

A Theology of Sabbatical Rest

Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

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Taken from an article by Ronald Rolheiser about the importance of forgiveness, he makes this observation about the created rhythms of sabbath:

The theology and spirituality of Sabbath teach us that God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath. Moreover, not only did God rest on the Sabbath, God declared this a day of rest for everyone forever, and with that God set up a certain rhythm for our lives. That rhythm is supposed to work this way:

- We work for six days, then rest for one day.
- We work for seven years, then rest for one year (a sabbatical).
- We work for seven times seven years, forty-nine years, then have a jubilee where the world itself goes on sabbatical.
- We work for a lifetime, then enjoy an eternity of sabbatical.

Taken from Peter Scazzero's "Sabbath" in his book Emotionally Healthy Discipleship

The word 'sabbath' comes from the Hebrew word that means 'to stop, to cease working.' It refers to doing nothing related to work for a twenty-four hour period each week. It refers to this unit of time around which we are to orient our entire lives as "holy," meaning "separate, a cut above" the other six days (see Genesis 2:2, 3).

Sabbath provides for us now the rhythm for an entire reorientation of our lives around the living God. On Sabbaths we imitate God by stopping our work and resting. Make no mistake about it: keeping the command to Sabbath is both countercultural and extremely difficult in our everyday lives. It cuts to the core of our spirituality, the core of our convictions, the core of our faith, and the core of our lifestyles.

Our culture knows nothing of setting aside a whole day (twenty-four hours) to rest and delight in God. Like most, I always considered it an optional extra, not something absolutely essential to discipleship. But, living in a fallen world is much like being in a blizzard. Without the Sabbath, we easily find ourselves lost and unsure of the larger picture of God and our lives. I am convinced that nothing less than an understanding of Sabbath as a command from God, as well as an incredible invitation, will enable us to grab hold of this rope God offers us.

Keeping the Sabbath in scripture is a commandment - right next to refraining from lying, murdering, and committing adultery. Sabbath is a gift from God we are invited to receive. Israel lived as slaves in Egypt for over four hundred years. They never had a day off. They were treated as tools of production to make pyramids. They were "doing" machines. They worked seven days a week all year long. Imagine how deeply ingrained activism and overwork must have been for them! They had never observed or experienced a rhythm of work and rest. They had neither permission nor the choice to do so. Living meant performing tasks, with one day blurring into the next.

When God called Israel out of Egypt, he affirmed they were sacred human beings made in his image. He then showed them how to live according to their God-given nature. In effect, God said, "It may feel awkward at first, but as a fish is created to live in water, I created you to live according to this design."

The longest and most specific of the Ten Commandments is the fourth. Let's take a look at all of them in comparison:

- You shall have no other gods before me.
- You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord our God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
- Honour your father and your mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not give false witness.
- You shall not covet. (Exodus 20:1-17)

God worked. We are to work. God rested. We are to rest. After completing his work of creating the heavens and earth, God rested on the seventh day. It was the climax of God's week in Genesis 1:1-2:4, and it is to be the climax of ours.

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses proclaimed further that the very act of ceasing from work in the midst of all the surrounding nations was a sign of their liberation by God (see Deuteronomy 5:13ff). By the very act of refusing to succumb to the enormous pressure of Western culture around us, we too serve as a sign of a free people. We have been called out of a world trying to prove its worth and value by what it does or possesses. We are deeply loved by God for who we, not for what we do.

The Sabbath calls us to build the doing of nothing into our schedules each week. Nothing measurable is accomplished. By the world's standards it is inefficient, unproductive, and useless. As one theologian stated, "To fail to see the value of simply being with God and 'doing nothing' is to miss the heart of Christianity."

The Sabbath was always a hallmark of the Jews throughout their history. This one act, perhaps more than any other, kept them from the pressure of the powerful cultures that have sought to assimilate them. For this reason it is often said that, for 3,500 years, the Sabbath has kept the Jews more than Jews have kept the Sabbath.

This is certainly not the case with Christians living in the twenty-first century. Sabbath, when lived, is our means as the people of God to bear witness to the way we understand life, its rhythms, its gifts, its meaning, and its ultimate purpose in God. Observing the Sabbath, we affirm: "God is the centre and source of our lives. He is the beginning, the middle and the end of our existence."

Eugene Peterson points out even though Sabbath has been one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life, we cannot do without it. "Sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us; it is about God and how God forms us... I don't see any way out of it; if we are going to live appropriately in the creation we must keep the Sabbath."

One of the great dangers of faithfully observing Sabbath is legalism.

What about pastors, nurses, doctors, police officers, and others who must work on Sundays? Jesus observed Sabbath but he also healed the sick and preached sermons on that day. What might be work for you may be different for someone else. Some people will have to choose another day besides Saturday or Sunday (depending on your church tradition) if it is to be a day without work. The key is to set a regular rhythm of keeping the Sabbath every seven days for a twenty-four hour block of time.

Traditional Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends on sundown Saturday. I know many Christians who begin their Sabbath precisely at 6:00 PM or 7:00 PM on Saturday until the same time the following day. Others, like myself, choose a day of the week. The apostle Paul seemed to think one day would do as well as another (see Romans 14:1-17). What is important is to select a time period and protect it!

The following are four countercultural practices that have served me well in distinguishing a "day off" from a biblical Sabbath. A secular Sabbath is to replenish our energies and make us more effective the other six days. A "day off" produces positive results but is, in Eugene Peterson's words, "a bastard Sabbath." I commend them to you as you develop a biblical framework for Sabbath that fits your particular life situation, temperament, calling, and personality.

Practice 1 – STOP

Sabbath is first and foremost a day of "stopping". "To stop" is built into the literal meaning of the Hebrew word Sabbath. Yet most of us can't stop until we are finished whatever it is we think we need to do. We need to complete our projects and term papers, answer our e-mails, return all phone messages, complete the balancing of our check books to pay our bills, finish cleaning the house. There's always one more goal to be reached before stopping.

On Sabbath I embrace my limits. God is God. He is indispensable. I am his creature. The world continues working fine when I stop. I have hated stopping my entire life. When I was a college and seminary student, I had too much homework to stop for one twenty-four-hour period. When I taught high school English, I had too many papers to grade to stop. When I was learning Spanish in Costa Rica, I couldn't stop if I was going to learn the

language. If I was going to be responsive to the needs of the people in our church and still have time to pray and study, I needed to work at least half of my Sabbath, didn't I?

We think, maybe I will stop when our children grow into adults and are on their own, when I have enough saved to buy our first home, when I retire and. . . The list goes on. We stop on Sabbaths because God is on the throne, assuring us the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities. Life on this side of heaven is an unfinished symphony. We accomplish one goal and then immediately are confronted with new opportunities and challenges. But ultimately, we will die with countless unfinished projects and goals. That's okay. God is at work taking care of the universe. He manages quite well without us having to run things. When we are sleeping, he is working. So he commands us to relax, to enjoy the fact that we are not in charge of his world, that even when we die, the world will continue on nicely without us.

Every Sabbath reminds us to "be still and know that [He] is God" (Psalm 46:10) and to stop worrying about tomorrow (see Matthew 6:25-33). The core spiritual issue in stopping revolves around trust. Will God take care of us and our concerns if we obey him by stopping to keep the Sabbath? When I trust God and obey his commands, he provides. Jesus takes our loaves and fishes that we offer him, even though they are insufficient to feed the multitudes, and somehow miraculously and invisibly multiplies them. We can trust him enough to stop.

Practice 2 – REST

Once we stop, the Sabbath calls us to rest. God rested after his work. We are to do the same—every seventh day (see Genesis 2:1-4). What do we do to replace all we are now stopping during our Sabbath time? The answer is simply: whatever delights and replenishes you. For example, in my case work relates to my vocation as founder of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship, along with writing and speaking. I purposely engage in ideas and people that get my mind off even the thought of work! That includes napping, working out, going for long walks, reading a novel, watching a good movie, going out for dinner. I avoid the computer and cell phone.

For me to enjoy Sabbath rest on Saturday, however, requires I have another day of the week to do the tasks of life that consume my energy or fill me with worry. For example, planning my week, paying bills, balancing our check book, cleaning the house, fighting traffic and crowds to shop, doing loads of laundry are all work I need to do a different day of the week.

The following list gives you nine possibilities to consider replacing with rest. The primary one, of course, is rest from work. But you may want to also consider picking one or two of the others over the next couple of months as you develop your practice of Sabbath-keeping.

- work
- physical exhaustion
- hurriedness

- multitasking
- competitiveness
- decision-making
- catching up on errands
- talking
- technology and machines (e.g., smart phones, TV, computers)
- worry

When we stop and rest, we respect our humanity and the image of God in us. We are not nonstop human beings. Sadly, it often takes a physical illness such as cancer, a heart attack, a flu, or a severe depression to get us to rest. We don't serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath serves us.

Practice 3 – DELIGHT

A third component to biblical Sabbath revolves around delighting in what we have been given. God, after finishing his work of creation, proclaimed that "It was very good" (Genesis 1:31). God delighted over his creation. The Hebrew phrase communicates a sense of joy, completion, wonder, and play. This is particularly radical in a culture like ours, both secular and Christian, that is "delight deficient." Because of the way pleasure and delight has been so distorted by our culture, many of us as Christians struggle with receiving joy and pleasure.

On Sabbaths we are called to enjoy and delight in creation and its gifts. We are to slow down and pay attention to our food, smelling and tasting its riches. We are to take the time to see the beauty of a tree, a leaf, a flower, the sky that has been created with great care by our God. He has given us the ability to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, that we might feast with our senses on the miraculousness of life.

On Sabbaths God also invites us to slow down to pay attention and delight in people. In the gospels, Jesus modelled a prayerful presence with people— whether it was a Samaritan woman, the widow at Nain, the rich young ruler, or Nicodemus. He seemed "into" the beauty of men and women crafted in God's image. This has become a spiritual discipline for me. I try, for example, to walk slowly, leaving lots of free space and time on Sabbaths so I can stop for unexpected conversations with neighbours, family, and shopkeepers. I ask God for the grace to leave the frenzied busyness around me and be a contemplative presence to those around me.

Finally, Sabbath delight invites us to healthy play. The word chosen by the Greek Fathers for the perfect, mutual indwelling of the Trinity was perichoresis. It literally means "dancing around." Creation and life are, in a sense, God's gift of a playground to us. Whether it be through sports, dance, games, looking at old family photographs, or visiting museums, nurturing our sense of pure fun in God also is part of Sabbath.

Practice 4 – CONTEMPLATE

The final quality of a biblical Sabbath is, of course, the contemplation of God. The Sabbath is always “holy to the Lord” (Exodus 31:15). Pondering the love of God remains the central focus of our Sabbaths. Throughout Jewish and Christian history, Sabbath has included worship with God’s people where we feast on his presence, the reading and study of Scripture, and silence. For this reason, Sundays remain the ideal time for Sabbath-keeping whenever possible.

On every Sabbath, we experience a sampling of something greater that awaits us. Our short earthly lives are put in perspective as we look forward to the day when God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness and we will enter an eternal Sabbath feast in God’s perfect presence. We will experience his splendour, greatness, beauty, excellence, and glory far beyond anything we ever experienced or dreamed. As with stopping, resting, and delighting, we will need to prepare in advance how to do this. Is it any wonder that the Jewish people traditionally had a Day of Preparation for the Sabbath? There was food to buy, clothes to wash for the children, and final preparations to be made.

What will it mean to prepare yourself for worship, to receive the Word of God? What time do you need to go to bed the night before? When might you have times of silence and solitude or prayer during the day? What final items do you need to resolve so you can have an uncluttered Sabbath? Devout Jews today have numerous customs related to their Friday Shabbat meal as a family. They maintain various traditions, from the lighting of candles to the reading of psalms to the blessing of children to eating of the meal to the giving of thanks to God. Each is designed to keep God at the centre of their Sabbath.

There are an amazing variety of Sabbath possibilities before you. It is vitally important you keep in mind your unique life situation as you work out these four principles of Sabbath keeping into your life. Experiment. Make a plan. Follow it for one to two months. Then reflect back on what changes you would like to make. There is no one right way that works for every person. You have permission to play, be with friends, take a nap, read a good book. And if you begin to practice stopping, resting, delighting, and contemplating for one twenty-four-hour period each week, you will soon find your other six days becoming infused with those same qualities. I suspect that has always been God’s plan.