

## A Delightful Restriction

A Sermon by  
E. Calvin Beisner

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Early in our marriage, with a growing family of infants, toddlers, and young children from whom we rarely took a break, Debby and I established something of a tradition. Our anniversary was the day to go to Target and find turtle necks to get the kids ready for winter. Sometimes we also had dinner alone together, but that wasn't very common. "Hey! We're at Target. Must be our anniversary!"

But through all these twenty-five years, what we've wanted most to do on our anniversaries was just to spend time enjoying each other—in the early years, getting to know each other better, and as time went on, remembering together the blessings of our past.

Our anniversaries could have been more delightful had we been able, every year, to clear everything else off our schedules and devote the time entirely to each other. Some years we achieved that pretty well, but not many. Most of the time other obligations crowded in on us, and some anniversaries were tarnished with unwanted intrusions.

The fault has been mine. I should have carefully marked off each day and kept business and other concerns from encroaching on it. I should have dedicated myself to making the day thoroughly enjoyable for my beloved bride.

Did you know that Old Testament law actually provided for something much like that? Not just for one day in a year, but for every day through an entire year? Listen to Deuteronomy 24:5:

When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, and bring happiness to his wife whom he has taken.

Think about that for a minute. The newlywed man is forbidden to go out to war, and indeed no business obligations are to be laid upon him. He is to be at home with his bride for the sole purpose of bringing happiness to her. That is to be his focus for an entire year: to make his bride happy.

Wives, think back on your first year of marriage. Would you have appreciated it if your groom had set aside all business and spent every day focused on making you happy—whatever that meant? Suppose he had done all the dishes? Or all the vacuuming, or mopping, or laundry? Suppose he had made sure to spend time in prayer and reading the Scriptures with you every morning and evening, and maybe even at noon? Or had simply sat down to listen to you for as long as you wanted to talk—and listened carefully enough that when he said something in response, it was always pertinent and helpful, arising from genuine understanding, and never from self-defense?

Suppose he had realized that, in order to bring you true happiness, he needed to work on his

own relationship with Christ, since without maturity he wouldn't be able to minister well to you, and so he had devoted significant time every day to prayer and the Scriptures and good Christian books on doctrine, holy living, marriage, and other important matters?

Suppose he had paid careful attention to your wardrobe and jewelry collection and taken you out from time to time just to get you beautiful things? Or had encouraged you to go and see friends or family, with or without him, from time to time?

Okay, maybe by now you're thinking, "Good grief, he'd drive me crazy!" But think again. Remember what the verse says: He's to focus on one thing, and one thing only: *bringing happiness to you*. That means he's going to learn what drives you crazy and steer clear of it. He's going to give you the time alone, the time with others in his absence, the time with others along with him, that you need. He's not going to drive you crazy. He's going to drive you happy. So you're not allowed to brush this sermon illustration aside with that objection. By definition, he can't drive you crazy.

Would you have welcomed such a first year in marriage?

And now, you husbands, think about it. Just suppose for a moment that you'd had the financial freedom to spend the whole first year of your marriage focused on just one thing: making your bride happy. And suppose for a moment that you had been spiritually mature enough really to lose yourself in doing that—to find nothing in life more delightful than making your wife happy. Do you think it might have made a difference for the rest of your marriage? Do you think making *her* happy every day might have made *you* more happy? Do you think it might have helped the two of you be better lovers? Better parents? Better friends, not just to each other but also to others at church, in your neighborhood, or at work? Better able to share with other couples at church how to enjoy the blessings of God in marriage?

I think we all know the answer. Such a first year of marriage could have made all the difference in the world.

Now I want you to think about an imaginary couple, George and Charlotte. Imagine for a moment that, a month or two before their wedding, God had sent some very wealthy person to them, and he had said, "George, Charlotte, I really want to see your marriage get off to a good start, so here's my signed and sworn promise—notarized right here—to pay all your expenses, not just for necessities but for whatever you two want to do that's godly and enjoyable, for the first year, and to ensure that George has a good job starting the day after your first anniversary. George, all you have to do is take this promissory note and sign it, and you'll have immediate use, for a full year starting on your wedding day, of my bank account and credit cards. All I ask is that you spend that whole year making your wife happy."

I understand, it's pretty far fetched, but go along with me here. Use your imagination. This man has just told George he's going to cover all his costs for the first year of his marriage, and he's set down only this one condition: George has to commit to spending the year making Charlotte happy.

Now, wouldn't you think it pretty strange if George responded, "You know, I don't like that restriction. I want to do my own thing, serve myself, make myself happy. Sure, I'll take the money if you want to give it to me, but it's oppressive and legalistic for you to insist that I spend the year making Charlotte happy"?

Or think back now to an Israelite groom. He's about to marry the girl of his dreams, and then somebody reminds him, "Hey, Shmuel, remember Deuteronomy 24:5. You aren't to go out to

battle, and nobody can saddle you with any business, for a whole year. You get to spend the whole year just making Hannah happy!”

Do you think Shmuel would have responded, “You can’t be serious! Forget it! You don’t really think God would put the burden on me of spending a whole year relaxing with my wife and making her happy, do you? Hey! I want to go out to war. I want to march for hours every day in heat and dust and just be around other hot, sweaty, smelly, tired, grumbling men. I want to get into fights and get splattered with other men’s blood and guts and itch and stink for days before I get a chance to wash. I want to get knocked out by clubs, have my arm broken, maybe get an arrow through my thigh. I want to pine away for home and long for Hannah but not be able to have her. And when I’m not away at war, I want to be wearing myself out working twelve-hour days digging, planting, cultivating, harvesting, building fences and barns, carrying bundles of sheaves to market. And I want to get killed in battle before I ever get a chance to come back and raise a family with her”? Is that how you think Shmuel would have responded?

Of course not. That law in Deuteronomy 24:5 offered newlyweds the chance of a lifetime to start their marriages off with consummate joy and happiness, and no bride and groom in their right minds would have balked at it. Some might have had a hard time making it work out financially (although I bet the common practice of a bride’s parents giving the couple a large gift at the start of the marriage helped). But however difficult it might have been for them to make it happen, I can’t imagine a couple’s having turned down the opportunity and protested that the law was oppressive.

But, my brothers and sisters, many Christians today do essentially that all our lives. We look at one of God’s laws, given us for our great blessing and happiness, and say, “I don’t like it. It’s oppressive. It’s legalistic. I don’t want to live that way. In fact, I’m going to do everything I can to figure out some way to show that the law doesn’t apply to me. After all, it was given to the people of Israel, and Israel’s not around anymore. Surely it must have been part of the ceremonial law, given to Israel as a church under age. The ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ, the church has come of age, and so that law no longer binds anybody. Or maybe it was part of the judicial law, given to Israel as a body politic, and the church isn’t a body politic anymore, so that law doesn’t bind anybody. I just can’t handle the notion of having to take a bunch of time off from work to celebrate and make my wife and children happy.”

I’m not talking anymore about Deuteronomy 24:5 and the law requiring a groom to stay home with his bride and make her happy for a year. I’m talking about what God says in Isaiah 58:13–14:

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on My holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight,  
the holy day of the LORD honorable,  
and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,  
nor finding your own pleasure,  
nor speaking your own words,  
then you shall delight yourself in the LORD;  
and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,

and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.  
The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Both laws make restrictions, and both contain, the former implicitly and this one explicitly, promises of great blessing on those who obey them.

Let's look at Isaiah 58:13–14 backward, starting at its end. It ends with, “The mouth of the Lord has spoken.” That's a guarantee. Remember the rich man in my illustration who gave George the promissory note, signed and sworn? That's what this closing statement does. It's God's signature at the end of this marvelous promise—sworn and sealed. And God keeps all His promises.

What does God promise to those to whom He gives this promissory note? That they will delight in Him, and He will cause them to ride on the high hills of the earth and feed on the heritage of Jacob.

What is it to delight in Jahweh? The Hebrew verb, עָנַג, means to be soft, delicate, or dainty. In the form used here, it means to “take exquisite delight” in something or someone. The word is associated with intensity or great magnitude of pleasure. For instance, in Isaiah 13:22, palaces—always opulent, magnificent places—are called עָנַג, and in the passage we're looking at, in verse 13b, Jahweh tells His people to “call the Sabbath *a delight*,” using the same adjective. In Isaiah 66:11 it denotes the delight a baby finds in the satisfaction and consolation of nursing at its mother's breast.

The exact form of the verb found in Isaiah 58:14 is an intensive middle, indicating intense action upon oneself. We might translate it, “take to yourself intense delight” in Jahweh. It's the same verb we find in Psalm 37:4, that familiar verse that says, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

To delight in the Lord, then, is to experience intense, exquisite pleasure, happiness, and joy because of one's communion with Him. As Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary President Joey Pipa puts it,

To take exquisite pleasure in the Lord is to be overwhelmed by His beauty and glory that are revealed in His attributes and work. To delight in God is to enjoy special communion and fellowship with Him, responding with gratitude and delight as He manifests His love to you. This communion is captured [in the Song of Solomon] by the emblem of a luxuriant garden adorned with beautiful foliage where God meets with you . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Like the pleasure young lovers feel when they get together for the first time after a long separation, such is the pleasure we're told God will give to those who use His Sabbath as He directs.

God likens delighting in Him to our “rid[ing] on the high hills of the earth” and being fed

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph A. Pipa, *The Lord's Day* (Rosshire, UK: Christian Focus, 1997), 12.

“with the heritage of Jacob.” It can be a little difficult for us, so far removed in time and culture from ancient Israel, to grasp the significance of “riding on the high hills of the earth.” But it harkens back to how God, in Deuteronomy 32:13–14, described what He did when He delivered Israel from Egypt:

He made him ride in the heights of the earth,  
that he might eat the produce of the fields;  
He made him to draw honey from the rock,  
and oil from the flinty rock;  
curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock, with fat of lambs;  
and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats, with the choicest wheat;  
and you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.

In Deuteronomy 33:29, we learn a little more of what was entailed in Israel’s riding in the heights of the earth:

Happy are you, O Israel!  
Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD,  
the shield of your help and the sword of your majesty!  
Your enemies shall submit to you,  
and you **shall tread down their high places.**

This was the language of victory—victory over the enemies of God, the destruction of their pagan worship, with all its abominations, and their submission to the rule of God.

By borrowing that language in His promise to those who honored His Sabbath, made it their delight, and delighted in Him, God implied that observing the Sabbath is part of how we contribute to the expansion and intensification of His Kingdom. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.” When we keep the Sabbath holy, not only are *we* submitting to God’s kingdom and doing His will, but the victory God assures us includes increasing submission to His kingdom and will by His enemies. That is, Sabbath observance can be, and should be, linked to evangelism. When unbelieving neighbors, friends, and co-workers see Christians joyfully delighting in the Sabbath, they may in curiosity and even in jealousy begin asking questions that open the door for gospel witness.

I suppose it can also be a little strange for us to think of feeding on “the heritage of Jacob.” The heritage of Jacob? You mean the Promised Land? I don’t have a plot in the land of Israel, and I don’t know many Christians who do.

But that’s not the point at all. Hebrews 11 explains that the real hope of all the Old Testament saints wasn’t for a strip of arid land on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. No, they desired “a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16). What they really had their hearts set on was “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22), “coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,” where “the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:2–3). The heritage of Jacob is God Himself. God Himself

is what God promises that those who make the Sabbath their delight and keep it holy will feed upon.

How can one be assured that we'll experience the delight God promises here? Verse 13 sets forth the conditions, and it sets them forth in paired requirements and prohibitions.

Now, the moment we hear of prohibitions, the temptation is to be resentful. We don't like prohibitions. We want to be unrestricted. But think back to Deuteronomy 25:4, which prohibited a new groom from going to war or even being burdened down with any business for a year so that he could put all his effort into making his new bride happy. Who wouldn't welcome such a prohibition?! It was really like an invulnerable fortress keeping distractions from interfering with the start of that marriage. It didn't deprive the bride and groom of anything. It *protected* them.

That's how we should see the prohibitions God imposes on our use of the Sabbath:

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on My holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight,  
the holy day of the LORD honorable,  
and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,  
nor finding your own pleasure,  
nor speaking your own words,  
then you shall take to yourself exquisite delight in the LORD . . . .

The prohibitions can be summed up as setting aside our own ways and pleasures, and even our own words, on the Sabbath, and the requirements can be summed up as making the Sabbath a *holy day*, a day *set aside* from all other days, a day in which, more than any other day, we honor the Lord with all our attention.

Think back again to the groom who was to set aside a whole year for making his bride happy. Do you think she'd feel honored by his doing that? You know she would! Undivided attention is one of the greatest honors we can give someone. In the Old Testament, Joey Pipa points out, God "sanctified places, garments, altars and other such things that they might be dedicated to His worship."<sup>2</sup> So making the Sabbath a "holy day" means making it a day on which one refrains from activities common to all the other six days of the week and dedicates it to worship so as to honor the Lord by our undivided attention to His day. To do things on the Sabbath that are common to other days, when they aren't works of either necessity or mercy (as the Westminster *Confession* and *Catechisms* tell us), is to profane it—to make it unholy, that is, common.

Many people find the instruction to turn from doing their pleasure on the Sabbath confusing. "How can the Sabbath be such a delight if on it I'm not allowed to do my pleasure?" The confusion is understandable, but it's also easily solved.

God isn't against doing things from which we get pleasure, so long as they don't violate His moral will expressed in the Ten Commandments. Of course, if we get pleasure from lying, stealing, committing adultery, or worshiping false gods, He forbids that. But if we get pleasure

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<sup>2</sup>Pipa, *Lord's Day*, 17–18.

from making beautiful music, or running or swimming, or painting, or managing a business well, or building fine furniture or cabinetry, or cultivating a farm from which we can harvest an abundant crop, those and uncountable other things are all fine. He encourages us to do such things and enjoy them. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might,” He tells us in Ecclesiastes 9:10. God isn’t opposed to our doing things in which we take pleasure.

But He wants us to set the Sabbath aside for *particular* pleasures, pleasures we don’t so easily obtain on the other six days of the week, because our daily responsibilities distract us from them.

Think back once more to the groom whom God restricted in Deuteronomy 25:4. Now, because he’s made in God’s image to be creative and productive as God is, and to fight evil and protect the innocent as God does, that young groom should actually get pleasure from pursuing his vocation and even going to war if necessary to protect God’s people from enemies. But *that first year of marriage was to be set aside*. In *that year* he wasn’t to pursue those other pleasures. He was to concentrate on making his wife happy.

Now, do you think a new husband who did that—who really succeeded in making his wife happy all through that year—would himself go through the year moping around, thinking, “Boy, did I ever get the shaft! I can’t go off to war. I can’t work my farm or go on long journeys for trade. I’m stuck here at home with my wife all the time!”? Of course not. You and I both know that if he spent that year making *her* happy, *he* would be happy, too. If, rather than pursuing his *own* pleasure, he pursued *her* pleasure, *his* pleasure would come, too. It’s the spiritual lesson we learn from Jesus when He says, “whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it” (Luke 9:24).

That’s the way it is here in Isaiah 58. God’s prohibition of pursuing our own pleasure on the Sabbath doesn’t mean the Sabbath becomes a dreary, sad, dark day. It means it becomes the day of our greatest pleasure, because in it we delight in the greatest object of our pleasure, God Himself. As Asaph put it in Psalm 73, “Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. . . . God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25–26).

On the Sabbath, we avoid the activities, even the pleasures, common to the other six days of the week not because they’re bad in themselves, and not because we’re ascetics who think somehow we get closer to God by torturing ourselves, but because we don’t want them, good as they are, interfering with our drawing nearer to God and experiencing that exquisite delight that comes from knowing Him better and better week in and week out for a lifetime.

All this should make it clear why, if we are to abide by the instructions here in Isaiah 58:13–14, we mustn’t fall into the trap of thinking it’s enough just to set aside an hour or two on Sunday mornings for worship. Neither in the Fourth Commandment nor here in Isaiah 58 do we encounter the word *morning* or *hour*. What we are told to sanctify, to keep holy, to set apart from all other days, is the Sabbath *day*. Through the whole day, we set aside our ordinary pleasures, not to deprive ourselves of pleasure but to dive into the deepest, purest, greatest pleasure there is—the pleasure of knowing, loving, enjoying, taking delight in, worshiping, adoring, praising, and communing with our blessed King and Savior.

As the Jews celebrated the Sabbath on the last day of the week, looking back at God’s finished creation and their finished deliverance from Egypt, and forward at the promised Messiah

and eternal rest to come, so we celebrate it on the first day of the week, looking back on the finished work of Christ on the Cross crowned by His Resurrection, by which accomplished His new creation, the church, and looking forward at Christ's return and our entry into that eternal rest in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Let me address one last matter before I conclude. Isn't the Sabbath commandment really restricted to the old covenant? Wasn't it a sign of God's special covenant with Israel? And doesn't that mean it doesn't obligate anyone now?

Joey Pipa answers this objection well in his book *The Lord's Day*:

We do not use this line of reasoning with the wonderful things the Old Testament says about marriage or the place of our children in the Covenant. Why use it here? The moral and spiritual commands, as well as many of the Old Testament promises, apply to us, and we may not dismiss a threat or promise simply because it is found in the Old Testament.

Among other things, we consider the context of the promise when seeking to determine how it applies. This entire section of Isaiah refers ultimately to Jesus Christ and the New Covenant people. The section begins with the famous promise of the suffering servant in chapter 53. In chapter 54:1–3 the prophet assures the church of its world-wide outreach . . . . In chapter 55:1 he calls sinners to repentance . . . . All of this material refers to the New Testament era.

In chapter 56 God begins to relate the Sabbath to the New Testament people. He says in 56:2–5: "How blessed is the man who does this and the son of man who takes hold of it, who keeps from profaning the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil. Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from His people.' Neither let the eunuch say, 'Behold I am a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD, 'To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give *in My house and within My walls* [emphasis added] a memorial.'" How do we know that this applies to the New Testament era? Because *only in the gospel era may a eunuch enjoy the privileges promised here*. In Deuteronomy 23:1, God declares that a eunuch may not enter the house of the Lord. Here, anticipating the reign of Christ, God promises the eunuch that he shall receive a great memorial name in the house of the Lord. The prophet is relating Sabbath-keeping to the days of the New Covenant and the glories of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, there were aspects of the weekly Sabbath that were specially restricted to Israel's covenantal relationship with God as a church under age and a body politic, and those aspects, as *Westminster Confession* 19.3–4 tells us, are fulfilled and done away. But the Sabbath commandment itself, because it is rooted in both creation and the redeeming work of Christ, both of which reach far beyond Israel, applies to all people, everywhere, at all times. While it had ceremonial and civil elements that have passed away, its moral element abides forever. That non-Christians ignore it, as they do many others of God's commands, doesn't excuse us from observing it.

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<sup>3</sup>Pipa, *Lord's Day*, 14–16.

To everyone who sincerely honors the Sabbath day—who turns from his own pleasures and makes the Sabbath his delight—the Lord promises that he will take to himself exquisite delight in the Lord Himself and even experience victory over spiritual enemies, whether those enemies are sin within or opponents without. “Sabbath-keeping,” Pipa points out, is thus “a means of grace that will help you die to sin and grow in holiness.”

Let me set before you, in closing, a challenge from Dr. Pipa. “Is it not possible,” he asks, “that one reason for the spiritual weakness of the church is her failure to honor God on the Lord’s day? Is it not possible that one reason our churches are not more effective in reaching the lost is because we are not practicing the Sabbath-keeping that brings us victory? Could this be true of us as individuals as well? Is it not possible that you continue to fall under the dominion of some particular sin because you have refused to sanctify God’s day in your heart? We lack victory because we have failed to recognize and utilize one of the God-given means of victory, while those who keep the Sabbath have victory.”<sup>4</sup>

Hear afresh these wonderful words of the Lord:

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on My holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight,  
the holy day of the LORD honorable,  
and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,  
nor finding your own pleasure,  
nor speaking your own words,  
then you shall delight yourself in the LORD;  
and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,  
and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.  
The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

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<sup>4</sup>Pipa, *Lord’s Day*, 13.