



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

July 4, 2021

# **My Favorite Bible Command**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 4, 2021

When it comes to communicating weighty ideas and instilling discipline among adults, we can learn much from those who educate children.

At an early age, kids try to claim authority for themselves. When they hear “no” every time they reach for the gas burner or try to race in the street, they in turn say “no” to adults’ request. Kids bristle at “no” and to ever-increasing rules.

A wise Children’s Ministry program realized that rather than teach the “Ten Commandments,” and ten more rules for faith, they invited the kids to wonder about the “Ten Best Ways” of being with God and one another.

The simple word change sparks their imagination to become what pleases God, create a relationship with God, and allows their God-given gifts to blossom.

If we are honest, we too do not like to be limited, and the minor word change from “commandments” to the “best ways” appeals to our sense of agency.

Rather than picture Charlton Heston throwing stone tablets at the Israelites and you, consider the late Jimmy Stewart or Christopher Plummer sitting next to you, to share what he learned from God.

Humor me as today we explore one of the Ten Best Ways.

These Ways appear in scripture twice, once in the story of Exodus as the Israelites form a community after fleeing Pharaoh's Egypt and slavery. With slight alteration, Moses repeats the list as part of his farewell speech, decades later, as they stand on the border to the Promised Land.

My favorite of the Ten Best Ways is, without question, foundational to life with God. Since it is the longest of any of the Ways, I wonder if it is also precious to God. I'll also confide, it is the most difficult for me to follow. Before I read, please pray with me.

*Creator of time and space, all that is and all that is to come.  
Quiet in us any voice but yours that we might hear afresh  
your call to be with you, obediently belong only to you, and  
bless others with your divine gift. Amen.*

### **Deuteronomy 5:12-15**

<sup>12</sup>Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

<sup>14</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God;

    you shall not do any work—  
    you, or your son or your daughter,  
    or your male or female slave,  
    or your ox or your donkey, or any of your  
livestock,

or the resident alien in your towns,  
so that your male and female slave may rest  
as well as you.

<sup>15</sup>Remember that you were a slave in the land of  
Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from  
there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm;  
therefore the LORD your God commanded you to  
keep the sabbath day.

*This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

“There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to  
be,  
not to own but to give,  
not to control but to share,  
not to subdue but to be in accord.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the Sabbath’s meaning  
and purpose to highlight its holiness and mystery. Let me  
repeat this rabbi’s writing:

“There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to  
be,  
not to own but to give,  
not to control but to share,  
not to subdue but to be in accord.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (Canada: HarperCollins Canada.Ltd, 1979) 3.

Heschel's book, *The Sabbath*, first published in 1951 remains a classic in theological studies, places this day in the center of an "architecture of holiness."

When we keep the Sabbath, by resting with God, we are to remember that God breathed the world into being, creating the dimensions of heaven and earth, and separated time into the order and rhythm of days.

Into this architecture of life, God speaks humankind into being, each of us to live for an unknown length of days.

God gave us days to work and all the talents and creative imagination to employ them. For six days, we can work to our hearts content. Then rest on the seventh day as God also did after six days of creating.

One day each week, God calls us to release ourselves, first and foremost, from the demands of production and all the human-centric measures of value. Then, release others from the demands placed upon them. These are heady and soulful ways of grasping the gift of sabbath.

Now, my confession.

Sabbath keeping seems charming but had felt like a waste of time to me. Notice the word I used, I noticed...waste of time.

For decades I'd measured my days in fifteen-minute increments and the notion to purposefully abstain from doing

something of value went against everything I'd learned, witnessed in my family, and those measures of worth celebrated in society.

Think about all the clichés that assign economic value to time - waste time, take time, invest your time, and time is money.

Sabbath purposefully disrupts this cadence to remind us time is not money. Time is a gift. All of these days – pure gift.

Years ago, while listening to a podcast from preacher and writer Rob Bell, I almost drove off Lake Shore Drive in Chicago when he more bluntly put it: “God does not care how productive you are.”

The notion of learning *to be* and not always *to do* runs counter to the way we approach life. That is the point. To keep the Sabbath is an act. Sabbath keeping calls us to stop *doing* on one day in seven and *be* with God.

To keep the Sabbath allows our bodies, minds, and spirits to rest and enjoy.

We need the prescriptive force of this command to be the best human beings and to receive God's gift of grace – something we can never in all our days earn or create.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation Series, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 118-123. Miller and Heschel's writings inspired much of my thinking about time and God's call to live in the best ways possible.

This Best Way, again the longest measured in word count and details, is undoubtedly neglected more than the other Ways.

How often have you said to someone, “nope, I cannot work or do whatever you requested on Sunday out of reverence for God,” even if you don’t state the reason. Have you declined an offer for something you particularly might enjoy or want to do because of the Sabbath?

Many of us are guilty, which is why Elie Kligman’s decisions caught national attention. Let’s talk about baseball.

Some Jewish players have refrained from competing on certain religious holidays through the decades, mainly on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana.

Recall Sandy Koufax, the Hall of Fame left-hander, chose not to pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. (His replacement, Don Drysdale, got hammered, and when the manager removed him in the third inning, Drysdale said, “I bet right now you wish I was Jewish, too.”)

Observant Jews do not work from sundown on Friday until the sun sets on Saturday. In this time to be with God, Jewish tradition prescribes what may not be done.

For example, on the Sabbath, they may not make, cut, or tear clothing, like the uniform pants which can be ripped



when a player slides into second base. They may not break the soil, targeting farming and tilling the soil, but whenever a spike rips into the infield dirt, soil is broken.

Baseball is a game, it is work, it demands focused attention, and would get in the way of being with God.

Based on talent and desire, at age eighteen, Kligman is good enough to realistically achieve his dream of playing in the major leagues, or at least top-level college ball, and is ranking fourteen in Nevada.

He insists a potential \$10 million signing bonus, and the promise that he would be playing in front of 40,000 people, will not sway him from his devotion to his faith and the sabbath.

Ever since he was a little boy, he and his family have managed to find a way to negotiate playing baseball and remaining faithful. Yet, one time, when he was eight, he chose to sit out a game rather than play on the Sabbath.

His dad, Marc said, "I was blown away. Here's a kid who won't put God second. He believes that the two can coexist. He's got six days of the week to do everything he can to be a baseball player, and if colleges and Major League Baseball aren't inclined to make any changes, then we'll take what we can get."

This eighteen-year-old explains that what he is doing is for God, so there is no feeling of sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

He fundamentally believes that he became a good baseball player because he belongs first and foremost to God.

These Ten Best Ways call us to live a life in accord with God as individuals and as a community.

Even thousands of years ago, women and enslaved humans received the same dignity as everyone else. God reminds the Israelites and us that once we were slaves, and now we are not to abuse other humans created in God's image.

They defined for ancient Israel the practice of social order to limit those in power and guarantee the rights of individuals. In effect, they provided the same structure as our constitution does for American democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Along with the prophets, keeping the sabbath is the primary biblical impetus for social justice in the human community.<sup>5</sup>

The desires for liberty and freedom for all people ring true with what we celebrate today – the bloody and hard-fought independence. To be free from taxation by foreign

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<sup>3</sup> David Waldstein, "Looking for a shot at the majors, but still sitting out on the Sabbath, *The New York Times*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/sports/baseball/elie-kligman-jewish-sabbath.html>

<sup>4</sup> Steven Tuell, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 1, ed David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 413.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Commandments*, 129

governments. To be a land welcoming of immigrants and those seeking freedom. To practice our religion as we feel called by God.

Our country feels so divided these days with factions increasingly intolerant of one another.

Our divided country may heal such rifts if first we learn to remember who we are and whose we are first and foremost – beloved human beings created by God.

Try this first, be with God for a day, then observe a Sabbath each week for a month.

Step back from all the ways we keep score to just be and to let others be.

Learn to belong to God.

Then bless those around you with this gift.



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