

WISDOM AND SABBATH REST

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Leadership is stewardship—the cultivation of the resources God has entrusted to us for his glory. The Sabbath gives us both theological and practical help in managing one of our primary resources—our time.

In Ephesians 5, Paul invokes the biblical concept of wisdom:

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”
—Ephesians 5:15–17

The King James Version translates verses 15–16 as, “walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” Living wisely (or circumspectly) is to a great degree a matter of how we spend our time.

So what does this verse tell us? First, the word “redeem” is drawn from the commercial marketplace. It means, essentially, to “make a killing” in the market, or to spend so wisely and strategically that the returns are many times that of the investment.

Second, Paul’s phrase “the days are evil” doesn’t simply mean his readers were living in bad times. When Paul speaks of “the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4), he means the time between the first coming and the second coming of Christ. It’s the overlap between the old age and the new kingdom age, a time when Christians are spreading the gospel and being a witness to the kingdom. Thus, Christians are solemnly obliged not to waste time. Time-stewardship is a command!

However, applying the principle of “making the most of every opportunity” from a kingdom perspective may be harder today than ever. Especially in global cities, we find more pressure, fewer boundaries, and less stability in our daily work than perhaps ever before. Part of the issue is how connected we are through technology. Part of it is globalization, which creates such enormous economic pressures that everybody is pushed to their limits. Employers are trying to get so much productivity out of workers that many of us are being asked to go beyond what is really fair and right.

Even though technology and contemporary idols have created longer and longer work weeks, “do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” Discern God’s will. Long ago someone told me that God does not give you more to do in a day than you can actually do, and I’ve wrestled with that for many years. We may feel there’s way too much to do, but some of it is not his will. The pressure is coming from you, or your employer, or your friends, or your parents, or someone else besides God!

SABBATH PRINCIPLES

One of the fundamental principles of the Bible when it comes to time management is the *Sabbath*. If we are to be an “alternate city” (Matthew 5:14–16), we have to be different from our neighbors in how we spend our time outside of work; that is, how we rest. So what is the Sabbath about?

According to the Bible, it is about more than just taking time off. After creating the world, God looked around and saw that “it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God did not just cease from his labor; he stopped and enjoyed what he had made. What does this mean for us? We need to stop to enjoy God, to enjoy his creation, to enjoy the fruits of our labor. The whole point of Sabbath is *joy* in what God has done.

Writer Judith Shulevitz describes the dynamic of work and Sabbath rest this way:

My mood would darken until, by Saturday afternoon, I'd be unresponsive and morose. My normal routine, which involved brunch with friends and swapping tales of misadventure in the relentless quest for romance and professional success, made me feel impossibly restless. I started spending Saturdays by myself. After a while I got lonely and did something that, as a teenager profoundly put off by her religious education, I could never have imagined wanting to do. I began dropping in on a nearby synagogue.

It was only much later that I developed a theory about my condition. I was suffering from the lack [of a Sabbath]. There is ample evidence that our relationship to work is out of whack. Ours is a society that pegs status to overachievement; we can't help admiring workaholics. Let me argue, instead, on behalf of an institution that has kept workaholism in reasonable check for thousands of years.

Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily. This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactly intentional. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. They were meant to communicate the insight that interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.¹

In the Bible, Sabbath rest means to cease regularly from and to enjoy the results of your work. It provides balance: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:9–10). Although Sabbath rest receives a much smaller amount of time than work, it is a necessary counterbalance so that the rest of your work can be *good and beneficial*.

God liberated his people when they were slaves in Egypt, and in Deuteronomy 5:12–15, God ties the Sabbath to freedom from slavery. Anyone who overworks is really a slave. Anyone who cannot rest from work is a slave—to a need for success, to a materialistic culture, to exploitative employers, to parental expectations, or to all of the above. These slave masters will abuse you if you are not disciplined in the practice of Sabbath rest. Sabbath is a declaration of freedom.

Thus Sabbath is about more than external rest of the body; it is about inner rest of the soul. We need rest from the anxiety and strain of our overwork, which is really an attempt to justify ourselves—to gain the money or the status or the reputation we think we have to have. Avoiding overwork requires deep rest in Christ's finished work for your salvation (Hebrews 4:1–10). Only then will you be able to “walk away” regularly from your vocational work and rest.

1. Paraphrase of Judith Shulevitz, “Bring Back the Sabbath,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 2, 2003.

Sabbath is the key to getting this balance, and Jesus identifies himself as the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27–28)—the Lord of Rest! Jesus urges us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you 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” (Matthew 11:28–29). One of the great blessings of the gospel is that he gives you rest that no one else will.

SABBATH “PRACTICALS”

In practical terms, how do we figure out how much time we need for Sabbath rest, and how do we spend that time? The following are a few suggestions or guidelines, by no means exhaustive.

WHAT IS THE IDEAL AMOUNT OF TIME OFF FROM WORK?

The Ten Commandments require one day (twenty-four hours) off each week. When God gave these commandments, the Hebrews had been working from sunup to sundown, but the gift of the Sabbath was to stop working at sundown on Friday and rest until sundown on Saturday.

If you look at the Scripture, there’s nothing that says you have to confine yourself to a forty- or fifty-hour work week. I suggest that to be within the biblical boundaries, you need to have at least one full day off, and the equivalent of an additional half-day off during the week.

For example, if your work and commute take up almost all of your weekdays but you have a full weekend off, with church participation on Sundays, then that is probably a sufficient Sabbath. Or if you get one full day off per week, and perhaps three evenings free after 6:00 p.m, you can live a pretty balanced life. This still allows quite a lot of hours for work during the week.

WHAT COUNTS AS TIME OFF?

Of course, “making the most of every opportunity” is not simple. It never has been simple. Yes, two hours spent in prayer with God will produce far more spiritual benefits than watching an old Cary Grant movie; yet, recreation is something you must have! Mental refreshment is part of a balanced diet for the body and soul, so prayer cannot replace all recreation, exercise, and so on. Sabbath encompasses several different types of rest, as outlined below.

1. Take some time for sheer inactivity.

Most people need some time every week that is unplanned and unstructured, in which you can do whatever you feel like doing. If your Sabbath time is very busy and filled with scheduled activities of “recreation” and ministry, it will not suffice. There must be some cessation from activity or exertion. This pause in the work cycle is analogous to Israel’s practice of letting a field lie fallow every seventh year to produce whatever happened to grow (Leviticus 25:1–7). The soil rested so over-farming would not deplete its nutrients and destroy its ability to keep producing. Whatever came up in the soil came up. You need some unscheduled time like that every week to let come up—out of the heart and mind—whatever will.

2. Take some time for avocational activity.

An avocation is something that is sheer pleasure to you, but that does require some intentionality and gives some structure to your Sabbath rest. In many cases an avocation is something that others do for “work,” which is analogous to occasionally planting a different crop in a field to replenish the nutrients and make the soil more fertile for its normal crop. Include these elements:

- You need some *contemplative* rest. Prayer and worship are a critical part of Sabbath rest, from any perspective. Regular time for devotion, reading the Scripture, and listening to God forms the basis for inner rest and provides time away from the more exhausting exertions of life.
- You need some *recreational* rest. The Puritans and others were rightly skeptical of recreations that required spending a great deal of money and time and exertion, because those types of recreations exhaust people. Be careful that recreation really refreshes.
- You need to include *aesthetic* rest. Expose yourself to works of God’s creation that refresh and energize you, and that you find beautiful. This may mean outdoor things. It may mean art—music, drama, and visual art. God looked around at the world he made and said it was good, so aesthetic rest is necessary for participating in God’s Sabbath fully.

3. Consider whether you are an introvert or an extrovert.

When planning your Sabbath rest, ask yourself what really “recharges” you. This self-assessment can help you determine how relational your Sabbath time should be. Introverts tend to spend their energy when out with people and recharge their batteries by being alone. Extroverts tend to spend energy in personal work and recharge their batteries by getting out with people. If you are a real introvert, be careful about trying to maintain all of your community-building relationships during your Sabbath time. That would be too draining. On the other hand, relationship-building could be one of the greatest things a true extrovert could possibly do. Don’t try to imitate an introvert’s Sabbath rhythms if you are an extrovert or vice versa! Recognize that some avocational activities take you into solitude, while some take you out into society.

4. Don’t necessarily count family time as Sabbath time.

Do a realistic self-assessment of “family time” and how it affects you. Family time is important, but parents need to be very careful that they don’t let *all* of their regular Sabbath time be taken up with parental responsibilities. (Introverts especially will need time away from the kids!) Keeping all of these things in good balance may be virtually impossible when your children are very young, but this too will pass.

5. Honor both micro- and macro-rhythms in your seasons of rest.

Israel’s Sabbath cycles of rest-and-work included not only Sabbath days but also Sabbath years and even a Year of Jubilee every forty-nine years (Leviticus 25:8–11). This is a crucial insight for workers in today’s world. It is possible to voluntarily take on a season of work that requires high energy, long hours, and insufficient weekly-Sabbath time. A new physician has to work long hours in a residency program, for example, and many other careers (such as finance, government, and law) similarly demand some sort of initial period of heavy, intense work. Starting your own business or pursuing a major project like making a movie will require something similar. In these situations you have to watch that you don’t justify too little Sabbath by saying you’re “going through a season”—when in actual fact that season never ends.

If you *must* enter a season like this, it should not last longer than two or three years at the most. Be accountable to someone for this, or you will get locked into an “under-Sabbathed” life-style, and you will burn out. And during this “under-Sabbathed” time, do not let the rhythms of prayer, Bible study, and worship die. Be creative, but get it in.

BRAINSTORM IDEAS WITH OTHERS

As soon as Christian communities start defining specific rules for what everyone can and can’t do on the Sabbath (like traveling, watching television, or recreation, for example), we begin to slip into legal-

ism. Observing Sabbath rest along with a community can be beneficial, but keep in mind that people differ widely in their temperaments and situations.

It may be helpful to find other Christians in your field of work and ask them how they handle the need for rest, leisure, and restoration. Inquire about their weekly or seasonal rhythms. You will probably discover one or two ideas that are really helpful. If you can, bring these people together to brainstorm in person.

We live in a broken world, and some employers do relentlessly exploit their employees. Dealing with situations like these is difficult, but being part of a community made up of wise Christians in your field can help you correctly assess your work situation and your alternatives.

“INJECTING” SABBATH INTO OUR WORK LIVES

I have come to see that if you develop the foundation and inner rest of Sabbath, it will not simply make you more disciplined about taking time off, but it will also lead you to be less frantic and driven in your work itself. This is perhaps the most important application of Sabbath, where we can truly act as a counterculture, and here’s how it works.

Associated with the Sabbath laws were “gleaning laws,” such as Leviticus 19:9, in which field owners were not allowed to “reap to the very edges” of their fields. They had to leave a percentage of grain in the field for the poor to come and harvest. Sabbath, then, is the deliberate limitation of productivity, as a way to trust God, be a good steward of your self, and declare freedom from slavery to our work.

In concrete terms this is the hardest thing to do, because it’s a heart matter. Personally, this has meant deliberately setting fewer goals for myself in a given day and week, rather than harvesting “out to the edges.”

In global cities, many people are stingy with their money yet freely give their bodies away. By contrast, we Christians are stingy with our bodies and generous with our money. Likewise, many people are willing to mortgage their souls to work, but at a certain point Christians have to say, “I’m willing to set fewer goals, not go up the ladder as fast, and even risk not accomplishing as much, because I have to take Sabbath time off. And ultimately, I don’t need to be incredibly successful. I can choose this path of freedom because of the inner rest I’ve received from Jesus Christ through what he has done for me.”

You have to actually *inject* this Sabbath rest into your thinking and into your work life. Some of our work worlds are institutionally structured toward overwork. Sometimes you have to “pay your dues” in the early stages of your career when you’re in a season of hard work (as I mentioned previously) or are trying to gain some credibility in your field. When you’re more established in your field, you may be able to moderate your workload. However, at some point, even if that doesn’t happen, you will have to trust God and honor Jesus—who is Lord of the Sabbath—by practicing Sabbath and risk “falling behind” in your career.

It may happen that you *will* fall behind, and yet retain your sanity. Or it may be that God will allow you to keep moving ahead in your career despite your practice of Sabbath and the “gleaning” principle. It is up to him.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of Sabbath is not simply to rejuvenate yourself in order to do more production, nor is it the pursuit of pleasure. The purpose of Sabbath is to enjoy your God, life in general, what you have accomplished in the world through his help, and the freedom you have in the gospel—the freedom from slavery to any material object or human expectation. The Sabbath is a sign of the hope that we have in the world to come.

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