

September 6, 2020

Labor Day 2020

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 (1850-1917), 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. The idea spread and Oregon made it a state holiday in 1887. Thanks to the efforts of Grover Cleveland (1837-1908), it became a national holiday in 1894. You know it is true.

Labor Day is a strange and unique holiday, it is like none of the others. Just think about it for a moment. We do not decorate our homes for Labor Day. We do not give gifts on Labor Day. The floral and card industry have not found a way to sell us their products on Labor Day. Traditionally, especially in Canfield, Ohio, no one wants to go to church, like Christmas and Easter, on Labor Day because it is fair weekend. If the truth be told, we do not even like Labor Day because it means the end of summer and the beginning of something much colder. Yet, we observe Labor Day annually and this year will be no exception. However, today I do not want to talk about Labor Day.

I want to talk about what you should do on Labor Day: REST! God knew from the very beginning, our bodies, minds, and spirits have 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** 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 grain fields, 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."

We find ourselves today in the twentieth chapter of Exodus. It is impossible to summarize the story in any detail. It will have to suffice to say, God made a promise to Abram that his people would become a great nation. God kept his word and generations later his descendants found themselves enslaved in Egypt. They cried for a liberator and God sends them Moses. Does any of this sound familiar? Have you seen the movie? It was a great day when God's Chosen people left Egypt and faced the harshness of the wilderness. God watched over his people and protected them from the Egyptians. Once safe, God summons Moses to Mount Sinai. It is on Mount Sinai God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. They are written on stone tablets.

The Ten Commandments will not save you soul. We are saved by grace and by grace alone. Jesus is your only hope of salvation. However, that does not mean the Ten Commandments are worthless. We consider them guidelines for holy living. They may sound familiar. As they say, in the day they were posted in schools.

1. You shall have no other "Gods" before me.
2. You shall not make yourself an idol.
3. You shall not take the name of God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not lie.
10. Do not covet.

You can categorize the ten. The first four deal with our relationship with God. The last six deal with our relationship with other people. It is number four that grabs our attention today. It is God's misunderstood commandment.

Number four 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 have limitations. Two things should happen on the Sabbath. They are equally important. First, on the Sabbath, we should rest physically. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) once said, *"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."* We need to rest physically. Second, on the Sabbath, we should recharge ourselves spiritually. Evangelical preacher and radio host Woodrow Kroll (born 1944) said, *"The God who made us can also remake us."* We need to be recharged spiritually. God 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 overly complex.

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 their 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 will not. 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? We saw that a great deal in the past.

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 could not dance on the Sabbath. You could not play cards on the Sabbath. Many were not permitted to visit friends on the Sabbath. Can I be honest with you? I am 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.

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 incredibly 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 cannot blame them.

To a certain degree you cannot 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 church stories. 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. There is too much drama within the life of the church. One of the reasons I exist in the ministry is I try to stay away from the drama. 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. However, this is equally true.

Even with all our imperfections, your best opportunity to experience God is at church. Has anyone here experienced God at the beach, at the golf course, in the woods or in your bed? I guess you could, but I do not think so. His name maybe mentioned but no one is really experiencing God. 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? 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.

Years 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 time came to sell it. Our lives had gone in different directions. I would like to say I miss it, but I do not. I am not going to break commandment number nine, do not lie. I never caught the magic of Lakeside. I miss absolutely nothing about it. I always felt like an

outsider. I do not miss the gate fee. (It is now over \$25 to get into Lakeside, plus your car pass. I am confident the dog pass is coming.) I do not miss my neighbors (they were odd, not cool like me.) I do not miss the annual repairs. (It was built in 1883 and I am not a handy man.)

The only thing I miss about Lakeside is my annual trip to the cottage to close it up for the winter. I do miss those trips. It was like a twenty-four-hour retreat. I was alone and all my neighbors were gone. The place was empty. There is nothing better than Ohio in October. It is simply beautiful, full of color. For once, I did what I wanted to do. After the work was done, I would walk through those historic streets, walk along the lake front, take a nap and work on my next sermon. In the evening, I drove to the Confederate Cemetery on Johnson Island, ate at my favorite restaurant, where I ate my favorite meal. It was great being ignored. 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 a steel gray and 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, orange and gold. 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 did not break the rules. I had my Sabbath in the middle of the week. I 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!**"