

The Art of Living Well: Take a Rest **Exodus 20:8-11 & Mark 2:23-28**

Now we come to the fourth commandment--the sabbath. The commandment says that we shall remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; for six days we shall labor, but on the seventh day we shall do no work. Sabbath means "ceasing"--no work...what would you do with a day of no work? Imagine you could take one day this week and do absolutely any you wanted except work, what would you do?

I have a friend, a retired minister, who for years said that if he could only play golf on Sunday morning at 11 a.m. he was sure he would get a hole-in-one. And there's a joke about that. A presbyterian minister decided to get one of his elders to preach and he took off to play golf on a Sunday morning. Gabriel saw him, and summoned God. "God!" said Gabriel, "We have a minister golfing on the Sabbath. Strike him down with a lightning bolt." God said, "I've got better plans for him." Just then, the minister took a swing at the ball, and it drove 420 yards, bounced and rolled up onto the green and fell directly into the cup, a hole-in-one. The minister was ecstatic, whooping it up. Gabriel says to God, "What gives, I thought you were going to punish him?" God says, "Who's he going to tell?"

Now does Sabbath mean I can't play golf? Personally, I would find a round of golf relaxing. So can I do that on the sabbath? Does Sabbath mean I can't do anything, even if it's relaxing? Or does it mean that I can't do any work? Now, that raises the question what counts as work and relaxation? And even if it doesn't count as work for me, what if it means work for someone else? In other words, is it okay if I play golf, even if that means the pro shop and greens-keepers have to work that day in order for me to play? What does it mean to keep Sabbath? You realize we could keep going with these questions, and twist ourselves into knots on this Sabbath day, and at the end of the day we would have no clear-cut answers for what it means to keep Sabbath. There has always been confusion about what the Sabbath means, and how we keep it holy.

In the passage I read from Mark, we heard that Jesus was challenged by the religious people of his day for not keeping the Sabbath well. He and his disciples were walking through the cornfields on the Sabbath, and they started to pluck heads of grain. When the Pharisees--those who were expert and rather rigid keepers of the law--saw what they were doing, they questioned him: "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus replied with a story from the life of David, the great king Israel. He recalled a story when David and his friends were hungry and they went into the temple and took the holy bread that only the priests were allowed to eat; not only did the great David take the bread, but then he gave some to his friends. And this is not condemned in scripture. So after telling this story, Jesus makes his point: the Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath. Throughout his ministry Jesus demonstrates this point, and much to the frustration of the religious leaders around him.

Seven times Jesus heals on the Sabbath day and is challenged for it: he healed a lame man by the pool of Bethesda, he drives the evil spirit from a man who was possessed, he healed Peter's mother-in-law from her illness, he healed a man with a deformed hand, he healed a man born blind, he healed a crippled woman, he healed a man born blind, and he healed a man with edema. The Sabbath was made for these people, not they for the Sab-

bath. God created the Sabbath as a blessing for his people and his creation; not as a burden or a straitjacket. We are not made to torture ourselves with questions about what counts as work and what counts as relaxation; nor to lay down lists of rules for how to keep the day holy; and we are not meant to feel guilty for not keeping it well enough. We are not meant to be slaves to the day. The day is made for us.

The day is made for us because we are made with a need for Sabbath rest, a need for holy “time-out.” This need for time-out is the heart of the Sabbath challenge in our lives. I do not believe the challenge for us lies in deciphering what counts and what doesn’t in the matrix of Sabbath rules; the challenge is finding any rest for our souls. In our culture, we live 24-7-365: we are so busy we use every available minute to accomplish all that we have to do, and we’ve even developed the art of making time do double duty--we call it multitasking. There was a time in our world when Sunday would at least slow down; but more and more that is not the case. Sunday runs into Monday and then Thursday and then Saturday and we start again; every day is just as full as all the others. And they are full of good things; when we’re not working, we volunteering, or meeting with friends, or going to support groups, or taking kids to sports, or working on a hobby.

Early this week, I was reading about a man who moved to a busy suburb of Washington, D.C., and he said that life there was so hectic, he just couldn’t imagine what a Sabbath would like in that community; there was no day of quiet rest. Until...it snowed. While it was snowing everyone was quietly in their homes; and when the snow stopped falling, they began to drift out of their houses, talking to their neighbors, making snow men and throwing snow balls, and helping the elderly shovel the snow. And few people went anywhere. He said it was the closest thing he had seen in that place to a Sabbath. Yesterday in our community we had the same scene: ball games and meeting cancelled, no particular place to go and no hurry to get there, time at home with family and friends and neighbors, a needed rest from all that fills our days.

We need rest; we need rest for our bodies and rest for our souls. We need to in order to recharge and physical, emotional, and spiritual batteries, and prepare for the future. Often we think of resting *after* our labors; we think that vacation is something we earn once all our work is done. But the biblical picture of creation shows us that rest is not simply from work, but also in preparation for work. In the account of creation in Genesis chapter 1, we read that God created the heavens and the earth and all that are in them in six days; on the sixth day, at the end of the day, God created humankind in his image, male and female. And on the seventh day God rested. Now for God it was the seventh day, but for us it was the first day. The first day of the existence of humankind was not a day of work, but a day of rest. We were created and on our very first day we were told to rest.

There are three aspects of this Sabbath rest that I want to highlight briefly; they come from scripture and from my own reflections on what Sabbath means. One of the questions I’ve asked myself this week is, “Is there a difference between Sabbath rest and a day off?” In other words, what makes *Sabbath* rest unique? First, Sabbath rest gives us perspective on our limits. On most days, as far as I am concerned, I can do it all; there is nothing that I need to say no to. If I work hard enough and plan well enough, I can accomplish everything. But when I take a Sabbath rest, I say to myself and to others: I cannot work all the time and I cannot get everything done; I am human and I need rest. It is an acknowledge-

ment of my limits and my needs; it draws a line around how much I can get done in a week. My Creator tells me that six days I can work, but not seven--I need rest. For me, this is one of the hardest truths to admit, and that is why Sabbath is good for me. When there is so much to be done and so much of it is good: people to see, families to help, plans to make, books to read, sermons to write, deadlines to meet, how can I say no? How can I say no to someone who is in need? How can I say, "No I can't. Today I need to rest." It feels like a cop-out at best, and a failure at worst. But in reality, it is truly human; and saying it only recognizes how I am created, and how all of us are created: we need to rest.

Second, Sabbath rest gives us an opportunity to focus on "the important things" in life. I say the "important things" because for each of us these things are different, and often they vary by the day; but you know the sort of thing I'm talking about. The important things are the things you really wish you could get to on the other six days, but you can't because there's too much work. It's spending time with your wife or your friends; playing with the kids; reading a good novel; or just riding around looking at stuff. It's having the time to talk to the person who is lonely; it's being free to help the person across the street. It's being truly available for others. Part of what is so striking about Jesus' many "violations" of the Sabbath is how he was available to meet the needs of the people in his path: almost all of the stories are of healing, a blind man, a lame man, a crippled woman. Jesus was available on the Sabbath to meet the needs of the people in his path--in other words, to love his neighbor as himself. Sabbath rest make us available; it frees us for that kind of love and service.

And third, Sabbath rest includes time with God. The great Christian scholar Saint Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* to God "You move us to delight in praising You; for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You." In other words, the only way that we will find true rest for our souls is in relationship with the God who created us to be in relationship with him. Sabbath rest provides time for growing and developing in that relationship. You know that in any relationship we have to invest the time for it to grow and develop; in a marriage or in a friendship, we have to intentionally spend time with that person for the relationship to develop. Our relationship with God is no different; we need time to develop in that relationship. When I feel a need for Sabbath, it is often this part of Sabbath that I feel the most. I will have days when I long to be in worship, when I long to sing a hymn or hear a sermon (not my own); I dream of walking along the canal path and marveling at God's creation as the river bends half-way Milford; to pray and lift up all my cares and lay them at God's feet; to read a book that inspires me to love God and love others. Of all that makes Sabbath rest unique and special, this is the part of the rest I most long for.

But I have to say I am not particularly good at it; I don't keep the Sabbath well. My soul cries out for Sabbath rest; yet rarely I am able to keep it. And so have no illusions about my life or your life, and I know that finding Sabbath rest is no easy prospect. But recognizing the need for it, listening to the cry of the soul for rest, is a first step. And after taking that first step, we make time. Perhaps a whole day seems undoable at first; so take half a day, or even just the morning; take time to get perspective, to focus on the important things of life, to develop your relationship with God. If you and I take just a little time, I bet we will find it so life-giving, that we'll want more. I believe we'll find that the Holy Spirit

will so fill our lives and recharge our souls, that we will long for the whole day. And maybe we will cut ourselves the slack and find the grace to take it, to take the Sabbath Day and to keep it, and keep it holy.

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