

Living a Rhythmic Life

by Earl Palmer

The fourth commandment tell us to "Remember the sabbath day." We are to labor and do all our work for six days, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord our God. The word for sabbath means "seven"; it also means "cease."

"The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maid servant, or your cattle" (Exodus 20:10). Notice the ecological impact of this commandment. What's good for us has now become good for the animal kingdom as well. Finally, the sojourner, the foreigner, is also protected in this fourth commandment.

The first three commandments are almost identical in the Deuteronomy listing, but with the fourth commandment there is a difference. "Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant,



or your maidservant, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you." (Deuteronomy 5:12). A redundancy was put in there to make sure that a note of equilibrium and equality is struck. And now comes the difference: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." In Exodus, the doctrine of creation dominates. It goes on to say, "Remember that God created the earth." In Deuteronomy, the

theology of redemption dominates. "Remember that you were in bondage and the Lord your God redeemed you. He brought you out of the land of Egypt."

There we have two foundations for the sabbath. (1) You shall remember creation, God the creator. (2) You shall remember that God redeems you. You shall not forget that you were once in slavery and you were brought out.

Work and Leisure

So we have six days for labor and one day for rest. The rest doesn't make much sense if you don't also work. The work is spoken of first. We are creatures who need to work.

Pascal said, "To ask a person to be at leisure is to misunderstand man." You misunderstand human nature if you tell someone, "Oh, what you need is a rest." After people have a terrible shock in their lives, maybe a death in the family, well-wishers may come up to a widow or widower (they especially do this to women) and they'll say, "Listen, this has been such a terrible shock, you must just rest awhile. Don't make any hasty decisions." Sometimes doctors

will even sedate people during the grieving period. Then afterward they wonder what happened. Did I miss something?

It's true that our work puts us under stress. Remember, after the fall it is out of the sweat of your brow that you will work the land and it will return to you briars as well as wheat. There is no easy way to work. In fact, the Greek word for work literally means sweat. So the fourth commandment is a commandment about work and also about rest.

By the time of the first century, however, a controversy had arisen about the rest component. The commandment tells us that we're the creature that needs to stop. We must stop and reflect and remember who we are in the light of God's creation and in the light of his redemption. We're supposed to remember the good design. We're supposed to remember that God redeems us.

The law is paying us a compliment in describing us as rememberers. The moment we start to remember, we become artists. We write our poems, songs, hymns. We draw our pictures to remember. Three great memories make up our art. In art we remember creation. We also remember how tragic is the fall, and how surprising and exciting is redemption.

Life's Boundaries

Two other parts of this commandment, parts we don't often think about, are especially apropos to us today. First of all, the commandment is a commandment about boundaries. Seven days. That's so obvious, it's easy to miss it. It teaches us to think of our lives in terms of one concrete week.

It doesn't say, "One month you are to work and one month you are to rest." It doesn't describe our lives in terms of a year either, though the Jews were certainly year-conscious. Their feasts were based

on the lunar year.

Seven days are a God-given boundary of our life, and logically that shows us that all of history is boundaried by the good design of creation. That's why we never mock creation. As Christians we can never make fun of the earth. We love the earth. That's why we care about lakes and whales. That's why we care about dolphins and redwoods. Part of our memory is to remember God's good design.

But we also remember the crisis.

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That's one of the reasons we believe in democracy. As C. S. Lewis said, we want to be able to throw the rascals out. We don't believe in the divine right of kings. We know too much about our sins, and that knowledge of sin is part of the boundary too. All of that boundaries us: the memory of our sins and the memory of redemption.

Finally, this commandment is also a commandment about rhythm, about balance. Six days to labor and one day to rest. So many people have missed the obvious rhythmic nature of humankind. Life is to be rhythmic—boundaried and rhythmic. A rhythm of work and rest. Time with people, time alone. Time to be physical and time to be cerebral. Time in fellowship with

large groups of people and time in fellowship with small groups of people.

Balance

From these theological points, I want to suggest five principles for how we can develop balance on the basis of the fourth commandment. First I want to stress the principle of having workable boundaries. I started my life in the ministry completely out of control as a youth worker. Working with youth I was at the church all the time and the kids were with me all the time and every single day looked alike. It was a jumble of influx and stimuli. The first two years I was single and I had nothing to go home to. Then I got married and my poor wife was swept into this incredible activity.

For the first two years of our marriage she was teaching high school in Seattle. Because she was a yell leader adviser, she had to go to all the football and basketball games. We were out every single night.

Then we got pregnant. Our first little baby came and we had to change everything.

But that was a wonderful thing God did for us. Thank God for the birth of our little daughter Ann. It bought me a chance to recast my life. I was preaching a series of sermons on the ten commandments and I came to the fourth commandment which I never liked because it got such a bad press in the New Testament. The Pharisees had so trivialized it. But when I was

doing my study of the fourth commandment, I saw its goodness. My life was transformed when I discovered this principle of balance and saw my life in terms of the seven days. I said, "I'm going to get my week under control. And if I can get seven days under control, I can get my life under control."

You can't always get one day under control. A lot of people think about how to get a day under con-

trol, how to be time managers. Well, there are three units to a day, and that's a good way to look at a day. It has three logical units: morning, afternoon, and evening. It's true, we should be rhythmic in those three units. But still there can be a day that is totally scattered. But a week is manageable. A week you can make rhythmic.

I've been in Berkeley for 19 years and this is a high-powered town. I've seen many people get burned out in Berkeley. But by using the seven-day principle I have not burned out.

So, don't see your life in terms of a year. We do follow the feasts of the year, and that's good. But when people say, "When Christmas comes, I'm going to take care of all my interpersonal relationships"—it doesn't work. W. H. Auden has a great line: "Christmas is that time when we all try unsuccessfully to love all our relatives." You have to love your relatives in the seven days, in the week-by-week segments that God allots us.

My wife and I make our decisions on a weekly basis and it's changed our whole life.

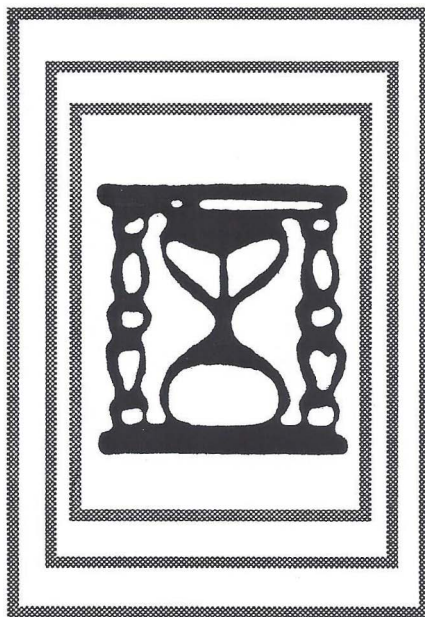
Every day should not look alike. We need to have a week that moves from intensive to extensive, that moves from high impact to low impact. We have to have a day in there where everything looks a little different. When we do that, our week has balance. Then the week is under control. That is how we outwit things that do come in and sabotage the balance.

So many people have their evenings ruined by TV. Well, for one thing, establish a rule: Never watch TV; only watch programs. That's a rule in our family and it's saved us so many times. We never turn on TV, except for a specific program we want. Second, if you have a program you want to watch, earn the right to watch it. How do you earn that right? Well, do something you don't want to do for a reward, which could be a TV

show. Then sometimes you get so caught up with what you have to do, it will go right beyond that show. You've outwitted yourself.

You know that a whole five hours of the wasteland of TV will make you feel miserable at 11:00 p.m. So work your way back. What do you have to do at 10:00 in order to feel good at 11:00? What do you have to do at 9:00? Exercise stewardship. See your evening as boundaried, not endless.

See your week first and then you



can go to your month. Then you can go to your year.

Authority

A second principle is the authority principle as presented in the fourth commandment. It's a freedom commandment in that it is an authority commandment; you're given authority over your week.

You have to find your work and you have to find your rest. As a pastor, every once in a while I'll meet people who say to me, "You know I'm perfectly willing to be put to work in the church, but no one has ever asked me to do anything." Well, I just tell them the fourth commandment: "Six days thou shalt labor." You've got to

find your work. No one can bring it to you.

I also want to say one thing about disadvantaged youngsters. Research has shown that teenagers usually get their first job through a family or referral. Think of a young teenage boy who has no father and no relatives in an American inner city. He needs our help to

get his first job. So I don't point to this commandment in a hostile sense. One of the best gifts you can give to anyone is to help them find their work.

Further, we should not see ourselves as victims of the clock. We all have exactly the same number of hours, 24 hours a day. We are not victims of time.

Do Good

A third principle is what I call the do good principle. There is a very decisive New Testament text on the ten commandments in Mark 3:1-6 Jesus "entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him."

Why was the law trivialized like that? Well, I have a theory. It's because the fourth commandments is easy to specialize in. It's hard to specialize with the other commandments, but you can specialize in "Thou shalt not labor on the sabbath." It was a ready-made offer to lawyers, and it is true that most of the Pharisees were lawyers. The Pharisees were not clergy, they were laymen. And it was those laymen who trivialized the law.

The clergy had other problems. They were fat and rich. But the Pharisees were the ones who turned the law almost into idiocy, and Jesus therefore made fun of them: They were swallowing camels and straining gnats, he said.

Here they were, watching to see if he would heal a man so they could charge him with sabbath violation. "And he said to the man

who had the withered hand, 'Come here.' And he said to them [here comes an important theological teaching from Jesus], 'Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm? to save life or to kill?' But they were silent." Isn't that ironic? They wouldn't answer the question.

Right here we've got to pay tribute to Judaism. Toward the end of the first century the Judaic movement battled with this issue: Does God himself believe in work on the sabbath?

They came to agree that God did three things on the sabbath. First, he gives life on the sabbath. They realized that however devout a Jewish woman was she still might give birth on the sabbath. Birth was God given, so it was clear that God gives life on the sabbath.

Second, God judges on the sabbath, and as God he obviously had the right to judge on the sabbath.

Third, God saves on the sabbath.

You can see how our Lord got to the Pharisees on this issue: Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath? So "he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out, and immediately held council with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." You can see how uptight they were about the sabbath.

Jesus clearly said we are to do good on the sabbath. To do good means to be healthy. That means that a CPA who sits all week in front of a terminal, on the sabbath should play football or some other sport. That's what rest on the sabbath means: to be rhythmic.

My poor wife grew up in a German home with a Germanic grandfather who said that all you could do on Sunday was go to church and sit all day. You couldn't even read the comics. She ended up hating church and hating Sunday as a child. The only thing that helped was that her grandfather was a wonderful person.

No Retirement

A fourth principle is the all my life principle. All my life I'm to work and rest. Six days thou shalt labor, one day thou shalt rest. One of the most evil doctrines that's hit modern America is retirement. Where did we ever get the idea that at 65 you put a person on the shelf? That's simply non-Biblical. Christians do not have a doctrine of retirement. We have a doctrine of discipleship.

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Of course, anyone's work will change. It will change when you move. There are mid-career movements and post-career changes. That's different from giving up on yourself and others, and losing your lifelong call to discipleship and service. We have Christian people who are marching all over the world who are so-called retired people. They are in good health, they've got tremendous minds, and they've got wisdom. They should be using all their gifts. Your life should be rhythmic until the day you die. Now if part of the end of your life is going to be in a rest home, then that's your work too.

Fulfillment

Fifth and finally, my last insight is the fulfillment principle.

This commandment shows that nothing we do will last forever because everything is bounded. Augustine saw a profound theological point in the fact that humankind was created on the sixth day, not on the seventh day. The sixth day has an ending in continuity with all other animals.

Some people evidently don't like that, that we were created on the same day as the other animals. I can't see why some Christians are so uptight about evolution, because as far as the Bible is concerned, we are so unique that God breathed his breath into us and he made us in his image. But we were made on the sixth day, will all the rest of the animals. We're certainly the last thing made, right on the edge, but we've always resented it. We wanted the seventh day, that tree of life, but God has to give us that.

Everything passes away. My job passes away. All my work passes away. But God's Word abides forever.

In the end, however, everything is going to be fulfilled. There is a Greek idea that everything will be vaporized in the end, but that's not a Christian idea.

The Christian idea is the resurrection of all things. And I have a hunch that that's a good argument in favor of picking up a saxophone at age 70. Why not? You can play on into eternity.

So don't stop learning new things. You can play the guitar on into eternity or even the great pipe organs. I can't wait to hear Franz Liszt improvisations in eternity. And we will meet Johann Sebastian Bach and he'll play.

We've got a lot ahead of us, and we're going to have an active part in it too. You're not just going to sit there with a harp—that is, unless you are a

harpist. ■

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