

Deuteronomy 5:12 “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁴ 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 manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do.¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

HOLY TO THE LORD!

Dear Friends in Christ,

Can you multi-task—read an email and hold a conversation? Can you watch TV and send texts?

A couple clinical studies have been done on multi-taskers in recent years. When I first heard about those studies, I was just a bit worried. You see, I cannot multi-task. Just ask our kids about what happens when I drive up to a busy intersection. I can do nothing other than the driving part. So I worried about multi-taskers. I asked myself, “Do they have some in-born ability that will relegate people like me to the junk piles of history?”

Well, when they got down to the testing, one study last year found that people who do lots of multi-tasking have lower brain densities in certain parts of the brain. They haven’t yet researched whether multi-tasking is the cause or the result, but it suggests a worrying possibility: multi-tasking may harm the very structure of your brain.

A few years ago, another major study was done on multi-tasking. It was specifically meant to look at the question, what is special about people who have a gift for multi-tasking? This study found that people who multi-task a lot and who think they are good at it, were actually worse at multi-tasking than people who prefer to do one thing at a time.

More study needs to be done, to be sure. But it seems to indicate that multi-tasking is actually a degenerative activity, a truly bad habit. It seems to say that the more you multi-task, the worse it is for you.¹

Holy Means “To Set Apart” – Not Multi-Tasking

Which brings us to the very first sentence of our reading. It says, “*Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*” The key word is the last one, “holy.” Now what do multi-tasking and the word “holy” have in common? Be patient.

“Holy” is such an important *and misunderstood* concept that we must spend some time talking about it. (Now, in our Wednesday Bible class a couple weeks ago we discussed this very topic. But all of us need to be on board.)

If I asked you, “What does the word ‘holy’ mean?” You might tell me it means something like “being really good, being perfect.” Which is how we usually use the word. Well, the word “holy” means a lot more than being good. When you go back to the original language of the Hebrew in the Old Testament, and the Greek in the New Testament, and even older English, “holy” does not really mean “morally pure.” The word “holy” means “set apart.”

For example, when the LORD first appeared to Moses, the LORD said to Moses, “*Take off your san-*

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2014/10/08/multitasking-damages-your-brain-and-career-new-studies-suggest/>

dals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Now how can dirt be morally pure? It has no life or choice. Then how could God call it holy?

Or remember how the Israelite temple was made. There were two parts to it: The Holy Place and The Most Holy Place. Only priests on duty could enter The Holy Place. Everyone else had to stand outside! And only the high priest could enter The Most Holy Place one time a year. Was that plot of ground somehow morally superior to other plots? Not at all. But that plot of ground was “set apart” for God. That is why it was called The Holy Place.

That idea of “set apart” is at the core of the word “holy” in the Bible. It has huge implications for some very important Bible passages, like this one: “*Be holy, because I am holy*” (1 Peter 1:16). It doesn’t so much focus on how good we are—though that thought is in there. “Holy” focuses on the fact that God wants Christians to be set us apart from the rest of the world.

Why We Must Setting Apart God-Time

Which brings us back to multi-tasking. When you multi-task, you set nothing apart as “holy”. You throw it all into the pot and stir it around and treat it like none of it is special. But God said, “***Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it...***” by keeping it what? Holy.

God knows how we are. We need to set things apart, or else we don’t do them. We need to designate vacation time as vacation time, or else we don’t take any. We need to set aside money because if we don’t, we use it all. Back in 1993 I worked as a pizza delivery guy. And every dime I got—and by that I literally mean all the dimes, not the quarters, nickels, or pennies—every dime I got I set aside for some day. No particular use, just for when I had a special use for it. I bought some savings bonds and just set aside that money for some day. And finally, in December of 2014 I cashed those savings bonds in and paid for most of my bicycle with those dimes. If I had not set them aside, those dimes would not have done me any good. And we all do that sort of thing. We know how we are. We know that if we don’t set things aside we fritter them away. It is only by setting things aside—by treating them as holy, if you will—that we can do the special things in life.

We do that not just with money, but also with that even more precious gift—time. If we do not discipline ourselves to set time aside, we waste it. God knows how we are. That is why God told the Israelites to keep the Sabbath day holy, to set it apart. It is the only way we humans can ever really give something the attention it deserves. not by multi-tasking, but by setting it apart.

Should We Set Apart the Sabbath or Sunday?

That brings up a whole host of questions. We have time for one or two briefly.

The most obvious question is about the day. “If God told us to set aside the Sabbath – our Saturday – as a special day, then should we not worship on Saturday?” That is a good question. It is a good question because any time that we read a command of God, and then don’t do it, we had better be able to answer God why we don’t do it! Why don’t we worship on Saturday like God told the Israelites?

The reason is found in God’s own word. In our second reading it said, “*Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival... or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality... is found in Christ.*” (Colossians 2:16-17). The ceremonies of the Old Testament religion, like the Sabbath, were temporary. They were shadows, placeholders, which were in force until the reality, the Messiah, came. When he came, the shadows passed away.

Note what I said, “The shadow passed away.” In the Sabbath commandment there is both a shadow and an eternal truth. The eternal truth remains in force. The core truth of this commandment is in that word “holy.” The core truth of this commandment is that God wants us to take time in our lives and set it apart to God. Now we in the New Testament have a great deal of freedom in how we do that. But the core message is, “Set apart time for your God.”

That’s what we do here isn’t it? Every Sunday, at this place, at this time, we set aside time for our

Lord. But in your hearts, is this time holy to the Lord? Is this 10 o'clock time slot really set aside in its own hermetically sealed container, with "Set Apart to the Lord" written on the side?

Truly Setting Apart God Time

Oh yes, exceptions happen. The Gospel reading was all about that. Jesus was out in the grain fields and the disciples were doing what some strict religious teachers thought as sinful. Jesus didn't try to make excuses for them. Instead he explained about a time when someone broke one of God's laws—for the preservation of lives. So Jesus tells us that sometimes one of God's laws will yield to another law. We realize this principle in our own human laws. Doesn't the ambulance exceed the speed limit on the way to the hospital? If someone is drowning at the far end of the swimming pool, won't you run even though the pool rules prohibit running? Some laws have priority over others.

So there can be exceptions, where even our time specially set aside to the Lord perhaps will yield to another necessity. If you had a heart attack and are in the hospital, I'm not going to be asking, "Why weren't you in church yesterday?" But when our "set aside" time is routinely pre-empted by other concerns, we might wonder if we have really set it aside to the Lord? Or is it just when it's convenient? That is almost the opposite of "set aside." Now worship is just one of many tasks we multi-task.

Or "set aside" becomes some variation of this: I can worship God while I'm fishing. While that is not untrue: you can worship God while fishing or driving your car, or golfing. But it is also true that worshipping God while fishing, driving or golfing is not time "set aside" to the Lord. It is time doing what I want to do, and kind of squeezing God in around the edges. And I probably need to honestly ask myself while out in the fishing boat pretending that I am worshipping God, "Which is getting more attention: the bobber or God?"

Look. I am your pastor. I am not pointing this commandment at any one, any more than I am pointing it at myself. My set aside devotion time this week didn't do very well on a couple days. And that is not good. In fact, in at least a couple instances, I am certain it was sin, just because I chose something else over God in my set-aside God time. This commandment applies to every person. The all-knowing God who knows whether you have really set aside time to God, and whether you actually carry through with those intentions, he judges that. That is a hard-nosed truth about who we are. Each of us is a sinner who needs something only God can give: forgiveness.

Which is precisely why the early Christians chose Sunday as the Lord's Day. No longer did their religion key off creation, nor was it the birth of the Israelite nation (the Exodus), but the Christian faith celebrates the greatest work of God for his people: Jesus' death and resurrection. Sunday is the day Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday is the day when the first believers understood that their sins were completely paid for and taken away. So the Christian Church, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, chose a new holy day, Sunday. In setting aside Sunday, they were observing the core of the commandment. We 21st century Christians can look at the Third Commandment, "***Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,***" and unashamedly say that we do keep this commandment.

Keeping this commandment really comes down to this question, "Have I declared some portion of my day, of my week to be holy to God? Is there some time when my priority is not what I want to get done, but God?"

This is where multi-tasking can be so corrosive. Now if you want to text while watching TV, that's your decision. If you want to talk to your spouse while reading the newspaper, it's your judgment call. But when we get used to this approach to life, it corrodes our relation with God. Set aside time for your God – especially a time to worship him. He will bless you to desire and to do this in his name. Amen.