

Rest

Mark 2:27-28, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Question: How can I find rest?

Key Passages: Colossians 2:20-21; Genesis 2:2; Matthew 11:33

In a world as frenetic as our, rest is a rare commodity. Worker-bees race to the office for a barrage of meetings and tasks. Then they wrestle their way home through rush hour just in time to sit on the sidelines of a kid's event before collapsing in a recliner like catatonic zombies until it's time to repeat the cycle. All our automation has only increased the pace of the rat race. We desperately need an exit off the treadmill.

Sabbath is the Only Eden We Have Left

You can change your schedule all you want but until you change your master you will never find rest for your soul. As a culture we are in crisis. We are so busy that we have no time for the things that matter most: Worship, family, meditation, and soul-care. From the very beginning God knew our need for rest and embedded a radical regulation to ensure we would enjoy it. It is called Sabbath and we need it now more than ever.

For many the Sabbath is associated with the Mosaic Law. Indeed, Sabbath *is* one of the Ten Commandments. Nonetheless, the prohibition against work on the Sabbath has its origin in Eden. Genesis 2:2, "And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."

Clearly, God didn't rest because he was tuckered out. He rested as part of the beauty of creation and embedded the Sabbath principle into the physical earth. Land is to lay fallow every seventh year. Animals sleep as part of their daily cycle. Humans are to cease from work one day a week. The principle is simple: Earth's greatest productivity is within a cycle that includes rest. For humans that means that we will get more done in six days of work than seven. Our mind, emotions, and body need time to marinate, clear the clutter, dream, and reorganize. Without rest our work is impeded because our creativity is stifled. Research shows that after 50 hours of work a week our productivity drops so low that the extra hours are virtually unproductive.

This is similar to the principle of the tithe. Scripture teaches that we can do more with 90% of our money under God's rule than 100% without Him. So too, we will be more productive with a day of rest in-between work weeks. Interestingly, the percentage devoted to tithe and to Sabbath are quite close. The tithe is 10% of our money; the Sabbath is 13% of our time. There is another connection between money and time. According to Colossians 3:5, covetousness is idolatry. In our country and culture we understand this. America is the wealthiest nation on the

planet for all of human history. And yet, our prosperity has become our prison. We bow down to the materialistic idols all around. We even embed a paradoxical statement of worship on our bills: In God we trust. This statement can only be true in our culture if the god we are talking about is money. Going back to the Ten Commandments, the two prohibitions against idolatry and Sabbath work are a mere twenty percent of the commandments. And yet, the commentary Moses offers on those two commands make up 63% of the verbiage. In other words, God had more to say about these two commands than all the others combined! Why? Because God knows that the idolatry of materialism and our refusal to rest from work go hand in hand. He also knows the devastating effects on family, church, and our own mind and bodies when these two are violated. And typically they are violated in tandem.

When God's ownership is recognized in our time and treasure--our two most-valuable commodities--we live longer, are more productive, more generous, healthier, and balanced. It really is a very good deal. In fact, this is the closest to Eden we can get on earth. As a consequence of Adam and Eve's sin, humans expelled from the Garden. Our fellowship with God was more distanced, virtually alienated. Our use of the earth was more difficult, even cursed. Our marriages got strained (and for many, irreparably). Our bodies aged and died. The only part of Eden we still have full access to is Sabbath. If we will return to the rest of Eden, the rest of our lives would rest less under the curse of Adam's sin. In order to do that, we will need to become deliberate disciples of Jesus. He had much to say about Sabbath.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus got sideways with the religious leaders for a number of reasons. He ate with sinners, he didn't keep all the ritual washings, he claimed to be God's son, etc. Yet the most frequent fight Jesus got embroiled in was Sabbath violation. The Jewish establishment took the simple command "Don't work on the Sabbath" and turned it into a small encyclopedia of prohibitions. For example, one regulation stated that if you could latch your sandals with one hand, that did not constitute work. If it took two hands it was prohibited as "work". A person could carry two acorns worth of weight. That was ok. If, however, you had three acorns, you had to eat one first before moving on. Women were prohibited from looking in a mirror on the Sabbath lest they see a grey hair and lack the self-control not to pluck it out. These are pretty petty regulations but not seem so arbitrary as this one: An egg laid on the Sabbath was off limits. Now, you could hatch the egg and eat the chicken. Or you could eat the eggs laid by a chicken hatched from the egg that was laid on the Sabbath. But you couldn't eat that egg laid on the Sabbath. Is it any wonder Jesus deliberately flaunted those rules that turned the blessing of rest into a fretful list of rules requiring us to walk on egg shells?

More than any other offence, Jesus ran afoul of the Pharisees for Sabbath violations. Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand one Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6/Matt 12:9-14/Luke 6:6-11), a woman bowed double (Luke 13:10-21), a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-24), a lame man

at Bethesda (John 5:10–18), and a man born blind (John 9:1–7). As you can see, Jesus' was pretty active on the Sabbath. Taken as a whole, the point of each of these events could be simply summarized: humanity should be served by the Sabbath not burdened by it. Or to use Jesus' memorable phrase: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

The first part of the sentence is a claim any prophet might have made—the Sabbath should be a blessing not a burden. The second sentence, however, crossed the boundary of blasphemy: "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath". To be clear, the issue at hand is not mere washing of cups and dishes. This is not about an insignificant cultural idiosyncrasy. The Sabbath, along with circumcision and dietary regulations, marked the social boundaries between Israel and the pagan world. In other words, Sabbath was a key element of being Jewish. To tinker with it was a lethal proposition. Anyone who altered a Mosaic command would have to claim to be on par with Moses. To adjudicate the Sabbath, stemming from Eden itself, would be a claim to stand on par with God himself. That's the point! Jesus does on earth what Yahweh does in heaven. Who does that? Either a liar, a lunatic, or the actual Lord! That is outrageous enough as it stands. But if we read between the lines, there is another claim, equally bodacious and even more beautiful. Because Jesus breeched the Sabbath by healing people, he is not showing *how* to Sabbath but *who* is Sabbath. The Sabbath is a blessing to bring health and healing. That's not a thing; it's a person. Jesus is our health, our healing, our rest. As he said in Matt 11:28, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Jesus pressed his Lordship with the issue of Sabbath. In other words, he took on squarely one of the central symbols of Israel and claimed control over it. At the same time, he used that very authority to practice compassion, particularly through healing. This is precisely what we have come to expect from the King of Kings who said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

Legalism is not Restful

There is one more critical observation that comes out of Colossians 2:20-21, "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.'" In essence, the Sabbath fits that description. There are things the Jews were not to eat, things they were not to pick up, and things they were not to touch. This institution to rest had become as much a burden as a blessing precisely because the principle of rest was turned to a practice of righteousness.

By meticulous observation of religious rules one could prove how righteous he was. It was almost a contest to see who was more meticulously observant. This extended far beyond the Sabbath, of course. It included how often you prayed, how much you tithed, what rules you

kept, and what people you avoided. This is not so different than how many people grew up in church. There were lots of things on the naughty list—dancing, drinking, cussing, smoking. Lots of people on the “untouchable” list—drug dealers, loose women, those of a different political persuasion or perhaps ethnic background. There were things you could brag about—how much scripture you memorized, how many mission trips you had been on, how many Bible Studies you participated in.

Paul’s shrewd insight in Colossians 2:20-21 uncovers the nefarious arrogance of legalism. What you avoid doesn’t make you righteous. Nor do the religious practices you observe. What makes us righteous is the blood of Jesus. Religious activities such as going to church, prayer, tithes, Bible reading, are only valuable in as much as they train us for serving others. And those things we avoid are not feathers in our cap. Rather they are crutches we used to need to get us through the day that are now irrelevant since we are empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

So let’s be clear. Our religious actions—attending worship, prayer, bible reading—are God’s gift to us, not our gift to him. And what we avoid is not because outsiders are icky and we are awesome. They are old habits no longer relevant since they have been replaced by things far better, deeper, and longer lasting. Consequently, our practice of Sabbath is a gift we receive so that we can serve God and neighbors with more energy, productivity, and joy.

Key Points:

- Sabbath rest was instituted in Eden as part of the order of creation.
- Jesus claimed authority over the Sabbath to restore its true purpose.
- Legalism is the opposite of Sabbath being a burden not a blessing.

Action Step: Talk with whomever you live with. Inform them of your intention to practice Sabbath in a practical way that they can hold you accountable.

Further Resources: Richard Swenson, *Margin* (2004).