

September 4, 2016

Labor Day 2016

*God's Misunderstood Commandment*

Exodus 20:8-11/ Mark 2:23-28

**Opening Words:** The history of Labor Day can be traced back to 1882. Matthew Maguire, a machinist, suggested the holiday while he was serving as the secretary of the Central Labor Union of New York. It must have been a good idea. Oregon made it a state holiday in 1887. Thanks to the efforts of President Grover Cleveland, it became a national holiday in 1894. In our time, Labor Day marks the end of summer or the beginning of autumn.

Today, I don't want to look at Labor Day. However, I do want to look at something you should do on Labor Day: rest! God knew from the very beginning, our bodies, minds and spirits had limitations. He knew that we needed to slow down and rest. That is why he commands us to take a weekly Sabbath. May God give you ears to hear two scripture lessons today. The first is from the Old Testament, Exodus 20:8-11. The second is a Gospel lesson, Mark 2:23-28. Let me call this message *God's Misunderstood Commandment*.

**Exodus 20:8-11** <sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

**Mark 2:23-28** <sup>23</sup> One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. <sup>24</sup> The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" <sup>25</sup> He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? <sup>26</sup> In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

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*"Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work, your judgment will be surer...Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller."* Those are the words of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). He excelled as a painter, sculptor, poet, architect, engineer, city planner, scientist, inventor, anatomist, military genius, and philosopher. He knew the value of work and he also knew the value of rest. When was the last time you relaxed? When was the last time you took a true Sabbath? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Our primary scripture lesson for today comes from the Old Testament. The main character in the scene is considered to be the greatest character in the Old Testament, the great law giver, Moses. You remember him. He is the one that looked like a young Charlton Heston. He was the one who led the Hebrews out of Egypt and through the wilderness for forty years. He was the one who went to the top of Mount Sinai and interacted with God. He was the one who came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments. Today's Old Testament lesson is one of the ten; number four. It says: *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*. Listen to what I am about to say. God gave us the fourth commandment because he loves us. He knew we needed to take one day each week to rest physically and recharge ourselves spiritually. The fourth commandment is easy. It is people who have made it very complex.

On this holiday weekend, I want to talk about two ways people have made the fourth commandment complex. Some have tried to **restrict** the Sabbath. Do you know of anyone who has tried to restrict the Sabbath? With manmade rules, they have squeezed all the fun out of the day. Do you know of anyone who has **redefined** the Sabbath? For them it is nothing more than a day off. They do whatever they want. The problem is, there is no time left for God. Never forget, God gave us the fourth commandment because he loves us. He knew we needed one day a week to rest physically and recharge spiritually. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

### **Restrict**

Do you know of anyone who has tried to restrict the Sabbath? That is what you find in this morning's Gospel lesson. According to the story, Jesus and the disciples are walking through a wheat field. The text says it clearly. It is the Sabbath. As they walked they picked some heads of grain. It is easy to visualize, because nothing really happens. No one really cares, except the legal beagles. They cried, "Foul!" The disciples are not really doing anything wrong. However, the orthodox leaders of the day are right. Technically speaking, the disciples were harvesting on the Sabbath. Technically speaking, they broke the fourth commandment, *remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy*. The leaders knew the law, but they had lost the Spirit of the law. The fourth commandment does not exist to limit our fun. It exists so we can rest physically and recharge ourselves spiritually.

The orthodox leaders of Jesus's generation were experts at restricting the Sabbath. Did you know there were 1,521 manmade laws protecting the Sabbath during Jesus's generation? Some, quite frankly, were impossible to keep. Some sound ridiculous to our generation. According to the manmade law, one could not cook a meal, light a fire, look in a mirror, pick up a needle or lift a baby on the Sabbath. According to the manmade law, you could not save a drowning man, shave your face or take a bath on the Sabbath. According to the manmade law, you could not ride a horse, move a lamp or take your medicine on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath you could save your ox that had fallen into a hole, but you could not get yourself out of the hole. I could go on but I won't. The orthodox leaders of the faith restricted the life out of the Sabbath. The fourth commandment exists so you can physically rest and be spiritually recharged.

Do you know of anyone who has restricted the Sabbath?

Years ago, I had a friend by the name of Suzanne. She was raised in a missionary family in Africa. They returned to the United States during her high school years. She would tell us how her parents were famous for restricting the Sabbath. Outside of worship, reading the Bible and prayer, the only thing she was permitted to do on Sunday was listen to the Salvation Army band. You know it is true. Generations ago, many in our land restricted the Sabbath. You couldn't dance on the Sabbath. You couldn't play cards on the Sabbath. Many were not permitted to visit friends on the Sabbath. Can I be honest with you? I'm glad those days are over! The manmade rules made the Sabbath too much work. If you are glad those days are over, then say, **"Amen!"** The fourth commandment exists so you can physically rest and be spiritually recharged.

### **Redefine**

Do you know of anyone who has redefined the Sabbath? The word "Sabbath" means 'seventh day'. The seventh day of the week is Saturday. The Jewish world still observes their Sabbath on Saturday. We observe our Sabbath on Sunday because Jesus was resurrected on Sunday. We worship on Sunday morning because Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday morning. Every Sunday is designed to be a little Easter. For the Christian world, Sunday is a time for Jesus. How much time are you spending with Jesus?

Several years ago, I read an article about a company that was having a horrible problem with drugs. The problem became so great, the company began random drug testing. The CEO of the company said they would test their employees on Monday because people party on the weekend. If you are Jewish, then your Sabbath is Saturday. If you are Christian, then your Sabbath is Sunday. Think about it for just a second. It is very sad. Those days were designed to be the Lord's days, but they have become party days.

Do you know of anyone who has redefined the Sabbath? What pops into your mind when I say the word SUNDAY? If you answer church, worship or God, then you are in the minority. Many people in our land equate Sunday with a day off. You know what I mean. It is a day to get some extra sleep. It is a day to slow down. It is a day to watch football and do what you want. There was a day when church attendance was expected. Now, church attendance is optional. Observe your neighbors next Sunday. How many of them have decided not to go to church? They deserve a day off! You really can't blame them.

To a certain degree you can't argue with them. They make two very good points. First, we believe in an omnipresent God. In other words, we believe you can experience God anywhere. You can experience God on the beach. You can experience God on the golf course. You can experience God walking in the woods. You can experience God in your bed. God is everywhere. If God is everywhere, then why go to church? Second, we have a surplus of ugly churches. You have heard the stories. Some professional clergy have done some ugly things. Some lay people have done some ugly things. Every

church seems to have their share of ugly politics. When I am really frustrated, it seems like every church has become blind to the primary mission of the church: making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Even with all of our imperfections, your best opportunity to experience God is at church. Has anyone here really experienced God at the beach, at the golf course, in the woods or in your bed? I guess you could, but I don't think so. I am convinced only one kind of church will survive in the future. They are not churches that have fine-tuned their fundraising skills. They are the churches where people experience God regularly. When was the last time you experienced God here at Western Reserve? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** The fourth commandment exists so you can physically rest and be spiritually recharged.

Nearly a year ago, Kathryn and I sold our cottage at Lakeside on Marblehead peninsula. There was a time when the cottage was the focal point of my family life; however, the times have changed. Our lives have gone in different directions and we decided to sell it. I would like to say I miss it, but I don't. I never caught the magic of Lakeside. I miss absolutely nothing about it. I always felt like an outsider. I don't miss the gate fee. (It is now over \$20 to get into Lakeside.) I don't miss my neighbors (they were odd, not cool like me ☺.) I don't miss the annual repairs. (It was built in 1883 and I am not a handy man.)

The only thing I will miss about Lakeside is my annual trip to the cottage to close it up for the winter. I will miss those trips. It was like a twenty-four-hour retreat. I was alone and all my neighbors were gone. The place was empty. For once, I did what I wanted to do. After the work was done, I would walk through those historic streets, take a nap and work on my next sermon series. In the evening, I ate at my favorite restaurant and drove to the Confederate Cemetery on Johnson Island. At dusk, I would drive to the Marblehead lighthouse and watch the sun go down. If I close my eyes, I can remember everything. The air was cool and the water was calm. There were boats in every direction. The sun was brilliant. As it drew closer to the horizon, it generated a million shades of red. I would sit on the rocks in silence until that luminous ball disappeared.

Have you ever thought about a sunset? No two are the same. Every time, I thought about the timelessness of that sunset. It has been setting long before I was born. It will set long past my death. That made me feel small. I felt even smaller when I thought about God, who placed that sun in the sky. I felt humbled when I thought about the vastness of God. Why would he care so much for me? Why would he call me, with all my imperfections, into the ministry? Every time I made that trip to the lighthouse and experienced one more sunset, I was completely at peace with God. I hope I didn't break the rules. I had my Sabbath in the middle of the week. I will miss those trips. I physically rested and I experienced God. When was the last time you observed a Sabbath? Exodus 20:8 says, *"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**