

Week before last, after three months of my melancholy mood, my wife finally sent me away. Sensitive and sensible as she is, she recognized my need for solitude, respite, and fellowship with nature, so she made arrangements with the Andersons for me to go up to their cabin and spend some quality time alone with Jesus.

And it was wonderfully refreshing. I read portions of several books, listened to sermons, read 5 or 6 the epistles of the NT, listened to some classic hymns, took long meditative prayer walks in the snow, and breathed deeply in the atmosphere of grace and truth and Douglas fir.

And there was no particular agenda. In fact, when I first got there I just stood and looked toward the mountains and remembered **Ps.121**, *“I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from whence shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”* And I just stopped and said, that’s it; that’s why I’m here: to lift up my eyes and look. I’m not here to fix anything or write anything or do anything or even come up with a list of things to do when I get back; I’m just here to raise my head and open my eyes and see what God is doing and recognize that whatever help I need, He’s it.

It was just what the doctor ordered. In fact, it was so beneficial to me, that I’m compelled this morning to talk to you about why it’s important for each of us to do that regularly.

And of course, as I reflected on my two nights and one full day away, I realized that what I was doing was not anything original or new; all I was doing was the very thing God established from the beginning of time and commanded Israel to do every week. The name for it is *Sabbath*.

Technically, I wasn't up there on the Sabbath day, but essentially I was observing a Sabbath. And the benefits of that are so profound and so important to our health and wholeness, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, that I want to take a couple of weeks to study the concept and commands related to the Sabbath and consider why and how we as Christians today, without subjecting you again to a yoke of bondage, without putting you under the law, without being legalistic, can benefit from revisiting a forgotten practice.

Wendell Berry writes:

We are living at the climax of industrialism. The "cheap" fossil fuels, on which our world has grown dependent, are now becoming expensive in money and in lives. The industrial era at climax, in the panic of long-anticipated decline, has imposed on us all its ideals of ceaseless pandemonium. The industrial economy, by definition, must never rest. Rest would deprive us of light, heat, food, water, and everything else we need or think we need. The economic impulse of industrial life (to stretch a term) is limitless. Whatever we have, in whatever quantity, is not enough. There is no such thing

as enough. Our bellies and our wallets must become oceanic, and still they will not be full. Six workdays in a week are not enough. We need a seventh. We need an eighth. In the industrial world, at climax, one family cannot or will not support itself by one job. We need a job for the day and one for the night. Thank God for the moon! We cannot stop to eat. Thank God for cars! We dine as we drive over another paved farm. Everybody is weary, and there is no rest. *Living the Sabbath*, Norman Wirzba

In other words, because of the industrial age in which we live, we're on the treadmill, everyone of us, and there's no timer that shuts it off, there's no stop button, there's no sensor that monitors our vital signs and says, "Okay, that's enough." There's no such thing as enough. "Stop now" is not even part of the program. And many of us, spiritually if not physically, are *dying from doing*. Our whole identity and value as human beings is defined by what we do and how much we do and how well we do, and as long as we keep going and don't stop performing, we justify our existence and prove our self-worth.

But that's not the way God designed us to live. We aren't machines. We weren't created for perpetual motion, or worse, ceaseless pandemonium.

From the beginning God built into creation a rhythm. A cadence. A pace. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, every seventh day *stop*." And we need to look at that again and ask why.

Why is that important? Why did God command His people to do that? And what are we missing if we neglect to do that?

So turn with me – we'll just do this inductively, looking at the relevant passages, and letting them speak for themselves – first to Exodus 20.

In Exodus 20 we find the first list of the 10 commandments, and the fourth one is about keeping the Sabbath.

READ Exodus 20:8-11.

The basic command is “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*” Everything else is explanation or reason. And I think so much explanation is given for this one because the command itself is counter-intuitive (it's certainly counter-cultural). “Stop doing? Set aside a whole day in every week to not work? To rest? That's what night is for. I have responsibilities; I have customers waiting; I have crops to harvest; I have animals to feed; I have to make hay while the sun shines – every day.” And God says, “No, you don't. Six days is enough to do your work. One day a week you need to stop.” And the basic reason He gives is what? We are to keep a Sabbath because He did.

Now let's look at this. I find several compelling reasons why God instituted the Sabbath and why it's so important.

1. To rest from all your labor.

That's the thought in **vs.11** – *“In six days the Lord made the heavens and the 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.”* For six days He created, on the seventh He rested, and so the Sabbath day is to be a day of rest.

Now what does that mean? We know God doesn't get tired, so what does it mean that He rested?

Well the idea is simply that He stopped. That's what the word Sabbath means – to cease or desist. God didn't need a day off because He was tired, rather He set aside a day to stop *doing* and simply *be*. For the sake of analogy we could say He stopped being God the Creator and went back to just being God. And once a week we need a day when we stop being Brad the pastor or Brad the preacher and can just be Brad the person created in the image of God.

That's the kind of rest this is talking about. Not so much physical rest, although we need that too, but a cessation of our normal routine of work and activity and business (of doing, doing, doing) so that we have time to catch our breath and think and meditate and enjoy life and *be people* not just laborers. Setting aside a whole day where the focus is not on what we accomplish or what we have to get done, but the focus is on *who we are* as human beings in relation to God and the rest of creation.

It's about getting our bearing.

In his book, *Living the Sabbath, Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, Norman Wirzba writes: The frantic, fragmenting, multitasking character of contemporary living has made it likely that many of us will simply evade, or fail to consider with much seriousness or depth, life's most basic and profound questions: What is all our living finally for? Why do we commit to so much? Why do we devote ourselves to the tasks or priorities that we do? Will we know when we have achieved or acquired enough? What purpose does our striving serve? While these questions point to the basic ingredients of any recipe for a decent human life, they are also vital to the life of faith, for in pondering them we not only become clearer about our ultimate allegiances but also gain insight into who we understand ourselves to be. In answering them we get a clearer picture of how closely our intentions and our living line up with the purposes of God. Do we truly believe ourselves to be children of God and members of creation, and thus able to trust in God's beneficent care and provision?

(p.20)

So Sabbath keeping is not simply about resting, it's about realigning, redirecting, recalibrating. It's a reset button. It's taking out our compass and finding true North again, and asking, "Where am I and where am I going? It's not just an intermission to refuel so we can plunge back into our frantic schedule with renewed energy and efficiency; it's a regular reappraisal of our values

and priorities and objectives: Who am I and why am I here?

We have to face those questions, but we have to stop to do it.

We do this with our children. You ever try to talk to one of your kids when they're preoccupied? They say they're listening, but you can tell they're not. They think they can keep doing what they're doing *and* listen too, but they really can't. What do you do? You say, "Sweetie, can you stop what you're doing for a minute and look at me and listen to me, this is important." That's what a Sabbath is for. God knows that we can't really pay attention to Him unless we stop what we're doing.

Here's a second thought. Why did God give man the Sabbath day? To rest from all his labor, to stop doing and simply *be*. Second reason for a Sabbath:

2. To reverence the Lord as your God.

Vs.9 says, "*Six days you shall labor and do all our work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of/to the Lord your God.*"

The day belongs to the Lord. It's His Sabbath. It's to be singled out as time devoted to Him and focused on Him.

That's the point of **vs.9** – "remember the Sabbath day, *to keep it holy.*" "To keep it holy" means to set it apart and make it distinct and unique from ordinary days. Ordinarily your days are filled with

work, this day is to be filled with something different, like worship and reverence for God.

And notice the phrase – “*a Sabbath to the Lord your God.*” It’s a time to affirm *by* your change of pace and change of preoccupation that your God is the Lord and the Lord is your God.

We need that, don’t we. We need flags and markers and sticky-notes built into our routine that remind us to see that and say that and *show* that and *savor* that – Lord you are my God. You are the sovereign ruler and creator of all things. I belong to You. You are my treasure. You are my hope. You are my reason for living. You are worthy of all my affection, adoration, worship and praise. You are the Lord and you are my God.

That’s what we learned last week from 1 Cor.12. Spiritual people, by the Holy Spirit, see and say and savor that Jesus is Lord, and spiritual maturity is being able to see and say and savor that more and more in every aspect of life.

I hope we stop to say that every day, but if we forget, we at least can stop and say it one day.

Look at **Exod.31. READ vs.12-13, 16-17a.**

This was a sign between God and His people. This was a way to demonstrate that they were His covenant people. It was a reminder – **vs.13** – “*that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.*” The Sabbath was a sign. It pointed to the most profound reality there is and one that God’s people must never forget – namely, that He (not we ourselves) has made us

and He (not we ourselves) has sanctified us. He has chosen us and set us apart and worked to make us distinct among all the people of the earth – His people, to show forth His glory.

Turn to **Isa.58:13. READ vs.13-14.**

What's God saying? He's saying, I want you to delight in Me. I want you to turn from just keeping the Sabbath out of obligation and start keeping it out of delight. "Delight in the Lord." "Call the Sabbath a delight." That's what God wants it to be. Not a burden. Not an interruption of your pleasure, but the pinnacle of your pleasure. What God wants is for our highest pleasure to be delighting in Him because that is life's highest pleasure.

And it can never be that everyday if we can't even make it so one day.

While I was walking through the snow in my snowshoes, listening to my ipod, the thought flooded my soul – "What is the chief end of man?" That's the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." And I thought to myself, "Hey, I'm doing that! I'm doing that right now. That is the chief purpose for my existence and I'm doing it. Whatever else I may leave undone in my lifetime, I have done and am doing the thing for which I was chiefly made: I'm glorifying God and enjoying Him. Thank you Lord for the thrill of knowing that and doing that."

And here's another thought. If you don't delight in the Lord now, what makes you think you'll enjoy heaven? Unless God is your chief delight now, heaven will be hell to you. You'd be miserable there.

Abraham Heschel observed, "Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come." He's right. We're naïve if we think that we'll enjoy God in heaven if we don't enjoy God on earth. If we haven't cultivated an appetite and acquired an appreciation for God's presence, God's blessings, and God's ways here, how will we ever enjoy the culinary delights of heaven?

Keeping a Sabbath is how we say to ourselves, to God, to each other, and to the world, *the Lord is God and He is our God.*

There's a third reason for a Sabbath.

Not only to rest from our labor.

Not only to reverence the Lord as our God.

3. To receive blessing from God.

Again notice vs.11. **READ vs.11.**

Now what does that mean? "The Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy?"

I think it means He singled it out as a unique object and source of blessing.

When God blessed Abraham, what did that mean?

It means He singled him out in a special way to

become the object of His blessing and a channel of His blessing to others.

When God blesses the land, same thing. He fills that land with blessing.

So I think that's the point here. God blessed the Sabbath, meaning He made it rich with blessing so it would be a blessing to others.

And when we stop what we're doing long enough to rest from our labor and reverence the Lord as our God, we also receive His blessing.

We stick our empty cup under His hydrant and He fills it to overflowing. We come before Him with cold hearts and He warms them with the fire of His love for us in Christ. We fall down before Him with burdens too heavy to bear and He fills us with so much joy our burdens seem light as a feather. We wait upon Him and He gives us new strength.

So why is Sabbath important? Because it puts you in receiver mode instead of doer mode and provider mode and giver mode. You need what God has to give you more than the world or your family or God needs what you have to give them.

There's a psalm that says "Be still and know that I am God." And sometimes that's the only way to know Him is to be still. Stop trying to be all and do all; and let Him who is all fill all.

Here's a fourth reason man needs a Sabbath.

4. To restore dignity and liberty and extend charity and show mercy to your fellow creatures.

Notice Vs.10.

[READ vs.10]

Everyone was to experience the Sabbath. The head of the household couldn't say, "Alright, I'll stop working, but no reason why the ox shouldn't keep threshing, no reason why the maid shouldn't keep milking." God says, "No. Them too." Why?

One, they belong to God, too. Your children, and slaves, and workers, and relatives, and guests, and animals belong to God before they belong to you. Don't be like Pharaoh who wouldn't let the children of Israel go worship their God.

Two, you miss the point if you try to keep the business running by using children or servants or animals to do the work while you hypocritically "keep the day holy." People are more important than profit or production or produce.

So this was an expression of justice and mercy. The Sabbath was to be the great equalizer, as each member of the household, each person in society, regardless of age or status, shared equally in the celebration of rest.

The rest of one person was not to be at the expense of the exhaustion and toil and abuse and neglect of another. Even the animals were to be relieved of their burdens.

The principle extends further: **Exod.21:2.**

If an Israelite had to sell himself into slavery to pay off his debts, you could buy him and put him to work, but unless he chose to stay, he was to be released in the 7th year.

It goes further: **Exod.23:10-12.**

Even the land was to rest and lie fallow every 7th year, and whatever volunteer produce came up was to be for the poor.

Further still, look at **Lev.25:8-10, 13.**

The year of Jubilee. Every 50 years – reset button. Everyone that had been displaced by indebtedness or slavery or war or poverty, was to be returned to their tribe and family and ancestral lands.

Do you get the point of all that? God is more concerned about human dignity and liberty and mercy and charity than He is about us getting rich. People are more important than possessions and property and profit. And this practice of *releasing* people and animals and land every 7 days, every 7 years, every 50 years was *a way to crucify the idols of greed and control and power and selfishness and security than run so deep in our hearts.* Turn it loose. Let it go. Stuff is not yours to keep. People are not yours to own and use. The whole creation belongs to God not you. He will take care of you; you do right by your fellow man.

So the Sabbath carried with it a strong emancipatory thrust, a strong egalitarian thrust. It was just the opposite of being tightfisted and cruel and unloving. It was a way to cultivate into society compassion and kindness and generosity and justice and faith.

And who modeled this way of thinking about the Sabbath better than anybody? Jesus.

READ Matt.12:1-13.

What was wrong with the Pharisees? They had missed the whole point of the Sabbath. Compassion. *“If you had only learned what this means, “I desire compassion, not sacrifice.”* To honor, restore, heal, feed, to bless your fellow man, not condemn him. To restore relationships. To relieve pain and suffering. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So why did God give man a Sabbath? To teach us to restore dignity and liberty and extend mercy and kindness to our fellow creatures.

Then here’s the fifth and main reason from this passage.

5. To remember the original Sabbath and celebrate God’s work of creation.

Vs.8 – “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it set apart.”

“Remember the Sabbath” implies that the concept was already well known. And of course it was because it goes back to the very beginning of creation.

What this fourth commandment calls for is to remember **the** Sabbath – the *first* Sabbath, the 7th day of creation when God rested.

It's calling us back to the creation account to remember what God did there.

And what did God do there?

Go back and look. **Gen.1:31 – 2:3.**

God's work of creation was done in six days and it was very good and so what did He do? He rewarded Himself for finishing early by making the 7th day a day to enjoy His handiwork.

Seriously. What He had made was very good.

What do you do with something that's very good?

You enjoy it.

Get this. There's no other reason to have a 7th day.

The 7th day was established to commemorate and celebrate what God accomplished in 6.

The Sabbath calls us to stop our work and look at God's.

The Sabbath is an invitation to participate regularly in the delight that marked God's own response to a creation wonderfully made.

Wendell Berry – “The requirement of Sabbath observance invites us to stop. It invites us to rest. It asks us to notice that while we rest the world continues without our help. It invites us to find delight in the world's beauty and abundance. (Thank God for cheap recreation!).”

(p.12)

I think it was Charles Spurgeon who said, “Second to the ministry of God's grace to us through Scripture, there's nothing quite like a stiff breeze

in the face by the sea.” I understand that. Sometimes natural revelation ministers to my soul just as powerfully as special revelation.

We get so caught up in *our* work, don't we? How silly is that? Compared to God's work is our work really all that special? Does our work keep the planets in orbit? Does our work make the sun shine? Does our work make it rain and snow?

When the kids get fussy or rowdy, parents often say, “*Go outside and play.*” “*It's a beautiful day, you kids should be outside.*” I think the Sabbath is a similar exhortation from God – My child, you've lost perspective; you're too big and I'm too small. You need to go outside and play. Go climb one of My trees and just sit there for an hour listening to the birds I made. Run barefoot in My grass. Lie on your back and watch the clouds float by. Fish one of My streams. Hike to the peak of one of My mountains. I gave you a whole extra day just to play and my whole world is your playground.

Eugene Peterson wrote, “One of the ways God has provided for us to stay aware of and responsive to Him as the determining and centering reality of our lives in a world that doesn't care about it is by Sabbath-keeping. At regular intervals we all need to quit our work and contemplate his, quit talking to each other and listen to him. God knows we need this and has given us a means in

Sabbath – a day for praying and playing, simply enjoying what he is [and what He has made].

Prayer Time, 82

The Sabbath is for celebrating God's work of creation. For remembering that what He's doing is more important and more wonderful than anything we're doing.

Now there's one other passage I want us to look at. Turn to **Deut.5:12-15**.

Deut. 5 is the second time the 10 commandments are listed. It's the same list and the same fourth commandment, but this time there's a different reason for keeping it.

READ Deut.5:12-14. Same as before until vs.15.

READ v.15.

What's the motive here? In Exodus the motive is creation; here the motive for keeping the Sabbath is what? Redemption. Keep the Sabbath as a way to celebrate God's creation. Keep the Sabbath as a way to rejoice in your redemption.

6. To rejoice in your redemption.

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt but the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

In Egypt they didn't have a choice; labor was forced upon them daily without end. But God delivered them from that. And every Sabbath was a reminder of their liberation. Likewise for us, in a spiritual sense, we were slaves to sin and death

and Satan, but God saved us. He redeemed us from our futile way of life. And every day we stop working to rejoice in our redemption we're reminded that all our works could never make us free from sin, only God in Christ could do that and He did.

Have you been redeemed? Then how bad can life be? Rejoice and give thanks for your salvation.

So six reasons for a seventh day.

To rest from all your labor.

To reverence the Lord as your God.

To receive blessing from God.

To restore dignity and liberty and show kindness and charity to your fellow man.

To remember the first Sabbath and celebrate God's creative work.

To rejoice in your redemption.

Now what would happen if a person kept a Sabbath day every week with those reasons in mind? What would happen? Pretty soon all those intentions for the Sabbath day would begin to permeate your attitude every day. Right? And that's precisely the point.

That's why in the NT, to Christians, Paul can say in **Rom.14** – “one person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike.” And both are right. When we come to know Jesus and His intentions for our lives then Sabbath keeping becomes Sabbath living. We can observe the Sabbath *any* day or *every* day.

Next time we'll talk more about *how* to do that.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for building into creation a rhythm of rest and delight. Help us to walk by the cadence and pace You've established for us. Even today, allow us the uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our own activities so we can see what you are doing. Allow us the uncluttered time and space to detach ourselves even from the people close to us so that we and they have a chance to deal with You personally and directly without interference or distraction. Whether with weary bodies or anxious hearts may we hear the invitation of Jesus today to come unto him and find rest for our souls. Or if possible, may we take you up on the offer to go outside and play. You know our needs, Father, minister Your grace to us this day, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.