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Parsing the Law—How to Keep the Sabbath

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Within this episode I offer some follow-up thoughts to my discussion of the ritual and the moral Law in my previous episode: <https://adversariapodcast.com/2019/05/20/ritual-and-moral-law/>. In particular, I discuss how we might keep the Sabbath command today.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I thought I'd do a brief episode following on from yesterday's discussion of the ritual and the moral law. As we look through the Old Testament, on a number of occasions we'll encounter laws that do not fit neatly into any one of the three categories into which people will often divide the law.

So there are laws that seem to go beyond mere moral laws, or ceremonial and ritual laws, or civil and judicial laws, but seem to involve elements of two or more of those categories. And as we try and understand how to understand these laws and to relate them to our life as individuals, as a society, and in other sorts of ways as the people of God, there is a difficulty that we might face. If they are not so easily categorised, how

are we supposed to treat these things? And this, I think, expresses one of the problems with the neat division of the law into these hermetically sealed boxes.

The law just doesn't work that tidily. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of a law that does not neatly fit these distinct categories is the law of the Sabbath. The law of the Sabbath is given as part of the Ten Commandments, the Ten Words in Exodus chapter 20 and Deuteronomy chapter 5. Now a different rationale is given on both occasions.

The first occasion is associated with God's creation of the world in six days and then his resting on the seventh. On the second occasion, in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 5, it's associated with God bringing Israel out of the land of Egypt and giving them rest. Now as we look through that, we might think it's part of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are associated with these unchanging and universal moral principles that apply to all peoples, everywhere, at all times. But yet it seems to be distinct in other ways from the commandments that surround it. Although the other commandments seem to be more general in their application, the Sabbath is very particular to Israel in some respects.

When we get to the book of Exodus chapter 31, we read from verse 12, we'll see something of this. Now this is given to us by God's creation of the world in six days. Now this is given to us by God's creation of the world in six days.

And it seems to have a great significance as part of the overall covenant declaration. It's one of the ways in which God forges the bond between himself and his people, marks the strength and the significance of that relationship. Now as you read through that passage, there may be nothing that it reminds you so much of as circumcision.

Circumcision is expressed in much the same language, a sign throughout generations. Those who do not observe will be cut off from the people. And all these other aspects of the gift of circumcision would seem to connect with the gift of the Sabbath.

It's a sign of the covenant. It's not just a general moral law that applies to all people everywhere, irrespective of the covenant. It rather is related to Israel's life in particular.

But yet when we look at the principle of the Sabbath, we find that it is something that seems to have more general principles that relate to all human beings. The principle of rest from labour. That we're not just supposed to work non-stop.

We need to have rest. And resting on one day in seven seems to me a more general principle. A principle of giving rest to the people who work for you, of giving rest to your animals, of giving rest to the land.

And of giving rest to the society where otherwise it would be caught up into irresolvable tensions and antagonisms and forms of oppression. But as you give that one day in

seven, it has rest. The Sabbath principle expands further in the rest of the Old Testament.

As you look through the Pentateuch, you'll see that the Sabbath in chapter 23 of the book of Leviticus extends into things like the various feasts of Israel. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Booths. All these things are related to the Sabbath.

It's kind of growing out from that larger principle of a rest. A feast day is... all the feast days of Israel are built upon that fundamental principle. But then we also see it expand in other ways into the principle of the seventh seven as it were, the Feast of Weeks.

We see it connected with the seven-year principle where the Hebrew slave would go free on the seventh year. We can see it connected with the principle of the Jubilee. Every fiftieth year that slaves would go free, land would be returned to its original owners, etc.

And so these principles are things that are not limited to one day in seven. It involves giving rest to the land on the seventh year, lacking the land life fallow. And it includes giving slaves release after seven years and then returning the land to people and people to the land on the fiftieth year.

So all of this is part of the Sabbath principle. But as you look through those commandments, what you'll notice is that it does not relate narrowly to what we might think of as the moral law or to the ceremonial or ritual law. The ceremonial or ritual law certainly seems to comprehend those principles of the festal calendar of Israel.

You think that if anything is to do with the ceremonial or ritual, it's the Feasts of Israel. And so Sabbath might seem to belong there. But yet the Sabbath extends further than that.

It also includes many aspects of Israel's civil life. It's about how you buy and sell. It's about how you can own property and what period of time you can lease it for.

It's about how you treat your slaves when they need to go free, how you treat your land. All these things are bound up in the Sabbath principle. And it seems to be very deeply, it leaves a deep impact upon the civil life of Israel.

And so to prise apart the ceremonial and the ritual and the civil and the judicial seems to be impossible. They are very closely intertwined and entangled. Step back a bit further and you'll see that these principles are seen not just as, oh, this is an arbitrary commandment that God gave us as a sign of his love for us.

There's something about this that draws upon principles of deeper equity and justice. And so if you are working your servants seven days in seven and never giving them any rest, that is breaking something that is a natural principle. Not just an arbitrary principle

or a pure positive command that God gave to Israel.

An arbitrary command that could have been something entirely different. No, there's something about the Sabbath that draws upon principles of general universal equity. It's the principle of giving rest to those who work for you, of recognising the limits of your rights of possession.

So how do we deal with a commandment like this? As Christians we recognise that the Sabbath principle is something that has died and risen again in Christ. The Sabbath principle doesn't just go away. We're not just abandoning all the principles of the feasts, for instance.

The feasts are fulfilled. Christ fulfils the meaning of the Passover. And the church continues that meaning as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, which was instituted in the context, broader context, of the Passover celebration.

And we might think about the way that Christ is our Passover lamb, sacrificed for us, the way that we eat in remembrance of our deliverance. But also in remembrance of the greater pattern of deliverance that we see throughout the whole of the scripture. This culminated in and summed up in the work of Christ.

As we look through the Old Testament we'll see that the Passover is always straining towards something greater and more, a greater exodus that's still to come. And Christ brings that. And so we're not just doing away with these old feasts.

Likewise with the Sabbath, we celebrate one day in seven. We take rest on the first day of the week, not the seventh day. We begin with rest rather than ending with rest.

And when we talk about the Lord dying and rising again, it's a great example of this. Think about the Sabbath commandment. The Sabbath commandment was associated with the original creation.

God resting on the seventh day is also associated with the original great event of redemption. God bringing his people out of Egypt. Now in the New Covenant we celebrate on the first day of the week because the old creation has been brought to an end.

Christ rested on the seventh day in the tomb and on the first day of the week, a new week, he rose again. And so we still celebrate one day in seven, but it's a different day of the week. Not because we're abandoning the principle of Sabbath altogether, but because the times have changed, the covenant situation has changed.

And so we celebrate in a new way. We celebrate with new feasts. We associate the Passover and things like first fruits with Christ's resurrection, death and resurrection, not with the deliverance of Egypt, from Egypt primarily.

Now it has a different significance. It's associated with the great first day, the great first day of the new week. The first day of Christ's resurrection.

The first day that begins the new creation. Now the Sabbath principle then has not gone away. Likewise, the seventh seven, when we think about the feast of Pentecost, is associated with the giving of the spirit.

If the first Pentecost was associated with the giving of the law, the second Pentecost, the great Pentecost that we celebrate in Acts, that we see in Acts 2 and that we celebrate, is associated with the gift of the spirit that writes the law upon the heart and prepares people to obey the law from the heart. It's a fulfillment of the covenant meaning. And so we have not a rejection of that principle, but a death and a rising again in a new, more glorious form.

Now what about the other aspects of it? There are aspects of the commandment that of the Sabbath that are not just related to the life of Israel as a sort of covenant sign. As a covenant sign, we might think about the principle of the Sabbath continuing as we celebrate this day as a sign of the resurrection. And that's the great sign of the covenant.

But there are other ways that we can think about it. We can think about it as, and in the same way as circumcision. Circumcision is fulfilled in the death of Christ.

So the rest of God is fulfilled in Christ's rest in the tomb that brings to the end the old creation and the new creation being born in his rising from the dead. When we think about the moral principles though, they still have general application. As we look at that law, we're not just putting it into a nice, neat category of the ceremonial or the ritual law to do with the life, religious life and worship of Israel.

We're recognizing that there are principles of general equity built into it. Principles about how you treat your servants. What it means to have a nation that is good, where people are not decapitalized, where people are not rendered poor beyond recovery.

And where you don't have just the concentration of resources in a few people. And so the principle of the Sabbath is something that could relate to our society in those ways too. Those principles are also things that should inform our development of policy and our government systems.

And as we think about it from that aspect, it's moral law that then can be developed into human positive law that learns from the way in which that basic principle of the Sabbath that we encounter in Exodus 20 is expanded into divine positive law in the form of the various seven year principles. Seven year and the 50th year. So putting all of this together, I think we need to be very careful about trying to fit laws very neatly into one category or another.

Laws generally will fit into a number of different categories in different ways. As you look at just about any law, you'll notice if it is a positive law, it is a positive law that's based upon natural principles of equity, upon principles of justice. So I gave the example of parents telling their child not to jump up and down on the table.

Now, that's a positive law, a human positive law given by parents. There's no reason why a household has to have that law. There might be some tables where it's perfectly OK for kids to jump up and down upon.

And some parents may follow that and allow their kids to jump up and down on the table. I don't know why they would, but perhaps they do. If we're thinking about this in terms of its roots, though, that particular human positive law needs to be traced back to its underlying principle.

And the underlying principle is taking care for human life, taking care for order of communities, of these sorts of things that we find within the moral law more generally. And that can inform the way that we approach positive law. Because positive law is never just arbitrary.

And once a particular authority or polity has been removed, the positive law can just be abandoned completely and neglected and there's nothing to learn from it. Rather, there is much that we can learn from good positive law as an example for us of how to apply these deeper principles to specific cases. And in the same way, when we see something like the Sabbath and how that is applied to the life of Israel, we need to learn from some of the things that God took concern for.

God took concern that people were not reduced to slavery, that people were not decapitalised, that people were not put in a position where they were hopelessly indebted. And so he put these guardrails in place, in effect. And all of these things were associated with a deeper principle of work and rest, a deeper principle that is associated with God giving people rest and enabling people to enter into his rest.

Now, part of what the Sabbath means is that human beings belong to God. The land belongs to God. All these things ultimately belong to God.

And if we seek to have full possession of these things, we are encroaching upon what belongs to God alone. God ensures in the Sabbath principle that there are limits to our possession. And so we always have to return things.

There's a recognition that we cannot get every single ounce of work out of the week. We cannot get every single ounce of work out of our employees or our servants. We cannot get every single ounce of fertility out of the land.

Rather, we need to recognise that these things belong to God alone and that we have the use of them. And in the way that we treat them, we need to acknowledge that. And

that's something that can be done in a number of different ways, even beyond that Sabbath, that specific one day in seven or one year in seven or one year in 50.

There are ways in which that principle can be enshrined in our homes, in our societies and in our governments. We can think about the limits that we place upon the right to possess, to control. And the way in which we need to recognise ultimately that things belong to God.

That can be a very important principle that is derived from the fundamental principles of morality, the fundamental moral law that is revealed in the Sabbath principle, the Sabbath command. And so we can pass that out in different ways. In some respects, it reveals a more general moral principle that relates to the way that we treat people who work for us, the way that we treat our land, the way that we treat, organise our social relations.

There are more general moral principles there. And those moral principles can then inform the way that we approach our civil law, the way that we develop positive laws to guard and protect and encourage and foster those virtues and those principles. But there are also ways in which the Sabbath principle is not just about principles of economic justice or principles of giving people rest or taking rest for yourself.

It's also about God's relationship with his people and a sign of what he has done for them in the past, what he will do for them in the future. It's a sign of the day of the Lord. It's a sign of eschatological rest that we can enter into.

It's a sign of all these different things that are covenantal realities. And as a result, when we're celebrating the Sabbath, we're not just celebrating some general principles of moral equity and justice. We're celebrating something that declares God's relationship with us as his people.

A relationship that we see most particularly in Christ's death and resurrection. And in Christ's resurrection, this first day of the new week, the day of the Lord, his advent as he rises from the grave in glory. We can see that as a sign of that greater day that's to come.

We can see it as a sign of the beginning of a new creation, a new creation that will be brought in in a fuller and more complete sense in the future. But that has a definitively arrived in Christ. And so the Sabbath principle is not something that can be neatly partitioned into one category or another.

Rather, we need to learn to pass it and other principles, other laws like it into the various aspects. Those things that belong to the more general moral law. Those things that should inform the way that we create our polities and societies, the ways that we organize our homes and the way that we organize our churches.

There are aspects of it that relate to those that relate to the covenant. Those things that apply to us as a people and as the people of God that help us to understand who we are and how God has forged a relationship with us. And so there's a sign to us of God's love for us.

But then there are also aspects of it that belong to the civil life of Israel and have passed with that polity. So we do not celebrate one year in 50 as the Jubilee year, nor should we necessarily be expected to. There is a principle of general equity that we can see within that.

But there are ways in which we can enshrine that in our law in different sorts of ways. We can be creative in the ways that we apply the principles of the moral law within our human positive law, whether that's within your household or within your society. I hope this helps.

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