



The Practices of Jesus: Sabbath

INTRODUCTION

Sabbath

“We have become perhaps the most emotionally exhausted, psychologically overworked, spiritually malnourished people in history,” A. J. Swodoba declares.¹

Can you relate to this statement? Do you feel painfully busy? Frequently drained? Tired in spite of a night’s rest? Stressed even after a vacation—like you need a vacation from your vacation? Does some sweet element of life—the rest, peace, and enjoyment sold to us in advertisements—seem missing no matter what you do?

Jesus made a practice of Sabbath-keeping—setting aside one day a week for resting from his work to rest in God and in God’s work. And he invites us to follow him, to practice Sabbath, as a way to come to him when we are weary and carry heavy burdens so that he can give us rest (Matthew 11:28). Sabbath is the practice from Jesus’s life that addresses our frazzled and exhausted lifestyle.

Luke tells us that the day Jesus begins his earthly ministry is a Sabbath: “As was his custom, he (Jesus) went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read,” (Luke 4:16). Over the course of the next few years, Jesus has numerous run-ins with religious leaders on Sabbath days because he heals on the Sabbath, offending their sensibilities (see Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:1-9). He also lets his disciples pluck grain and eat it on a Sabbath day as they pass through a field (Matthew 12:1-8), and the leaders don’t like that either!

“The Sabbath is made for man,” he asserts, “not man for the Sabbath. The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath,” (Mark 2:27). He flips their understanding of Sabbath on its head—the

¹ Swodoba, A. J. *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazosa, 2018).

Sabbath is a loving gift to mankind, not a burden. But in his assertion of authority over the Sabbath, Jesus does not ever say there is no Sabbath; he only objects to *how* they practice Sabbath.

Confirming this understanding, we see that after Jesus' death his disciples rest on the Sabbath, "according to the commandment," (Luke 23:56). For his disciples to be observing the Sabbath after his death, Jesus certainly must not have taught them otherwise.

The commandment Luke refers to is the fourth of the tenth commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day, to 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. On it you shall not do any work . . . for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy," (Exodus 20:8).

The Hebrew word for Sabbath connotes stopping, resting, *and* delighting. It's meant to be a day of freedom from the tyranny of work, a day of worship, joy, and rest. The Lord built the Sabbath day into the created order because mankind is not made for slavery but for freedom and worship—for delighting in God and in God's presence in our lives.

Practicing the Sabbath is therefore an act of faith—we can stop working because we are in the care of God. It is an act of worship—we cease all the things we normally do to make space to notice and pay attention to God and his world. It is an act of resistance—a statement that we are not created to endlessly work and consume until we die. It's an act of restoration—one day of every week is a day to rest. And it's an act of joy—we cease work to delight in God's provision and goodness, all his good gifts.

THE PRACTICE

Traditionally, the Sabbath begins in the evening. In Jesus' day the people began the Sabbath by feasting and sleeping, feasting to celebrate God's goodness and the life he has given, and sleeping to express trust that God is the one who takes care of us.

The Sabbath traditionally ended at dinner time the following day, and the hours in between were 24 hours when people did not try to make anything happen. In our day it could mean stopping not just work but internet surfing, email, housework, shopping, and errands.

So how do we fill a day with no work, no consuming? How about with napping, praying, silence, hiking, reading, scripture, music, creativity, enjoying time with friends or family? What helps you notice God and gives you delight? The possibilities are endless! The point is to stop. To delight. To worship. To rest.

If you have never practiced Sabbath, be patient with yourself. This is a practice that takes practice; sabbath-keeping is an art.

A helpful tip is that it works best if we can take a few hours to prepare for Sabbath keeping. Do you need groceries, a clean house, to run that errand, to finish the laundry? Try to set aside a few hours to get ready as you would for a special day.

And then go—rest!

INTERESTING QUOTES

“The Sabbath is an invitation to enter delight. The Sabbath, when experienced as God intended, is the best day of our lives.” Dan Allender

“You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” St. Augustine

“A widespread misunderstanding of Sabbath trivializes it by designating it ‘a day off.’ ‘A day off’ is a bastard Sabbath. Days off are not without benefits, to be sure, but Sabbaths they are not” Eugene Peterson

“In the practice of Sabbath keeping, we live out the truth that one day we will leave all things unfinished as we rest in the arms of Jesus.” Rich Villodas

“A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we learn to let God take care of us – not by becoming passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives.” Marva Dawn

HELPFUL SCRIPTURES

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Matthew 11:28-29

“On the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” Genesis 2:2-3

“Remember the Sabbath day, to 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.” Exodus 20:9

“The LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” Exodus 20:11

“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:8

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

Before you try this practice:

1. Listen ahead of time or together to this podcast by Jeff Bethke and John Mark Comer: [Fight Hustle, End Hurry: 5. Sabbath](#) (27 mins)
2. What thoughts and questions do you have after listening to this conversation?
3. Have you ever tried to practice the Sabbath? What went well? What didn't go so well?
4. What questions do you have about this practice? Would you like to do some additional inquiry before you try this practice? Where will you go for more information?
5. What do you anticipate could be enriching about this practice?
6. How do you anticipate you might struggle with this practice?
7. Are you willing to give this practice a try?
8. Someone pray for your group as you head out to explore or begin to practice Sabbath.

After you have tried this practice:

1. What were your experiences, good and bad, with keeping the Sabbath?
2. If you didn't try it, did you explore or learn about it? What did you discover?
3. What would recommend to others that you found helpful?
4. What questions do you have or what support do you need as you keep exploring or practicing Sabbath?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry, John Mark Comer

The Deeply Formed Life, Rich Villodas

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly, Marva Dawn