

Resting in God

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Memorial Day is past, and schools are letting out. Summer is finally here, even if it's felt like summer for the past few weeks, and summer doesn't truly officially arrive for a couple of weeks. But with school out, summer seems to be a time for rest. Or at least summer used to be a time for vacation and rest. But that's no longer the case. Americans are taking less vacation than they used to take. On average, Americans receive two weeks of paid vacation a year, but use only about half of them. Millions of vacation days go unused every year. And even when we do go on vacation, many aren't actually on vacation, still checking their work emails and doing other work.

Part of the problem is that companies don't always offer vacation time and those who are self-employed or work hourly jobs know that missing work means missing pay. Others worry about the stress of working ahead before the vacation and catching up afterwards. Others worry that taking a vacation will be seen as a lack of dedication to their job, or they fear they will be seen as replaceable. We don't rest because we feel the need to work.

We don't rest because we don't think we can rest. A surprise best-seller in 1991 was called *The Overworked American* and reported that work hours and stress were up and sleep and family time was down for all Americans. Things have only gotten worse since then.

But we also know we need to rest. For those of you who exercise, you know that rest is important. As you do weigh training, your muscles are breaking down. They need to rest in order to build themselves back up. Rest days allow your body to recover.

Music is the same way. Singers and those who play woodwind or brass instruments need rests so they can breathe in and have enough air to blow out and make the music. Some musicians even say that the rests are more important than the notes.

Some of you may have heard that the FBI recommended that people reboot their routers to disrupt some Russian malware that could be on there. We also have to restart our computers and phones and tablets so they can clear out the old and rest and recover. Our minds and bodies work the same way. We need rest.

When God gave the Israelites the command to rest, the command to keep a Sabbath, he did it for two reasons. The first is to remind the Israelites that they were free. After years of slavery in Egypt, years of not being able to rest, they finally could choose to rest, and needed that reminder. It would have been unbelievably good news to people who were recently slaves whose time was never their own and who never, ever had a guaranteed period of rest!

The second reason to rest is to remind them that they are not God. If they worked and worked and worked themselves, they might forget who provides all they have. They might forget who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. They might think everything depended on them, and not on God. Refusing to rest is pride, thinking that the work can't happen without you

As time went on, though, the command to rest became a burden instead of a blessing. Over the years, teachers of the law had to clarify what exactly rest was and what work was. Rabbis eventually came up with 39 different categories of actions that were forbidden on the Sabbath. As times changed, they had to clarify what that meant. If kindling a fire counted as work and could not be done on a Sabbath, could you handle matches? The rabbis answered no. How far could you walk before it became work? The rabbis came up with answers to that question, as well.

That also meant that anything that looked like work was forbidden. That's what gets Jesus and his disciples in trouble from the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson today. Plucking grain as they walked through the fields would have been considered "harvesting" and would have been work. Traveling like they were was also not allowed on the Sabbath, and would have been considered work. How the Pharisees could be out watching them harvest and travel without breaking their own Sabbath laws are questions left unanswered.

Yet Jesus knew that the law was getting in the way of people seeing the lawgiver. Instead of spending the Sabbath worshipping God, all of the time spent making sure you weren't breaking the rules got in the way. Jesus knew God gave the command to rest to be freeing, not to be enslaving. And so he tells the

Pharisees, “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

But Jesus also knew that we could never keep God’s command to rest on our own. With sin in the world and entropy always increasing, there’s always more work to be done. So, to prove He is the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus would go to the cross. He’d be unable to rest those last few days of his earthly life as he did the work His Father set for him to do. He’d then spend his Sabbath rest in the tomb. But when he rose from the dead that first Easter, he had defeated sin and begun God’s work of restoration.

Now because of Jesus, we have our rest today! Jesus is our Sabbath rest. He forgives us for all the time we’ve wasted, spent, and squandered, and all the ways in which we’ve abused our bodies and misused the day. Jesus says, “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). Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, and he gives rest to all who call on him. Because he’s done all that needs to be done.

Those of you who have gardens know how that works. You have to do the work of planting the seeds, watering the plants, fertilizing the ground, and keeping weeds and animals away. Yet you can only do so much. You can’t control the temperature or the rainfall. You can’t control the sun. You can’t make the seed grow. You can only make the conditions better for the seed to grow. God gives the growth.

God’s command to rest reminds us that we’re not in control, and that’s ok. It’s freeing not to be God. It’s freeing to know you don’t have to pretend to be infallible and inexhaustible. It’s freeing to know that the world can go on without us sometimes. The Sabbath rest, first observed and set apart by God at the end of creation week and given to His people for remembering and observing is not a burden, but a blessing. How wonderful it is to trust God to keep the world working, and to be able to rest.

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