

Sabbath Rest

Texts: Romans 14:1-8, Leviticus 25:1-12

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Gordon Macdonald writes, “One Saturday morning, I sat in our kitchen obviously rattled and withdrawn, and my wife, Gail, was trying to discern what it was that was bothering me. Suddenly, she asked one question too many, and I broke into weeping. Even now, I remember the next two hours vividly because it seemed as if I would never be able to stop the flow of tears...

For the previous two weeks I had minimized my sleep because of busyness; thus I was physically exhausted. I had allowed my schedule to become so packed that I had ignored any times of personal worship; thus I was spiritually empty. In what seemed to be a remarkable coincidence I had presided at two funerals of indigent men who had died on the city streets and whose lives and deaths seemed to me to be so terribly meaningless. The experiences had profoundly affected me. Additionally, I had been reading a well-known author who was launching an attack on matters of personal belief important to me, and I was not responding to his logic.

On that Saturday I was a dried-out man. My resources were non-existent. Years and accumulated experience after, I would know better than to get backed into such a corner. But I didn’t know then. It was a difficult way to learn an important lesson about being empty” (from Craig Brian Larson, ed. Contemporary Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers & Writers. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996. p. 214).

It is easy for me to get up here this morning and talk with you about Sabbath rest. As you watch this pre-recorded sermon, I am currently 350 miles away on a lake, resting and relaxing and taking the time to be with my family and with God. I will admit to you,

though, that it is usually difficult for me to get to a point of rest during these two weeks. For days after we leave, I will have difficulty falling asleep at night because I cannot keep my mind from thinking and racing. And so now, the question for us is, “How do we commit to times of rest amidst the chaos of life?” Our lives are always busy, and we have so many things beckoning for our attention. So, how do we intentionally take time to rest? How do we commit to spending time with God with everything else that needs to get done?

If you know anything about business or how companies work, you know that what the Lord is proposing to Moses here in our text for this morning goes against everything that you have ever learned. By doing what the Lord is commanding, we lose our competitive edge. The “other guy” wins. We lose. And we do not want that, do we? The Lord is telling Moses that when they enter the Promised Land, the Israelites are to enable the land to observe a Sabbath for the Lord. For six years, they are to work the lands, sowing and reaping them, growing and harvesting the crops, working the land to its limits. Then, in the seventh year, they are to observe a Sabbath. That is, no work is to be done on the land, they are not even to “reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.”

Now, if Moses and the people decide not to do as the Lord has commanded, but continue to work, what do you think will happen to the land? It will probably produce more crops, but chances are, without the rest, the quality and the quantity will both decrease. A year of complete rest is needed in order for the land to be effective and fruitful.

That same reasoning goes for us. Many of us can relate to Gordon McDonald's story from the beginning. We keep going and going and going, and we leave little room for periods of rest and recharge. We are up at the crack of dawn, and we go non-stop until we hit the bed at sometime past midnight or even later. If we continue to do that over and over again, the quality and quantity of what we can do will dramatically decrease, and we will just collapse from exhaustion.

So, what does a Sabbath rest look like for us today? Martin Luther stressed the importance of honoring and maintaining a Sabbath for this reason, "The spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment [the covenant command to keep the Sabbath holy] is that we not only cease from our labor and trade but much more – that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers do we do nothing of our own" (Martin Luther. As in Marva Dawn. Keeping the Sabbath Wholly. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989. p. 56). We are called, friends, to honor the Sabbath by taking time from our work and our labors and just, as Psalm 46 said to us this morning, "Be still and know that I am God." Maybe for you, that period of Sabbath rest could be Sunday. Perhaps try this: starting the day off with quiet time, then worship, and then time with family or friends, and ending it with a time of devotions or prayer to God.

If Sunday does not work, and I know that for some of you, it will not because Sunday is your day to get things done, then find some other day during the week to set aside time to spend in rest and renewal in the presence of the Lord. Paul affirms that in the first Scripture reading for today. "One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike...Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord" (Romans 14:5-6). The real point is, if we continue to run ourselves ragged

and burn the candle at all ends, one of these days it will catch up to us and we will regret not taking the time to rest, spiritually and physically.

Our bodies were not designed by God to be overloaded with stuff to do or stress to handle. We need outlets in our lives that help us cope better with both the daily stresses as well as the major crises of our lives. Would you consider taking a Sabbath rest each week and renewing your commitment to God? Take a day to rest, to put aside the “To Do” list and spend time with your family or friends. Take time to spend with God, in prayer, in His Word, or just being still. It is amazing how God speaks to us during those times when we finally shut off the world and focus on Him. You may be surprised at what God tells you.

We need rest. We need Sabbath in order to deal with the things that life has in store for us. Will you commit to setting aside time each week for rest, renewal, and revitalization in God’s presence? Will you take a God-rest? Let us pray...

Almighty and loving Creator, Sustainer, and Source of all Life, we thank You for creating rest for us. We pray, dear God, that You would help us to take the time from our busyness to rest in Your presence. We know that You created rest for a reason; help us to honor a Sabbath each week by spending time quiet and listening for Your still, small voice speaking to us and renewing our spirits. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray, Amen.