with certain stipulations—namely, the tithes. It is as if God is saying, "Here, I give you this money. However, I ask that you give back ten percent, not only to support the ministry and the work I am doing, but also to teach you a valuable lesson in giving. I also ask you to set aside another ten percent for use at the annual festivals. And every third year, I ask that you set aside another ten percent, not only to help those who are needy, but also so you learn to have compassion for others, to trust in Me, and to give as I do."

This certainly changes our concept of ownership!

We can see that one of the underlying premises in tithing is that we really do not *own* anything—we are simply given the use of certain things, as stewards. Observing this law is primarily for our benefit because, as Owner of everything, God does not need money!

This principle of ownership extends into a much larger issue at the core of our relationship with God. It will continue to be an issue as long as humans live on this earth. This larger issue is the Sabbath—not whether or not the Sabbath is valid, or on what day it must be kept—but the Sabbath from the perspective of ownership.

Our Day or God's Day?

Moses writes in Genesis 2:1-3:

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

The Hebrew word translated here as "rested" is the verb *shabath*, from which comes the noun form that is rendered in English as "Sabbath." Interestingly, the primary meaning of this word is not "rest," in terms of relaxing or rejuvenating, but "to desist from exertion" or "to cease." This makes perfect sense considering that God does not get tired (Isaiah 40:28)!

Genesis 2 states that at the end of Creation Week, God stopped His physical labors, not because He was tired, but because He was setting an example for us. Furthermore, God blessed this specific day of the week and sanctified it—He set it apart for a specific purpose. Just as God deliberately sets apart or sanctifies those people with whom He is working, He purposefully made the seventh day different from the other six.

Thus, not only did God create the Sabbath day—and thus it belongs to Him; Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28)—but He also made it separate and distinct from the other six days. So how can we think that this day belongs to us? There is not a single second of this sanctified time that we have authority over! This day is *not* our day—not for our work, our sports, or our entertainment. It still belongs fully to God, and only He can dictate its right and proper usage.

It is not that we have no part in this day. On the contrary, the Sabbath day is the most important day of the week for us as Christians, because it enhances our relationship with God the most.

When we tithe, we decide whether we are going to tithe by choosing whether or not we will submit to God and follow His way. Once we make the decision to follow God, we give up all claims to the money God requires of us. If we start "deciding" that money is ours to use, we also choose not to submit to God. Similarly, once we decide to follow God, we give up all prior claims to the 24-hour period of the Sabbath, to the extent that we have to monitor our speech and even our thoughts!

We recognize that God has given us a stewardship responsibility in using the money and material possessions He has provided us, and correspondingly, we have a stewardship responsibility over His holy time and its proper use. The Sabbath is *not* our time. It may belong to God, but He entrusts us with the responsibility to keep it righteously. We had better handle it with care!

Exodus 20:8-11 provides a further example of God's ownership of our lives and time:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Verse 10 plainly states the seventh day is *God's* Sabbath. This passage also shows that, although it is God's time, we still have a responsibility to ensure that we observe it properly. Verse 11 reiterates Genesis 2:1-3, that *God Himself* set the seventh day apart.

Why Observe the Sabbath?

The context of the fourth commandment explains why He commands us to observe it. Notice Exodus 20:1-2: "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'" Why do we keep the Sabbath holy? Why do we keep *any* of the commandments? Because God first acted to free us from spiritual Egypt, that is, slavery to sin. Before God began working with us, we had no power over sin; we were slaves to it, just as the Israelites were literal slaves to the Egyptians. When we choose to follow God and His way of life, we no longer serve sin but God, and God gives us everlasting life. Paul explains this in Romans 6:22-23:

But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Since Jesus Christ paid the ransom for our lives, freeing us from the bondage of sin, we are now subject to the laws of the Kingdom of God, one of which is the seventh-day Sabbath.

Deuteronomy 5 repeats the Ten Commandments, and its wording of the fourth commandment is very insightful:

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall not do any work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an out-stretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Verse 15 emphasizes this relationship: God redeemed us from spiritual Egypt, and because of that, the seventh day is no longer ours!

Our Relationship with God

The Ten Commandments can be summarized in two overall principles: love toward God and love toward neighbor, as Jesus explains in Matthew 22:37-40:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" [Deuteronomy 6:5]. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19:18]. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God, and the last six commandments expound on our relationship with fellow man.

What does it mean to have a relationship with God? An analogy is frequently used to describe the relationship between Christ and the church. Notice Revelation 21:1-4:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Paul writes in II Corinthians 11:2: "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." The word "betrothed" seems somewhat archaic; today, we would say the church is "engaged" to Christ. By making the New Covenant with Him, we have agreed to spend all eternity with Him, but at present, we are within the period preceding the marriage described in Revelation 19:7-9. Following the analogy, we are to be preparing ourselves for this future relationship. During this preparation time, the parties involved are getting to know each other. God the Father has handpicked us for this relationship, and now is the time we need to make ourselves ready.

How does this fit into the Sabbath and the concept of ownership? God has already established a regular meeting time with us—a "date," as it were. Every week, that part of our schedule is already determined. Amos 3:3 asks, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" In other words, can a person meet with another if they have not determined a meeting time?

Sabbath time has been specially designated as the Bride's time with Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we should restrict our interaction with Him to this day; on the contrary, part of *each* day should be devoted to prayer and Bible study. Nevertheless, this is a primary reason the seventh day has been set apart and made holy.

What does this mean practically? Imagine a couple planning to marry. Being devoted to one another, they have set their wedding date and have agreed to meet on a weekly basis. It is easy to see that, if the young man shows up at the designated time, but the young woman suddenly decides that there is a more convenient time, a rift is going to develop in the relationship. Obviously, *the correct day* is vitally important. God has already established that day.

Suppose the couple gets the day right, and they meet and spend time together. What if the young lady, in the midst of this quality time she is supposed to be spending with the one she loves, pulls out a cellphone and begins talking to her friends, as if her fiancé does not even exist? What if the topic of conversation, either between her and her friends or between her and her fiancé, is little more than gossip or what she is planning on doing as soon as her weekly date with her alleged beloved is over? Or, what if their date, which her betrothed had made special for them, has become a mere ceremony to her? What if she just goes through the motions, doing the things required of her, showing little or no feeling about what this relationship really means to her?

On a spiritual level, we are *commanded* to assemble, if possible, and part of our Sabbath is intended to be for fellowshiping. What are the topics of our conversation? Do sports, entertainment, shopping, or business advance our relationship with God? Is catching up on the latest gossip and social news appropriate for this time that does not belong to us? During this weekly appointment, where do our thoughts wander? Do we think about our business interests or financial concerns? Do we think about or make plans for what we are going to do as soon as the sun sets? Do we esteem Saturday night more than the time God has set apart for us to meet with Him? Are our Sabbath services mere ceremonies? Are we demonstrating to God by our actions on this day that we are eagerly looking forward to spending eternity with Him?

These are points to ponder.

Idolatry and Sabbath-Breaking

God says in Isaiah 58:1, 13-14:

Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. . . . If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath [keep from trampling it], from doing your pleasure on *My* Holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father [the promised blessings]. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

On this passage, commentator Matthew Henry writes:

On sabbath days we must not walk in *our own ways* (that is, not follow our callings), not *find our own pleasure* (that is, not follow our sports and recreations); nay, we must not *speak our own words*, words that concern either our callings or our pleasures; we must not allow ourselves a liberty of speech on that day as on other days, for we must then mind God's ways, make religion the business of the day; we must choose the things that please him; and speak his words, speak of divine things as we sit in the house and walk by the way. In all we say and do we must put a difference between this day and other days.

At the heart of Sabbath-breaking is idolatry, having other gods before the true God (Exodus 20:3). The basic, physical manifestation of idolatry is the worship of idols—graven images, statues, etc.—but its spiritual manifestation is much more subtle and dangerous. It is putting *anything* above God:

money, a job, a house, or even a spouse! If anything becomes more important than God, idolatry is committed. Thus, if in the weekly observance of the Sabbath we do anything that becomes more important to us than our relationship with God, we have broken the Sabbath *and* committed idolatry. It could be said that idolatry is at the heart of all sin, as our willingness to esteem something higher than God and His way of life causes us to sin.

We must make a very real distinction between the Sabbath and the other days. The Sabbath was "made for man," as Christ points out (Mark 2:27), but that does not mean mankind has the authority to use it for his own purposes—rather, God made it *on man's behalf*, for his benefit. The seventh day still belongs to God, and He shares it with those whom He has called and sanctified. We have a key responsibility in esteeming the Sabbath in our conduct, in our conversations, in our attitudes, and even in our thoughts. By entering into this covenant with God, we have been entrusted with the knowledge and significance of this day, but we have also been warned, as stewards of God's truth, to be very careful with it.