

## Sabbath Rest

by Derek Sanford | 2-25-20

*How did we get so terribly lost in a world saturated with striving and grasping, yet somehow absent of joy and delight? I suggest it is this: we have forgotten the Sabbath. -Wayne Mueller*

### **My Journey with Sabbath**

Sabbath simply means “to cease.”

Sabbath is a commandment that we’ve become very comfortable breaking. And I think the time has come for us to allow our disobedience to this commandment to rattle us. During my sabbatical a few years ago, at the middle of the second week I had an insight. I had been very diligent about my life-rhythms for two whole weeks. It was then that I realized, “I’m a better person, I’m a better dad, a better husband, a better friend, a better Christian, there is more fruit of the spirit in my life when I’m living in rhythm.

I made a commitment then to be diligent about a weekly Sabbath. As crazy busy as my schedule gets – once per week I will ‘cease.’ It doesn’t always look the same – but I aim for a 24 hour period at some point during the week. Sometimes it’s dinner Friday to dinner Saturday. Sometimes noon to noon. Sometimes all day Friday if I have something going on on Saturday. But I always strive for a 24-hour period.

Sabbath is simply making yourself unavailable for the world, so you can be fully available for God.

### **Stop Making Bricks**

God had brought his people out of slavery. They had endured 400 years of brutality. Egyptian overlords had forced them to make bricks. They worked on a very strict quota, and over the years, the Egyptians kept adding expectations. Instead of just making bricks now they added “gathering straw” to their work load and still they had to meet the same production numbers or they would be brutalized (Ex. 5:7ff). The demands were merciless.

They cried out, “How long oh Lord?” Generation after generation. And then finally God intervened. Moses was chosen to lead the people, they escaped through the parted Red Sea, Pharaoh and his armies were swallowed up behind them, God took His people into the desert, and there He cared for them, He led them, He fed them, and He began the long process of breaking the yoke of slavery off their backs.

One of the gifts he gave them was the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20. 10 Guidelines about life with God and with each other. The first 3 commandments dealt with their relationship with God. Have no other gods before me, make no man-made images, and don’t use the Lord’s name inappropriately.

The last 6 commandments dealt with their relationship with other people. Honor your father and mother, don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie about your neighbor, don’t get grabby with each other’s stuff.

If you’re counting – that’s only 9 commandments.

Embedded in the middle is commandment Number 4. It's the longest and most comprehensive commandment, and its placement in the middle is not by accident. Commandment Number 4 provides a bridge between a healthy relationship with God and a healthy relationship with our fellow man. It is the longest command by far and it's profound in its prominence especially when seen in light of 400 years of slavery under Pharaoh

Exodus 20:8-11 says:

*"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

God takes us all the way back to the creation account. He reminds us that the foundation of Sabbath is rooted in God himself. The sabbath is never mentioned from Genesis 1 until the middle of Exodus 16. Not until after slavery. When God reestablishes Sabbath, He essentially says one day a week you're going to stop making bricks. Why?

Because, according to God, "It's important to know that your worth goes much deeper than what you can produce. You need to stop and realize that you are My child. Once a week you need to press pause on the madness and just BE. Be in My presence, Be in my holiness. Be fully yourself."

This is radically different from what the Israelites had known. And it's radically different from what we know too. God says in order for your soul to be healthy, you must regularly rest. Life is designed to be lived in rhythm of work and rest. A rhythm of hustle and renewal. But our 24/7 culture has demanded that we never slow down. The demand to produce means that we live our lives "on the run," squeezing God in where we can. It means that we live off other people's spirituality because we don't have the time to cultivate our own. It means we multi-task so much that we ourselves are oblivious to the fact that we are constantly trying to do three things at once – and never present anywhere. It means we are always on the way to the next thing. As a result, few of us ever make time to develop our own direct relationship with God.

God's restfulness is both urgent and difficult, because our motors are set to run at brick-making speed. Sabbath is an act of rebellion against the pervading values and assumptions of our workaholic society. In fact, we have to work hard to rest. It takes great intentionality. Look at this passage from Hebrews 4:

*There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, **make every effort** to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. - Hebrews 4:9-11*

### **Benefits of Sabbath:**

1. I'm more present with people. Sabbath makes me more centered and undistracted.

2. I connect at a deeper level with Jesus. Sabbath provides me time and space to do spiritual work and build my relationship with Christ.
3. I can acknowledge my limits. Sabbath forces me out of the role of God. Stuff will still get done – the world will still turn. I have to trust God for all the stuff I’m not doing.
4. I can delight in who God is and what He’s provided. Sabbath re-focuses me on my blessings and away from my burdens.
5. I am more grounded and at peace. Sabbath has an effect on my emotional well-being.

## Framework for a Great Sabbath

(with suggestions from Merle Mees and Dan White)

Let’s get very practical. What exactly should you do with that 24-hour period? One of the first keys is to avoid legalism. Give lots of grace. For some, there will be baby steps involved. Just agree that outright disobedience to this commandment is not an option. The pharisees created many man-made rules around the Sabbath and what started out as a gift from God became like chains around their necks. This is not God’s design. Sabbath is a gift for our benefit.

Some preliminary decisions are involved. Figure out the ‘when’ What’s your best shot at 24-hour period? It may be just a 3-hour block to start. For many people the best day is Sunday. In the Jewish culture it is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. I don’t think the point is the exact day – instead it’s taking the time to spend with God. As a baby step, parents of young children may want to work out a kid swap program. You take my kids this week and I’ll take yours next week so that we can have a sabbath day. So what does the picture of a great Sabbath day look like? There are four components: imagine them like a picture frame around the picture.

1. UNPLUG - To unplug is an act of rebellion against the world. Simply disconnect. Cease from work, noise, technology, to-do lists, problem solving. Walt Brueggeman says it this way, *“On the Sabbath the practical benefits of technology are set aside, and one tries to stand in the cycle of natural time without manipulation or interference.”* For me – I usually disconnect all email stuff on Fridays. I will still have a phone in case of emergencies but no work stuff. My friend Dan tries to incorporate the discipline of unplugging a little bit each day usually from 6-7 PM each night.
2. GATHER – one of the ancient components of Sabbath was that it was a time of communal feasting. Friends and family gathering together around the table as an expression of celebration. During my sabbatical last year, I read a book by a Jewish author, Abraham Heschel called *“The Sabbath.”* Heschel’s parents were immigrants to the states back in the 1950’s and he was just a small boy. He remembered each week walking home from synagogue in New York City with a group of people – often different people each week – whom his parents had invited for a meal. It was a celebration of community and life together. Because embedded in the Sabbath is the idea of community. Because no one is working, that means no one is competing against each other to produce. We are all equal in our rest. So, in addition to resting, Sabbath becomes an occasion for reimagining all of social life away from coercion and away from competition and toward a more compassionate solidarity

between all people. The bible says that “Jesus came eating and drinking.” This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. When Jesus ate and drank with sinners, this was not a secular act but a sacred act. I have a friend who as part of his Sabbath tradition, has an open table at his house. His life group gathers and invites anyone they want to, preferably those who are different than them in some way – a different religion, a different race, a different socio-economic status. And they have food and wine and a little sacred moment where they go around the table and share highs and lows from the week. And every time - God shows up. Every time there is a tear shed, or a celebration shared. I think it would be a beautiful thing for many of you who use Sunday for your Sabbath to share more meals together after church. Even make it a goal to meet someone new at church and immediately invite them to lunch. Part of a great Sabbath is gathering in community and feasting together.

3. RECHARGE Remember the beginning of that fourth commandment. It says “remember the Sabbath and keep it ... “Holy.” An intentional part of every great Sabbath is getting lost in the presence of God. Worshiping Him; entering His holiness. Jesus said, ‘abide in me, remain in me, abide in my love.’ The Sabbath is a weekly opportunity to stay connected to Christ and recharge spiritually. For many, attending church is part of that tradition, which I would obviously encourage! But, what other ways can you intentionally enter into His presence? What about making sure that worship music is playing whenever you’re in the car? For me, I like to spend a good amount of time on Fridays finding my chair. In a slightly different way than during the week. During the week I usually read and study. But on Sabbath I like to practice Lectio Divina it’s a more devotional and personal way to read the bible. It involves reading one short passage over and over again and then personalizing it and having a conversation with God about it. I also usually try to pray through my hopes and hurts – and if I’m on top of my game I’ll do a bit of journaling about it in my Evernote. Sabbath is another great time to find your chair and meet with God and recharge your spiritual batteries. Observing a weekly Sabbath ensures that at the very worst, we are never more than six days away from a holy perspective.
  
4. RECREATE – Sabbath should be a playful space. Through the Old Testament we’re told that God delights in us. This is a Hebrew phrase that literally means "laughing knowing." God has a laughing knowing of us. God enjoys knowing you. He enjoys spending time with you. He enjoys when you experience joy. Do you know how we can know that? Because joy is at the heart of God Himself. We seriously underestimate God’s capacity for joy. GK Chesterton asserts that we will not understand God until we understand this about Him, “God is the happiest being in the universe.” So, the sabbath should include some recreation. "Recreation" means to literally re-create or rebuild, renew, restore, and regenerate. There is a big difference between recreation and amusement. Binge watching a show all day on Netflix might amuse you- but is it really restoring your soul? It’s important to figure out what those things are for you that bring restoration. I heard a saying one time and have found it to be true; that those who work with their minds sabbath with their hands, and those who work with their hands sabbath with their minds. I typically work with my mind during the week, so things like mowing my yard and cutting wood and folding laundry – those things fill me up on my sabbath. For my wife, Kim who works with her hands all week – she likes to read and relax

with a cup of coffee. But we need to figure out how to recreate in a way that's restorative to our souls.

Sabbath is God's gift of restful rhythm. And I'm wondering as you've been reading this, if the Holy Spirit has been pointing out any areas to you where your rhythm of life or your pace of life is out of whack. Maybe one of the greatest expressions of faith that you could achieve right now is to receive the gift of rest. What better time to practice the Sabbath than during the season of Lent.