

“It tastes awful. And it works.” Can anybody guess what that slogan is advertising? (Buckley’s Mixture cough syrup) Has anybody tried Buckley’s? Was it awful? And did it work? (Wait for response) Buckley’s thought up a pretty clever way to sell their cough syrup – a product that’s not glamorous, or even very interesting. They admitted how bad it tastes. But they also highlighted the most important thing that buyers would want to know – does it work? In other words, is it good for you? Sometimes we use Buckley’s strategy in our everyday lives, too. If children don’t want to eat their vegetables, we tell them they should anyway. Why? Because they’re good for you. When we’re feeling like being a couch potato and tucking into a bowl of chips or ice cream, we try (on a good day) to convince ourselves to go outside and get some fresh air instead. Why? Because it’s good for you. I’ve often heard the good-for-you argument used for spiritual disciplines, too. Fasting, confession, some kinds of serving, and even Scripture reading, prayer, and worship can sometimes seem like more of a chore than a joy. They might not sound like much fun, but we’re told they work. I’ve felt like this plenty of times and used the good-for-you argument on myself. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes not. Until about 20 years ago, when I tried one particular spiritual discipline for the first time: Sabbath. And then my idea of spiritual discipline changed, from drudgery to delight.

Sabbath is the background for today’s reading in Leviticus, but it’s not explained there. Because it’s assumed that if we’re reading Leviticus, we’ll be familiar with the 10 Commandments, where we find out exactly what Sabbath is. So let’s dig into it a bit. Can anybody tell me where we find the 10 Commandments? (Exodus 20 & Deut 5) Now that we have pew Bibles, let’s crack them open and check out Exodus 20. The part about Sabbath starts at verse 8. Take a look at the commandment on Sabbath. What do you notice about its length?

(wait for response) It's long. In fact, most of the commandments are really short – one line. For example, verse 13 - "You shall not murder." That's it! Short and to the point. But Sabbath gets a lot of press here. In fact, the only other commandment that long is the first one – about not worshipping idols. God wants us to notice the Sabbath. Isn't it funny, though, how we tend to skip over the Sabbath? Something to think about.

In both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, we're told to remember the Sabbath, observe it, and keep it holy. In case we aren't really sure what that means, the commandment spells it out. On the Sabbath, we're not to do any work. No excuses. God commands us to take the day off. In today's workaholic world, where our phones are with us 24/7, and always buzzing with new messages, a command to stop working is very good news. The best kind of news! This is the kind of God I want to sign up with – one who not just allows, but commands me, to take a day off, every week. This makes no sense in our productivity-driven society. It makes no sense in our often compulsive church schedules, either, where we think that more activity and busyness means we're more committed and better Christians.

In case this kind of God sounds just a little too good to be true, let's use our detective skills and find out why God tells us to stop working once a week. Two reasons are given. Let's go to Deuteronomy 5 first. In verse 15, we read that we need to observe Sabbath because God brought his people out of Egypt and slavery. He has freed his people. The implication is: now that you're free, don't go and enslave yourselves! Which is exactly what we do, when we measure ourselves by what we accomplish and how busy we are. We need the Sabbath to remind us that we are free, and to have the time to experience that freedom. Now let's check Exodus 20. In verse 11, God says that we need Sabbath because he created the world in 6 days

and rested on the 7th. Notice what comes next: “the LORD blessed the sabbath day.” Not only can we experience freedom from work, and from ourselves, by observing the Sabbath, but we will also find a blessing in it.

This has certainly been my experience. Stopping work for the Sabbath, one day a week, is a treat. It’s such a counter-cultural thing to do, and it can sound impossible at first. Some people get tied up in what you can and can’t do on that day, and they get lost in the details. But if you focus on the simplicity of the commands in Exodus and Deuteronomy – simply don’t work, experience freedom, and expect a blessing – then the day becomes a complete delight. Your whole week becomes structured around it, because you look forward to this day when you’re free from your to-do list. You live on God’s time for a day and let him run the world without you. It is pure pleasure. A taste of heaven, you could say.

I hope you are sold on trying a regular celebration of the Sabbath. I’ll be glad to talk more with you about it after the service, if you’re interested. But now let’s move on to today’s passage in Leviticus 25. In verses 1-7, God tells the people to make every 7th year a Sabbath year. The interesting thing is, it’s a Sabbath for the land. That can sound really strange to us today, because we consider land to be a commodity, a kind of raw material to use however we like. In the city, we talk about “developing” the land, which sounds like some kind of progress, a positive thing. But what do we really mean? Usually something like this: mowing down whatever was there before, and then replacing it with whatever we want, often without paying much attention at all to the plants and creatures who live there, or the natural features of the land. I can’t help thinking of Joni Mitchell’s song, “Big Yellow Taxi”: “They paved paradise / And

put up a parking lot / With a pink hotel, a boutique / And a swinging hot spot.” That sounds awful, but isn’t it what our society does all the time?

God’s command to give the land a Sabbath is a completely different perspective on what land is meant for. In Leviticus 25, we find out that God cares intimately about the land itself, not just about what it can do for him - or for us. Because God says in verse 23, “The land is mine.” You might be familiar with a similar verse, Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.” A better translation would be “The land belongs to God.” Just think about that for a minute. Our modern understanding of real estate is suddenly out the window. According to God, we don’t own any of the land! It belongs to him, and we are just tenants. But out of his gracious extravagance, he’s given us the chance to be part of the riches that he’s created. If God loves the land this much, and it isn’t ours in the first place, we might have to totally rethink how to how live on the land, care for it, and share it with other people and animals. How will this new way of thinking affect the way we live on the land where our homes are located? What about the land around our church? The land where we work or shop?

These are challenging but intriguing questions. We find some creative directions to pursue, in the rest of Leviticus 25, starting at verse 8. That’s where we find out about Jubilee. The gist of the Jubilee is a special Sabbath year every 7 Sabbath years – if we do the Math, that’s taking an extra Sabbath year every 50th year. But the Jubilee is Sabbath on a gigantic scale – kind of like Sabbath, super-sized. The Day of Atonement kicks it off. That’s when the high priest does all the required sacrifices, so that he and all the people know that they’re right with God. When Christians talk about being right with God, we often stop at the idea of being forgiven. But Jubilee goes way beyond that, and shows us a much more exciting way to live.

Once the people have their relationship with God restored on the Day of Atonement, the Jubilee enables them to be right with each other, and all of creation. Listen to what's supposed to happen. Not only does the land get a rest, for two years in a row, but anyone who fell on hard times and had to become a servant, to pay their bills, is given back their freedom during the Jubilee. That means no family is forever locked into low-skilled, boring work, because they're guaranteed to be freed on the 50th year. Along the same lines, in Deuteronomy 15, we read that all debts are to be cancelled at each Jubilee. No family is destined to eternal poverty, because the Jubilee means no one can stay in debt beyond that 50th year. To top it off, back in our passage in Leviticus, verse 10 says: "you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one to your family." In that 50th year, nobody gets left behind, separated from the family and land they love. Everyone has the chance to go back to their family, home community, and land. The people, creatures, and land they know and love best.

The Jubilee expects a lifestyle so generous, that it's almost beyond what we can even imagine. Some people say it's just too idealistic. But that answer is too easy. Because then we can just write off Jubilee, and go on with life as it was before. What I want you to see, is that Jubilee does not hold up an idealistic way of life. Instead, it actually paints a very realistic picture of life with God. Remember how Jubilee gives people the freedom to go back to their families and lands? The God of Jubilee – our God - takes the ups and downs of life seriously. He knows that relationships will get broken, and some of us will be isolated from those we love most. He knows that some of us will get sick or have financial problems. To make ends meet, we might have to sell our land and move away from home. He also knows that some of us will do stupid things and get disconnected from where we belong. What Jubilee does, is make

allowances for life to not be ideal. Jubilee is the recognition, from God himself, that life happens. And that even in the craziness and chaos, God's grace can still be found. In Jubilee, God makes no judgements about why the people are away from their family, home, or land. He just makes a way for them to return. In Jubilee, God offers to bring people back to him, to each other, and to all of creation. No matter how things got messed up in the first place.

How could we live out this gracious lifestyle in our families, church, city, and country? What do we need to change about our attitudes and lifestyle? What systems in our work, our homes, our city, and our country need to be transformed, so that all of God's creatures - and the land - will be loved and fulfilled? I can't answer these questions for you, but I hope we will think about them, pray about them, and keep talking about them together.

May our Creator's unbelievable kindness awaken us, inspire us, and empower us, to live out the kingdom of God here and now, on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.