



Exodus 20:8-11
Practicing The Way
“Sabbath”

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Today we start a brand-new sermon series to kick off the new year, titled, “Practicing the Way.” It is based on a New York Times bestselling book by Pastor John Mark Comer, and the book has a subtitle of “Be with Jesus; Become like him; Do as he did.” And so, naturally, we are kicking the series off with a passage that isn’t from Jesus’ life. In fact, it’s from the Old Testament.

In this series, we will look at what John Mark Comer calls “the practices” of Jesus. Often, they are called “spiritual disciplines.” They are the habits Jesus practiced for cultivating his own spiritual life. We might think, “He needed to do that? Isn’t he God come to us in the flesh?” Yes, but remember, Philippians 2:5-7 says, **“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-7, *emphasis added*).**

He made himself nothing. The Greek for “made himself nothing” literally says, “he emptied himself.” So, yes, Jesus had to engage in practices to stay in relationship with his heavenly father, and to do his will. We need to do the same.

So, the nine practices we will look at in this series aren’t the end-all, be-all in discipleship to Jesus, and they aren’t necessarily *all* the habits that we see Jesus practice. For instance, Jesus walked a lot...it was a habit...but walking itself isn’t a spiritual practice. It could be incorporated into a variety of the practices, but it’s not a spiritual practice in and of itself. Skiing, on the other hand, *is* a spiritual practice even though Jesus didn’t do that. I’m kidding. It’s not actually a spiritual practice, though it is a reminder that we’re washed white as snow. With that introduction to the series, let’s pray and then dive into today’s passage... **Exodus 20:8-11.**

When people think of spiritual disciplines, or spiritual practices, the Sabbath is probably one of the first ones that comes to mind. Prayer and Fasting are probably the other two that most Christians think of. None of these three are natural for us, and of these top three, Prayer is probably the only one done with any regularity and intentionality by a lot of Christians.

But, as Comer writes, “**The spiritual journey begins with rest...Rest is essential to apprenticeship under Jesus**” (John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way*). And we all know that rest is important. It’s why we sleep, for instance. We need that rest. Our bodies are designed by God to need rest to recuperate and re-energize, and so for a number of hours each night, that’s what our bodies do.

Sabbath is intentional rest. This last summer I took an extended sabbath – a sabbatical. It was an intentional time of rest. That doesn’t mean I sat on the couch eating Doritos all day every day. Rather, I engaged in things that rejuvenated me spiritually, as well as physically, emotionally, and relationally with those closest to me. In a nutshell, this is what Sabbath is. It’s a weekly day of rest and rejuvenation, getting off the hamster wheel that is the rest of the week for so many people, and having a day of rest. Yes, a whole day.

This pattern – and maintaining it as a pattern, as a discipline, is important – this pattern is established in the opening pages of Scripture, where, after the 6 days of Creation, God rests on the 7th day. This has deep theological and symbolic meanings, and I want to highlight 5 of them:

1. Completion and Satisfaction – God’s rest signifies the completion of creation. Everything was finished, and it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). His rest is not from exhaustion (since God does not grow tired or weary, as explicitly stated in Isaiah 40:28) but a pause to enjoy and reflect on the perfection of what He created.

2. A Pattern for Humanity – The seventh day established a rhythm for human life. It is the basis for the Sabbath, a day of rest and worship. Exodus 20:8-11, that we read this morning, links the Sabbath commandment to God’s

creation work, calling people to emulate His rest by ceasing labor and dedicating time to God and renewal.

3. Sacred Time – By blessing and sanctifying the seventh day, God set it apart as sacred, or holy. This emphasizes the importance of rest and worship as integral to human flourishing and spiritual life.

4. A Symbol of Trust – Resting demonstrates trust in God's provision. By observing the Sabbath, humans show faith that God will provide for their needs even when they are not working.

5. A Foreshadowing of Eternal Rest – Hebrews 4 speaks of a “Sabbath-rest” for God's people that we experience with God in eternity. When we take a sabbath, we are preparing ourselves for the eternal sabbath in God’s Kingdom.

So, in essence, God's rest on the seventh day is a profound theological act that highlights completion, sets a rhythm for human life, and points toward eternal rest and communion with God.

Now, to be sure, when Scripture tell us that God rested on the 7th day, there’s a certain kind of work that continues for him. Jesus even says in John 5:17, “My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working.” So, **God rested on the 7th day from creating. But he continued to sustain and rule over the universe.** Colossians 1:16-17 puts it well: “In him all things were created...and in him all things hold together.”

This rest, however, is so important, that God includes it in the 10 Commandments, as we read in our passage from Exodus this morning. And it explicitly patterns the commandment after the six days of Creation and then the 7th day of rest. God models for us how we are to live. I think of Jesus’ baptism when I think of this: Jesus didn’t *need* to be baptized. And yet he does it because he wants to model it for us. He’s not asking us to do something that he himself wouldn’t do. It’s the same with Sabbath. God rests, in part, as an example to show us what it is and how important it is.

Now, it has often been noted that the first four commandments deal with our relationship with God (vertical relationship) while the last six deal with our relationships with other people (horizontal). That is mostly true. What it misses is that this fourth commandment, normally seen as a “God relationship” command is really a transitional one that *also* includes our relationships with people. The Sabbath helps us get centered on God and it helps us relate to other people, as it impacts servants, family members, and an entire community as everyone rested, which we see in these verses today. In fact, it has broad societal impact when properly practiced. It wasn’t *that* long ago that businesses were closed on Sundays for the Sabbath. And so by taking a true Sabbath, you, like God, set an example for others and encourage them to take a Sabbath.

The word “Sabbath” is a word that is sometimes misunderstood. “Sabbath” is the way we have pronounced the Hebrew word Shabbat. And: **“Shabbat” means to stop, or to cease, doing something; to take a break.** It does not automatically mean that the Sabbath is when we worship. Most Christians associate the idea of the “Sabbath” with both rest and worship. I suppose this is because we are also told her to keep the Sabbath holy, and because with everyone taking a break from work, we can gather together for worship. And there’s nothing wrong with gathering for worship on Sundays. But the fact is, the Sabbath is not the only holy day, and worship and rest is not the only holy thing we do. Even our work is holy.

You might not think that working at Amazon or Boeing or a school or Starbucks or nannying, or wherever you find yourself working...you might not think of that as holy: but when God created Adam, he put him in the garden that God had made and gave him the task of caring for it. God put him to work. It’s not as though the snooze button is a holy gift from God and the work clothes come from the devil. God gives us work. So, it’s not that this day of rest is the only day that’s holy; it is holy in addition to the other days. **The difference about this day is that it is a day to stop working.** We are to “Shabbat” or “Sabbath” our work. We are to cease our holy task of working, and engage in the holy task of resting.

Now, it's not a time to kick back and literally do nothing, as if we can't move, can't exercise, can't cook a meal, and so forth. It's that our life of creation is set aside. I think an even better word and way of thinking of it in our society is this: Our life of *producing* is set aside on the Sabbath. We could say that God, on the 7th day, stopped producing the universe. That kind of work was done. And similarly, so is ours. What we do the rest of the week to produce income, or a closet full of clothes, or social media followers, or to produce school work, or to produce a pantry of food...all the things we do that are associated with "production" get set aside for a day.

Ruth Haley Barton has written a book called, "Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation" and it's another book I would highly recommend. She writes, "Sabbath is more than just taking a day of rest; it is a way of ordering one's life around a pattern of working six days and then resting on the seventh... **"The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship and delighting in God, but the rest of the week must be lived in such a way as to make sabbath possible"** (Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*) "Paid work needs to be contained to five days of the week. Household chores, shopping and errand-running need to be completed before the sabbath comes, or they must wait. Courageous decisions need to be made about work and athletics, church and community involvement."

This is where we get into trouble with the Sabbath: we don't prioritize it in such a way that we even can take a sabbath. We end up with grocery shopping, kids' sporting events, house cleaning, checking work email, and all kinds of other things on this day. Prioritizing and loving the Sabbath...seeing it as a day of rest and enjoyment *that the whole rest of the week is oriented around* helps us get everything else done during the other six days of the week.

This probably raises a lot of questions around "what is ok to do on the Sabbath and what is not?" Jesus argued with the religious leaders about this all the time because Jesus did a lot of things on the sabbath that ticked them off. They had very small boxes of what could be done on the Sabbath, and Jesus expanded those boxes all the time. But Jesus taught that the sabbath is for our benefit (Mark 2:27). So, there's certainly some flexibility in what we

do on the Sabbath and we need not be legalistic like the religious leaders of his day. However, we've probably gone too far in 21st Century Christianity, at least here in America. In fact, I suspect a lot of our sabbaths are dominated by much of the stuff we're supposed to complete the other 6 days of the week.

And it's not that adjustments or exceptions can't be made on occasion, but it's way too easy for those exceptions to end up being a regular feature of our Sabbaths, and then it's no longer a Sabbath; we're no longer resting. So, **What can be done on the Sabbath?** Here are some ideas, in three broad categories. There can be overlap between them, or you might move things around to different categories, so mostly the categories are simply to help you think about this through different lenses. But here you go:

Rest your body. Take a nap, go for a walk or a bike ride, take a bath, eat your favorite foods, sit in the sun, listen to music, get a massage, watch a movie. If you're married, hop in bed with your spouse. According to Ruth Haley Barton, in the Jewish tradition of the rabbis, married couples get sabbatical brownie points for sexual intimacy on the sabbath.

Replenish the Spirit. Do what brings you joy. Read a book. Exercise. Sit in your favorite chair and dream. Wear your pajamas. Play a musical instrument (though caution if you're just learning and others are in the house, maybe?). Play a board game. Knit. Fly a kite. Play with Legos. There could be a lot of things that bring you joy...but make sure they're not things that actually belong in the other 6 days. Studies show that social media does not actually bring joy, or contentment, by the way, so shut that stuff down.

Restore the Soul. This is our spiritual rejuvenation. So, worship God. Go to church. Read Scripture. Pray. Journal. Share at a meal what you're grateful for – our family does that one at dinner every night, actually, sharing what we're grateful for that day. But, as a once a week sabbath, maybe it's what you're grateful for from the past week (can do this in a retirement community, your home, etc.). Turn off the TV and talk with someone. Pick up the phone and actually use it as a phone: call a relative or a friend you

haven't talked to in a while. Sit still and see what God puts on your heart. Listen to worship music.

The point is, to Shabbat – stop – your work, and do other stuff. Stop your producing. **Get out of the consumer mentality as well as the producer mentality, and be with God, be with people. Rejuvenate your mind, your body, and your soul. This is what Sabbath is for.** It's for our benefit, particularly benefiting our relationship with God and with other people. God commands it; Jesus upholds it, practices it, and models it for us.

I'll end with a quote from an author named Nan Fink, who John Mark Comer quotes in his book. Maybe this will inspire you. She's a Jew who became a Jesus follower. She writes, "Shabbat is like nothing else. Time as we know it does not exist during these twenty-four hours, and the worries of the week soon fall away. A feeling of joy appears. The smallest object, a leaf or a spoon, shimmers in a soft light, and the heart opens. Shabbat is a meditation of unbelievable beauty" (*Practicing the Way*, p. 182).

I pray you and I would orient our weeks around the Sabbath. Live the other 6 days intentionally in such a way that the Sabbath really is a ceasing of our work...of our producing. Let's have a real Sabbath one day a week, on the same day every week, in our journey of practicing the way of Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.