

Sabbath:
Finding Rest in a Busy World
Part Two: Sabbath Essentials

1. *Time*

2. *Breath*

3. *Rest*

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Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Busy World Part Two: Sabbath Essentials¹

Last Sunday we began our January sermon series called, “Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Busy World.” This is so important, because our culture is obsessed with activity, busy-ness, and productivity to the point that we measure someone’s character or worth based on how hard they work. It’s telling, I think, when research indicates that we place a higher value on those who are busy, when the fact is, what we really need to learn is how to experience true, Sabbath rest. Last week, we looked at how desperately we need rest, and what our stress-filled lifestyles do to us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Yet Scripture promises us that:

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4:9-11, niv)

God intends for us to experience true rest – not just in heaven someday, but here on earth in our daily lives. He’s made it available to all those who are the people of God. So he set the example by resting on the seventh day after he created everything in six days, and he commands us to do the same. Remember that we realized that practicing Sabbath is not legalism; we are not to approach it as another thing that we are required to do, and that we to become self-righteous about it. But neither is it laziness; God’s Sabbath for us is not a day to waste by doing whatever we feel like. Last week we looked at the two listings of the Ten Commandments from Exodus and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament. Remember that we looked at the distinct differences in those two commands that give us a big picture of the reason that God wants us to practice the regular rhythm of Sabbath rest: one is rooted in creation, the other in liberation; one in Eden and one in Egypt. Remember? One reason we practice Sabbath is to follow God’s example in creation, by realizing that we are *not* God; he is. So we can take a day to rest and trust that he who created everything will make sure our world doesn’t fall apart. But we also do it to remind ourselves that, if we are in Christ, we are never to go back to a life of slavery – not slavery to schedules and certainly not slavery to sin. Slaves never get a day off. We are set free in Christ, so we need to enjoy a day of rest from work and in God.

¹ Resources include: Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives* (Bantam Books, NY, 1999); Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2006); Joe Gorman, *Healthy. Happy. Holy. 7 Practices Toward a Holistic Life* (The Foundry, Kansas City, 2018); Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* (Basic Books, NY, 2016); Andy Stanley, *Choosing to Cheat: Who Wins When Family and Work Collide* (Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, 2002); Robbie Cansler, “Kingdom Come: Remember the Sabbath,” *P&B Quarterly* (Oct/Nov/Dec 2018)

So if you recall, we came up with a working definition of Sabbath that will take us through this series:

***Sabbath is a time to rest by worshiping God,
focusing on and enjoying his presence in your life,
and practicing the things that celebrate life and relationships.***

(repeat/write it down)

This can happen for an entire day, and it can also be done for a moment. This series will add more and more meaning to that definition, and you will be able to add more and more practical expression of it in your own life. I asked you last week to simply find one way to practice that. Was anyone able to do so? What did you do?

Now, when I left you last week, I told you that I have a confession to make to you about Sabbath and my own struggle to understand and practice it. I wasn't joking; I have been asking God to help me realize the seriousness of what I'm about to tell you, and I want you to hear it in all honesty and transparency: I have been a bad example to you of practicing Sabbath. Up until I went on sabbatical last summer, I rarely, if ever, took my day off.

Now, traditionally, pastors would take Mondays off, because Sundays are pretty busy days and they drain us emotionally and spiritually, so it was typical for a pastor to take Monday off. But when our boys were little, it occurred to me that, for the reasons I just explained, Mondays were bad days for me. I was a slug on Mondays. I was not resting; I was recovering. It was the worst day of the week for me, as far as my energy levels. And *that* was the day I was giving to my family! I would rather give that to work! But more than which day I took off, the evenings mattered because of the boys' school nights. So I decided to start taking Fridays off, because then I not only had the day, but I had the evening with Shelly and the boys, and I didn't always have to get up early on Saturday for work.

That also gave me a day to do my household chores – mow the lawn, do house repairs or car repairs, run errands, and other stuff like that. I could do those while the boys were in school on Friday. Then it became a regular tradition in our house with Friday night pizza and renting a movie or a game night. In fact, Shelly and I still do that together, and the boys often do it too as adults!

But it was simply a day to do a different type of work – chores, repairs, etc. – not a day to rest. I have to admit that it was a day off, not an intentional Sabbath practice. There is a difference.

And then, as the boys got older and eventually left the house, taking that day didn't seem to have the same sense of urgency. So it became very easy for me to turn Fridays into a catchall day to finish up whatever I didn't have time to finish at work the rest of the week. And so for years now, I have not taken a day off. And, since I got here to West Valley Church 9 ½ years ago, I have never used all of my vacation time. I usually only use a week a year; a couple of years I've taken two weeks.

My church: what I've been doing is *not* practicing Sabbath.

And then, last summer you were gracious enough to grant me a sabbatical. I learned while I was on my sabbatical that I am not giving you or the staff my best, and I'm setting a

terrible example that is based more on the values of this world than the values of the Kingdom of God. I began to think that my work of the church wouldn't get done if I didn't work seven days a week, and that I'd better not take time off. I began to think I was too valuable to the work to take time off.

I say this with a seriously repentant heart, and I'm asking you to forgive me. Will you? I am on the journey with you, and I'm learning too. I learned a lot on my sabbatical.

For those of you who don't know, a sabbatical is an intentional period of time away from work to rest, but also to focus on things that will enhance your work, or to do work related things that you don't normally have time to do. So last summer, after serving here for eight and a half years, you granted me a sabbatical. Actually, your policy states that after seven years pastors are awarded a sabbatical, but I didn't take it then – it took me another year and a half before I took it. That should tell you part of my problem!

But I did finally take it. We scheduled it so that the first half of it – four weeks – was rest, and Shelly and I and our dog dragged our little camping trailer around the Northwest and relaxed. That was fun. The other half was here in town, and I did research in preparation for writing a book. Throughout the entire thing, I tried to learn Spanish with Rosetta Stone, which was hard! But here's the deal: the entire time, I felt really, really guilty. I couldn't allow myself to enjoy the time, because I was taking that much time off work. I wasn't worried about the staff – they are an amazing team and I knew things would go well. They did a great job, and I only felt that I needed to come off sabbatical once to connect with one of our families that was going through a severe crisis. But the whole time I was out, I felt like I should be working at the church. I really struggled, feeling guilty. I didn't "Sabbath" well.

So I determined to do two simple things to correct my poor example, and you can feel free to hold me accountable: one, I will do my best to take Friday off from now on. I've been able to do that since returning from sabbatical about 75 percent of the time. The second is that I will do my best each year to use up the vacation time you give me. I'm working on that, and I will let you know how I'm doing. Is that okay to say to you?

So as we continue in this journey of learning to Sabbath well, there are three very simple essentials to Sabbath that we must realize, and we must practice if we are going to live into that definition that we are working with. The first is:

1. Time

I read several books while on sabbatical, and one of them was called, "Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives," by Wayne Muller. In that book there were many helpful things, but one quote really struck me. This is what it said:

"One of the astonishing attributes of Sabbath time is its unflinching uselessness. Nothing will get done, not a single item will be checked off any list. Nothing of significance will be accomplished, no goal realized. It is thoroughly without measurable value. Many of us are reluctant to slow our pace because we feel a driving need to be useful."²

² Muller, *Sabbath*, page 211

What he means by that is that we are not to approach Sabbath time as if it is time in which we are trying to accomplish something. Will something be accomplished? Yes, very much so. But what gets accomplished is not up to us; that is up to God. Our job is to give up that amount of time on a regular basis in order to let God have his way and work in our lives.

Even after I read that, though, I will say that it took me all the way to week eight of my sabbatical to stop feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt – and by then it was over. It isn't easy to change our mindset about time.

The Bible gives us this admonition:

“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12, niv)

The Message translation of the Bible states that verse this way:

“Oh! Teach us to live well! Teach us to live wisely and well!” (tmt)

This issue of time and our attitude about it is vital to our ability to practice Sabbath.

Sabbath time allows us to be refilled and renewed. “The Greeks understood. Embedded in their language (is) expressed...two distinct words for ‘time’...One is sacred, the other profane...The first word is **chronos**. **It's the root of many of our own words: chronology, chronicle, chronic. It is the time of clock and calendar, time as a gauntlet, time as a forced march.** The word derives from one of the (Greek Gods) named Chronos. Chronos was...a glutton and a cannibal who gorged himself on his own children. Always consuming, never consummated. Chronos is the presiding deity of the driven. Chronos consumes everything in our lives.

The second word is **kairos**. **This is time as gift, as opportunity, as season.** It is time pregnant with purpose. In *Kiaros* time you ask, not ‘What time is it?’ but ‘What is time for?’ *Kairos* is the servant of holy purpose.”³

The New Testament reminds us:

“So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times.” (Ephesians 5:15-16, ceb)

The word “opportunity” is *kairos*. The words “evil times” has more to do with *chronos*.

“There is a time for everything,” Ecclesiastes says, “and a season for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot...a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away...a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 5-8, niv)

Every year, every day, every hour, every moment is ripe for something powerful and wonderful. Ecclesiastes sums it up this way:

“I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11, niv)

³ Buchanan, 61-75

Chronos betrays us – always. It devours the beauty in time that God creates. Either we end up like the man in Ecclesiastes did: driven, driven, driven, racing hard against *chronos*, seeking purpose and finding none – only emptiness, or we learn to follow the eternity that God has set in our hearts. We begin to orient our lives toward *kairos*. We start to sanctify some of our time. We purposely take time out of each week, or even some time each day, and we give it to God and give up our busy-ness and need to accomplish something. If so, we might find what the writer of Ecclesiastes did:

“I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God.” (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, niv)

This is a gift of God – to be able to experience the sacred amidst the commonplace – to taste heaven in our daily stuff. This is what Sabbath does for us. But we must take *Kairos* out of *Chronos* if we are going to experience it.⁴ We must take time to stop and begin to focus on our lives and on our God.

Also, when we take that time, we need to take...

2. Breath

Many of you know that I deal with chronic headaches that can be pretty debilitating, as a result of the auto accident and traumatic brain injury. One of the things that I am learning to do better in order to cope with that is to meditate. Meditation is most simply focused thinking. I've been learning to calm down and to focus on my breathing – to feel the breath coming in my nose and out my mouth, to feel it as it fills my lungs. This practice helps calm me down, lower my heart rate, and then to be able to isolate the intrusion of pain and to begin to address it.

To calm down, to quiet my spirit, and to breathe in and notice the life in the air I breathe is, in itself, an act of worship. It is to acknowledge, as one of Job's counselors rightly said:

“The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”
(Job 33:4, niv)

By meditating, I'm learning how, with each breath, to acknowledge that it is God himself who gives me my very breath. And so, I can be one of the ones who is obedient to Psalm 150:6 –

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.” (Psalm 150:6, niv)

So when I say “breath,” what I mean is to stop your busy-ness, block out some time, and make sure you take time to simply breathe – to calm yourself in the presence of the Lord and simply breathe in the life he gives you.

I'm trying to give you some practical direction here: take the time to be still, and allow yourself to simply breathe – stop being so out of breath from your busy life. A big part of Sabbath is to breathe in and breathe out the life that God gives you, to appreciate it, and to

⁴ Buchanon, *The Rest of God*, 36-37

enjoy and rest in it. In the process, you can turn your *chronos* into *kairos*, because you are allowing the Holy Spirit to fill your spirit just as the air is filling your lungs. Remember that Jesus met with his disciples:

“And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”
(John 20:22, niv)

You might think you can’t afford to sit still. But remember what we said last week – God will take care of you and your schedule. You just need to remind yourself of that and rest in him.

When the Apostle Paul was speaking to a group of Greek philosophers, he reminded them:

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.” (Acts 17:24-25, niv)

Take the time to simply breathe, and most of all...

3. Rest

I remember times in college that I would stay up all night for two or three nights in a row to cram for a final exam and write final papers. I was young and I could handle that, I thought. But I remember at the end of one stretch, I went into my room right after lunch to study for the next test that was a day and a half away, and that is all I remember. I had three other roommates, and about six the next morning they decided to check on me. I assume they first checked to see if I was still breathing. Then they began to dress me in all kinds of ways. Fortunately there were no smart phones or Facebook back then so there’s no record of it! But I was dead to the world. As one author puts it, “I fell into a sleep so deep that, had God plucked a rib from my side, fashioned a woman from it, and brought her to me naked, I wouldn’t so much as twitched.”⁵ I had lost the power to resist sleep.

The thing about Sabbath is that while it is a form of rest, it is *different* than sleep. Sleep is so needed that, if we defy it for too long, our bodies will eventually, inevitably, and even violently, force the issue and take over our brains and will. Sabbath won’t do that. If you resist Sabbath rest, it backs off. If we ignore it, it goes away, and we don’t even notice. Not for quite a while, actually. So we feel good about all we accomplish. But don’t be fooled; it takes its toll. You can spend your life ignoring Sabbath and never figure out why your life is fraying at the edges in your lack of joy and your frayed relationships and spiritual life – and you’ll never realize why your life is coming apart at the seams. You spend time with friends, you take vacation, and you are still exhausted.

To keep Sabbath well, as both a day and an attitude, we have to think clearly about God and freshly about time. We need to change our minds about both. We’ve already talked about seeing a regular time of Sabbath as *kairos* instead of *chronos*. But we must also change our

⁵ Buchanan, 61

approach to God. Listen: *unless we truly trust God's sovereignty, we won't dare risk Sabbath.*⁶ (repeat)

For the Jews, their Sabbath began Friday night at sundown. In other words, it began with sleep, with no agenda or schedule to wake them up the next day. They recognized they needed a good night's sleep in order to rest effectively in God's presence. That's why I said last week that sleep might be one of the most spiritual things you can do first, if you are depleted. But not only is sleep physiologically and psychologically necessary, did you realize it is an act of faith? You are never more vulnerable than when you are asleep, as my college roommates proved! When you sleep, you are trusting God to watch over you and replenish you.

In Psalm 3, David writes:

"Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" (Psalm 3:1-2, niv)

But then he declares:

"I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me." (Psalm 3:5, niv)

And then in the next psalm he writes:

"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety."
(Psalm 4:8, niv)

We can only enter sleep unguarded, trusting that God will take care of us. We enter Sabbath the same way. We enter Sabbath believing that God will cover us and take care of us. If we don't believe that, we don't rest. We *won't* rest.

One more thing about sleep versus rest: Sleep is often a recovery of what we've been through the day behind it. We sleep at the end of the day. But Sabbath isn't just about recovery; it is even more about *preparation* for the week ahead.

In Acts 3-4, Peter and John perform a miracle in Jerusalem, and that gives Peter the opportunity to preach about Jesus. But this lands them in trouble with the "law" – the Jewish religious leaders call them in, in order to put a stop to them and regain control. So Peter preaches about Jesus to them, too. They are astonished at Peter's courage. He preaches with authority, not as the impetuous fisherman that he used to be. They threaten Peter and John with dire consequences if they don't stop, and then let them go. But they make note of something:

"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13, niv)

Then the two men go rejoin their church, and they pray together. This is what it says (it's a long passage, so it won't be on the screen – just listen). In fact, in honor of God's Word, would you stand with me as I read:

⁶ Much of this section is inspired and borrowed from Buchanan, pp. 61-75

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one."

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." (Acts 4:23-31, niv)

Thank you – you can be seated. Their prayer *ended* with the trouble they face, but it didn't *start* that way. It began with "Sovereign Lord..." And it moves from there to naming and recounting the height and depth and weight of his sovereignty: God made all, rules all, and overrules all that stand in his way. They rehearse the reality of God. As they grow, God starts to look even bigger.

Then, and only then, as a kind of footnote, they pray about the problem they have: "Oh, by the way, God, we've had some trouble today, some blowhards making empty threats. Could you please clear it up?" Then God sends a fresh infusion of the Spirit. They grow some more. God sends his Spirit, but *not* to keep the disciples safe: *to make them more dangerous*.

Are you in the midst of a situation or in circumstances where, as you pray, you find yourself putting the problem first? If so, you're starting where you should end. You're rehearsing the problem, making it seem larger than it is, when what you need to do is rehearse how great and big God is. Then the problem shrinks to the right proportions. Then you can say, "Oh God, by the way...can you take care of this?"

Sabbath is intentionally taking regular time *before* each week, and even throughout your day, to breathe, to rest, and to focus on how great God is. Circumstances and situations become secondary when we focus on Jesus first. Then, Sabbath isn't about recovering from the day before; it is about empowering for whatever lies ahead.

Explain worksheet to help them take the time, breathe, and rest. You can also ask your small group to help you with this and share your thoughts with them. →

Now, you've heard me say before that Sabbath is actually an activity; it's not just about sitting around. There are actually lots of things we can and should do as a part of our Sabbath times. J.I. Packer, a great Christian author, said we should "choose the leisure activities that bring us closest to God, to people, to beauty, and to all that ennobles." That's what we will begin looking at next week.

WRITING YOUR SABBATH PLAN

- My Sabbath day each week will be _____
- I will mark off this day each week on my calendar as Sabbath
- Activities to complete each week to *prepare for my Sabbath* include:

- Temptations to break my Sabbath commitment will most likely include:

- Who will be affected by my observation of Sabbath, and how will I inform them of my plans?

- Activities I will engage in during my Sabbath (What renews my spirit?):
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 -
- Activities I will *avoid* during my Sabbath (What drains my spirit?):
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- Encouragement I need to stay on track:
 - Person(s) who can keep me accountable:

 - Person(s) with whom I will share my Sabbath journey:

 - Additional ways I will share/process my Sabbath journey (journaling, blog posts, testimony, etc.):

Adapted from 24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life by Matthew Sleeth, MD