

Sabbath:
Finding Rest in a Busy World
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West Valley Church
1/06/19

Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Busy World Part One: What is it?

I have been looking forward to this sermon series with you in the month of January for a long time. For this month, our series is called, "Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Busy World."

I'm guessing you might be approaching this topic with one of a few different attitudes. You might be thinking that it's too good to be true – you do not think that we actually *can* find real rest in this busy world. Or, you might be thinking that all we are going to do is regurgitate some legalistic fundamentalistic religious rules that everyone is supposed to obey on Sundays, whether they like it or not. Or, you might not even know what the word "Sabbath" means, except maybe your head-banging parents used to listen to a hard-rock band from the 70's called "Black Sabbath." If any of those are your thoughts, you are in for a great surprise because you are way, way wrong.

By the time we are done with this series, you will hopefully know what sabbath is, what it isn't, and you'll have a definition to work with. You'll know how great the impact on your life is that Sabbath can bring. And, I hope you will be able to put into your plans some practical patterns for the rhythm of Sabbath that will bring balance and rest into your life. I also need to say that if you are not a Christian, you will not understand or be able to fully experience what we are about to learn.

So open our church app or get out your worship brochure, because today we want to get a grasp of Sabbath basics, starting with

1. Sabbath: why we need it

I don't think it would take any convincing for any of us to say that life is stressful. All of us understand and have experienced the debilitating effects of stress in our lives.

Our most notorious industrial accidents in recent history—Exxon Valdez, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, the fatal navigational error of Korean Air Lines 007—all occurred in the middle of the night, with significant blame being on overly-tired and stressed operators. When the USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian A300 airbus killing all 290 people aboard, fatigue-stressed operators in the high-tech Combat Information Center on the carrier misinterpreted radar data and repeatedly told their captain the jet was descending as if to attack when in fact the airliner remained on a normal flight path. In the Challenger space shuttle disaster, key NASA officials and engineers had been working round the clock for weeks in preparation, and made the ill-fated decision to go ahead with the launch after working twenty hours straight and getting only two to three hours of sleep the night

before. Their error in judgment cost the lives of seven astronauts and nearly killed the U.S. space program.¹ Lack of rest is very costly.

It seems like we are always under pressure of some kind, and that pressure-driven lifestyle gets carried over into every area of our lives.

Here's what happens to you: your central nervous system is in charge of your "fight or flight" response. In your brain, the hypothalamus gets the ball rolling, telling your adrenal glands to release the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rev up your heartbeat and send blood rushing to the areas that need it most in an emergency, such as your muscles, heart, and other important organs.

When the perceived fear is gone, the hypothalamus should tell all systems to go back to normal. If the Central Nervous System fails to return to normal, or if the stressor doesn't go away, the response will continue.² And therein is the problem; because we continue to function at a high stress level. We've gotten to the point in our society where we place higher value on those who are the busiest.³ So we've carried that frenetic pace into our personal lives; we're always in a self-imposed hurry, always under the gun. We need to accomplish certain things at home or on our days off work. We plan vacations with the same stress-packed schedules. And that adrenaline push in our systems *really* works; we can think more clearly and get more done in a shorter amount of time.

But our central nervous system continues to run at that high-adrenaline pace, like always driving your car at 5000 RPMs. When that happens, our bodies get addicted to our own adrenaline; our body gets dependent on that adrenaline in order to function. So if we slow down, our brain alerts us that we need more stress in order to keep functioning at that level.⁴

Some of the *common* effects of stress on your body include:

- Headache
- Muscle tension or pain
- Chest pain
- Fatigue
- Multiple changes in reproductive abilities
- Stomach upset
- Sleep problems

¹ Gary Yates, Roanoke, Virginia; references Martin Moore-Ede, *The Twenty Four Hour Society* (Circadian Information, 1993)

² <https://www.stress.org/stress-effects/>

³ Michael Blanding, "Having No Life Is the New Aspirational Lifestyle," *Forbes* (2-20-17)

⁴ Dr. Archibald Hart, *The Hidden Link Between Adrenaline and Stress* (Word Publishing, 1995)

The *common* effects of stress on your mood are:

- Anxiety
- Restlessness
- Lack of motivation or focus
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritability or anger
- Sadness or depression

These can lead to *common* effects of stress on your behavior:

- Overeating or under-eating
- Angry outbursts
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Tobacco use
- Social withdrawal
- Exercising less often⁵

Left unchecked, stress leaves a devastating trail of destruction in our bodies, with heart attacks, migraine headaches, chronic fatigue and immune system syndromes, ulcers, high blood pressure, strokes, obesity and other eating disorders, anxiety disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, diabetes, and all kinds of cancers.⁶ If the symptoms get to the point where we need a doctor, one of the admonitions we are given is to slow down and get some rest. But the problem is that when we seek rest for its own sake, then rest itself becomes *one more thing* that we have to accomplish – crammed into our already busy schedules. Or worse yet, our bodies take over our brains and force us to get rest – we get sick, or the symptoms overtake us and we end up flat on our backs and in a hospital bed.

Over the last decade, anxiety has overtaken depression as the most common reason college students seek counseling services. For many of these young people, the biggest single stressor is that they "never get to the point where they can say, 'I've done enough, and now I can stop,'" [one expert] says. "There's always one more activity, one more A.P. class, one more thing to do in order to get into a top college. Kids have a sense that they're not measuring up. The pressure is relentless and getting worse."⁷ And that is just the physical and emotional toll of stress. Obviously stress also gets spewed out like poison on those closest to us; the results of stress in our lives hammer all of our relationships.

⁵ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>

⁶ <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress/effects-on-body#1>

⁷ Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety?" New York Times Magazine (10-11-17)

And then there is the spiritual toll. We have little energy to focus on God, and church simply becomes one more thing to pack into our too-tight schedule. So more and more people are skipping out on church, and today the average church attender goes to church a little over twice a month, when just a couple decades ago it was *every* Sunday. We find less and less time and energy to spend in small groups or in reading the Bible and prayer. And when we are exhausted and stressed, our ability to avoid temptation and sin goes down; in fact, our tendency to *choose* habitual sin goes up.

God warned us way back in the Old Testament:

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:2, esv)

Sounds like the treadmill many of us are on! The wisdom of Proverbs points out what we should be recognizing:

“Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down.” (Proverbs 12:25, esv)

We may not think we are afflicted like Job, but then you hear him say this and it sounds so much like our stressful lives:

“My inward parts are in turmoil and never still; days of affliction come to meet me.” (Job 30:27, esv)

God says that all of our hurry and worry simply leads us further and further from God, to be more self-reliant, and to sin. So he describes our stress-filled condition:

“Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit, this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant. It will break in pieces like pottery, shattered so mercilessly that among its pieces not a fragment will be found for taking coals from a hearth or scooping water out of a cistern.” This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: “*In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength*, but you would have none of it. You said, ‘No, we will flee on horses.’ Therefore you will flee! You said, ‘We will ride off on swift horses.’ Therefore your pursuers will be swift! A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away...Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you.” (Isaiah 30:12-17, niv)

God has the answer we need, but it's going to involve some ruthless determination to trust him and to make ourselves stop and begin taking time to trust and enjoy God, our time, and our relationships. That's what Sabbath will do for us.

The paper used for standard letter writing and school essays is 8.5 x 11 inches, or 93.5 square inches. Most teachers require one-inch margins for class papers. That's the standard we've become accustomed to seeing. But have you ever stopped to consider what percentage of the page that margin occupies? When I ask people, most answer anywhere from 15 to 25 percent.

But a one-inch margin on a standard sized paper is 37.4 percent of a page's area. More than one-third of the page is given to empty space. And that's just around the edges. When you double-space the lines of text, a majority of the paper is blank.

The empty border helps us focus on the printed text. It creates a comfortable feel for our eyes. Sometimes people think that margin (sometimes called "white space") is wasteful and inefficient. They pack as much print as possible on the page. But have you ever seen a page packed with text from top to bottom and side to side? You'll get tired looking at it, even before you begin reading it.

Sabbath works like margins. The uncluttered space in our lives gives us margin, brings the rest of our lives into clearer focus, and makes everything so much easier.

So I think we've just begun to see why we need it, what about...

2. Sabbath: *what it's not*

There are a lot of unhealthy traditional ideas about Sabbath.

It's interesting some of the old rules that some communities had created around church and "Sabbath" – they actually turned them into civil laws. Some of these are still on the books, although they aren't enforced anymore: For example, in Wheeler, Mississippi, young girls are never allowed to walk a tightrope unless it's in a church. So, no female circus performers in Wheeler Mississippi! What's going on in these towns?

In Blackwater, Kentucky, tickling a woman under her chin with a feather duster while she's in church service carries a penalty of \$10.00 and one day in jail. Was it happening that much in church in Blackwater, Kentucky that they had to draw the line?!

No one can eat unshelled, roasted peanuts while attending church in Idanha, Oregon. I've been to Idanha. It's in the Middle Santiam Wilderness, over an hour and a half west of where I grew up. It was incorporated in 1949 and the population is 148 people. I'm guessing that maybe they *all* have a peanut allergy...because they all share the same DNA...

In Honey Creek, Iowa, no one is permitted to carry a slingshot to church except a policeman. These gun control laws are getting out of hand!

Turtle races are not permitted within 100 yards of a local church at any time in Slaughter, Louisiana.⁸ What?

How many of you grew up in a church that didn't allow you to do anything at all on Sundays? What things were you not supposed to do? You know what I never understood about that? You couldn't go grocery shopping or go out to eat, because you'd be making someone else work on the Sabbath. So instead, everyone went home and the food just magically appeared on the dinner table? No? Who put in all the work for Sunday dinner? The wife? So let me get this straight: you couldn't go to a restaurant because you didn't want to make a *stranger* work, but it was okay to go home and make your *wife* work??

One thing we've got to make very clear is that the Sabbath is *not* - ***legalism***. Let me tell you that we could spend a lot of time talking about this issue. I know that for some of you, this is difficult. You either had very bad experiences with this growing up, so you think Sabbath is all about legalism. Or, your family genuinely tried to honor the Sabbath, so even

⁸ Robert W. Pelton in *The Door. Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 5.

though you had strict rules about it, it created some significant moments for you and your family. I respect that. But the Sabbath was not ever supposed to be a legalistic issue.

God created the Sabbath principal for *your* benefit. *You* were not created for the Sabbath's benefit. In other words, Sabbath is not some ironclad law by a tyrannical God that you are required to obey without any benefit to yourself. The entire thing was created for your benefit. As soon as you make it legalistic, you start existing for *it*, and, by the way, you are well on your way to being self-righteous about it.

In Mark chapter two, Jesus has just finished some amazing teaching about new wine and old wineskins, making the point that the religious rules are too rigid for the abundant life that God will give you through Christ. But the religious rule-keepers start arguing with him about it. The passage then says this:

“One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?’ He answered, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.’ Then (Jesus) said to them, ***‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.’***”
(Mark 2:23-28, niv)

Jesus is the one who established the principal in the first place. He is God. He created the world; he rested on the seventh day to set the pattern for us. He created the Sabbath principal for our benefit. He is the Lord of the Sabbath and every other religious rule or law. Keep your eyes on Jesus! We are never to be legalistic about Sabbath.

But, neither is Sabbath - ***laziness***. The Sabbath is not about just sitting around doing nothing. And it certainly is not about wasting the day watching TV or playing video games or just doing whatever we want to do. Far from being a wasted day, it is the most productive day of our week, when we truly practice it. So get that idea right out of your head!

God challenges us about this:

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” (Isaiah 58:13-14, niv)

So there is a right way and a wrong way to approach and practice Sabbath. Keep that in mind as we continue in this series.

So finally, let's begin to explore...

3. Sabbath: **What it is**

Here I intend to just give you the basic definition of Sabbath – it will become a more clear picture and practice as we continue through this series.

Mark Buchanan has written a great book called, “The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath.” In that book he points out some important truths about Sabbath as we find it in Scripture.

The Bible provides two complete renderings of the Ten Commandments – one in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. The two are virtually identical. They are so similar that it’s hard to tell them apart, but when you see the differences, it helps you identify them. (*Adam and Stephanie: how do you tell the twins apart?*) So the differences, even though small, make a big difference. That happens in the two Sabbath commands. Would you stand while I read them? Here’s the first from Exodus:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8-11, niv)

Then Deuteronomy says this:

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15, niv)

Thank you – you can be seated. Could you tell the differences? Exodus grounds the Sabbath in creation. Deuteronomy grounds it in liberation. Exodus remembers Eden, Deuteronomy Egypt. In Exodus, Sabbath-keeping is about imitating divine example and receiving divine blessing. Deuteronomy is about taking hold of divine deliverance and observing divine command. One looks up, the other looks back. One gives theological rationale for rest, the other historical justification for it. One calls us to be like God, the other calls us to never go back to slavery again. One reminds us that we are God’s creation and children, the other that we are not to allow ourselves to be enslaved again by anyone or anything. One is invitation; the other is warning.

In Exodus we are called to imitate God in order to remember that we are *not* God. God’s agenda creating *everything* was pretty packed. Talk about stress. But he chose to stop, rest, and enjoy himself and what he’d created. He calls us to do the same; to trust that, for that one day, God will make sure everything is provided for and taken care of. We just need to rest, enjoy his presence and creation – both his and ours. Sabbath keeping reminds us that we are weak, and small, that we are NOT Gods; only He is. The Bible tells us that God never

slumbers or sleeps (Psalm 121) – so, friends, take a day off; God’s got this. God doesn’t need to rest – we DO. We, along with everything else in creation, need rest. Not just sleep, although sleep can be a very spiritual exercise, especially when we aren’t getting enough of it. But Sabbath is to enjoy God’s presence, the life he’s given us, and our relationships.

Deuteronomy, using the imagery of the Israelite’s slavery in Egypt, is a reminder to us that, if you are a Christian, once you were a slave to sin. You did not get a day off from the slave driver of sin. You did not get to rest and enjoy God’s presence and pleasure and blessing in your life. But God has now set you free from sin in Christ (Galatians 5:1, John 8:36). You didn’t free yourself.

The Israelites escaped the 24/7 stress of slavery to Egypt. The Egyptians chased them down to try to destroy them, but God drowned them in the Red Sea. In Christ, God has thrown your sins in the sea of forgetfulness (Micah 7:19), and he drowned your sins in his red-blood cleansing (1 John 1:7). You do not want to go back to slavery again – you are not a slave to stress, to schedules, and not at all a slave to sin!

Listen to the point of the Deuteronomy command: don’t revive what God has removed! Don’t gather and piece back together what God has smashed and scattered. Don’t place yourself in a yoke that God broke and tossed off with his own hands. Slaves don’t rest. You have been set free. Enjoy it. Rest. Here is our working definition of Sabbath:

Sabbath is a time to rest by worshiping God, focusing on and enjoying his presence in your life, and practicing the things that celebrate life and relationships. (repeat)

This can happen for an entire day and for a moment. Okay? Some of you might have a more complete understanding of Sabbath than this, but just remember we are only getting started.

Now, I have a confession to make to you about Sabbath and my own struggle to understand and practice it. And...I will tell you that next week.

Here’s what I want you to do this week, whether for an hour or for an entire day: find one practical way to put into practice that definition.

Pray: to be saved, to obey and practice Sabbath.