

Sabbath Economics

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Isaiah 58:6-14

sermon digest

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Larry Dipboye

Chisholm, Texas, was a farm community about twenty miles east of Dallas. I began my pastoral ministry there in 1962 in my third semester of seminary. The primary source of income was cotton, and the cotton gin at the center of the community along with two church buildings set the skyline of downtown Chisholm. The congregation was small, twenty or thirty people revolving primarily around two extended families. Decisions were fairly easy. The business meetings of the congregation were irrelevant. When something important came up, the men would gather in a huddle on the porch where they could smoke, sort out the economics, and divvy up the cost. They decided to buy an air conditioning system in ten minutes one Sunday after church. The thermometer got to 107 that day. They greeted me the Sunday after Michelle was born with a five dollar a week raise in salary.

About ten months into my first year, Ewell Smith gently informed me that I would not be seeing much of the men for the next six weeks. Harvest was approaching. When the cotton was ready and the weather was right, Sundays were just another long work day. I understood. I had grown up in an industrial community. The mills and refineries in Houston ran 24/7. We did not hear much about the fourth commandment in a community where personal values and religious views were servant to the company schedule, where jobs and work organized the rhythm of life. We took the Christian high road, we thought. Did not Jesus heal on the Sabbath and declare that the Sabbath was made for people not people for the Sabbath? Besides, the Christian day of worship was Sunday, the Day of the Lord in celebration of the resurrection of Christ. Only orthodox Jews and Seventh Day Adventists were radical about the Sabbath, and they were fixed on Saturday. Furthermore, I could hardly refuse to work on Sundays because it was my Sabbath or to criticize others for a problem that I could not resolve for myself. As I would learn in the years to come, my profession was not exempt. Writing about the need of physical rest and spiritual renewal, retired pastor Eugene Peterson wrote that he and his wife learned to take Mondays off both to accommodate the needs of the congregation and their own need for Sabbath rest and renewal.

The Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalist economics have set a new rhythm to life in the modern world and have overshadowed the ancient order set by the Jewish Sabbath. We are not likely to turn back the clock to an agrarian society out of which the Sabbath law was formed; but especially in this world of economic crisis, global competition for jobs, and increasing demand for precious natural resources, we need to understand and apply Sabbath economics to our way of life. Our discussion of economics usually revolves around money issues—the management, uses, and distribution of wealth. The word was borrowed from the Greek *oikonomia*, house management. As every person in a place of leadership knows, management of a business, household, or a nation is about more than money. In fact, the place of money and the things that money can buy are secondary to the management of time.

The Sabbath establishes the priority of sacred time over the secular things. In his book *The Sabbath: The Meaning for Modern Man*, Rabbi Abraham Heschel characterized Judaism as a religion of time rather than space and suggested that the Bible is more concerned with time than with space. He noted that ancient Hebrew has no equivalent to our word *thing*. *Davar*, the word by which God created the world, came to serve the purpose of *thing*. In the creation, God made the world in six days and blessed the seventh day and declared it holy (Genesis 2:3): “When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time” (9). So the Rabbi concluded that the meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space: “Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*” (10). The Sabbath sets the priority of time over the importance of things that tend to run our lives.

The Sabbath principle suggests that if we can get the time right, all of the things will fall into the right place. Sabbath economics is about money only to the extent that the old saw “time is money” applies to the way we use the days of our lives and especially the way we view the importance of the Transcendent in our system of values. Work is important. In fact, the command to Sabbath is a command for six days of labor, but it puts work in its place. Life is more than work and the things that work produces.

If anything in this rule of life applies to our age, it is the need to find release from the tyranny of work. I have been interested in the recent discussions surrounding the “Tiger Mother” of Chinese descent who maintains pressure on her children to stay at the top of the heap. She has become a symbol of parenting in this age of high competition between children for grades that translate into battles between nations and competing economies for dominance. Even for our children, work has become our master. The concern of Sabbath economics is that it becomes our god.

Old Testament scholar Patrick Miller discovered that the Sabbath commandment is at the center. The Sabbath law dominates the text of Deuteronomy, rivaled only by the first commandment focus on the priority of God. It is also found in the middle of the Ten Commandments. It is not only placed at the center, it relates both to vertical commands concerning God and the horizontal commands relating to neighbors. On the front end, the Sabbath command safeguards the first two commandments against competing gods and idolatry, denouncing the worship of things. On the human end, the priority of Sabbath is the principle which changes one’s attitude toward things and prevents that insatiable appetite for your neighbor’s property. Every Sabbath is a reminder that labor and the things that labor can buy are transient. In seven years the land is allowed to rest and to provide food for the poor and the animals and the debts of the poor are cancelled. In fifty years, after seven times seven years, Jubilee calls for the release of prisoners and the release of property. Can you imagine a fruit basket turn-over of property ownership every fifty years?

The Sabbath is God’s gift to all of creation. The Sabbath is a day off for kings princes and managers; but it also a time of rest for sons, daughters, servants, servants’ children, aliens in our house, and even the animals. The Sabbath levels the playing field. Whoever heard of such a thing? Former slaves, perhaps! As you are enjoying the abundance and luxury of life in the fast lane, don’t forget where you came from. You were once slaves in Egypt. You lived in a place where Pharaoh and his house were obsessed with building their palaces, temples, and cities by exploiting the labor of the Jews. As Brueggemann so aptly describes the situation: “By the end of Genesis 47 Pharaoh has all the land except that belonging to the priests. . . .The notion of scarcity has been introduced into biblical faith. The book of Exodus records the contest between the liturgy of generosity and the myth of scarcity—a contest that still tears us apart today” (*Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, 343). You know the principle: “them that has, gets.” The more things you possess, the better your posture for getting more. The insatiable appetite for more is far more characteristic of the wealthy than of the poor. But there is a great leveler in place. As someone has so aptly noted, “a funeral hearse does not pull a Uhaul.” The Jewish law simply suggested another leveler. On the Sabbath, remember your days as slaves in Egypt and act accordingly.

Patrick Miller finds here a connection to the Great Commandment recited by Jesus. After you have loved God with your whole being, treat others as you want to be treated. Observing the Sabbath had to do with taking a day off work and eventually investing a day in worship and spiritual renewal; but, more than the personal benefit, the Sabbath was a day around which the wheels of economic justice were to turn.

That is why the Isaiah who wrote after the Exile linked loosing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into your house, and clothing the naked with making the Sabbath holy. It was all about Sabbath economics.

Jesus told a story about a man who happened to hit the jackpot. Every time he gathered his harvest it got bigger. So he considered his options. Without any consideration of sharing the wealth with the poor at his gate, he decided that what he really needed was more and bigger barns. He would hoard and store and save and keep until he reached the full mark again and had to spend some on more barns and bigger barns again. Finally he reaches a point where he starts talking to himself. He says, “self” (another word for soul), “I think I will now eat, drink, and be merry.” But the word of God has another name for him—fool! “Fool, today your soul (same word) will be required of you.” Now to whom shall these things belong?