

SABBATH KEEPING

INTRO & CONNECTION to SERIES

We have spent the last few months looking at [Faith Practices](#). Spiritual Disciplines, if you will, of our faith family throughout history used to remain steadfast and joyous regardless of our internal conflicts and external circumstances. These Faith Practices help us to

cultivate grace; a way of being and living in relation to God's character, purposes and context.

Equipping us to participate in fostering an environment in which we and others can grow up into the fullness of our humanity within God's Story.

*"The cultivated life is one of persevering in our longing. In the garden...grace collaborates with dedication. Our completion [in Christ] comes toward us as we move toward it...Spiritual completion is **not** a matter of willfully straining after an ideal. It is, rather, a relational fullness of life that is forever unfolding and developing, like the way tree trunks thicken as sun, water and nutrients are imbibed.*



In our living, we aren't supposed to come to the end of our growing, or even of heartfelt yearning for it. Nor are we to become independent pursuers of growth...Through the lens of cultivation, we see our lives taking place in God's garden."¹

Now a garden, is not simply the 'natural' growth of vegetation; rather, a garden in a carefully crafted environment made for beauty, enjoyment, and fruitfulness. For flourishing.

*A context or picture of life in which all that we feel, experience and know is **in relation to God**.*

And our Faith Practices are tools used to keep us faithfully participating in the ordinary work of garden life as daughters and sons, employees, roommates, neighbors, parents, friends, spouses, and the church. Not the summation of life in the garden, but actions and attitudes that help us remain steadfast and joyous.

¹ Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*. 35, 37, 19.

So far we have seen that,

[Praying Scripture](#) & [Repentance](#) *orient us to the conditions* of God's garden. Reminding us that our story is found in the all-encompassing, gracious, and sure story of God's character and purposes. Awakening us to a much larger world!

[Listening](#) in the Spirit is the *fundamental act for all work* in the garden. We recognize that the world is neither limited to us nor controlled by us, so in order to walk wisely we must be ones who hear and see God; most evidently in Jesus! Every action begins in a listening response.

[Stopping](#), helps us to *recognize & enter into the rhythmic seasons* of the garden. Discovering a pattern for life that is attuned to how God works in the good times and the bad all for our good and his glory. Allowing us to find stability in what often appears to be chaos.

[Mindfulness](#), a form of stopping, helps us to *identify disproportion & respond in proportion* to our emotions and experiences. Giving us a daily and moment-by-moment centering that develops an awareness and release from the tension of circus life.

As we continue the series this afternoon we will be looking at another form of stopping, of ceasing striving to take note. After all, this is perhaps the most difficult and countercultural Faith Practice in a world of constant motion. The Faith Practice of Sabbath Keeping is meant to help us flourish in both the most prevalent of all gardening activities: **work** amid the most pervasive of garden resources: **time**.

UNDERSTANDING SABBATH?

Many of us have different backgrounds with the idea of Sabbath. Some have grown up simply understanding Sabbath as Sunday, a day to go to church and full of church activities. For others it has been a day to nap and take it easy. A few have experienced Sabbath as a regulated day of inactivity. Still others have no history with Sabbath. How have you experienced Sabbath?

My own history of Sabbath, ironically, is that it has been a work day. A Sunday full of activities around church events and serving others through volunteering or leading. I have not known the Sabbath to be restful! There have been seasons when Sunday responsibilities have been all but removed and as rejection and an attempt to simply disconnect from everything—including God and the church(!)—was my over correction to a full, though often enjoyable, Sabbath rhythm.

Yet, as we read through Scripture we cannot escape the reality of Sabbath. Our culture, within and outside the church, does not deal with Sabbath much. And perhaps, that's the issue.

So, in order to develop a healthy understanding of Sabbath that will allow us to practice Sabbath Keeping in a way that brings flourishing in work and time, we need to go back to the beginning. Literally!

We are introduced to the *rhythmic pattern of Sabbath* in the completion of the creation story. For six days God has worked at creating and the work has been good, even very good. And yet creation was not completed in six days (Gen. 1:31), a seventh day was required to finish what God started “in the beginning”,

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God **finished** *his work* that he had done, and he **rested** on the seventh day from all *his work* that he had done. So God **blessed** the seventh day and **made it holy**, because on it God rested from all *his work* that he had done in creation.”
(Genesis 2:1-3)

On the seventh day the creation of the universe and the planet we inhabit, was finally finished. A day in which God's activity was to rest from all that God had done and was doing. God rested by blessing and making holy this final day of creation. Just as God had blessed man and women, set apart as unique image bears and participants in this wondrous world of his;

so too does God bless the seventh day, setting it apart as unique rhythmic pattern of rest in response to and the continuous work of his glorious creation.

Now this unique contour in the pattern of creation will not be known as Sabbath (or *Shabbat* in Hebrew) until generations later in the Exodus account. But the practice of *Shabbat*, meaning to quit, stop, take a break, take a look around, etc.; **resting as a pattern for life in response to God's work** is set forth for us in the very good establishment of place, time, and purpose of Genesis 1-2; in the place of the garden. After all, what follows Genesis 2:1-3 is the details of life and work for humanity. God created and God finished so that in God's work we can work and in God's completion we can be whole and full.

Obviously the very good of the garden is disrupted by humanities longing for control and now the pattern of creation is twisted to fight back against humanities attempts of self-flourishing. And so, many many many years later, when God rescues his people from slavery from Egypt (physically, emotionally, and spiritually)—a real representation of both human control and spiritual authority or principalities—

*God gives his people a way of living that will restore the pattern of responsiveness and abundance in relation to himself: **a Sabbath command and covenant.***

We see this in Exodus 20 and explained in greater detail in Exodus 31,

“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, 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)

““And the Lord said to Moses, ‘You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, **Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths**, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I the Lord, **sanctifies you**. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who *profanes* it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that *soul* shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of **solemn rest**, holy to the Lord. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a **covenant forever**. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day **he rested and was refreshed**.” (Exodus 31:12-17)

As one of the primary commands given to shape life in relation to God, in the middle of these laws, we find the Sabbath. The fourth command to stop working as individuals and a society for the purpose of wonder and worship of God. A time to recognize that God created, God sets apart, God works, God finishes. A covenant reminder that God will finish what God started, that God will make holy so that we might dwell with him!

It is interesting that the Sabbath command is the bridge between the commands to distinctly honor and focus on the God of all gods and the commands shaping how we interact with one another as family, neighbors and in the economics of a society. Thus, **the Sabbath connects loving God and loving others**. And keeping the Sabbath is way in which we keep at both.

This is reiterated in Deuteronomy 5, a reminder before Israel was enter the promised land of abundance, that the Sabbath keeps us in wonder of God’s might and power as CREATOR and worshiping in his restoration as RESCUER in the way we interact with those around us and under our charge.

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as Lord your God 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, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant **may rest as well as you**. You shall **remember** that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a **mighty hand** and an **outstretched arm**. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

As the people of God continued forward in their relationship with God, for the purpose of blessing all the world by the way, it was keeping the Sabbath or their failure to do so, that demonstrated whose world they were living in—their own or God's.

Let's look at few.

"In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and brining in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on that day when they sold food. Tyraims also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing that you are doing, **profaning** [to make irreligious, remove divine distinction or intention] the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all his disaster on us and on this city? Now you are brining more wrath on Israel by **profaning** the Sabbath.'" (Nehemiah 13:15-18)

"...everyone who keeps my Sabbath and does not profane it, and **holds fast my covenant**—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer..." (Isaiah 56:6-7)

"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing **your pleasure on my holy day**, and call the Sabbath a *delight* and the holy day of the Lord *honorable*; if you honor it, not **going your own ways**, or **pursuing your own business**, or **talking idly**, then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth, I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoke." (Isaiah 58:13-14)

"...they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck...But **if you listen to me**, declares the Lord, and bring no burden by the gates of the city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes who sit on the throne of David...And this city shall be inhabited forever...But **if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath** day holy...then I will kindle a fire in [Jerusalem's] gates, and it shall devour the places of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched." (Jeremiah 17:23-27)

Perhaps both the weight of the Sabbath and the purpose of the Sabbath is seen most explicitly in Ezekiel's comments on why the Sabbath was given and rejected by Moses' generation,

"And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on...and do not defile yourselves with the **idols** of Egypt; I am the Lord your God...So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. I gave them my statues and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live. Moreover, I gave them my **Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them**. But the house of Israel rebelled...they rejected my rules and did not walk in my statutes, and profaned my Sabbaths; **for their heart went after their idols.**" (Ezekiel 20:7, 9-13, 16)

Why did God rescue Isreal from Egypt? To show them that the idols they pursued for provision, prosperity, and to fit in; the gods they hoped in were indeed lessor and ultimately destructive. Why did God give them the Sabbath? To sanctify

them, make them holy so that they could dwell in the presence of God. Why did Israel ultimately fail to make distinct the Sabbath? They longed for something other than God, something less than God, some sort of world in which God was not in control—whether it be a lesser god or themselves that were in control.

Even a brief look at how God viewed Israel's keeping and breaking of the Sabbath helps us to understand why, hundreds of years later, there was a strong push by some for a strict keeping of the Sabbath. They longed for restoration as God's favored people and so they put in place 613 laws to keep the Sabbath distinct—does and don'ts to define work and labor meant to appease God and bring blessing. Ironically, in doing this,

they forgot the purpose of the Sabbath, to recognize and rest in God's sanctifying work; not their own.

Thus Jesus enters the world in a context where some were profaning the Sabbath by selling goods in the temple, but most were profaning the Sabbath by oppressing themselves and others with laws made by man. Seeking self-sanctification and actually submitting to a lesser god (Jn. 8).

So Jesus sets out to correct our distorted view of Sabbath, to re-establish Sabbath as a day of wonder at the creator and day of worship of the rescuer:

"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."
(Mark 2:27-28)

The Sabbath is not ours to control, to make work for us. God created and God finishes. God works and God rests.

"You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan **bound for eighteen years, be **loosed** from this bond on the Sabbath day?"** As he said these things all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him." (Luke 13:15-17)

Just as Israel was loosed from the bonds of the gods of Egypt, so Jesus frees from that which binds us still today.

"The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had **healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, '**My Father is working until now, and I am working.**'"** (John 5:14-17)

"If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body **well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."** (John 7:23-24)

God the creator and God the rescuer is the one who makes well what is broken, heals what is distorted; so that we might be a people that flourish in his world, in his presence, his purposes.

*The point of the Sabbath was to rest and be restored in the **creating** and **rescuing** work of the Lord our God.*

Thus to be healed and made well, be freed from what binds, to pray and to play, to be in wonder and in worship; this is what the Sabbath is for! Keeping a strict set of rules was not honoring to God but *an attempt to replace God*, to do the work only God can do; as Colossians 2 so pointedly enlightens us,

“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are shadows of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions...and **not holding fast to the Head**, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, **grows with a growth that is from God**.

If with Christ you died to the **elemental spirits of this world**, why...do you submit to regulations--'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'...according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting **self-made religion** and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of **no value** in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” (Colossians 2:16-23)

We may profane the Sabbath by having no distinction time to rest and be restored in Creator and Rescuer or we may profane by trying to do what only he can do by strictly keeping the Sabbath. Yet is Jesus, the substance of the Sabbath allows us to overcome that which binds us and live freely in that which God has created.

DESCRIBING SABBATH

So then, WHAT IS SABBATH actually in the light of Jesus? Well, Sabbath can be described as...

- A **rhythmic pattern of life** in which we physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually find rest and refreshment in the work of God.
- A **day** of stopping to [attend](#) to the Lord. A day, not just a few minutes, because of our tendency to grasp onto something other than God.
- A **set time** to recognize that God created and finished, God works and God blesses.

Throughout Scripture, even with Jesus, there is a soberness associated with the Sabbath. A clear recognition of distinction. We can certainly overdo it, as the Pharisees did, but we can also under do it as many of us do. It is important to note that,

“Creation is so endlessly complex and so intricately interconnected that if we are not very careful and deeply reverent before what is clearly way beyond us, no matter how well-intentioned we are, we will probably interfere, usually in a damaging way, with what God has done and is doing. So begin by not doing anything: attend and adore.”²

Which is why we practice keeping the Sabbath with proportionate soberness!

In Jesus, keeping the Sabbath is properly proportioned as a rhythmic pattern to a free and abundant life of work and relationship to time.

So why then is keeping the Sabbath so difficult? Why do we either profane through having no distinction or through controlling—both of which reveal our idols(!)?

² Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 109.

WHY IT'S SO HARD

The answer lies in how we have created **division** between work and Sabbath and how we **relate** to time. We have separated work from Sabbath, as if it is this thing to fit into our schedule that is conflict with the place we spend the majority of time and energy—the workplace. In turn, this division distorts how we view and use the precious resource of time.

When we were introduced to Sabbath in Genesis, it was in the context of a very good world in which there was work that was good. Work done flowed into Sabbath rest and work done flowed from Sabbath rest. The Sabbath was the rhythm which allowed work and life to flourish in what God had done and was doing.

Eugene Peterson, a pastor, author, scholar, and one who has spent a better part of 80 years working; has this to say about our propensity to separate work and Sabbath³...

“I’m prepared to contend that the primary location for spiritual formation is the workplace...

...We cannot understand either the character or the significance of Sabbath apart from work and workplace.

Work doesn’t take us away from God; it continues the work of God through us. Sabbath and work are not in opposition; Sabbath and work are integrated parts of an organic whole. Either apart from the other is crippled...”

Work without Sabbath means we begin to live in the never ending consciousness of work. There is not natural break in the work we do. It, whether in action or in mindful awareness, is always about us. Sabbath without work is a removal from the context in which we are meant to be most formed; thus developing a distorted way of living that is actually counter to God’s created order. Therefore...

“...We cannot rightly understand Sabbath apart from work nor rightly understand work apart from Sabbath...

...There is more to work than work—there is God: God in completion, God in response, God blessing, God making holy. Most of us spend most of our time in the workplace. But without Sabbath, in which God goes beyond the workplace (but not away from it), the workplace is soon emptied of any sense of the presence of God and the work becomes an end in itself. It is the ‘end in itself’ that makes an un-sabbathed workplace a breeding ground for idols [as we reduce humanity—others and our own]...”

We breed idols of identity when God is removed. We begin to reduce humanity and are likewise reduced as people become means to an end, obstacles in our pursuits, objects to help us escape the never ending pressure of constant work. For...

“...If there is no Sabbath—no regular and commanded non-working, not-talking—we soon become totally absorbed in what we are doing and saying, and God’s work is either forgotten or marginalized. When we work we are most god-like, which means that it is in our work that it is easiest to develop, god-pretensions. **Un-sabbathed, our work becomes the entire context in which we define our lives.** We lose God-consciousness, God-awareness, sightings of resurrection. We lose the capacity to sing ‘This is my Father’s world’ and end up chirping little self-centered ditties about what we are doing and feeling...”

³ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 127, 115-118.

This is why...

“...We must stop running around long enough to see what he has done and is doing. We must shut up long enough to hear what he has said and is saying. All our ancestors agree that without silence and stillness there is no spirituality, no God-attentive, God-responsive life.”

Disconnecting work from Sabbath keeps us fighting against the very thing we long for; holistic abundance.

Because the way we live effects the way we work and the way we work effects the way we live; **God gave us the Sabbath to set the rhythm for both.** To see our work flowing from his work. Our life flowing from his life and thus stopping to rest and enjoy; be blessed!

In disconnecting work from Sabbath, failing to recognize that our work flows from God's work, not only perverts work but also **distorts time.** Time now becomes something that we fight against, try and kill, or attempt to commodify. Rather than rightly seeing time as God's gift of holy freedom that allows us to live sacrificially, selfless and in abundance (remember Galatians!). We are graciously given time. It is not ours to control or manipulate or get more of or even waste. It is given to us to live!

Keeping the Sabbath is our faith practice that allows us to flourish in work and time. A way for us to connect loving God and loving others in transformative ways; as we live in *a rhythmic pattern with God* in the context of our weekly lives.

So, how then do we keep the Sabbath holy?

HOW WE KEEP SABBATH

First, we KEEP IT SIMPLE! We don't disregard it, doing only what we desire without distinction; but we don't try and control it either by creating standards by which to judge one another.

We have taken this principle to heart in how we as Christ City "do Gatherings". Intentionally we have tried to foster an intentional time to wonder at God (I'll share more on that momentarily!), that is not labor intensive or requiring a full-days focus and energy for the event. There are certainly things to do to put together, but one way we can help each other Sabbath is by serving together to share that load even more! In part, because Sabbath keeping is a community rhythm.

Sabbath keeping has always been a communal practice. Even the commands in Exodus and Deuteronomy include all of your household, economic relationships and even societal strangers. Therefore, Sabbath, almost always, includes collective wondering(!) of some sort.

That is why we Gather, to WONDER at the God Creator, the one who starts and the one who finishes (Heb. 12:1-3). To be in awe of the one who sets the stars in their place and gives us air to breathe each morning we wake,

"What has really happened during the last seven days and nights? Seven times we have been dissolved into darkness as we shall be dissolved into dust; our very selves, so far as we know, have been wiped out of the world of living things; and seven times we have been raised alive like Lazarus, and found all our limbs and senses unaltered, with the coming of the day."⁴

In turn, keeping the Sabbath includes time of refreshment! Wonderment at God leads to freedom as we recognize God started, finished, blessed, and sanctifies. He is the Rescuer who frees us from what binds us—internally and externally--so we and therefore able to enjoy all of creation in relation to him! We can WORSHIP him in ways that fill us—stir our affections and restore us. In nature, in relationships, in leisure.

When we keep Sabbath **Simple** by focusing on **Wonder** and **Worship** we can be ones who flourish in the God dependent, God constant rhythmic pattern of work and life. May we become such people who Sabbath together!

The mind the comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.
Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
Your will, not ours. And it is fit
Our only choice should be to die
Into that rest, or out of it.⁵

⁴ G.K. Chesterton quoted in Maise Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 397.

⁵ Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, 7.