

The Least Of These: Lesson 3

Sabbath: A Day Of Freedom

Memory Text: “And He said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

Setting The Stage: Ricky Jackson grew up on Cleveland’s East Side, the first son of a large working-class family. At 18, he enlisted in the Marines, hoping to make a career of it, but within a year was granted an honorable discharge for a balky back. Soon after returning home he and two friends were arrested for killing Harold Franks outside a neighborhood convenience store. Franks was doing business there—he sold money orders—when, according to police, a pair of assailants splashed acid on his face, clubbed him, shot him several times, stole about \$425 and fled.

Police never found the murder weapon, and Jackson and his friends, the brothers Wiley and Ronnie Bridgeman, insisted they were elsewhere at the time of the shooting and had never laid eyes on Franks. But detectives had obtained a statement from a local paperboy, 12-year-old Eddie Vernon, who knew the Bridgemans and Jackson. Eddie told police that Jackson fired the handgun, Ronnie Bridgeman doused the victim with acid and his brother drove the getaway car.

Though Eddie was a shaky witness—he failed to identify the suspects in a police lineup, and several of his classmates testified he had not been near the crime scene—three separate juries accepted the youngster’s account. In 1975, Jackson and the Bridgemans were convicted of murder and sentenced to die by electric chair.

On death row, in a narrow cell with a slot for a window, he was unnerved by the realization that people wanted him to die. Then, in 1977, his death sentence was reduced to life in prison because of a technicality, and the following year the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Ohio’s capital punishment law was unconstitutional. Jackson joined the regular population at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility.

He studied gardening. He refereed basketball games. He found solace in the prison library, often reading a book a day—biology, nature, history—losing himself in those other worlds. And he wrote letters—to journalists, filmmakers, anyone who might be interested in his case.

In 2011, *The Scene*, a Cleveland magazine, published an article about the frail nature of Jackson’s conviction and the implausibility of the testimony that had condemned him. Among the readers was Eddie Vernon’s pastor, who arranged a meeting between Vernon and lawyers with the Ohio Innocence Project. Vernon rescinded his 1975 testimony, saying police coerced him into fingering Jackson and the Bridgemans. In 2014, prosecutors dismissed charges against the three men.

After 39 years in an Ohio prison for a crime he didn’t commit—the longest prison term for an exonerated defendant in American history—Ricky Jackson was set free.

If you were Ricky Jackson and had been set free, how would you spend the remainder of your days? For Jackson, he said he planned to make the days count. The freedom (which he termed a “re-birth”) he is enjoying has caused him to properly prioritize his life, hone his focus, and make him appreciate the most important things in life.

We’re talking about the Sabbath this week, and the Sabbath and freedom are inextricably linked together, not opposed to each other. We’ll see this as the lesson unfolds.

The memory verse reminds us that when God gave the Sabbath He gave it to man. While the observance of the Sabbath certainly benefits the individual, the Sabbath was deigned to benefit mankind—humanity in general. Now you might say, “Yes, that’s right, there’s nothing new about that,” but when we usually talk about the Sabbath and its benefits, it’s often presented as a personal incentive. There is also a wider dimension to the Sabbath, and, if understood, will make the observance of the Sabbath that much more richer and fuller for us personally, and prove to be a blessing to others as well.

We’ll be answering the following question in this week’s lesson: **What is the integral role the Sabbath is designed to play in the world and in our lives—the lives of God’s people—as a symbol of His grace and provisions?**

Sunday – Manna Enough

Exodus 16:16-18; 2 Corinthians 8:10-15

“After generations of slavery and the social degradation that such a condition could inflict on His oppressed people, God sought to lift up the newly freed Israelites, pointing them to a better way of living and giving them laws for the best ordering of their new society. But one of the first parts of this process came in the form of a practical and instructive object lesson [that would continue] for 40 years of their wilderness wanderings... [And] this visible evidence of God’s provision and practiced unselfishness, should have become part of the culture of Israelite society.”

What was that object lesson, and what is the significance of the specific measure for each person emphasized in these verses?

Exodus 16:16-18: “This is the thing which the Lord has commanded: ‘Let every man gather it according to each one’s need, one omer for each person, according to the number of persons; let every man take for those who are in his tent.’ Then the children of Israel did so and gathered, some more, some less. So when they measured it by omers, he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack. Every man had gathered according to each one’s need.” (cp. 2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

The lesson for the Israelites, and us, was that God has sufficiently provided for His people and His creation. If we take only what we need and are prepared to share our excess with others, all will be cared for and provided for. Taking only enough for the day required the people to trust that there would be more the following day (“Give us this day our *daily* bread”). God wanted to show them a life of trust, generosity, and sharing.

But there was also another, more remarkable, dimension to this practice that occurred every Friday. A double portion of manna appeared on the ground, and that day—only that day—the people were to collect the extra manna in preparation for the Sabbath. The special provision for the Sabbath became an additional way for them to learn to trust the Lord for all their needs. This extra portion of manna, an act of grace on God’s part, enabled them to enjoy even more fully the rest that God had promised them on the seventh-day Sabbath. With adequate preparation, we too can enjoy the blessings of the Sabbath.

Monday – Two Reasons For Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15. How do these two versions of the fourth commandment complement each other?

“Remembering is an important part of the relationship that God seeks to reestablish with His people, a relationship centered on the fact that God is our Creator and Redeemer. Both roles appear in the two versions of the fourth commandment and are thus linked closely with Sabbath and its practice.”

God desires that we remember His true role as Creator. The Sabbath is a crucial way to do that. God also desires that we remember his true role as Savior. The Sabbath is a crucial way to do that too (see Ezek. 20:12). The Sabbath reminds us that Christ has freed us from sins power. Often, the Bible connects God’s creative activity with His redemptive activity (see Heb. 1:1-3; Col. 1:16, 20; 2 Cor. 5:17; Ps. 51:10)

Should experiencing the Sabbath this way and building on our relationship with God have a positive effect on others around us? In what way? Should Sabbath keeping make us a better, kinder, more caring, and compassionate people?

As we reflect on our roots, on our relationship with our Creator, on His provisions for us, and on His saving grace, all things that the Sabbath experience brings to our minds, we are reminded of our worth and purpose in this world, how blessed we are, how much we are loved and valued, how God has treated us even though we didn’t deserve His mercy. This weekly experience ought to have an effect on how we relate to others, how we treat them, and call us to be willing to serve them.

Tuesday – A Day Of Equality

Exodus 20:8-11

When compared with the other commandments, the Sabbath commandment is by far the most detailed. It gives us the why, how, and who of remembering the Sabbath day. Without a doubt, there is something significant about the Sabbath commandment. It certainly has a prophetic significance and will be the main last day issue bringing the masses to a point of decision in favor of or against Christ. The Sabbath commandment provides the reason and motivation for obedience to God—He is Creator and re-Creator of our lives.

What other important focus does the Sabbath provide (see Ex. 20:8-11)? The commandment urges that the Sabbath is to be enjoyed by everyone. In light of the Sabbath, we're all of equal worth and to be treated equally (with exception of the cattle, obviously). Whether employer or employee, whether male or female, whether child, friend or stranger, because all are deserving of enjoying the benefits of the Sabbath, all are equal in God's eyes, and as such should be treated the same by us as well.

If observance of the Sabbath is beneficial for everyone, why not legislate it, put it into law and ensure everyone gets to benefit? Because the Sabbath is a religious matter, the government shouldn't be a party to enforcing something contrary to someone's personal convictions and religious beliefs. Ironically, whenever modern governments legislate a family or rest day, it seems to be, without exception, on a Sunday.

But others can certainly benefit from the Sabbath...by our own personal Sabbath observance. While the day does have some restrictions (entirely for our benefit to remove distractions), there are a host of opportunities the Sabbath presents to us to bless others.

Wednesday – A Day Of Healing

Matthew 12:12

While the original vision for the Sabbath and Sabbath keeping was broad and inclusive, the Sabbath had become quite different for many of the religious leaders by the time Jesus came to earth. Instead of a day of freedom and equality, the day had become all about restrictions and rules. But Jesus showed that Sabbath is a blessing to the individuals and to others the individual takes time to bless. The Sabbath is not only about relationships and rest but it's also about mercy and service.

The Bible records that Jesus performed seven of His healing miracles on the Sabbath. It was intentional in order to demonstrate something important about what the Sabbath should be.

Matthew 12:12b: “Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

We have all day. We’re not going shopping, going out to wash your car, paint that fence, or weed the garden. So we can do something with the day to make it positive. We can reach out to somebody. We can be a blessing to somebody. The Sabbath day is most definitely a day to do good.

We can get creative. No one can prescribe for you what you might think to do on the Sabbath. It’s a day of ministry. What has God called you to do? Where are you gifted? What would you like to do? Who would benefit from your ministry of mercy and blessing on the 7th day Sabbath? View this day as a day of infinite possibilities. (See Isaiah 58:6-14)

It’s a day to remember that God is good and He’s love, and what He has done for you He would like to see done for others.

Thursday – Sabbath Rest For The Land

Leviticus 25:1-7

As we have seen, Sabbath was an ingrained part of the life cycle of the Israelite nation. But the Sabbath principle was not just about a day each week. It also included a special rest each seventh year, culminating in the year of jubilee after seven sets of seven years, meaning each 50th year.

Leviticus 25:1-7 (see also vv. 21, 22). **What is remarkable about this kind of instruction? In what possible ways could you incorporate this kind of principle into your life and work?**

“The observance of the sabbatical year was to be a benefit to both the land and the people. The soil, lying untilled for one season, would afterward produce more plentifully. The people were released from the pressing labors of the field; and while there were various branches of work that could be followed during this time, all enjoyed greater leisure, which afforded opportunity for the restoration of their physical powers for the exertions of the following years. They had more time for meditation and prayer, for acquainting themselves with the teachings and requirements of the Lord, and for the instruction of their households.” (Patriarchs & Prophets, p. 532)

In the sabbatical year the Hebrew slaves were to be set at liberty, and they were not to be sent away empty handed (Deut. 15: 13, 14). To the poor, the seventh year was a year of release from debt (Lev. 25:35-37). In the event that any of the Israelites

became so indebted as to sell themselves into slavery, they were to be freed in the seventh year (Ex. 21:1-11).

“The principles and pattern of the Sabbath were to be closely tied to the structure of the Israelite society as a whole. Similarly, contemporary Sabbath keeping should be a spiritual discipline that transforms all our other days. In a practical sense, the Sabbath is one way of living out Jesus’ instructions to seek first His kingdom (Matt. 6:32, 33)

What difference should keeping the Sabbath make to the other six days of your week? After all, if you are greedy, selfish, and uncaring from Sunday through Friday, what does it really matter if you are none of these things on Sabbath? (Or truly can you not be those things on Sabbath even if you are that way the rest of the week?)

Friday – Summary

“God gave the Sabbath as a way of remembering Creation and Redemption, but it also has many practical benefits. It teaches us to trust in God’s provision for us; it teaches us to practice equality [of worth]; and it can become a spiritual discipline that can transform all our relationships. Jesus demonstrated His ideal for the Sabbath by healing the sick and emphasizing the Sabbath as a day to benefit those in need.” Are there other parts of your life in which the patterns and principles of the Sabbath should have a greater impact?