



The Bridge Church

The Spiritual Practice of Sabbath

As a new Christian, I never really understood the idea of Sabbath. Is it an Old Testament Jewish thing? So why do some believers still seem to care about it? Is it just a biblical name for going to church on Sunday? I can eat bacon, so why would I continue the Sabbath?

Learning more, I found myself more confused. Sabbath was a command in the Mosaic law, but Jesus has fulfilled the law? Do I even need to follow the law anymore? I know I can eat bacon, but I also know I shouldn't kill people... but why do I know that?

Maybe you've felt similarly overwhelmed at points on your Christian journey. Take a deep breath. Karl Barth (giant brain theologian) famously answered a post-lecture question to summarise his theology in a single sentence with, '*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*' Confused or unsure? Rest in the deepest simplest truth of all: you are irrevocably loved by Jesus.

However, our difficult questions matter. Not just for a neat set of beliefs, but for a life lived with deep roots in the gospel. Through my confusion I have come to find the Sabbath a beautiful gift from God that helps us rest in the love of Jesus.

The rest of this article will seek to sketch the biblical picture of Sabbath for Christians; the unique contribution Sabbath makes to our discipleship; and practical steps for creating a rhythm of Sabbath in our lives.

Sabbath as Christians

Sabbath begins in the beginning, where God '*rested from all his work*' (Genesis 2:2). Having created existence in six days, '*God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done*' (Genesis 2:3). This follows his creation of humanity '*in his own image*' (Genesis 1:27), connecting our nature to his nature. This is the first clue that the Sabbath is deeper than a time-bound, old-covenant-determined reality.

The Sabbath is then embedded as the fourth commandment in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17). Most Christian traditions retain adherence to these commandments with differing approaches depending on one's position on Jesus' fulfillment of the law (a spectrum from '*law is now wisdom*' to '*law is binding for believers*'). We don't have space to explore the whole topic of the law, but a few comments on the Sabbath command might be helpful.

Some would interpret the Sabbath commandment differently from the other nine based on passages like Colossians 2:16 or Romans 14:5 that seem to minimise its importance. These passages are important for our understanding of Sabbath, but read closely, don't overturn it:

1. They have their own contexts that must be considered.
2. They deal with differing cases of improper Christian judgment and don't minimise the inherent wisdom of Sabbath.
3. They don't overturn or suggest a piecemeal approach to the coherent whole of the Decalogue.

My suggestion is that whether one considers the law through the lens of wisdom or binding morality, Sabbath remains important for the Christian because:

1. Its deepest rationale is found in the enduring pattern of God in creation.
2. The reprisal of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:13-16 moves from creation to redemption from slavery in Egypt, which only finds greater meaning in our redemption at Calvary.

3. Jesus' statement in constant conflict with the Pharisees over the Sabbath was to affirm that 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27-28).

So, should Christians continue a practice of Sabbath? **Yes. Not as an obligation, but as a gift.**

Susanna Herschel beautifully describes the Jewish practice of Sabbath as '*a metaphor for paradise and a testimony to God's presence; in our prayers, we anticipate a messianic era that will be a Sabbath, and each Shabbat prepares us for that experience.*'

Standing where we stand as Christians, she could not be more on the money. Sabbath has been fulfilled and transformed in the person of Christ. Paradise has dawned. His presence is here, near and intimate. Right now we can enjoy the rest of Jesus' light and easy yoke (Matthew 11:28-30), while we eagerly await the rest of the perfect Sabbath-rest to come (Hebrews 4).

This is why Christian Sabbath is such a precious spiritual practice. We not only make sense of our created nature as image bearers when we Sabbath; but we come to experience the grace of Jesus every week in a way that adjusts our life to the pace and voice of God. Sabbath is only more meaningful in light of Christ than it ever could have been under the old way.

The Ingredients of Sabbath

Under the banner of grace and gift without obligation or rules... what should the Sabbath look like? Traditionally the Sabbath is a 24 hour period (usually but not necessarily sundown Friday to sundown Saturday), constituted by the following four key principles drawn from practicingtheway.org (check their resources out for lots of practical advice and wisdom):

Stop

Fundamentally the word *shabbat* means to cease. We are intentionally stopping our work when we Sabbath, meaning our pattern of Sabbath should help us disconnect and disentangle from the pressures of our work. This will look different for each of us. What do you need to do to make sure that you can properly stop?

Rest

Sabbath begins with God's resting, and so rest is integral to Sabbath. Think about your whole-self: how do you need to rest given the demands and realities of your life? Perhaps you work a physically demanding job and need to spend the day quietly. Maybe you work in an office behind a computer, and would rest by doing something active outside. Read a book, take a nap, go for a walk. Whatever you do, rest.

Delight

We taste the goodness of God on Sabbath as we delight in his creation with gratitude and thankfulness. Most Sabbath practices have historically involved a 'feast' for this reason. What can you do to cultivate joy and delight in a way that restfully abides in God? Perhaps play a sport, meet a friend at a cafe, sit on the beach, meet another family with kids together, or quietly sit with a glass of wine. The possibilities are endless as we let the good lead us to delight in God.

Worship

Sabbath is not about formal religious adherence, but joyful heartfelt worship. If we are resting and delighting well on the Sabbath, that is part of our worship as we receive the presence of God in those gifts.

Equally though, we want to create space to be with God in a way that we might not otherwise be able to. Perhaps it's a longer devotional time, liturgy and prayer at dinner, pausing for a short time of prayer at morning/noon/evening, or a time of praise with your community. More than a secular day off, Sabbath revolves around God.

So, a biblical Sabbath will incorporate each of these four ingredients with flexibility. More than that, a regular rhythm of Sabbath will breathe life into our life with God individually and communally, more than we might expect at first glance.

Sabbath as Individuals

Living as a disciple of Jesus can be difficult in subtle and subconscious ways. Sin is a universal constant that would have us captain our own lives, and the modern world seems eerily designed to reinforce that desire without us even knowing. Here are a few ways a commitment to Sabbath combats and re-orientes our personal life with God.

1. Prone to over-work, anxious-achievement, or boundary-less living? Sabbath is a weekly line in the sand to proclaim with body, soul and spirit that we will not be defined by what we do. We cease our work and embrace the rest of Christ. Not to recharge our batteries for optimum success and efficiency, but to cease doing, and abide in the gospel of grace with our whole self.

Whether or not we are 'good' at resting is beside the point (in fact finding it hard often reveals how important this practice might be for you!). The regular commitment to Sabbath slowly forms each of us away from worldly pressure deeper into our identity in Christ. Walter Brueggemann puts it beautifully, *'People who Sabbath live all seven days differently.'*

2. Sabbath is a counter-cultural choice to embrace our humanity in all of its limitations. We teach ourselves each week, *'I am not God, and He will keep the world moving without me'*. We learn the counter-intuitive truth that true freedom is not found by throwing away limits, but by living in step with how God has created us to live.

In our digitally connected age, Sabbath only grows in importance as a weekly rhythm of ceasing and presence, but also in choosing to take a break from the relentless pressure of the man-made omnipresence embedded in our devices.

3. Life is busy, schedules are full, and there are more good things to do than there is time. Sabbath would have us (1) stop living reactively to the loudest or most urgent pressures, and (2) challenge our assumptions about what matters (for ourselves and our families) to live at the pace of God. To practice Sabbath regularly it will require hard and counter-cultural decisions.

As Israel practiced Sabbath in remembrance of their past slavery to pharaoh, the Christian practices Sabbath in remembrance of our slavery to sin in the ways of this world (Ephesians 2:1-3). We resist the hurry, consumerism and ambition of our time, to cultivate this holy space with God.

Sabbath as Community

In the face of pervasive loneliness, the unintended exaltation of marriage (and diminishing of singleness) in the church, the absence of intergenerational relationships of real depth, and the increasingly impossible task of discipling our young people in this post-Christian moment... What do we do?

We retrieve the practice of Sabbath.

Picture an ordinary home on a Friday evening. A pot of spaghetti bolognese remains warm on the stovetop while a single woman, a young dad, and two teenagers laugh together as they joke and banter while they set the table for the meal to come.

Down the hallway an older couple stressfully sit on the floor of a kid's bedroom managing the mayhem of a flock of young kids aged two through ten, doing their best to read a series of Bible story books and sharing insights about faith in Jesus. Next week will be someone else's turn, so right now they do their best to love these little ones as they can.

In the lounge room a handful of young workers, parents and a widow cradle a hot beverage and share honestly about their week, and the highs and lows of following Jesus in each of their seasons. There are awkward pauses given the early stages of some of these relationships, yet there is a tangible sacredness in this space unlike many others.

Together they all come to the table (amidst noise and distraction) to light a few candles, speak liturgy, read Scripture, bless the children, pray for each other while they share a meal together (finishing with a delicious dessert to tangibly taste the goodness of God). At the end of the evening each heads back to their home to enjoy a day of rest and joy with God in their own way.

A communal Sabbath moment like this is built slowly and intentionally with plenty of obstacles and mess along the way. Yet, there is a spiritual potency to be found in sharing the unique gift of Sabbath as the diverse body of Christ. How might we bless and be blessed as we involve each other in this regular rhythm with God?

Create a Rhythm of Sabbath

Here are some steps to consider as you build your practice on the four ingredients of Sabbath mentioned above:

1. Pick a time to try, and build from there

Instead of architecting the most perfect, idyllic 24 hours from sunset to sunset full of new ideas and practices? Start with a day, or even just an afternoon or morning. Do what is achievable. Learn from that experience and add something small for the following Sabbath. Take a posture of growing into Sabbath rather than seeking to master the Sabbath, and you'll slowly find it.

2. Try out different ideas

When we're rooted in the biblical principles of Sabbath, we can enjoy the freedom of Sabbath in alignment with who God has made us to be. On the one hand we should resist the temptation to imitate someone else in their pattern of Sabbath. On the other hand, we can learn and be stretched by other examples and traditions. For example, liturgy may not come naturally to you, but it may become a gospel anchor for your Sabbath. Similarly, trying to spend the Sabbath alone at home may drive you insane so you quickly learn to spend it with others.

3. Think about practical preparation

If you will truly rest in your time of Sabbath, you'll need to plan and prepare. You might need to do the grocery shop before hand, cook a meal in advance, plan what you'll do during the day, make sure your house is already tidy before you begin, and so on and so forth.

4. Do it in community

You could begin your Sabbath with a meal like the example above, but you certainly don't have to. What will bear fruit however is walking this journey of Sabbath with your community. Share highs, lows, ideas, difficulties and help each other along the way. You'll find the process more enjoyable and fruitful as you do it together.

In conclusion it must be said that beginning a practice of Sabbath can be difficult as you juggle schedule, expectations, life pressures, and anxieties, all while experimenting to find what works best for you. Remember we are seeking to rest in grace, so please do give yourself grace as you start.