The Sixth Day

Commandment number 4 (3 in the Catholic and Lutheran tradition) of the famous Ten Commandment is commonly referred to as the commandment relating to taking a sabbath. Exodus 20 8-11 provides the text of the commandment:

“Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor they son, nor they daughter, they manservant, nor they maidservant, nor they cattle, nor they stranger that is within they gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.”

From a physical perspective, working oneself seven days a week fifty-two weeks a year can take a toll on one’s, mind, body, and/or soul. Everyone needs a day off. Conversely, everyone doesn’t need seven days off fifty-two weeks a year. The commandment instructs, “six days shalt thou labor….” For those who take the Ten Commandments literally, the six days of work should be just as important as the day off. Moses saw God as a producer who labored for six out of seven days. To be like God, men and women are called to be producers. Production and wealth creation isn’t, therefore, just tolerated by God; it is seen as moral in and of itself. Even Wendell Berry, ([*What are people for*](http://www.powells.com/biblio?show=TRADE%20PAPER:USED:9780865474376:9.95#table_of_contents)*?*,) understands that work is important for the soul.

The US employment rate in January was just 58.5%. That’s the percentage of people aged 16 and older who have a job. Children aged 16 and under make up roughly 22% of the US population. That means that only 36.5% of Americans have a formal job. That’s not to say that some people do not work outside of the formal economy. Surely some people do household chores. Others sell goods and services in the underground economy to avoid taxes, regulations, or criminal prosecution. Still, of those people with formal jobs, only [35% worked on a weekend day](http://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/chart11.pdf). That means that the maximum number of Americans who even might be working six days a week is not greater than 13%. For those employed between the ages of 25 to 54 with children, the [average work day is only 8.6 hours](http://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/chart1.pdf) according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

It is amazing how much wealth we can create by working so little. Never before have Americans been able to work so little for so much wealth. Conversely, not working has never cost people so much forgone wealth. The price of leisure or idleness has never been higher.

If you take the above commandment at face value and work six days a week for 52 weeks a year, assuming 8 hour days, then you will log 2496 hours of work a year. Even at a minimum wage of $7.25 an hour, that is a salary of $18,096 a year. A married couple each doing the same thing can earn $36,192. Extending the work day to a 10 hour day takes the dollar values to $22,620 and $45,240. A twelve hour work day (not uncommon in 19th century America) puts the numbers at $27,144 and $54,288. That means that a household with two high school dropouts earning minimum wage and working really hard can place themselves in the top half of richest US households. The median US household made $49,445 in 2010. Who knew Moses was telling people how to get rich! It just takes work. Combine a work ethic with education and you can contemplate the awesomeness of God on the sabbath in front of a big screen TV.

The question that has to be asked, is why when wealth is easier to create from work than ever, are so few people working? Is it the result of a moral breakdown? Do people not understand that work is a moral activity? Is it a product of misguided government policy? Do people see no sense in working if other people will provide for their needs and wants? The effect of minimum wage laws, maximum hours worked laws (overtime for work beyond 40 hours a week), and high marginal taxes on labor all discourage work. If a democratic government chooses to discourage work, it must be that’s what voters want.

[Deidra McCloskey](http://www.amazon.com/Bourgeois-Virtues-Ethics-Age-Commerce/dp/0226556638) points out that the industrial revolution happened only when and where a change in common morality began to view production and wealth creation as inherently moral. The collapse of industrialization cannot be far behind the collapse of a work ethic. Just look at Greece, they have the lowest labor force participation rate of any country in the EU. In this light, the moral thing to do is to advocate changes to government policies that discourage work. All work and no play will make Johnny a dull boy. All play and no work will make him a poverty stricken sinner.