

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Holy Days: The Napping Church”

Written by Dr. Jay Howell

Delivered by Rev. Mark Lampley

February 7, 2021

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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It’s in the middle of all these laws about the tabernacle that we come to today’s passage, in which God reiterates the importance of the sabbath, the day of rest. Verse 13 reads, “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.” This is a big deal too: that the sabbath would be a sign forever between God and his people, that somehow their rest would point to their connection to the Lord. What does that mean? What does it mean for a people’s rest to point to their relationship with the Lord?

I’d like to offer two things it *doesn’t* mean, and then two things it does.

First thing it *doesn’t* mean: it doesn’t mean that God likes rest more than work. Sabbath rest isn’t a call to laziness. If we think, “Well, if rest is so good and holy, I guess I should just take every day off so I can be more

holy,” then we’ve missed something. It’s no coincidence that this call to rest comes in the middle of all the law about the tabernacle, all the effort that went into making it. In the first part of the passage we read today, your eyes might have glazed over from hearing about Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur and Oholiab son of Ahisamach and all the trades they were skilled with, but it’s talking about God’s concern and empowerment of work. God had filled these people with “divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft,” giving “skill to all the skillful.” It means that the Lord isn’t just in the Sabbath; the Lord is in every day’s work. Holy work is in the midst of holy rest, and vice versa. One leads into the other.

Second thing it *doesn’t* mean: it doesn’t mean that rest should be legalistic. You may have noticed in this passage some phrases that sounded harsh, like the penalties for disrespecting the Sabbath ranging from being cut off from the people and to even being put to death. You might think, that’s a bit harsh. It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that the Sabbath and its application became a subject of hot debate within the practice of the law and over time had gotten so rigid and legalistic that it would eventually be one of the subjects Jesus would clash with the Pharisees over, which we heard about in the passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus reminded us both of the importance of Sabbath in pointing us to God, as something made for our benefit, while also correcting the *worship* of the Sabbath as an end unto itself.

That brings us to the first thing I’d offer that this call to rest *does* mean: that rest should be taken seriously, just as seriously as the work God had empowered them to do in building the tabernacle. Do we ever think of rest that way? Do we ever think, “I’m going to rest from my work, and I should be just as serious about the rest I take as I am about the work I am resting from”? Maybe some of us do, but it’s almost counterintuitive. More often, rest is something we do only when we find we’ve reached a stopping point, only when we have time, only when we know the work can wait for a little bit—and for some of us that means never! But when we take rest as seriously as our work, they’re both in harmony, leading neither to laziness nor to over-busyness. It’s baked into the very fabric of creation: six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested. Rest points to the way things were made to be, the way things were meant to be.

But there’s a second thing that this call to rest means: rest reminds us what our work should be about. Earlier, we took a quick look at the retelling of the Ten Commandments from the Book of Deuteronomy, but the commandment to keep the sabbath, the fourth commandment, is a little different. Instead of giving the reason for the sabbath as the seven days of creation, as it does in Exodus, it says something different: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” Remember two weeks ago when we talked about Moses’s call to the Israelites: “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still”? Rest would remind Israel of how God had saved them. It means rest should remind us of what God has done for us. Rest should remind us of how the Lord has saved us. Rest should remind us that everything does not depend upon us.

For us, rest should point us to the truth that Christ died and rose again. When our work becomes overwhelming, how easy is it for us to lose sight of how Christ has redeemed every day for us in his service? How easy is it to get lost in thinking that everything depends on us? Rest doesn’t just recharge us; it reminds us of how we have been redeemed.

Ultimately, rest should be a sign of our relationship with the Lord. Too often, we might hope to be known by how hard we work, but what would it mean for us to be known just as much by how we rest? In your offices, in your schools, in your shops, in your homes, what would it mean for you to be recognized not just for how you

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Second thing it *doesn’t* mean: it doesn’t mean that rest should be legalistic. You may have noticed in this passage some phrases that sounded harsh, like the penalties for disrespecting the Sabbath ranging from being cut off from the people and to even being put to death. You might think, that’s a bit harsh. It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that the Sabbath and its application became a subject of hot debate within the practice of the law and over time had gotten so rigid and legalistic that it would eventually be one of the subjects Jesus would clash with the Pharisees over, which we heard about in the passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus reminded us both of the importance of Sabbath in pointing us to God, as something made for our benefit, while also correcting the *worship* of the Sabbath as an end unto itself.

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Second thing it *doesn’t* mean: it doesn’t mean that rest should be legalistic. You may have noticed in this passage some phrases that sounded harsh, like the penalties for disrespecting the Sabbath ranging from being cut off from the people and to even being put to death. You might think, that’s a bit harsh. It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that the Sabbath and its application became a subject of hot debate within the practice of the law and over time had gotten so rigid and legalistic that it would eventually be one of the subjects Jesus would clash with the Pharisees over, which we heard about in the passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus reminded us both of the importance of Sabbath in pointing us to God, as something made for our benefit, while also correcting the *worship* of the Sabbath as an end unto itself.

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It’s in the middle of all these laws about the tabernacle that we come to today’s passage, in which God reiterates the importance of the sabbath, the day of rest. Verse 13 reads, “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.” This is a big deal too: that the sabbath would be a sign forever between God and his people, that somehow their rest would point to their connection to the Lord. What does that mean? What does it mean for a people’s rest to point to their relationship with the Lord?

I’d like to offer two things it *doesn’t* mean, and then two things it does.

First thing it *doesn’t* mean: it doesn’t mean that God likes rest more than work. Sabbath rest isn’t a call to laziness. If we think, “Well, if rest is so good and holy, I guess I should just take every day off so I can be more

holy,” then we’ve missed something. It’s no coincidence that this call to rest comes in the middle of all the law about the tabernacle, all the effort that went into making it. In the first part of the passage we read today, your eyes might have glazed over from hearing about Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur and Oholiab son of Ahisamach and all the trades they were skilled with, but it’s talking about God’s concern and empowerment of work. God had filled these people with “divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft,” giving “skill to all the skillful.” It means that the Lord isn’t just in the Sabbath; the Lord is in every day’s work. Holy work is in the midst of holy rest, and vice versa. One leads into the other.

Second thing it *doesn’t* mean: it doesn’t mean that rest should be legalistic. You may have noticed in this passage some phrases that sounded harsh, like the penalties for disrespecting the Sabbath ranging from being cut off from the people and to even being put to death. You might think, that’s a bit harsh. It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that the Sabbath and its application became a subject of hot debate within the practice of the law and over time had gotten so rigid and legalistic that it would eventually be one of the subjects Jesus would clash with the Pharisees over, which we heard about in the passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus reminded us both of the importance of Sabbath in pointing us to God, as something made for our benefit, while also correcting the *worship* of the Sabbath as an end unto itself.

That brings us to the first thing I’d offer that this call to rest *does* mean: that rest should be taken seriously, just as seriously as the work God had empowered them to do in building the tabernacle. Do we ever think of rest that way? Do we ever think, “I’m going to rest from my work, and I should be just as serious about the rest I take as I am about the work I am resting from”? Maybe some of us do, but it’s almost counterintuitive. More often, rest is something we do only when we find we’ve reached a stopping point, only when we have time, only when we know the work can wait for a little bit—and for some of us that means never! But when we take rest as seriously as our work, they’re both in harmony, leading neither to laziness nor to over-busyness. It’s baked into the very fabric of creation: six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested. Rest points to the way things were made to be, the way things were meant to be.

But there’s a second thing that this call to rest means: rest reminds us what our work should be about. Earlier, we took a quick look at the retelling of the Ten Commandments from the Book of Deuteronomy, but the commandment to keep the sabbath, the fourth commandment, is a little different. Instead of giving the reason for the sabbath as the seven days of creation, as it does in Exodus, it says something different: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” Remember two weeks ago when we talked about Moses’s call to the Israelites: “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still”? Rest would remind Israel of how God had saved them. It means rest should remind us of what God has done for us. Rest should remind us of how the Lord has saved us. Rest should remind us that everything does not depend upon us.

For us, rest should point us to the truth that Christ died and rose again. When our work becomes overwhelming, how easy is it for us to lose sight of how Christ has redeemed every day for us in his service? How easy is it to get lost in thinking that everything depends on us? Rest doesn’t just recharge us; it reminds us of how we have been redeemed.

Ultimately, rest should be a sign of our relationship with the Lord. Too often, we might hope to be known by how hard we work, but what would it mean for us to be known just as much by how we rest? In your offices, in your schools, in your shops, in your homes, what would it mean for you to be recognized not just for how you

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Holy Days: The Napping Church”

Written by Dr. Jay Howell

Delivered by Rev. Mark Lampley

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