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Six ways to practice sabbath

Tim Keller, March 2018

We all know that “remembering the Sabbath day” is one of the Ten Commandments. It was also a creation ordinance, one of the rules God made for his newly created children to aid them in their flourishing. (Genesis 2:2-3). So the idea of regularly resting from your work, while not involving less than observing a single day of rest, entails more. In a culture that forces us to overwork, how can we practice Sabbath?

I suggest that you should be sure to get six kinds of Sabbath rest. All of these represent different kinds of breaks from ordinary work that can refresh and enrich.

- Make sure some time is *completely unplanned*. This means having a day in which you can do whatever comes into your mind and heart to do at the moment. It is like the Sabbath year in which the land was given “rest”— it was not planted with anything, and you could eat whatever happened to grow from it. (Leviticus 25:1-7) We need this kind of complete cessation from activity occasionally or even our supposed time off will just be another form of tiring exertion.
- Take some *avocational* time. An avocation is something that is pleasurable for you, but that takes some skill and expertise. Usually it is something that others do for a living. This could be a sport, but it also could be anything from carpentry to music. This is somewhat analogous to planting a different crop in a field one year in order to replenish nutrients and make the land more fertile for its ordinary produce.
- Take some *contemplative* time. The Bible requires that we observe the Sabbath day with gathered worship, but that is not all we should do. Prayer, solitude, journaling, reading and reflection are all crucial ways that we replenish our inward resting in Christ and his work alone for our salvation. Hebrews 4:1-10 draws a remarkable analogy between the gospel of free grace and the Sabbath. The writer says, “*there remains, then, a rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work just as God rested from his.*” (v.9) When we find salvation through Christ and grace, we rest from the most debilitating work of all — the work of establishing our own worth through our efforts, the work of earning our own salvation.
- Take some *aesthetic* time. The Genesis account indicates that God rested from his work at least partly in order to enjoy his creation. Throughout Genesis 1 and 2 we see God viewing all that he has made and saying, “It is good!” “It is good!” We also need to take time to simply enjoy the beauty of God’s world. The main thing to do with beautiful landscapes or great music or some other form of the arts is to take it in and say, “That is so good.” This refreshes and energizes in unique ways that the other forms of resting do not.
- Take time to *nurture relationships*. This is time with your family and friends, time set aside to pay full attention to the most important people in your life. Again we see that this kind of time replenishes and nourishes you in ways that the others cannot. We are irreducibly relational creatures, made in God’s image. Even strong introverts need both the affirmation and sense of being known that comes from close bonds and relational ties.

• *Inject Sabbath* into your work. Some people are so given to overwork that even regular time off doesn’t seem to keep them from being totally exhausted by the intensity of their workweek. Associated with the Sabbath laws were the gleaning laws, in which the owners of fields were not allowed to harvest out to the edges of their fields. They had to leave a percentage of grain in the field for the poor to come and take. Some people have used this as an inspiration for deliberately setting fewer goals for themselves in a given day and week, not *harvesting out to the edges*, not trying to squeeze productivity out of every single second of every day.

These forms of Sabbath do not need to be practiced in a wooden way, with exactly the same amount of time for each. But none of these forms should be completely missing from your life. Take stock. Honor the Sabbath. God has given it to us as a gift, as well as a command, and it should be received and enjoyed.

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