

The Privilege of Sabbath
Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Luke 13:10–17
Sunday, September 5, 2021

There are some things that scripture talks about over and over again; themes that are central to who *God* is and who God calls *us* to be. And so if *scripture* talks about these things over and over again, I think it's important that *we* talk about them again and again. So there are certain things that I will make a point to preach on at least once every year. And since I just got back from two weeks of much needed vacation and rest, and tomorrow is Labor Day, I thought it would be a good time to talk about *sabbath* – this command from God throughout scripture to take one day of the week to rest from our work.

On its surface, the idea of sabbath is pretty simple. Take a day off. Rest. But over these past couple of weeks that I was on vacation, I started thinking about how *lucky* I am that I can take two whole weeks off. I can leave my job for *two weeks*, not answer emails or the phone, someone covers for me, and when I come back things haven't fallen apart. Then I started thinking about how lucky I am that I can take two days off each week. Every week, I can take off Friday and Saturday and just enjoy time with my family. I don't have to worry about working enough hours on those days so that I can make enough money to *feed* my family. I can completely unplug from work, and my life is not negatively affected in the least.

I started thinking about a dairy farmer that I knew out in Nebraska who, when I would talk about the importance of sabbath, he would say, "That's great, but my cows aren't going to feed and milk themselves." He told me about how he had to get up every single day before sunrise, seven days a week, 365 days a year, regardless of how tired he was or if he was sick or hurt. That he *couldn't* go on vacation with his family – he couldn't leave the farm for more than a few hours at

a time – because who was going to take care of the chores and all the cows? Taking a day off to rest was something that was simply not possible for him.

I started thinking about the retired widow who, when I would talk about the importance of sabbath, would say, “Take a day off from *what*? I don’t *do* anything. My problem isn’t that I need more rest or more quiet time by myself. My problem is that I spend *too much time* by myself. I need *more* to do.” Taking a day off to rest was something that didn’t make *sense* in her life. The command to sabbath was given in a time before people *retired*.

I started thinking about the man I saw standing out in front of Home Depot, trying to get himself hired to do any kind of manual labor that day. Because if he doesn’t *work*, he doesn’t get *paid*, and his family doesn’t *eat*.

Or the single mother who works two jobs, and when she gets off, she *can’t* rest, because she has to take care of her child.

I started thinking about the people in Afghanistan that I have watched on the news the past several weeks and what sabbath, a day of rest, looks like for *them*, as they live each day in chaos and the fear of death.

I watched coverage of Hurricane Ida on TV and thought about what sabbath would look like for the people of Louisiana – people who are working every moment of every day to salvage their homes and *survive*.

I started thinking about how much of a *privilege* sabbath is. Not just a privilege in that it's something we *get* to do, but that it's something *we* get to do – something *I* get to do – that not everyone else *does*. My job, my place in middle class America affords me certain opportunities that not everyone else can enjoy. Theologian Lauren Winner writes about this privilege of sabbath, and she says, “My ability to rest one day a week – instead of devoting that day to vacuuming my house and scrubbing the toilets – relies on the labor of another woman, who cleans my house every other week. I like to tell myself I pay her well. But I'm pretty sure I'm not paying her enough to keep a Sabbath...My American Protestant Sabbath-keeping was a leisure pursuit, and my efforts to keep Sabbath marked me not as one who pursued God's rest and God's justice; instead, my Sabbath marked me as privileged.”¹

It's one thing for me to tell you how important it is to take a day off to rest – that God *commands* us to do that – but not everyone can *afford* to do that. So how can we turn sabbath from a privilege that is only available to *some* into a privilege that can be enjoyed by *all*?

I think it's important to remember that the initial command to sabbath was given, not to wealthy people of privilege – to people who could *afford* to take time off – but to *slaves*. The people of Israel have been set free from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They go out into the wilderness on their way to this new life in the land that God has promised them, and on their way there, God gives them the law that is supposed to govern their life together. And the fourth commandment that God gives them – number 4 out of 613, ahead of not killing, lying, or stealing – is to “observe the sabbath day and keep it holy...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.” These people

¹ <http://sabbathliving.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Sabbath-and-Privilege.pdf>

who never got a day off in 400 years, who lived day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, if they didn't *work*, they didn't *eat*, God commands *them* to take a day off to rest.

Sabbath is meant to be a reminder to them that they are not slaves anymore. God says, "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." Take one day to remember that you are not slaves anymore. You are not defined by your work or valued based on how much you can produce. Have you ever noticed that the first time you meet someone, or the first time someone meets you, one of the first questions that gets asked is, "What do you *do*?" We shape our understanding of people, how they fit in this world and in our lives, based on what they do for a living. As if that *defines* us. And what God is saying here is that it *doesn't*. Like it was for the people of Israel, sabbath is a reminder to all of *us* that we are not slaves, defined by our work, our value determined by how much we can *produce*. Our value and our worth comes from our status as *children* of God, created in the *image* of God, who have been *redeemed* by God. And not just *us*, but *every single person alive on the face of the earth*. Children of God, created in the image of God, their lives not defined by work.

A quick aside. There are actually several different versions of the sabbath commandment. The one that we read in Deuteronomy is different than the one in Exodus. Here in Deuteronomy the people are commanded to observe the sabbath because they were slaves and God set them free, so they aren't slaves anymore. But in Exodus, it says, "Remember the sabbath and keep it holy...for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it." The command to sabbath there is connected, not to liberation from slavery, but to *creation*.

Some people say, “I *can’t* take a day off. I have too much to *do*. If I take a day off to rest, this thing at work or at home won’t get done and everything will fall apart.” And maybe it’s not so much about just doing *nothing* for a day as it is to change the *rhythm* of your days. Six days you do *this*, but one day a week you *change* that rhythm and do something *else*. Six days you *work*, but on the seventh day you *play* or work in the *yard* or *exercise*. Maybe six days a week you’re on your own and don’t do much of anything at all, but on the seventh day you go out to eat with a friend or find some place to volunteer or a book group to be a part of. Sabbath is about changing the rhythm of life to reconnect with God and your neighbor and yourself.

But also, if we’re saying, “I can’t do that. I have too much to do, and it will all fall apart,” then sabbath is a reminder that *God*, the creator of heaven and earth, who set the planets in motion and holds them in their orbits, who created and sustains *everything that exists*, took a day off, and it was all still there when he came back. Nothing fell apart. If the creator of existence can do that, maybe we can, too. If the creator of existence *needed* to do that, maybe we do, too.

Sabbath is a reminder that all of this does not depend on *us*. That God is in control, ruling and reigning over heaven and earth. And it is an invitation to trust that God will provide for our needs. But we *also* need to consider that maybe the privilege that allows us to enjoy sabbath can be used to ensure that *everyone* can enjoy the privilege of sabbath.

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath. There was a woman there who had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. It says that she was bent over and unable to stand up straight. I would imagine that she was not able to work, and thus the sabbath didn’t really mean

all that much to her. It was just like every other day. But Jesus lays his hands on her and heals her. And he says to her, “You are set free from your ailment.”

A lot of times, what we focus on in this story is Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who criticize him for healing on the sabbath, which they consider to be *work*. But what stands out to me here is that Jesus used *his* sabbath to *set her free* so that *she* could enjoy the privilege of sabbath. He used his sabbath to make sabbath possible for *others*.

Lauren Winner writes about how our spiritual practices are never just for *us*. It’s never just about *me* growing closer to God. It’s also about me growing closer to my *neighbor*, ensuring that *they* have all that they need to live the fullness of life that Christ offers. She says that “fasting ought to connect us to the hungry and prompt us to take action on their behalf. Hospitality ought to prompt questions about whom we are willing to welcome...Sabbath-keeping is not only about devoting one day a week to rest. That day is meant to shape the whole of the week...Those of us who keep Sabbath ought to allow Sabbath to clarify just what it is we are working for during the other six days of the week – things like just labor practices and a living wage” that make it possible for *others* to enjoy sabbath as *we* do. And she says, “At Labor Day, let us remember to let our practice of rest transform our work week. Let us, one day a week, rest in God’s rest. Then let us return to the week, and work for a world where *all* may rest.”²

As we prepare to come to this table and share in a meal that the work of *our* hands did not make possible, how can *we* find the healing and rest that *we* need so that we can make that same healing and rest possible for *others*? How can we change the rhythms of our lives so that *all* may experience the privilege of sabbath?

² <http://sabbathliving.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Sabbath-and-Privilege.pdf>