

Time to Rest (Part 2 of 9 in the *Simple Summer* series)

Exodus 20:8-11

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It's interesting to think about the evolution of time-keeping. At first, we assume folks just worked when it was light out and slept when it was dark. What else would they do? They might meet up "day-after-tomorrow," but there were no 8:00 a.m. meetings or 60 minute worship services, for that matter. Then the sun-dial was invented, so things got slightly more defined. But still time depended on the universe: the tilt of the earth, the spin of the planets, the weather. There was no precise minute-by-minute timekeeping, but you might meet someone at "about 3:00 in the afternoon." Then, during the industrial revolution, the clock tower began to appear in the town square. Suddenly the hour was more precise, and would chime to you wherever you were, at whatever time of day or night. But time still was something communal – everyone focused on the same tower in the square, and watched its hands sweep through the days and nights in a rhythm. Fast-forward to the digital wristwatch: suddenly time doesn't sweep – instead, it flashes as distinct numbers, each second its own entity. Time is my own now – it's on my body, and I can reference it at any moment of the day, watch it slip away, or even argue with you over exactly what time it is. Suddenly time is not part of the universe – it has nothing to do with the sun or the earth. It isn't communal – it has nothing to do with others. It is mine, and mine alone, every little second.¹

And of course most of the folks I know now don't even wear watches anymore: they just pull out their cell phones when they want to know what time it is: time is streamed to them from antenna towers, so if you and I are on the same network, we will know that it is exactly the same time. We trust what the network tells us, too – I think if AT&T and Verizon wanted to play a big trick on everyone, they could fast-forward clocks by half an hour or so in the middle of the night and throw off about half of America.

But what does all this have to do with us? And what does it have to do with simplifying our lives to be more in line with God's vision for us? I think this evolution of timekeeping is important to notice, because somewhere along the way, we stopped thinking of time as something God is in charge of – we stopped thinking of time as God's gift to our community; and we started thinking of time as something we are in charge of – we started imagining ourselves as masters of time. Children as young as elementary school are now being required to purchase date books, if they are not issued iPads at the beginning of first grade. We are conditioning our youngest students to look at a day or a week as a series of boxes to be filled in, appointments to be made, to-do items to be scheduled. And what of all of us? We carry our calendars around in elaborate leather binders or on electronic devices in our pockets or purses, with each hour an empty slate waiting to be written on, waiting to be filled in some way that will convince us that we have not "wasted" even one of those little boxes, even one of those hours. Somewhere along the line, we began to believe that time belongs to us; and in truth, we became possessed by time. We became slaves to our watches, our date books, our calendars. We cram as much into every day as we possibly can, working well into the night and grocery-shopping when much of the world is sleeping. We never stop. We never rest until our bodies force us to, and then it's a day at the spa or an hour at the gym or a week on the beach, but it's not enough.

¹ I first heard this type of discussion about the evolution of timekeeping from Rev. Dr. Fred P. Edie at the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation at Duke Divinity School. Fred attributes this idea to Charles R. Foster, professor of Christian Education.

And it is not what God had in mind for us. God created the very universe with a pattern of work and rest: six days of work, one day of rest. Have you read the story in Genesis?

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”²

We doubt we have time for it, but we were made to rest, at least as much as God rested. Our bodies were created in God’s image with this rhythm in mind, to hold one day of every seven as holy, and not to work. It would have been easy for God to continue working on the seventh day: God could have said, “I’ll make the man and the woman a little better.” “I’ll just tweak those flowers over there; I think I can get more colors.” “I am not so sure about the mosquito – perhaps it needs another look.” But God rested, without regret, and took pleasure in what had been created. And this was the birth of the Sabbath.

If you open your Bible to Exodus chapter 20 and read *all* of the 10 commandments, of which we read one this morning, you’ll quickly notice that the command to keep the Sabbath holy is the longest and most involved, and the only one with reasoning included: you should remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy because God blessed it. In doing so, you honor creation, and acknowledge that you are not in charge of the universe – that job has already been taken. But if we then turn over to Deuteronomy 5, where the 10 commandments are repeated, another reason is given: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.”³ So not only do we acknowledge creation when we honor the Sabbath, but we remember the exodus, as well: that our God is a liberating God, one that has set us free. Slaves cannot rest, you see – slaves cannot stop working. But those who have been set free may rest as God commanded. So we remember creation, and our image-of-God-ness, we remember liberation, and how God has set us free again and again; and we Christians have another reason to honor the Sabbath: because we also celebrate that on a Sunday morning long ago, Christ defeated the powers of death and was raised to new life. So every Sunday is a little Easter celebration, as well.

But how do we do it? How do we keep the Sabbath? What exactly do we do, and not do? Obviously there are different ideas about this: some people still celebrate Saturday as the Sabbath, as is Jewish tradition, but Christians have celebrated Sunday as both worship day and rest day since the time of the early church. And so the first thing we do on our Sabbath is worship: we come together and give thanks for creation, for liberation, for resurrection. We acknowledge that we are creatures, that all of life is a gift, and that we are not so essential to this life that the world will stop turning if we stop working for one day. Of course, Sabbath-keeping has gotten a bit of a tough reputation in the past, because of abusive rules about what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath – for years, Sabbath was less about rest and worship and joy and more about rules to follow. But what if we all committed ourselves to making Sabbath a priority: that we might come together and worship, and then spend the day rejoicing in God’s gift of time: sharing meals with friends, perhaps, or walking on the beach. Spending the afternoon reading, or playing games with our children. Talking to each other. If we’re married, Sabbath is a time to be intentional about intimacy. It is time to remember that we are creatures, not Creator of the world, and we were created in the image of the God who rested, though more work could have been done.

² Genesis 2:1-3

³ Deuteronomy 5:15

When I worked at the Duke Youth Academy, we held a two-week program each summer for rising juniors and seniors in high school. They were high-achieving high school students, in AP classes and on sports teams, involved in their churches and proficient at many musical instruments. Their calendars were full. And so when it came to the Sunday between our two weeks of study, we purposefully planned a Sabbath. The students slept a little later than usual, then worshipped together at Duke Chapel. Then we gave them the rest of the day off, to rest. When we began, we tried to build all kinds of guidelines to make *sure* they were *resting*: perhaps they could play music but not basketball. They could walk in the gardens but not run on the trails. Pretty soon we had too many rules and very little rest or joy. That is when we began telling the students: you can do whatever you like, whatever brings you joy, as long as you do not try to *achieve* anything. You may not work, but you can rejoice. This means you can play basketball, giving thanks for the way your body moves and gravity works and your friends can play with you; but you may not run drills to prepare for tryouts. You can read and give thank for language and beauty and imagination, but do not study or take notes. You can jog on the trail and give thanks for the air moving in and out of your lungs and the trees all around you, but do not keep time. You can play music, but for God's sake, no scales or arpeggios. This time is a gift, receive it with joy.

And our students, these overachieving high schoolers, looked at us like we were crazy: they had never remembered having a full day to rest and enjoy one another's company and have fun. And it changed their lives. They came back to us that evening and said, "I had the most amazing day!" They were full of life, full of energy and it sustained them throughout the next week.

And what if we did it, too? What if we set aside Sundays and committed to worship and to rest, but not to work? To play games but not to compete? To share meals but not to labor over the perfect table setting? We will not be able to sustain this on our own: the rest of the world won't be stopping to rest on Sunday afternoons, which means we will have to make some tough decisions sometimes; and we, as a church, will have to commit to guarding this time against committee meetings and classes so we all might rest. But together I believe we can take one day out of seven to remember who we really are and what is really important. We can anchor our lives in God's truth for us. It can fill us with God's spirit so we might last through the rest of the week, and for weeks to come. We were made to rest. We were made in the image of the God who rested. We were made for Sabbath.

Amen.