



## Saying No to the Culture of Restlessness

Christians usually pay little attention to the Sabbath. We know what the day came to represent in the English culture, we know about the disciplined faith of the Puritans — which in recent times has been translated into a moralistic prescription for a day of quiet restraint and prohibition. In many Christian homes that meant — not playing cards or watching television on Sunday and definitely not shopping. In this context, the Sabbath is simply about keeping rules. But is the practice of keeping the Sabbath nothing more than a commitment to a long list of “Thou Shalt Nots”? I don’t think so.

In fact, this understanding has somewhat obscured the true meaning of the Sabbath. In the coming months, I want us to consider what the Scriptures say regarding the Sabbath. And we’ll do this, by emphasising one particular aspect of the Sabbath, which is rejected in our culture. In the Bible the Sabbath is essentially an affirmation of faith and identity in the midst of our culture that is inhospitable restless and empty. Contemporary society is preoccupied with gaining more control of the world and time. They tell us that to have more means to be more.

So, all human life has been reduced to the requirements of the global market. But the Bible is more concerned with the sanctification of time by rest and inaction. Of course, the will of God for human beings is to work for six days, but on the seventh we should cease to work and worship.

On this day, the every activities and ordinary business of the week must be suspended.

On this day — the benefits and distractions of technology are put aside, to give rest to the body, and more importantly to deepen our relationship with God. The Sabbath is a sphere of inaction. It is resistance to the relentless demands of the market ideology that encourages us to pursue the same needs and desires that leave us feeling restless, inadequate, unfulfilled. Our system of consumption requires that we want more have more, own more, use more, eat and drink more.

### **The Old Testament Example**

This situation of restlessness is not an unprecedented or even a new condition. It’s happened before. In the OT it was Pharaoh who imposed on the Hebrews a brutal and unquenchable system of endless production. Under this system there was never a time of rest for anyone (see Ex. 5:4-19). But Israel is remarkably delivered from this system of anxiety and comes to the wilderness. There, the people find bread and rest, but they’re not allowed to store up. Exodus 16:13-21 is part of that amazing story:

*‘That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, What is it? For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.” The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed. Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.” However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell.*

*So Moses was angry with them. Each morning everyone gathered as much as he needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away.'*

It's interesting to notice that in verse 20 the people immediately tried to replicate the ways of Egypt by storing up and hoarding because of anxiety and greed. They are concerned with quantity. The people obviously haven't realised that the days of bondage are history. God is now leading them out of a situation of oppressive restlessness to experience his sufficiency through belief and rest. For that reason storing up is unnecessary.

Now, as we continue reading we find something even more remarkable than the daily provision of bread. In verses 22 to 24, provision is made for the Sabbath. Israel is not allowed to store up bread for more than one day — but on the sixth day the community is told to store up enough for the seventh day for the purpose of resting on that day. Listen to Moses again:

*'On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much — two omers for each person — and the leaders of the community came and reported to Moses. He said to them: "This is what the Lord commanded: Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning." So they saved it until morning as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it.'*

This unexpected provision is a sign that the bread for life is not under the control of Pharaoh. It's under the sustaining rule of God.

Even in the desert and with limited resources, God commands a pause for the Sabbath. In verses 25 to 30 we are told for the last time, that when our lives are controlled by obedience to the promises of God, we're going to effectively overcome the restless anxiety of Pharaoh. Notice what Moses says.

*"Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the Lord. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day — the Sabbath day, there will not be any." Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. Then the Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and instructions? Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath — that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day — no one is to go out." So the people rested on the seventh day.*

In our contemporary society the issue remains the same. The Sabbath must be for the people of God an act of resistance and also an alternative. It's resistance because it's a visible persistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of things.

This act of resistance demands from us an enormous decision to fight against the seductive pressures of the unquenchable thirst of the market, and its intrusion into every part of our life. One of the great 'seductions of Pharaoh' today is the 'footy practice' or the compulsive need to fill up our time on Sunday with technology, rather than theological reflection and prayer.

But the Sabbath is not only resistance. It's alternative. It's an alternative to the things that destroy our 'rest time'. The Sabbath reminds us that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God.

This fundamental reality, however, is constantly attacked by the idea that we're the initiators of all things. That's why we neither expect nor even want the Sabbath gifts. We rather keep accomplishing, and achieving and possessing. If people had eyes to see and hearts to understand, they would realise the foolishness and the exhausting restlessness of their intense activity created by the complete disregard of the Sabbath day. But that's precisely the goal of advertising, entertainment, consumerism, and other things that are contributing to the forgetfulness of God. This is the problem, isn't? The loss of the Sabbath is the result of the persistent attempt to dethrone God. When God is rejected, and the seventh day is ignored, the degradation of humanity quickly follows.

There's no doubt in my mind, that the most insidious and dangerous attack on the Sabbath is by people in society who want to secularize it. They want to take advantage of the rest, which God has graciously given to us to manipulate it for their own pleasure-seeking purposes. So, you can see that the fourth commandment is the most difficult and most urgent of the commandments in our society. Why? Because the fourth commandment call us to challenge the demands of a commodity-driven society that specialises in control and entertainment — bread and circuses and disobedience and anxiety.

## **The Church and the Sabbath**

What is our responsibility today? Our responsibility is to remember that the Sabbath is a symbol of the perpetual relationship between God and his people. The repetition of the Sabbath every week tells us that we belong to him.

People who don't rest from their work in this joy are forgetting the goodness of God and they're putting their hopes not in God but in their own work. Christians are workers and worshippers.

In the last analysis, we need to remember that the Sabbath and Christian discipleship can never be separated. And if we fail to obey the Sabbath it will be impossible to enjoy the gift of freedom and rest that the Father invites us to experience in his Son. Jesus talked about this. On one occasion he even said that he had come to show us an alternative to the conditions of life that bring heaviness and despair. In Matthew 11:28 -30, he said this:

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Here Jesus is making a contrast between the 'heavy yoke' of society and his 'easy yoke'. That heavy yoke — the yoke that makes people weary and burdened is perhaps the imposition of Rome and the demanding endless taxation of the Roman empire to support military occupation. But most likely the yoke refers to the strict requirements of rabbinic Judaism, which many couldn't fulfil. Either way, empire or religion the requirements of both were heavy. And Jesus now provides an alternative life of discipleship.

Discipleship involves the love of God and the love of neighbour, practices of self-denial, and resistance to a world that values a person's worth by their capacity to produce and contribute to the idolatry of money. In this context, Jesus is offering very special and precious gifts. Gifts outside the domain of the empire, and the heavy loads of the Pharisees.

He is calling everyone who is feeling 'weary and burdened' to experience a new realm of life where God refreshes his people through discipleship and the Sabbath rest.

Church, the Sabbath now embodied in the resurrection day must be defended from all attacks, and we can only do this by the joy of worship and the willingness of service to demonstrate that the Sabbath is a delight.

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