

## The Problem With Sabbath

*Deuteronomy 5: 12-15*

“ ‘Observe the Sabbath day and 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 to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 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.

According to our Jewish friends who observe the Sabbath, the Sabbath begins when you can visibly see three stars in the sky. On Friday evening as the sun tucks itself in for the day, three stars—a trinity constellation—slowly emerges to announce it is finally time to rest. It’s time to put down the tools, take a break from shopping on Amazon or responding to emails. Some don’t even cook or bake or do laundry. On Friday evening, as dusk’s curtain drops, three stars—a Trinity constellation—invites all who are weary after a long week to finally rest.

Well, it might sound nice, but let’s be honest: Sabbath is problematic for a society which is constantly on the go. Maybe we had time to slow down in the horse and buggy days, or maybe even in the time before the internet or the cell phone. But today: Who has time to Sabbath? We have schedules, responsibilities. Some of us are caregiving—running loved ones around to doctor’s appointments while trying to hold down a job. Others are MarioKarting their children around to games and practices and tech week at the theatre. We have grass that needs to be mowed, fridges that need restocked, and every week in the corner of the bedroom there’s Mt. Dirty Laundry looking like it’s going to erupt! God forbid the car breaks down, or the dog gets sick, or someone quits their job which means we have more to do on our plate. We. Are. Busy. And then we come to church—home of the committee meetings and where we listen to sermons about how the church needs to be doing more—more volunteers, more hands on deck, more, more, more. Geesh. It’s enough to drive us crazy. I mean, Sabbath sounds like a wonderful idea, but honestly who has the time?

Except, here’s the thing: inside the patterns of perpetual motion, we find ourselves not only weary, but anxious. In the do more, make more, be more society it is a recipe for our anxiety. If you’re anything like me, when there is a moment of downtime, there’s a voice in my head that says, “Oh yeah, I forgot to do that.” And then I feel a jolt of anxiety surging through my body. Or how about that 2 a.m. wakeup call where a list starts scrolling through our heads. Then there is a somewhat recent new anxiety disorder called “telepressure.” It’s that sudden uncontrollable urge to respond to a new notification. You know, when they buzz, or ding, or vibrate. By the way, this sermon was interrupted five

times by a dinging phone, and then I felt the need to check it and respond. It's telepressure. If we doubt it, just look over at the person next to you next time you're at the stoplight, or—scary enough—at the person you're trying to pass on the highway where they are looking down at their phones. We live in a society which has engrained in us the value of keeping busy and responding immediately to needs. All of it is an anxious pattern for a people created in the image of productivity.

So God gives the people a Sabbath command. The word for Sabbath means “to cease” and the reminder to keep the sabbath is mentioned 107 times—which I believe is more than any of the other commandments; which probably means it is important because it is probably the first one to be neglected. Six days out of the week we work inside the grind, but on the seventh day we are to cease and break away from the busyness pattern. Some theologians have gone as far as to name the fourth commandment the “hinge commandment.” Because it is the commandment on which all the other nine commandments swing. Think about it: If we don't take a break from the pattern we could fall into the habit of worshipping other gods—who aren't gods at all—just to meet our anxious needs. Or if we don't take a break from the pattern we could begin to mistreat our neighbors by coveting what they have, or exploiting them as a means to our end, all in the name of keeping our anxious economy chugging alone.

Remember Israel's story and when the Sabbath command was first introduced to them? Remember, they were in the wilderness, fleeing Egypt. Escaping a life slavery. Now, how much time are slaves given to rest? Answer: none! So as Israel stands on the precipice of a new land, Moses reminds them: *you have come from a system which has required more and more of you. You come from a system which has built its empire on your backs. You come from a system where your worth is based on your productivity. But now...now we are going to live a different way: not only us, but everyone: including all people, animals, and even immigrants. You shall not exploit them to get your needs met. You shall not exclude them to get your needs met. You shall not be an anxiety driven people whose first priority is getting their needs and expectations met!* For one day a week all shall rest together as equals, so maybe we can start to work together as equals! And then Moses ends with, “So all may rest *as you rest.*”

So if it's true that all other commandments hinge on the Sabbath, how are we doing? After all, we are in an election year, and part of the problem is oppression never takes a break, so how can we? But you see, in a world where the 24/7 news cycle doesn't cease; in a world where the message to do more, and make more, and be more doesn't cease; in a society where exclusion and injustice doesn't cease, there has to be someone wise

enough to take a step back and reset so that we aren't being consumed by all the insanity around us.

Perhaps you remember the Moral Monday marches leading up to the 2016 election. Every Monday there was a march in Raleigh. Then the election happened and their hopes didn't happen. I was on a conference call with Dr. Barber afterward and he said something that stuck with me: "We will continue to galvanize and strategize and mobilize our efforts...after we take a break...so we can respond with sanity and not just profanity." He understood that if we are going to continue the endless work of striving for justice, we have to take breaks along the way.

So maybe when we are feeling overwhelmed, we give ourselves permission to take a pause—putting down our phones and turning off the news, and perhaps we meditate for five minutes. Maybe as we sense our limit approaching, we cease, before we hit our limit and not after—because burnout is real. Maybe one day a week we need to simply be and be free of all the anxiety our busyness creates, so that others can be free from it as well.

Then, like those three stars shining in dusk's evening sky, we can emerge as the darkness falls over the land announcing, "Come all who are weary, it is finally time to rest."