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“EMPLOYED OR LAID ASIDE”

- Week 4 -

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 20:8 NLT

**8“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.**

MESSAGE

*Again, the original context for this series was the season of Lent and, specifically, the spring of 2020. Adjust the context to fit your time and place.*

Welcome to week 4 of our 6 week series for Lent, the season leading up to Easter, and our series, “Covenant,” where we’re talking about surrendering our lives, our entire lives to God, and the problem that presents… namely that, we *really* don’t like to give up control. We think we know what’s best for us, so we scratch and claw to maintain some semblance of control over our own lives. But anyone who has had that security taken away from them knows, control is often just an illusion.

Each week, our series has seemed more and more appropriate. Let me recap for you.

Week one, we started by talking about our need for control, and the foundation of how to give control back to God. It begins with realizing our lives aren’t ours to begin with… everything we have is a gift from God, including the life we have, and when we realize that, we can offer them back to God, the one who should be in control in the first place, and we can have a sense of peace on the journey.

Week 2, we started getting more specific, talking about surrendering to God the stress and anxiety we find in our professional lives, our jobs and finances, an area that often feels out of our control, because it often IS out of our control. But Jesus reminds us that our Heavenly Father, who knows better for us than we do, has promised to provide for us, no matter what station in life we find ourselves, and so we can give our worry over to God.

Then last week, we talked about suffering, the times in life where everything seems to fall apart, and how God promises to support, strengthen, and restore our lives when that happens. There’s nothing required on our part except to trust God to do that.

This week, we’re going to move on to the next line of the prayer that we’re using to help us understand this notion of surrendering our lives to God.

Now, if you’re just joining us, we’re using a prayer called the Covenant Prayer, written by a man named John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in the 1700s, and it beautifully and challengingly outlines what it means to give God control of our lives. We’ve been breaking it down line by line each week. Quick catch up:

Week 1, we looked at the first line…

**I am no longer my own but thine.**

Saying, we’re giving our lives to God completely… trusting God with the outcome.

Week 2, the second line of the prayer read…

**Put me to what thou wilt,**

**rank me with whom thou wilt.**

Saying, whatever station in life, whatever job we have, we’re going to trust God.

Then last week, we looked at the third line…

**Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**

Saying, “God, I recognize that tough times are just part of life,

and when those come… I’m relinquishing control to you.”

This week, we pray the next line of the prayer.

**Let me be employed for thee,**

**or laid aside for thee.**

As I mentioned last week, we’re in the tough part of this prayer. But that’s why I like this prayer so much… it’s not easy to pray. Life isn’t always easy. It has its ups and down, and so this prayer has its ups and downs. It recognizes both and asks us to give both the good AND the bad over to God, which I think is absolutely necessary.

And so when we pray, “let me be employed for God or laid aside,” we kinda go, uh… aren’t we always supposed to be working for good, fulfilling whatever purpose God has for us? Why would pray to be laid aside? I don’t want to be laid aside.

Well, here’s how I want us to understand this line of the prayer. We are always to be about the work that God has in mind for us, fulfilling the unique, individual purpose God has for your life. But we are also to be mindful of times of rest.

To be “laid aside” doesn’t mean we no longer have a purpose. It just means that we occasionally need to take a step back, focus on what really matters, recharge our batteries, and take care of ourselves. Maybe God is trying to tell you to take a break and make more time for him.

*<Take a moment here to connect to the current situation of your faith community. We were in the middle of restrictions surrounding the CoViD breakout.>*

*Now, I know what many of you are thinking, “Uh, Mike, we’re on a stay at home order. I haven’t seen another human in 8 days. I’ve cleaned every inch of my house. We’re down to one square of toilet paper, and I’ve watched all 19 seasons of Say Yes to the Dress… New York AND Atlanta.” (I know the difference between a mermaid and a princess cut wedding dress, don’t judge me.) And others of you are saying, “Mike, I’m bored out of my mind! Taking a break is not my current problem.” And some of you are going, “Mike, I don’t know how homeschoolers do it. My kids are driving me nuts. I’d send them to the principal’s office, but then I realized, I’M THE PRINCIPAL! And so instead I just expelled them.” And you’re saying, “Taking a break, being ‘laid aside,’ is just not possible.”*

Well, stick with me, because there’s something we can learn from both sides in the midst of this, and there’s a pretty important scripture in the Bible that I think can help.

It’s from a book called Exodus where we find important stuff like the 10 Commandments. And the scripture I want to read for you today, is the 4th of the 10 Commandments:

Exodus 20, Verses 8-11:

**8“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9You have six days each week for your ordinary work, 10but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. 11For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.**

So what is Sabbath?

“Sabbath” is a Hebrew word that means, “to rest from work.” But this scripture explains that it’s much more than that, that it should be “a day of rest dedicated to the Lord.” When we take a deeper look at this passage, a couple really cool things pop out that instruct us about the Sabbath.

First, did you know this commandment is the longest of the 10 Commandments? It needs more fleshing out than the others because it’s not self-explanatory. “Thou shalt not steal.” Um… okay, got it. “Don’t lie.” Simple, right? But God knew we’d screw up this idea of the Sabbath, so it had to be explained. So, what does the explanation tell us?

Well, first, we are to do no work… neither are our sons or daughters. (Kids, I dare you to use this on your parents this afternoon.) Nor anyone who works for us… (convicting for you employers, right?) Nor our livestock… (sorry, the dog cannot do the dishes today.) Nor any guests in our home. None in your household is to do any work. The Hebrews took this seriously. There’s a scripture later in Exodus 35:2 that reads, “Anyone who works on the Sabbath will be put to death.” It was THAT important!

*<If you’ve ever been to Israel, you probably have a story similar to the one I tell. If you don’t, you can tweak this into a general statement about how important this commandment still is in Orthodox Judaism, or eliminate it completely.>*

*Some Orthodox Jews in Israel today still take it incredibly seriously, (a fact I discovered when I visited a few years ago.) When they don’t work on the Sabbath, they REALLY don’t work. They consider doing ANYTHING that operates a machine, even pressing a button, to be work. So, on the Sabbath, elevators are programmed to stop at every floor, so they don’t have to push a button. (That was a fun thing to learn on the fly.) They can’t drive a car, nor can they ask for a ride, so they’ll drop “hints” to get you to take them somewhere. (“Man, really wish I could go to the store.”) They have special warming drawers in ovens with a timer, so they can prepare a meal the day before, and it cooks itself on Sabbath. It’s a BIG deal! It was eye-opening for me, and began something in me as to how important the Sabbath was.*

See, it’s one of the Big 10, which puts it on par with not stealing, not cheating, not murdering. God believes it is THAT important. This realization transformed the way I look at Sabbath rest. Just as breaking one of the other 10 Commandments would be a sin, so is this one. When we don’t rest, when we don’t stop to be “laid aside” for a moment, we’re sinning against God. It’s a sin not to rest! That blew my mind. Puts it in perspective doesn’t it?

Another fun fact about this commandment, when we look at it a little deeper, it’s also only 1 of 2 that doesn’t start with “thou shalt not.” Look at how it *does* start, though: “remember…” *Remember* to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. Almost as if God *knew* we would forget it, God begins this commandment with the word “remember.”

You see, there was a day when Sabbath was observed, and it wasn’t that long ago. People didn’t work. Businesses closed. Entire towns shut down… just for this reason. Somehow, somewhere, some way… in just the last few decades, we gradually worked our way out of this practice. Businesses started staying open. Open businesses needed workers. Workers took on more hours. And before we knew it, we became a 24/7 society. And when we go 24/7, there is no rest… that’s what the 7 means. There is no Sabbath day, and we break the 4th Commandment. We have to force ourselves to *remember* the Sabbath. Otherwise we will gradually, subtly, almost unnoticeably, work our way out of the practice of remembering the Sabbath. And we return to living a 24/7 life.

This was a command God not only gave but observed, too. Verse 11 in the explanation of the commandment confirms this:

**11For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.**

But here’s the thing, God doesn’t *need* to rest after creating the universe because of exhaustion. God doesn’t get tired. God rests because God is holy, and everything that God does is holy. God rests. God is holy. Therefore, rest is holy. It’s simple math.

When we go back to the story of creation at the very beginning of the Bible, this is the first place the word “holy” is used. God creates the earth, and it’s good. God creates plants and animals, and they’re good. God creates humans, and they’re *very* good. But on the seventh day, God creates “rest” and calls it *holy*. The world and everything in it is *good*… but rest is *holy*. Man, that’s cool. So, if God can park his butt on Saturn, kick his feet up on Mars, lean back on Jupiter, and watch this little blue marble spin, you can be “laid aside” for a day off, too.

Before you start calling in sick to work and planning your Caribbean vacation, there is a stipulation to this commandment. It doesn’t just say to take down time. It says that Sabbath is a day “dedicated to the Lord.” So, let it reframe how you’re spending your down time. It’s very easy to put on Netflix and get lost in reruns of the Golden Girls. Yes, enjoy your time, but also begin the practice of *holy rest*. Use this time to dig a little deeper into your relationship with God. Read a chapter of the Bible a day. Spend 15 minutes (or more) in prayer. Start a journal. Go for a walk and put on a worship Spotify playlist, and use it as a time of worship. Let this scripture, and the line of the prayer that we’re looking at this week, reframe how you’re using your time off.

So, as we pray the Covenant Prayer to close the message today, when we get to this line of the prayer, I want you to think about it this way, saying, “God, help me see what’s most important, and to find holy rest in you.”

Let’s pray.

**I am no longer my own but thine.**

**Put me to what thou wilt,**

**rank me with whom thou wilt.**

**Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**

**Let me be employed for thee,**

**or laid aside for thee.**

**Let me be exalted for thee,**

**or brought low for thee.**

**Let me have all things,**

**let me have nothing.**

**Let me be full,**

**let me be empty.**

**I freely and humbly yield all things**

**to thy pleasure and thy disposal.**

**And now, sweet Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,**

**I am thine and thou art mine.**

**And may this covenant made on Earth,**

**be ratified in heaven.**

**So be it.**