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Exodus 23:10-13

Fiftieth Message

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REGULATED REST REQUIRED

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

Are you tired? Today in the Book of the Covenant we come to God's instructions for Israel regarding rest. Rest: there is hardly a word in the English language that evokes more pleasure to our work-weary souls. Just sit for a moment and reflect on the wonderful associations that come to mind with the word rest. Why, we could create a Yiddish dreamer's dream with just the letter "s": *solitude, silence, seclusion*, and perhaps the sweetest word of all, *sleep*. Each word causes us to salivate with the intensity of a weary desert traveler on the verge of collapse, suddenly spying an oasis of fresh water springs on the horizon.

Yet, despite our desire, rest seems to be rare luxury few of us can afford. Our modern technologies in transportation and telecommunications have made it possible for us to be virtually anywhere on the planet at any time and talk to untold numbers of people simultaneously. And yet, the potential to accomplish more tasks simultaneously has not only created more commitments than we can humanly meet, it has also damaged our ability to be fully present anywhere. So we work longer hours, extending our workdays beyond normal boundaries just to catch up. When night comes, we refuse sleep. When the weekend arrives, we refuse to stay home. When summer arrives, we don't take the vacations we are given. To stay motivated, we remind ourselves that it's only a season. But the season never ends. Children grow up without the presence and nurture of their parents. There are no weekend family picnics, memories of camping adventures, lake side fishing trips, or two-week stays at the old beach house. Instead, we've taught our children that they have to run even harder and faster than we did just to keep up or they will never qualify to enter a reputable college or university.

Who will set us free from this perpetual madness? I must admit that over the past several years, my ability to rest seems to have all but eroded. I sense deep within that it is time for an overhaul of my life. So I come to you as a depleted sinner, longing to repent, to aim my boat in a different direction and sail against all the prevailing currents. Where are you this morning? Perhaps like me you will see the need to steer your boat in a different direction in obedience to God's word, "In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves" (Ps 127:2).

The concluding set of laws (Exod 23:10-19) in Israel's Book of the Covenant is framed by the themes of rest and celebration. Both sections (a/a') are an extension of the fourth commandment of the Sabbath principle given in Genesis 1, regulating time under the pattern of the Creator, working six and resting one period of time. Sandwiched in between these laws are three exhortations (b) giving strong warnings against idolatry – an echo of the first commandment.

Literary Outline

Exodus 23:10-19

a The Gifts of Sabbatical and Sabbath Rest (10-12)

b The Threat to Rest: Returning to the Slavery of Idolatry (13)

a' The Gifts of Celebration that Shape the Yearly Calendar (14-19)

The juxtaposition of these themes suggests that the primary threat to God's gift of rest is the lure of idolatry residing in the human heart, driving us to work and consume endlessly 24/7. This morning we will look at the gifts of sabbatical and Sabbath rest for Israel (23:10-13), and how these were applied in the New Covenant. Then, in our next message we will conclude with the gifts of celebration.

I. The Gift of Rest Every Seven Years Exodus 23:10-11

"For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. (Exod 23:10-11 NIV)

A. The Sabbatical Year in Context

In the first law, God institutes the principle of the "sabbatical year." His people are to cultivate their land for six years, but on the seventh they are to allow it to lie fallow. The Hebrew verbs translated "unplowed" and "unused" by the NIV are quite striking. The first, *shamat*, means, "to release, to relinquish, to loosen one's grip, let fall." The second, *natash*, means, "to abandon, forsake, leave unattended." To ask a farmer "to let go" and "to forsake" his land for an entire year seems ludicrous. At first glance, it looks like economic suicide. Today, however, we know that non-stop cultivation leads to a depletion of the natural nutrients of the soil, diminishing long-term productivity and damaging the environment. Though conservation is an important benefit, the motive given here is social. By letting go of control of one's cultivated land on the seventh year the land is relinquished back to its wild, uncultivated state. Then the poor among God's people could freely eat, and what remained the wild beasts could devour.

God's command certainly radicalizes our view that owning property is an absolute right. Even though he calls them "your" fields, "your" vineyard and "your" olive grove, God claims that ultimately the land belongs to him. When the law is repeated in Leviticus 25:1-7, God emphasizes that the seventh year is the land's Sabbath of rest to the Lord, as the root *shabat*, "to stop," "to rest," "day of rest," is used seven times.

"When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD... But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD... The land is to have a year of rest." (Lev 25:2, 4a, 5)

Imagine what it would be like for an entire nation of farmers to stop farming and attending their vineyards and invite the poor onto their farms to glean in the fields. Imagine them taking down the fences and allowing the wild beasts to return to domesticated areas and feed freely in cultivated farmland for an entire year. Some com-

mentators say that this was not feasible, that the law allowed farmers the “freedom to decide how to rotate or stagger the resting of their crops among their various fields, groves, and vineyards.”¹ How could a whole nation survive, when farming ceased for an entire year? Yet we must remember that Israel was set apart to be a holy nation that walked by different laws than the nations around her. And in Israel’s history, God has already demonstrated how he provides faithfully for his people. Under Joseph’s leadership during their sojourn in Egypt, God orchestrated the seven years of plenty to provide for the seven lean years of famine. And during Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness, God provided enough manna on the sixth day to cover the Sabbath day. God promises to follow this pattern during the harvest of the sixth year:

“You may ask, ‘What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?’ I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in.” (Lev 25:20-22)

God explains that this way of regulating time should not be the exception but the norm. His people are to live in this delightful rhythm of six years of cultivation and one year of rest. We can imagine wealthy landowners objecting on economic grounds: Why, if we were allowed to work even harder we would be able to produce more to give to the poor. But God insists there is already sufficient production; the problem was **distribution**, and he wants everyone in Israel involved on a personal level. It is as if once every seven years there is a massive correction within the created order, raising the poor out of the ash heap and allowing wild beasts to roam free in old habitats. During this year, all of God’s creatures return to the same social standing, living in complete trust of what God provides. If Israel had faithfully kept the sabbatical year, these continual readjustments would have prevented huge gaps between the rich and poor, as well as allow the land a year to catch its breath from human development and replenish its natural resources for future generations.

This principle was further extended in the year of jubilee detailed in Leviticus 25. On the fiftieth year following the seventh sabbatical year, all those who were serving as bondslaves to pay off their debts were freed and allowed to return to their own land. In this system no land could be permanently sold, but remained within the original family or clan.² Once again, God affirmed his ultimate right of ownership of the land. His people were but stewards of his property, responsible to him for its care and distribution. To that end, the poor should never be forgotten.

B. The Sabbatical Year in History

Sadly, there is no record in Israel’s history of her actually keeping the sabbatical year. It is as if the nation could not muster up enough faith to trust God to provide for an entire year. A day is one thing, but a year? Impossible! God warned, however, that sabbatical rest for his land was not a luxury they could forego, but a mandatory cycle that was designed to shape all their years. If Israel chose to neglect it, God warned that he would remove his people from the land; then, while they were in exile, the land could enjoy its Sabbath rest:

“Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it.” (Lev 26:34-35)

This explains why Israel was exiled in Babylon for seventy years – to make up for the 70 sabbatical years (490 years total) she had refused to allow the land its rest (2 Chron 36:21). Sometimes I wonder if we, like Israel, are so consumed by our own work, becoming so depleted of spiritual resources, that God has to force us to rest in a mandatory exile of our own making, just to give our bodies and souls time to rest and repair.

C. The Sabbatical Year in the New Covenant

In the New Testament there is no mention of a sabbatical year for land, because the theme of “land” goes through a radical transformation with the resurrection of Jesus. But we can get a glimpse of how the intent of the law was fulfilled when the Holy Spirit was poured out in the early church, writing the laws on their hearts. If the intent of the sabbatical year was to limit one’s personal production and consumption, to grant relief to the poor on a regular basis, the early Christians took it to a higher plane. The gift of the Holy Spirit pulsating within them made them generous almost to a fault, with many giving up their property rights altogether by selling their “land” (which would be unthinkable to a Jew) and giving all the proceeds to the poor:

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. (Acts 2:44,45 NASB)

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. (Acts 4:32 NASB)

During the ministry of the apostles when a famine hit the Judean churches, no church was planted in Gentile territory without a strong mandate that the new believers contribute significantly to the poor (Rom 15:26; Gal 2:10).

D. Rethinking the Cycle of Our Working Years

If we want to make a New Covenant application of the sabbatical year principle to our lives, perhaps we could begin by rethinking the rhythm of our overall working years. Most of us work non-stop with the financial goal of making as much money as we can to buy a home, put kids through college, care for aging parents and save enough for retirement. At that time, we will consider working less and serving the Lord with more of our time. I wonder if a more Biblical view of our time might be: Don’t wait until you are worn out and your mind is gone to take significant time to serve the Lord. Why not establish a rhythm where you set aside regular intervals of extended time to serve God in the mission field or help the poor out of the funds you have saved in previous years?

I am impressed by scores of you who give up vacation time to serve in Mexicali and the Yucatan, helping the poor and building churches every year; the doctors among us who have served the poor and conducted outreach ministries in places like New Guinea and Ethiopia; the faithful servants who rebuild homes in hurricane torn Mississippi; and the wonderful team that has faithfully served in Gus Marwih’s ministry in Liberia. Tom and Barbara Metzler felt led of the Lord to use their savings and go to Thailand to serve missionaries. Now after years of service they have become our missionaries in that land. In each of these cases, believers are “letting go” and “abandoning” their work for a season in order to redistribute their physical and spiritual “wealth” to the poor on a personal basis.

If you choose to live like that, here is what will happen. You won't make as much money, and you certainly won't get the promotions, but you'll be much more content and integrated as you are able to see God more at work in your life. And perhaps, like Boaz in the book of Judges, you will find a new family as your heart is enlarged to love those who just so happen to wander into your field. As a pastor, I find it extremely fulfilling to take the spiritual "wealth" we have mined over the decades in our local context at PBCC and, on a regular basis, invest it freely in the lives of those who are less fortunate around the world.

From the theme of sabbatical rest every seven years, the focus now moves to Sabbath rest every seven days.

II. The Gift of Rest Every Seven Days Exodus 23:12

"Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed. (23:12)

A. Resting in Order to Imitate the Creator

Once again the rhythm of the six-plus-one pattern is repeated as Israel is exhorted to work six days and rest on the seventh. The law gives different rationales for Sabbath keeping. In Exod 20:11, the motivation was theological, i.e. Israel was to keep time with the Creator, who worked for six days and rested on the seventh. By imitating the life of the Creator, Israel became at home within his vast creation. But being at home was not possible without rest, as Eugene Peterson affirms:

The most striking thing about keeping the Sabbath is that it begins by not doing anything. The Hebrew word *shabbat*, which we take over into our language untranslated, simply means, "Quit ... Stop ... Take a break."

As such, it has no religious or spiritual context: Whatever you are doing, stop it. ... Whatever you are saying, shut up. ... Sit down and take a look around you. ... Don't do anything. ... Don't say anything. ... Fold your hands. ... Take a deep breath. 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, adore.³

Every seventh day, man was invited to cease all his work, put down his shovel, lay aside his drill, and cross over into holy time. By doing so he would not only be blessed with physical rest, but also with a new way of seeing. Sabbath means we are designed to first see what God is doing and then to choose to be involved with that and work with him in it. Work rises out of rest. We don't work *for* God, rather we are to work *with* God in what he is creating and building. This of course means that the workplace is the primary arena where we are to experience God, and that holy rest is designed for the purpose of sanctifying our work with the very life of God. Peterson continues: "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."⁴ When we go to work we are not permitted to operate any way we please; we must work in harmony with the Creator.

As Wendell Berry writes in one of his Sabbath poems:

Gift that nurtures and protects. Then workday
And Sabbath live together in one place.
Though mortal, incomplete, that harmony
Is our one possibility of peace.⁵

B. Resting to Care for the Poor

In the Book of the Covenant, a second rationale is given for Sabbath keeping that is primarily social and relational. Israel is commanded to rest so that the weaker members of the community may "refresh themselves." Robert Alter translates the expression as "catch their breath": "It is cognate with *nefesh*, most probably in the sense of "breath," and is related to the verb *nashaf*, "to breathe hard or pant." The idea of catching one's breath is consonant with the representation in Job and elsewhere in the Bible of a laborer panting from his work and longing to draw a long breath of relief after labor."⁶

There is nothing theological here, just the opportunity to "catch one's breath," something which even God is described as doing after his vast work in creation: "...on the seventh day He ceased *from labor*, and was *refreshed*" (Exod 31:17). When there is no Sabbath, we not only become so absorbed in what we are doing that we lose all sense of God at work within our work, we also oppress those around us, from our co-workers and secretaries to our wives and children. No longer in step with the divine rhythm, work now defines who we are and escalates to an obsession. As obsessions know no boundaries, we send out strong signals to everyone around us, that our "holy" task takes precedence over everything else, so there better not be any singing, laughing, fun or "breathing" while we are around. To that attitude the Bible says, "Stop making your work into an idol and grow up. Quit taking yourself so seriously and give people a break. Let them laugh and play a little."

This is probably the reason why these two commands of keeping Sabbath and the sabbatical year are juxtaposed with strong warnings against idolatry.

III. The Threat to Rest Exodus 23:13

"Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips." (23:13)

When you remove the Sabbath from the workplace it becomes "a breeding ground for idols."⁷ The seduction of idolatry is what robs us of our gift of holy rest. Every other god in the Ancient Near East was a "user" and an "abuser" of the worst kind; they engaged in sexual promiscuity at the level of NC17 and beyond. They raped, pillaged and got drunk. But worse yet, they were control freaks. Like Hitler, their "work camps" were in reality "death camps." To get them to take an interest in you, you had to sacrifice everything precious to you. Your time, your farm animals, even your children were not exempt from the fiery flames of Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites (Lev 18:21). For Israel to take the name of another god on her lips was to court disaster and undo everything God had liberated her from during her enslavement in Egypt. To worship them meant renewing her old sentence of slavery and being remade in their image – blind, deaf and unfeeling.

What are the most seductive temptations to idolatry in our world? Perhaps it is not the drug dealers in East San Jose or the pimps of Hollywood, but our own obsessive hearts that have deregulated work to become all consuming, so much so that we refuse "to take a breath," or let others "take a breath" lest production slip. Though we may not consider ourselves idolaters, the Bible places us at the head

of the class. And in the end we have to ask, How many children have been sacrificed to Molech as a result?

Who will set us free from all this madness? The answer in a word is simply, Jesus.

IV. “Come unto me...and I will give you rest”

When Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand, Israel was so weary from centuries of oppression that the word “rest” had all but lost its meaning. Within the cruel, oppressive Roman regime, Israel had precious little place to find a “resting place.” Under scores of deviant dictators, her existence in the land was carefully monitored and measured to the point where it seemed as if even the air she breathed was rationed. In response, her religious leaders had multiplied the regulations of the Sabbath to the point where it was no longer a celebratory rest but a weighty burden.

In the midst of that weary world Jesus cut right across the Pharisaical understanding of the Sabbath. When challenged as to why he had healed a blind man on the Sabbath, his response was surprising, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (John 5:17). He could have said, as he had on other occasions, that the law permitted saving a life on the Sabbath (Matt 12:11,12; Luke 14:3-5), but instead he agreed that the Pharisees were correct in accusing him of “work” on the Sabbath. But if he was guilty, so was God. As God’s unique representative, the “second” Adam, Jesus was imitating the work of the Father in heaven upon the earth. Though creation was complete, redemption was not yet finished. There was still plenty of work to do, and not until that work was fully accomplished would he fully “rest.” It is of no little significance that Jesus’ final words on the cross were, “It is finished!” And then they laid him in the tomb for one final Sabbath before the entire universe would be invited to enter into the ultimate rest when all time would be made holy.

John records that it was the evening of the first day of the week when the disciples, who were gathered together behind locked doors, encountered the risen Christ. After giving them a greeting of *shalom*, John says, “he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). Jesus’ resurrection was the signpost that the future age had burst into the present, and it was this very Spirit who would impart the life of the age to come to all who would believe. Thus it was appropriate that the early church gathered to worship on the eighth day, the Lord’s Day, the first day of the New Creation. This is when we cease our labors and gather with God’s people to sing, pray and listen to God’s word. And rather than merely stopping to “catch our breath,” we actually receive a fresh supply of God’s breath, his Holy Spirit, in order to see and cooperate with him in his New Creation. And then, as we launch out into our week of holy work, we are revitalized with the divine understanding that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10).

Are you tired?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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 will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

1 Douglas L. Stuart, *Exodus* (TNAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman: 2006), 531.

2 For an excellent treatment on this theme see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics and the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 198-211.

3 Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 109.

4 Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 115.

5 Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir, The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 14.

6 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses, A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 450.

7 Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 116.

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