

Discovering Sabbath (Part 2)

Let's face it. Most of us as pastors are exhausted. We have too much to do and too little time to do it.

The idea of practicing Sabbath keeping, that is to "cease, to stop working" for a 24-hour period each week, just doesn't seem practical. There is simply too much work for God to be done!

I began Sabbath keeping seriously in 2003 and it has transformed my personal life, my marriage, my leadership and our church.

"Isn't that a bit of exaggeration," you may say.

My answer is, "Absolutely not!"

Sabbath keeping (or not) cuts to the core of our spirituality, the core of our convictions, the core of our leadership, the core of our lifestyles.

The real heart issues are: Can I really trust God to build the church and care for the urgent needs around me? Do I really believe the gospel, that He wants to care for me through the gift of rest and delight, that He loves me apart from anything I do?

The Four Principles of Biblical Sabbath

The following are four foundational qualities of biblical Sabbaths that have served me well in distinguishing a "day off" from a biblical Sabbath. I commend them to you as you develop a biblical framework for Sabbath that fits your particular life situation, temperament, calling, and personality.

1. Stop

Sabbath is first and foremost a day of "stopping." "To stop" is built into the literal meaning of the Hebrew word *Sabbath*. I wrote about this in last toolbox article.

2. Rest

Once we stop the Sabbath calls us to rest. What do we do to replace all we are now stopping during our Sabbath time? The answer is simply: whatever delights and replenishes you.

For example, in my case, work relates to my vocation as pastor of New Life Fellowship Church, along with writing and speaking. For this reason, Saturday rather than Sunday is my Sabbath. If you find your mind is too occupied with your worship services, they you will want to pick a different day.

I purposely engage in ideas and people that get my mind off even the thought of work! That includes napping, working out, going for long walks, reading a novel, watching a good movie, going out for dinner. I avoid the computer and cell phone.

For me to enjoy Sabbath rest on Saturday, however, requires I have another day of the week, or minimally a half a day, to do the tasks of life. For example, planning my week, paying bills, balancing our checkbook, cleaning the house, fighting traffic and crowds to shop, doing loads of laundry are all work I need to do a different day of the week.

Below is a list of additional things I also seek to rest from:

- * physical exhaustion
- * hurriedness
- * multitasking
- * competitiveness
- * worry
- * decision-making
- * catching up on errands
- * talking
- * technology (e.g., cell phones, TV, computers)

Sadly, it often takes a physical illness such as cancer, a heart attack, a flu, or a severe depression to get us to rest.

3. Delight

A third component to biblical Sabbath revolves around delighting in what we have been given. God delighted over his creation (Genesis 1:31). The Hebrew phrase communicates a sense of joy, completion, wonder, and play.

Very few of us as pastors have much play or delight in our lives. We are too busy.

God here commands us to enjoy and delight in creation and its gifts. We are to slow down and pay attention to our food, smelling and tasting its riches. We are to take the time to see the beauty of a tree, a leaf, a flower, the sky that has been created with great care by our God.

I will never forget the first time I took pleasure in warm water running over my hands in a McDonald's restroom on a Sabbath. I slowly dried my hands, rubbing them together under the drier as the water dissipated. I did not run out of the restroom, drying my hands on my pants as I walked to the car. I did not skip putting soap all over my hands. I relished the present moment and tasted the Sabbath gift of simply washing my hands!

4. Contemplate

Pondering the love of God remains the central focus of our Sabbaths. So I make sure to feast on his presence, the reading and study of Scripture, and silence on that day.

We taste our earthly deaths every Sabbath. Our short earthly lives are put in perspective as we look forward to the day when God's kingdom will come in all its fullness.

And, yes, God's kingdom on earth will continue to be built when we are gone.

Next Steps

There are an amazing variety of Sabbath possibilities before you.

Experiment. Make a plan. Follow it for one to two months. Then reflect back on what changes you would like to make. There is no one right way that works for every person.

Sabbath is like receiving the gift of a heavy snow day every week. Stores are closed. Roads are impassable. Suddenly you have the gift of a day to do whatever you want. You don't have any obligations, pressures, or responsibilities. You have permission to play, be with friends, take a nap, read a good book. Few of us would give ourselves a "no obligation day" very often.

Think about it. He gives you over seven weeks a year (fifty-two days in all) of snow days every year! And if you begin to practice stopping, resting, delighting, and contemplating for one twenty-four-hour period each week, you will soon find your other six days becoming infused with those same qualities.

I suspect that has always been God's plan.

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