

***Remembering the Sabbath: Making Fewer Bricks***  
**Exodus 20:8-11**  
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**First Sunday in Lent**

Nearly every Friday morning René and I clean house. I have 4 jobs: I clean up our bedroom, do my own laundry, clean the bathrooms and do the floors, including the carpets. This is the way we begin nearly every day off, when we get one, and even when we don't. Because we try to get these chores done before Spinning Class at the Y that starts at 9:15, I really hustle to get the job done as quickly as I can. But alas! There are too many chores for the time we have to get them all done, so I usually end up finishing after Spinning and breakfast.

Well, guess what René gave me for Christmas as a time-saver? She gave me a "Roomba!" You're probably going, "What's a Roomba?" A Roomba is a little robot vacuum cleaner. You just clear cords and things it can choke on out of the way, make sure it can't fall down steps, and turn it on. I think it does a good job; however, as a perfectionist, not quite as good as I do, mind you. But for the time it saves me vacuuming every week, it's great!

There's one other thing about the Roomba, which makes it different from me. Unlike me, it knows when to quit! When its battery runs out (we recharge it) it beeps a happy little tune and stops in its tracks, wherever it is!

René mentioned this the other day while talking about this Lenten Sermon Series and Study on “*Remembering the Sabbath: Rest, Renewal and Delight in our Busy Lives.*” She said, “The Roomba’s smarter than we are. It knows when to stop and take a break!”

Alas! Not many are as smart as my Roomba. In fact, to let you in on a little secret, it’s rather hypocritical of me even to dare preach on the Sabbath—not that I ever truly believe I can preach *ex cathedra*, from the throne of God, on any Sunday anyway! Because I’ve probably broken the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, “*Remember the Sabbath,*” more than any commandment and more than any other person in this room; when I consider how many so-called “Days Off” I’ve missed. So this sermon series as far as I’m concerned is clearly a case of “Don’t do as I do, do as the Bible says.”

Still, I know I’m hardly alone in breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment. Consider what preacher Barbara Brown Taylor’s says: “As best I can tell, most Christians, follow 8 commandments, not 10. The 2nd commandment was dispatched at the Council of Nicea in 787, when the church decided graven images were OK and reasoned it should not displease God for us to have images of those persons who incarnated God in their lives. The 4th commandment has undergone a more gradual demise. When Jesus declared the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, many of his followers deduced they were free from Sabbath observance.

Since the rabbis themselves had said as much (‘The Sabbath has been given to you; you have not been given to the Sabbath.’), it seems more likely that Jesus was sharpening his disciples’ sense of Sabbath as divine gift instead of divine burden.”<sup>1</sup> In place of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, “we have fabricated an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment: Thou shalt not rest; thou shalt not look back, someone may be gaining; thou shalt not produce less this year than last year.”<sup>2</sup>

Sound familiar? It’s because we Americans are more pressed for time than ever. According to one rabbi, “The percentage of Americans who work 9 hours of overtime a week is up 6% since 1976. Americans work an estimated 70 hours more per year than the Japanese and 350 hours more than most Europeans.”<sup>3</sup> Our situation today is worse than it was 5 years ago when these statistics came out! Today, workers lucky enough to have a job, are fried! They’re expected to work longer hours and produce more than ever!

And it isn’t just time spent on the job that chews us up and spits us out. It’s family obligations, household chores, upgrading our educations, and a whole raft of other demands placed upon our already harried lives.

Back in Indiana we had a family with 6 children, all under 10 years of age. One day the mother comes to me to tell me she and her husband were constantly at each other’s throats. Both worked full-time jobs to pay their bills including expensive childcare. With a background in pastoral care and

counseling I was first inclined to recommend marital counseling. But then I thought: Wait a sec! This couple's problem had less to do with their marriage than with sheer exhaustion! Each needed Sabbath time away from one another and their kids and Sabbath time together with just the two of them. So, I asked the mother, do you and your husband ever take Sabbath time just to kick back and catch your breath? You should've seen the look on her face. It was like I'd found the antidote to the common cold. She knew it was true: the best thing they could do for themselves, their marriage, and their family was to get some rest, to remember the Sabbath!

We all know slavery was abolished in this country a little over 135 years ago with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. But slavery still exists. It doesn't come with shackles and whips. It comes in the form of compulsion to succeed, to see our children achieve, to cover all our bases from performing our jobs with maximum output to keeping our spouses and all our relatives happy on birthdays and holidays. The sure sign of this slavery is stress. It's like we're slaves in Egypt who were forced by their boss, Pharaoh, to make more bricks!

God knew Pharaoh was a tough boss. After 450 years in slavery the Jews had gotten pretty good making bricks to build Pharaoh's monuments to himself. So, Pharaoh told his slaves' overseers to make more bricks. When these overseers reported to Pharaoh that the slaves had met their quota,

Pharaoh told the overseers to tell the slaves to make even more bricks, which they did. When the overseers reported to Pharaoh the slaves had met the higher quota, Pharaoh told the overseers to have the slaves make still more bricks. On and on it went until the slaves were completely exhausted.

We tend to think the commandment to “*remember the Sabbath*” is just another rule God ordered from on high to make people’s lives miserable. We often read it through the lens of adolescent rebellion, no matter our age. But something far different was going on when God gave Moses these commandments at Mt. Sinai than to make people toe the line. God’s commandment for the people to “*Remember the Sabbath*” was God’s political and economic indictment against Pharaoh. The 4<sup>th</sup> commandment was given to the Jewish slaves as a gift from God for rest from Pharaoh’s unrelenting demands for more bricks and more profits through more back-breaking work. “*Remembering the Sabbath*” was God’s way of saying, your bodies, minds, and souls are no longer Pharaoh’s. They’re mine!

In the course of these Lenten Sundays we will look at the many dimensions of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment to honor the Sabbath. We’ll consider how the Sabbath relates to earlier commandments of worshiping no other gods but Yahweh, the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. We’ll look at how God made the Sabbath not just for us, but also for the whole earth. We’ll

experience Sabbath as more than mindless recreation, but as a way toward discovering the deeper meanings of our lives.

For now, though, it's important we understand the sensitivity God has to our stressed out condition. It's like the story of the Chief Operating Officer for the world's largest garbage collection company Waste Management Systems, Larry O'Donnell, who went undercover to find out what life is really like for his company's employees. You may have seen him in the premiere episode of "Undercover Boss," after the Super Bowl.

First, Larry, posing as new employee "Randy," goes to the Recycling plant. There he's told by the woman in charge how to separate pieces of cardboard on the conveyor belt from other recyclables. Larry tries his hand and complains the line moves too fast. But the woman in charge tells him they slowed the line down to help him train! When operating the line at normal speed, Larry misses one piece of cardboard that ends up jamming the multi-million dollar machine! During lunch break on this particular job, he also discovers the woman's supervisor docks her pay 2 minutes for every minute she's late getting back to work after her 30-minute break. Larry watches as she sprints to the time clock to check back in to work.

Then Larry meets a woman working at the landfill who does 4 different jobs in the course of a normal day. When asked if she's paid for more than one job, she answers, "No!" In the evening that same day she

invites Larry to her “dream house” for dinner, where he meets two other couples sharing the woman’s house so she can afford the payments. Larry realizes this gal needs help and a pay increase for all the jobs she is doing.

Finally, Larry goes to work on a garbage truck, which according to the woman driver makes 300 stops per day. She shows him the tin can she uses to go to the bathroom, because she doesn’t have time to divert from the route to find a place to take a bathroom break. He realizes his truck drivers make too many stops. No considerations are made for women driving the trucks.

By the time Larry is finished (he even gets fired from one job) he is deeply humbled by what he’s learned. He recognizes, even through tears, how slavishly hard his company’s employees have to work to do their job well. By the end, Larry realizes he is out-of-touch with the plight of the company’s poor employees. A sensitive man, with a handicapped child, Larry O’Donnell’s time as an “undercover boss” helps him realize his company needs to treat employees not as slaves but as persons of dignity. He learns to gift his employees with better working conditions and more “rest stops,” much as God gifted us with the Sabbath.

In the end, this is the whole point of remembering the Sabbath—though it’s more than about resting from our labors. It’s about dignity and honoring God even as we honor ourselves, others, and creation. The Sabbath comes as a gift for those willing to remember and keep it holy.

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<sup>1</sup>“Remember the Sabbath,” *The Christian Century*, May 5, 1999.

<sup>2</sup>Geo. Thompson, “Sabbath Rest,” *Pulpit Digest*, April-June 2000, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup>According to Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Free Time/Free People Campaign found in Rose Marie Berger’s “The Sabbath Sweet Spot,” *Sojourners Magazine*, September 1, 2004.