

Active Rest: The Value of the Sabbath

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I'm sure you are aware of the fourth commandment first given by God directly to Israel in Exodus 20:8 at Mt. Sinai, "Remember (observe) the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (set apart). Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath (a rest) of the Lord your God." The Hebrew word Shabbat first appeared in the creation account of Genesis 2: 2-3 to say that after God completed the creation, He "rested". God set that day apart and blessed it because in it He "rested". Therefore the word Shabbat meant to rest, or was used for the day of rest. In Exodus 31:17 it appears that the Sabbath day was to be observed as "a sign between God and Israel". God repeated the command to Moses in Ex. 35:2 adding that it was a day of complete rest to the Lord. Forty years later when Moses gave the Law to the next generation at the Jordan River, he added that on this day every week they were to actively remember that they were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord delivered them by His mighty acts. Thus the ceasing of doing their own personal labor or business was initially given to God's chosen people for their benefit to remember all that God had done for them and would continue to do. They were to clear their minds and personal efforts for one day of the week to re-focus on the Lord. The pattern had already been set in the wilderness when God had provided the manna from heaven for them to eat, "on the sixth day they gathered twice as much manna" because on the seventh day they were to have a Sabbath observance—a day set apart to the Lord (Ex.16:22-23). On any other day, if they gathered more than one day's supply it would spoil, but the bread supplied by God would last on the Sabbath.

Later generations that fell away from God into idolatry failed to keep the Law that God gave them through Moses so that by 586 BC, God allowed Israel to be conquered and the survivors to go into captivity in Babylon. When they were allowed to return around 538 BC, they were determined to eradicate idolatry in Israel and to return to observance of the Law. By the time of Christ in the first century AD, they had added volumes of tradition to the simplicity of the original fourth commandment to observe the Sabbath. They had abandoned the spirit and purpose of the law for the letter of the law. Obeying the law had become their religion, even their idol.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' activities on the Sabbath draw a marked contrast to His interpretation of the Sabbath as opposed to the religious leaders of the day. In Mark 2:23-28, Jesus and His disciples were walking through a grain field picking off a few heads of grain, separating the seeds of grain, and eating it. The religious leaders had become so legalistic they accused Jesus and His men of working on the Sabbath. Then in the next story of Mark 3:1-6, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and again He was accused of working on the Sabbath. They were so zealous for their burdensome traditions that they counseled together on how they might destroy Jesus. Jesus' reactions to the religious leaders' outrage gives us valuable teaching about the Sabbath and what it now means to us.

Jesus gave four defenses: First, there was Old Testament precedent in the story of David in 1 Sam.21:1-6 that human need is a higher moral obligation. Secondly, God created the Sabbath for the well being of humans as a gracious gift. Man was not created to keep the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was created to benefit man. Thirdly, tradition is superseded by the Messiah Jesus who is Lord of the Sabbath. Basically Jesus was saying that He wrote the law of the Sabbath and He darn well had the right to interpret it. Fourthly, the Sabbath was a time to do good, not to neglect people in need in order to follow some man made tradition.

Rules

I used to think laws, regulations, and rules were made to keep me from having fun or to restrict us from doing what we want and going where we want to go. I think that ever since Ex. 20:8 was commanded that man's view was that it was another punishing rule that restricts my money making capacity or my fun. Their reaction was to figure out how they could get out of it or put loopholes in it so they could do what they wanted to do. Nevertheless, from Jesus' teaching I now see that God's view was that we needed a day off, a day to reflect, recharge, and remember more important things we may have forgotten during the frantic activity of the week. We need a day off to worship God for our own good—our soul was made for it. If I am allowed to focus only on myself, my business, my family, etc. for seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, then I will forget my real purpose in life is to serve God and glorify God.

God is Really Really Big

We need one day to remember that we are really small and God is really really big. Without this you will suffer under the suffocating burden that you are in control and everything is up to you or your responsibility. Trying to be God has overwhelming consequences. For instance---1. Every setback is devastating, 2. You take everything personally, 3. You are constantly robbed of your joy, 4. You forget God's sovereignty, 5. You are tempted to take shortcuts, compromise, lie, etc.

If I don't take time off from being in charge of my life, running the show then the momentum of self deception is like the strong current in a major river. Very few of us will swim against it toward God; instead we will just go with the flow. Pretty soon Saturday and Sunday gets blurred into one thing, and for the workaholic, Sunday and Monday are without distinction. The workaholic thinks that to stay ahead he needs 365 days a year, and besides, work is what he derives his identity from, not his relationship with the Lord. When you blur the days, and go with the flow you take yourself too seriously, and forget about God. You will forget how enormous God is as the CREATOR, and you will forget how really small you are as the created.

The Paradox of Active Rest

A lot of people think Sabbath rest means laziness, boredom, taking it easy, and vegetating in the recliner. Instead, the Sabbath is meant to be active, even a furiously active rest that pursues Christ with all your energy. The rest is from thinking about yourself, your problems, your work, your competitive life. We redirect the spotlight that has been too much on us back onto Him. By the ceasing of your efforts to promote yourself, you redirect your efforts to make Him the Lord of your life. We take one day to rest in Him, remembering and worshipping Him as our all powerful God through our purposeful inactivity. Resting on the Sabbath is not about doing nothing, it is about doing the things we do to remember how great God is, and how small we are. We have activity that reinforces that our business, our family, our finances, and our relationships are all in His hands.

Let's be honest, you know we too often spend six days trying to make ourselves bigger, more important than we are. We manipulate, make things happen, close the deal, plan the future, protect our interests, and build our empires---in short we tend to play God. By the fourth command, God is telling us we need to shut down once a week or we will get carried away playing the role of God.

Saturday or Sunday ?

The particular day is not important because the Sabbath is a state of mind and attitude. It can be any day and happen any place, and involve any activity, but we need to let go for one day, and put the control and focus of our life in God's hands. Let go, and pry your fingers off the control panel of the circumstances and people in your life.

Why once a week and not once a month or once a quarter? God knew how strong the pride in us is, and God knows how deceitful the fallen world we live in can be. Therefore once a week is the minimum requirement for stopping worldly activity to look up, and regain our focus on God. We must be brought back to the spiritual reality that HE IS GOD AND I AM NOT on a regular basis. God knew when He gave this command how strong the undertow in the ocean of our life is. In fact, Paul wrote in 1 Cor.15:3 that his commitment was to "die daily" to himself and instead be alive to God. Paul set a good example for us to follow to deny himself daily and live for the Lord, but God set a bare minimum of one day a week to set aside our furious lives, and re-program the hugeness and awesomeness of God

The Ultimate Rest

In Hebrews 4, the author wrote of a future promised rest when all our troubles, pain, and tears would cease. In that rest, all of our selfish striving will cease, and it will be a blissful glorious rest in eternity. Hebrews 4:9-10 says, "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God". The author is using the promise of our future glorification to encourage his audience to "be diligent to enter that rest" by being obedient and faithful now. Rest is here used as another name for spiritual life as God originally meant it to be. In Genesis 3, when man lost that rest, God immediately began a recovery project through His Son, Jesus Christ. By God's sovereign decree, He designed a rest for all who would believe, and we look forward to entering it. Just as John wrote in Rev.14:13, "Blessed are those who die in the Lord...that they may rest from their labors". Both passages anticipate that final rest when we enter into the presence of the Lord.

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