

Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11)

Big Idea: Embrace God's gift of sabbath.

We have a problem.

In his book *The Way We're Working Isn't Working*, Tony Schwartz describes what it is:

The way we're working isn't working ... More information than ever is available to us, and the speed of every transaction has increased exponentially, prompting a sense of permanent urgency and endless distraction. We have more customers and clients to please, more e-mails to answer, more phone calls to return, more tasks to juggle, more meetings to attend, more places to go, and more hours we feel we must work to avoid falling further behind. The technologies that make instant communication possible anywhere, at any time, speed up decision making, create efficiencies, and fuel a truly global marketplace. But too much of a good thing eventually becomes a bad thing. Left unmanaged and unregulated, these same technologies have the potential to overwhelm us...

No matter how much value we produce today – whether it's measured in dollars or sales or goods or widgets – it's never enough. We run faster, stretch out our arms further, and stay at work longer and later. We're so busy trying to keep up that we stop noticing we're in a Sisyphean race we can never win.

All this furious activity exacts a series of silent costs: less capacity for focused attention, less time for any given task, and less opportunity to think re-

flectively and long term. When we finally do get home at night, we have less energy for our families, less time to wind down and relax, and fewer hours to sleep. We return to work each morning feeling less rested, less than fully engaged, and less able to focus. It's a vicious cycle that feeds on itself. Even for those who still manage to perform at high levels, there is a cost in overall satisfaction and fulfillment. The ethic of more, bigger, faster generates value that is narrow, shallow, and short term. More and more, paradoxically, leads to less and less.

Can you relate? I get tired just reading that. It feels increasingly like we're caught on a treadmill and we can't get off. We read books like *Essentialism* and *In Praise of Slow*, but our lives keep getting more complicated and tiring.

Not only does it cause all the problems that I just mentioned, but there's another problem. Our constant hurry also harms our souls. We feel that all the time. Corrie ten Boom once said that if the devil can't make you sin, he'll make you busy. John Mark Comer observes, "There's truth in that. Both sin and busyness have the exact same effect—they cut off your connection to God, to other people, and even to your own soul."

What should we do? One word: rest. It's one of the most important and neglected commands and gifts that Scripture gives us.

The Command

Here's the command. It's in the Ten Commandments, and it's the longest of all of them.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 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. 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. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Some observations:

First, this is surprising. God gives a list of his ten big commands for us to follow. Over and over, these commands are repeated and amplified throughout Scripture. These are a big deal. They orient us to love God and others well. They cover things like worshiping God, and other important notes like not killing other people and not stealing.

One of these important commands is that we take a break and don't work all the time. Don't work yourself to death seven days a week. Take one day and do something different. In other words, this isn't a peripheral matter. This is important to God. In fact, it's the longest commandment of the ten. God goes into the most detail on the benefits and the rationale compared to the other commands. It's the most detailed and the most repeated in the Old Testament.

Think about this. Out of all the commands that God could have issued, this made his top ten. Sabbath is so important that it appears in the second chapter of Genesis and is reiterated here and in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Second, this is relevant. Now, there's a lot of debate about whether this command still applies. Some people argue that the Sabbath is no longer in force for new covenant believers for a number of verses, including Romans 14:5: "One person es-

teems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

But even people who argue that the Sabbath command no longer applies aren't saying that it's a bad idea to rest. For instance, Tom Schreiner [writes](#), "It is wise naturally for believers to rest, and hence one principle that could be derived from the Sabbath is that believers should regularly rest."

The best line that I've read to help me understand it is by someone I can't even remember now: *While others like to debate the issue of Sabbath, I prefer to take one.* The Sabbath isn't something to debate. It's something to enjoy.

Christopher Ash writes:

I hope we can all agree that the "six day one day" pattern of work and rest is hard-wired into creation and therefore into the human race. Behind the Sabbath commandment lies a creation pattern. Even if the Sabbath is no longer an old-covenant religious obligation, we are simply foolish to behave as though we no longer need a day off each week.

Whether or not the Sabbath command is still in effect, we can agree that it just makes sense. We were not meant to work all the time. God made us to need rest, and Sabbath is a gift that makes sense for us to enjoy.

Third, It's for everyone. We were in the bank the other day. The manager asked if we could meet on Friday, and we said no, and explained why. "We take our Sabbath that day," I explained. The manager loved that and said, "Good for you. Not everyone can do that, but it's good you can." If you look at the passage, though, Sabbath isn't reserved for the privileged. It's for everyone. No matter how rich or poor you are, Sabbath is for you. If you look deeper, there are some other actions as well:

Fourth, Sabbath involves some actions. Rest is not just passive. It involves some actions. In particular, two of them:

- **Remember** – Don't forget. Don't get sloppy and lose this pattern in your life. Don't forget to take it off. Remembering also means taking it seriously. It's like remembering your anniversary. It's not enough to just bring it to mind; you need to treat it like it matters.
- **Keep it holy** – This means to make it different from all the other days. Keep it focused in a particular direction. Specifically, verse 10 says that it is a Sabbath for the Lord. This is more than just a day off for recreation. It's a day of worship. Eugene Peterson said, "Sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us; it is about God and how God forms us. . . . I don't see any way out of it; if we are going to live appropriately in the creation we must keep the Sabbath." One day out of seven, make the pursuit of God your focus rather than simply the pursuit of ordinary things.
- **Keep it one day out of seven.** There's a rhythm recommended in this passage. It's not an occasional practice. It's supposed to be one in seven.
- **Stop and rest.** "On it you shall not do any work..." It's a day that has a couple of purposes. One is to pursue God; the other is to rest and step away from your normal responsibilities. Phil Ryken says, "It is not a day for business as usual. Rather, it is a day for relaxation and recuperation, a day to step back from life's ordinary routines in order to rediscover God's goodness and grace."
- **No cheating.** Notice how God closes all the loopholes: "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."

Don't get all cute and think that you can find a way to skirt the intention of this command by keeping things going with others while you rest.

Put this all together, and you have the idea of intentionally pursuing Sabbath. It's not passive. It involves some deliberate activities: remembering to do it, engaging in activities that draw you to God, keeping a regular pattern of one day in seven, resting, and resisting the urge to cheat.

Final observation: God blesses the Sabbath. Verses 11 says, "Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Again, John Piper says:

What does it mean for God to bless a day? I think it means that he makes the day a time of blessing...

He made it a source of blessing, and he made it to focus on himself. Isn't it obvious that the hallowing is included in the blessing and the blessing is included in the hallowing. When you hallow God and focus your attention on him, you receive more blessing than if you keep on busying yourself seven days a week with secular affairs, thinking that professional advancement and money are the route to true happiness.

Just to review: this is surprising and relevant. It involves some actions. And God promises to bless it.

An Invitation

So I want to give you an invitation, an invitation not from me but from God himself. It opens up a completely different way of living and goes completely against the way the world operates.

As I give this invitation, I want you to realize that everything in you will resist this invitation and command. You will come up with a million reasons why it's not realistic or why it doesn't apply to you. And just to be clear, it's hard work to get going with this. It takes work, and at least initially, you'll find this hard.

One day a week, stop. Lay aside your regular responsibilities. Devote the day to two things: pursuing God and rest. Intentionally unplug and engage in activities that bring you closer to God and that renew you. Take a day to let your soul breathe.

And enjoy God. Sabbath is ultimately a picture of the true rest: the rest that comes from knowing that we matter to God, that God has done everything necessary so that we can lay aside what we do and receive from him everything that we need and enjoy and magnify Jesus in our lives. As you rest, remind yourself that you are a recipient of God's grace. Reset your life so that you're focused on what matters most. Enjoy the reality right now that Jesus has done everything you need to care for your deepest needs, and in Jesus he has prepared an everlasting rest – an end to striving – for your soul. Sabbath gives us a taste of that right now.

John Mark Comer says, "Sleep in. Relax. Spend time in the Scriptures. Pray. Eat our way through the day. Enjoy nature – go for a walk, to the park, or sometimes on a light hike. Spend time with close friends and family." Worship.

Don't do some things. Don't run errands. Don't even think of work. It's probably best to say offline as much as possible. As Comer says, "But these 'rules' aren't suffo-

cating or rigid; they are pliable and limber and spacious. They are the rules of a craft, a discipline, an art form.”

And then he continues, “I hope and pray that ... you start to Sabbath. It honestly changed my life, and I think it has the potential to do the same for you.”