

## KEEPING SABBATH RHYTHM



### A REMINDER

A *follower of Jesus* is someone who has responded to Jesus' invitation to be continuously in his presence with the aim of inheriting his character and imitating his actions. Accepting this invitation, we become his disciples. As apprentices to the Teacher, three goals give orientation to our

schedules and choices: *being with him*, *becoming like him*, and *doing the things that he does*—carrying on his way of knowing, relating to, and being obedient to God.

*Being with Jesus* is the first aim of our life of faith. While there are moments of teaching, the real training to carry on the work of our Rabbi comes by walking with him, absorbing both the knowledge and the nuances of the trade as we share meals, interact with his family, observe him at work, and keep in *rhythm* with his way of life.

When we look at Jesus' life, we see he was quite active during the traditional Jewish sabbath, teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick and lame, forgiving sins, basically doing what he knew the Father was doing on such a day. While this got him in trouble with the sabbath devotees, Jesus saw no tension in his restorative actions on a day set aside for restoration.

### A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Sabbath has been “called the historical anchor of a fundamental rhythm of time for the Christian life.”<sup>1</sup> But why?

Sabbath, “a time set aside to do nothing so that we might receive everything,”<sup>2</sup> is the reverberating pulse of created time. Spoken, practiced, and set apart by the establisher of our cycadean rhythms, “The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” It was a day gifted to us, though it soon became one forgotten or mastered, clumped into and manipulated along with all the other perpetual dawns and dusks.

Yet, when God intervened to pull his chosen people—the blessed to be a blessing (Gen. 12:3)—out of the oppression of squandered and abused time, he reset for them creation's clock saying,

Remember the sabbath day, and 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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female servant, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 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. (Ex. 20:8-11)

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<sup>1</sup> Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 82.

Likewise, as the next generation prepared to enter into the land of Re-creation, God once again reiterated the freeing rhythm of life with Him,

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. (Deut. 5:15)

Our Father was forming a people whose allegiance, affections, morals, and even calendars would be set apart from the cultures around them, a distinction meant to demonstrate the power and compassion of the Creator and Savior of the entire world. He is the God who speaks creation, gives it purpose and peace, and he is the one that rescues his creation from self-destruction. **Sabbath is a submission to the power and compassion of God, to his unceasing good purposes and his unabating healing presence.**

The abandonment of the Sabbath by the generations that followed that first into the promised land was not merely the secularizing of a religious routine, but the arrogant rebellion born of forgetfulness of who God is and who they were meant to be. More than mere absent mindfulness, the Israelites' forgetting was acting improperly, a "forgetting themselves" as they, "profaned [our Father's] Sabbaths; for their hearts went after their idols" (Ezek. 20:16). In failing to keep the Sabbath, God's people had abandoned their distinction, their dependency on their Creator, and the purpose for which they were created and redeemed.

But, our Father is faithful, even when we are faithless, and he promised to restore the relationships and rhythms broken and to raise a people, a royal priesthood, who would "teach [his creation] the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and clean," by "keeping [his] laws and his statutes...and...**keeping his Sabbaths holy.**" (Ezek. 44:23-34).

And so, God's people have sought to keep the Sabbath holy, *not so that God might do something but because God has and is continuing to do something: unceasingly sustaining his good purposes and unabating in his healing presence.* Understanding the Sabbath as submission to God's power and compassion is why Jesus and his disciples, like David, could enjoy the substance provided by the Father on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28), and why Jesus can heal the invalid on the Sabbath doing the work that his Father was at-that-moment, and still, this very moment, is doing (John 5:1-17).

Keeping a rhythm of Sabbath is about submitting to the authority and kindness of our Creator. It's a reminder that we are not slaves to the brokenness of this world but are created with purpose, to live and work in a manner that brings about goodness in the world.

## FOR OUR FAITH FAMILY TO UNDERSTAND

Admittedly, the people of God have kept the Sabbath in a variety of manners and strictness over the millennia. Repeatedly, like the Pharisees of Jesus day, we have been prone to attempt to master the Sabbath. But, just as often, like the Israelites before the exile, we have forgotten the Sabbath altogether.

So, were within the spectrum of mastery and apathy does our faith family fit? How do we *understand* and begin to follow Jesus into the rhythm of Sabbath time?

First, we understand fundamentally that the rhythmic setting aside of time called Sabbath is done to help us “manage our experienced dependency on God in such a way that we are better able to care for the world.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, **the days of the week move toward a Sabbath, a culminating rest, and from that rest flows the good work of the week that follows.** Sabbath is a time set aside to demonstrate to ourselves and our neighbors that our existence is dependent upon the power and compassion of God in the six days preceding. And, that the six days that follow will be lived through and in-sync with that same power and compassion. Sabbath flows from six days of good work—God’s and ours with him; and purified in rest, we re-emerge into that same current.

Secondly, **Sabbath is a universal rhythm of setting aside our cultural identities as consumers and producers and receiving or reviving our identity as children.** Holy children, whose attention is given to our Father as we playfully enjoy the goodness of his creation and our shared family. Holy children who are stewards of a great inheritance, a kingdom. Therefore, it is a day to stop. Sabbath is time set aside to the stopping of actions done with the *intent* to control our little world, to put it in order or distract us from our need for God, whether through production or consumption.

Thirdly, **the actions and in-actions of Sabbath are meant to help us develop lives of holy leisure.** Jesus could be described as many things: miracle worker, prophet, usurper, messiah, etc., but anxious has never been a descriptor that fits the one whom we apprentice. Jesus’ life was set apart, holy, and yet he never rushed. His life was full of ups and downs, happiness and disappointment, extreme joy, and devastating pain; however, fear and apprehension never set his course of action. He was purposeful, focused, and peaceful, never passing over something or someone which would often be overlooked by those of us merely trying get things done. It is a life of purpose at peace, of holy leisure, that Sabbath helps mature in us.

And lastly, **it takes a community to Sabbath.** Sabbathing, with any consistency, requires encouragement, most especially in our time and place in history. The counterintuitiveness of ‘doing nothing, *so that* we can receive everything’ means it grades against our natural dispositions, and so we need a community of faith to not only remind us but often instruct us how to Sabbath—at least at first. But there is also this, our faith family throughout the centuries has held, when at all possible, a Sabbath rhythm is at its best when it includes a time of common worship. A time to gather with those who recognize the power of God in and for this world, who themselves have life because of his power and compassion, and who will share that compassion with one another in song, in prayer, in retelling the good news, and in familial smiles!

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Reed quoted in Edwards, 19.

## BEGINNING GUIDELINES | Attentiveness, Playfulness, & Generosity in Community

So, what do we do, practically, to begin to develop a sabbath life? Where do we start? What do we stop? Perhaps some basic guidelines, like training wheels, would be helpful. If you are thinking about a Sabbath rhythm in terms of what to do, and what not to do, then consider this:

**Do those things that encourage you to be attentive to God, to yourself, to one another, and to your neighbors.** If an action or in-action is a distraction from God, from what is going on inside you, or the people he's placed you amongst, maybe it is best avoided during your Sabbath time.

**Do those things that allow you to enjoy God's authority and kindness *as a child would*.** In other words, play! If an action or in-action lends itself to getting ahead or getting things done, abusing or misusing his creation, etc., perhaps it is best avoided during your Sabbath time.

**Do those things that allow you to be generous.** As one receiving much on the day, go about it in a way that will enable you to share with others the goodness shared with you—the word of Lord, the joy of his salvation, needed resources, a hand, a smile, your presence. If an action or in-action requires stinginess of time, resources, aid, or presence, perhaps it is best avoided during your Sabbath day.

One final admonishment, there have been faith families within the Church throughout history who have striven for a *freedom in this stoppage*. And freedom in Jesus is what we hope to foster. Like these communities, we want to set out to cultivate lives of holy leisure, together, not by defining in detail or in particular what is “forbidden,” rather, consistently couraging one another and organizing in a way that holds each other to the expectation of a godly, rhythmic rest. Urging one another, modeling for one another, and teaching one another the nature of Sabbath rhythm as, “the time set aside to do nothing so that we can receive everything,”

To set aside our anxious attempts to make ourselves useful

To set aside our tense restlessness

To set aside our media-saturated boredom

To receive silence and let it deepen into gratitude,

To receive quiet into which forgotten faces and voices unobtrusively make themselves present

To receive days of the just-completed week & absorb the wonder & miracle still reverberating from each

To receive our LORD's amazing grace.<sup>4</sup>

If we let this helpful admonishment resound in our hearts and keep the three guidelines on our minds, I believe we'll be well on our way to developing a Sabbath life in rhythm with Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, 82.