



SABBATH: GOD'S PROVISION FOR REST

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

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Exodus 20:8-11

Third Message

Andrew Drake

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I have been working with teenagers for more than ten years, yet I am always amazed at how busy they are with school, jobs, homework, extra-curricular activities, year round sports and summer school.

But this hectic and exhausting lifestyle is not limited to teenagers. Although there is an entire industry devoted to leisure today, adults—parents, in particular—live extremely busy lives.

In an article in the *San Jose Mercury News* a few months ago, Michael Ventura described the plight of busy parents. Perhaps you can relate to this:

Today, parents' lives are a frantic maze of chores as they clean, shop, cook, and ferry the kids, often while working full or part time. Breadwinners wake early, commute in traffic, work at jobs whose rhythms are determined by others, and commute back home, exhausted and distracted, to an equally fatigued and distracted mate. Children rarely see either parent in a relaxed setting, and they find their daily lives run by school schedules and social pressures.

Is it any wonder young people are so busy? They are imitating the hectic and unexamined lives modeled by their parents.

Christians oftentimes are the worst offenders in this respect. The Scriptures encourage believers to be doers of the word and not just hearers (James 1:22). We respond by reaching out to the lost and the needy, attending worship services on Sundays, men's and women's morning Bible studies, home fellowships and youth staff meetings on week nights. We have morning devotionals; we teach children's Sunday School, attend retreats, workshops, choir practices, Noah's Place, Boys Brigade, and elders meetings. The list seems endless.

I think one reason we involve ourselves in so much activity is because we think that doing so will draw us into a more intimate relationship with God. We think all our strivings for God are the supreme expression of our love for him and for others. The fourth commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy," however, is a reminder that an integral part of expressing love for God and for others is ceasing all of our activities and entering into sabbath rest.

The commandment to observe the sabbath is given both in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. I want to begin by reading Exodus 20:8-11, where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, three months after the Israelites had gone out of the land of

Egypt:

"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 of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or female servant, or your cattle, or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the 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." (NASB)

The fourth commandment is one of only two that begin on a positive note: "Six days you shall labor..." (the other is, "Honor your father and mother..."). This positive commandment is then reinforced by the negative command, "on it you shall not do any work."

The reason behind a day of sabbath rest is found in the creation account. The sabbath is the seventh and final day of creation. On that day, "God rested from all his work which he had done" (Gen 2:3). Israel was to observe a day of rest because the Lord observed a day of rest. By his resting, God modeled for mankind the divine rhythm of work and rest.

The question that begs to be answered is, why did God rest? Was it because he was tired, hungry or thirsty? No, of course he wasn't. Let's dig a little deeper into the text to see if we can discover why God rested.

The first clue comes from the meaning of the words "sabbath" and "rest." The Hebrew word for "sabbath" means "to stop, to cease from work"; and the Hebrew word for "rest" conveys, not the thought of idleness, but rather, peacefulness, and the joy and satisfaction that comes from completing a work. On the seventh day God stopped his creative work. He rested because his work was complete.

Later in Exodus we read that the Lord himself told Israel that the sabbath was a day when he rested and was refreshed. It was also a day in which his people and their animals were to be refreshed when they rested. In Hebrew, the word for "refresh" means to "take a breath." The word is used in 2 Samuel 16 of David, who "refreshed" himself at the end of his weary travels. The picture conveyed is of finding a place to rest at the top of the mountain and reveling in the joy and satisfaction of completing an arduous climb, reflecting on the beautiful scenery, and taking an exhilarating breath of fresh air.

A second clue for explaining the purpose of God's rest is that it was a day of blessing. The word "blessing" is used in Genesis 2 in reference to humans and animals, "to confer abundant and effective life." So the sabbath was to be a day of blessing, a day intended to help man live an abundant and effective life.

A third clue is that the sabbath is a "holy" day. The Hebrew word for "holy" means "to set something apart and dedicate it to God for his use." The prophet Isaiah defined true sabbath-keeping as turning from one's own ways and pleasures and taking delight in the LORD: "If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth" (Isa 58:13-14a).

The people of Israel were not to profane the sabbath by filling it with secular affairs. Rather, they were to celebrate the day in gatherings for holy worship and loving fellowship.

Not only was the day itself holy but, according to Exodus 31, the sabbath was a sign that Israel itself was made holy by the LORD. Observing the Sabbath was a witness for Israel and for other nations that Israel had entered into a covenant with the Creator. By resting on the sabbath, the nation distinguished themselves as a holy people—a people set apart and dedicated to Yahweh.

Just as the rainbow is the sign of God's grace, and circumcision is the sign of Abraham's faith, so too, the sabbath is a sign: it is a sign of God's provision for man's rest. God works for man, so that man can rest in God's provision.

Further, the people of Israel were commanded to rest on the sabbath not just when it was convenient but, as we read in Exodus 34, even during the critical plowing and harvest seasons. This was a recognition that all the products of their work were a gift from God. The observance of the Sabbath by Israel was an obvious sign of their faith and trust in God's provision for them.

Here we must ask ourselves, do our schedules reflect trust and faith in God? Just like with Israel, our rhythm of work and rest can be a good indicator not only of our trust and faith in God, but also our motives. Are we secure in the provision and leading of God, or are our actions motivated by self-preservation? Is it our faith in God and our love for others that keeps us so busy in ministry, or is it our lack of faith and our fear that God will not be able to accomplish his will without our help? Is it love for our families that keeps us busy, or is it the love of money? Are we really working hard to support our families, or are we working to support a materialistic lifestyle?

The second expression for why and how Israel was to observe the Sabbath commandment is given in Deut 5:12-15. Here the commandments were repeated by Moses to Israel before they were to enter into the land of Canaan:

"Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in 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 cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day."

There are two things I would like to highlight in this text that are unique. First, there is more of an emphasis on the community aspect of God's provision to rest. The people were all so interconnected, if they did not rest, others could not rest. Their rhythm of work and rest affected the rhythm of servants, animals, and even strangers. Israel's rest was to be a contagious thing.

Second, in this text the Israelites are called to remember, not the mighty acts of God at creation, but his mighty acts in delivering them from Egypt. Israel's ancestors in Egypt were treated worse than mules. The captives slaved away for four hundred years without a day of rest. But the LORD intervened and with a mighty hand, restored them not only as a nation, but as men and women who possessed freedom and dignity.

Some of us are slaves to our jobs. And this slavery, this rhythm of work without rest, has a harmful impact on others. Consider this Yiddish song, "My Little One," sung by a father to his sleeping child:

I have a son, a little son, a boy completely fine.
When I see him it seems to me that all the world is mine.
But seldom, seldom do I see my child awake and bright;
I only see him when he sleeps; I'm only home at night.
It's early when I leave for work; When I return it's late.
Unknown to me is my own flesh, unknown is my child's face.
When I come home so wearily in the darkness after day,
My wife exclaims to me: 'You should have seen our child play.'
I stand beside his little bed, I look and try to hear.
In his dream he moves his lips: 'Why isn't Papa here?'

So in both the Exodus and Deuteronomy accounts of

the Ten Commandments, the sabbath was instituted by God himself as a provision of rest for Israel. It was a day of blessing in which the people of Israel were refreshed by ceasing from all their labors; a day to take delight in Yahweh by remembering his creative and redemptive works on their behalf. The sabbath was also a sign that they were a people set apart for God and that their trust and faith was to be in him alone.

By Jesus' time, the true meaning of the sabbath had been obscured. The scribes had developed an elaborate code of regulations and restrictions governing sabbath observance to keep Jews from inadvertently transgressing the commandment. Sabbath observance had become such a burden that people were not rested or refreshed by it at all.

But Jesus recovered the true meaning of the sabbath. His primary concern was not to ridicule or eliminate the laws of Moses, but to demonstrate their true importance and restore them to their true intention. The brunt of Jesus' criticisms toward the religious leaders of his day, was that they had cut the heart out of the law by their weighty additions to the written code.

For example, Jesus, in his confrontation with the Pharisees concerning the observance of the sabbath, had to remind them that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Through their absurd requirements, the rabbis were changing the sabbath into a cruel tyrant, and man into its slave. Jesus had to remind them that man was created first, and then the sabbath. The sabbath was instituted to be a blessing, not a burden for man.

Not only did Jesus restore the meaning of the sabbath, he fulfilled its purpose and took it to a far deeper level. He says in the gospel of Matthew, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28-29).

Then in the Upper Room, Jesus said that the pouring out of his blood on the cross would establish a new covenant. When the old covenant is done away with, so, too, is the sign. The sabbath, as a sign of the old covenant, is replaced by a new sign, the breaking of bread and taking of wine. From that point on it was the creative and redemptive acts of Jesus that the disciples should recall. They were to remember that in Christ they had become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and that they had been liberated by Jesus, not from the bondage of Egypt, but from the bondage of sin (Romans 6). They were to look forward to the day when they would celebrate a grand feast and find ultimate rest with him in heaven. Sabbath rest was found not in a particular day, but in a particular Person.

That is why the apostle Paul can say in Colossians 2:16-17: "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new

moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." Paul is saying that the sabbath, along with the remainder of the Jewish ceremonial system, has been fulfilled in Christ. The rest we find in Jesus is a fuller and deeper reality than the rest of the sabbath. Thus the law, with its regulations concerning foods and feasts, foreshadowed something far greater—the salvation and rest that is found in Jesus Christ. Keeping the sabbath is no more binding on Christians than are the dietary laws.

The sabbath had served a real purpose, however. As a shadow of Christ, it provided a dim, yet descriptive outline of the rest to be found in him. But, says Paul, why cling to the shadow when the true substance has arrived? What justification could there be for imposing the observance of the sabbath, when the bringer of eternal rest is urging everyone to come to him? The seventh day of the week is no holier than any other day. Each day is special and holy because we are holy in Christ.

The author of Hebrews also picks up on the theme that Jesus is our true rest. In Hebrews 4:8-11a, the writer compares the superior rest of Jesus to the rest of Israel under Joshua: "For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest."

The eternal and secure spiritual rest that we find through faith in Jesus Christ is far superior to the temporal and elusive rest given to Israel under Joshua. Joshua led the Israelites into the land of promise, where they temporarily enjoyed rest and peace. But Jesus, having completed his work of redemption on the cross, now rests at the right hand of the Father, and he grants eternal sabbath rest to those who enter into a saving relationship with him.

Does this mean that Christians no longer need to take time out for sabbath rest? On the contrary, because every day is holy for Christians, we have tended to observe no day as holy, therefore we especially need to take time out to be refreshed by God. Most of us have been fooled into thinking that by its very nature, a day off is a sabbath. But merely because we are not working does not mean we are resting. Sitting in front of a television for hours on end is rarely refreshing.

Gordon MacDonald hits the nail on the head when he says, "Sabbath rest penetrates to the deepest levels of fatigue in the inner, private world. This fatigue is rarely touched by any of the modern amusements...Leisure and amusement may be enjoyable, but they are to the private world of the individual like cotton candy to the digestive system. They provide a momentary lift, but they will not last."

It is true that the internal and eternal spiritual rest we have in Jesus Christ is ours no matter what our rhythm

of work and rest is like. It is also true that we are freed from having to set aside any particular day to rest. But if we look at the life of Jesus, it is clear that setting aside consistent times to be in the presence of God is crucial in staying refreshed.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he did not begin by saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Fostering that kind of intimacy with God requires unhurried times of quiet reflection.

Activity without reflection frustrates intimacy. But by reflecting on the work that God is doing in and through us, we are drawn closer to him, because we find eternal significance in all that we do.

Even though his days were filled with traveling, teaching and healing, Jesus took time to stop and pray to find strength and direction for his ministry. Taking time to stop and enter into sabbath rest does not come naturally for most of us, but sabbath taking is founded on the notion that we must stop. We cannot rest without stopping first. Being unable to stop is not a sign of godliness; it is a sign that we do not trust God.

We must learn that more important than being busy for God is being dependent upon him, and being sensitive and able to respond at a moment's notice to his calling. Busyness can be a distraction to godliness if we are too busy with our own agenda to respond to God's leading.

Jesus says, "if you abide in me you will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). The image of a godly man or woman in the New Testament is not someone who is always busy, but someone who is fruitful.

I must confess that over the last few weeks, my rhythm of work and rest has not been refreshing or fruitful. With my responsibilities pastoring the High School ministry, taking Hebrew at Western Seminary, trying to get some things done around the house before our baby is due, and preparing for this sermon, I have not often entered into sabbath rest. But God has been faithful in refreshing my spirit as I take a walk after work each day. During those times I find that I am able to reflect on my day and pray for those whom God brings to mind.

Even though Jesus was surrounded by distractions, whether he was on a mountain or in a garden, he could be refreshed by being alone with his Father. Finding a place of refuge can be difficult for us. It is hard to find a true place of refuge, a place away from the telephone, beeper, fax machine, computer, radio, or television.

As a pastor I find it is difficult to enter into a restful spirit on Sundays, so my wife Amy and I, together with our daughter Olivia, try to make Fridays a day of resto-