

SABBATH REST

Genesis 1:1–31; 2:1–4 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! If it's your first time joining us, we are in the middle of a series on humanity. We've been looking for a number of weeks at the doctrine of humans as image bearers of God and seeking to understand more fully what that means for our own identity, belonging, value, and purpose as followers of Jesus.

Two weeks ago, we looked at how our vocation/calling is directly tied to our being image bearers of the God who is Creator, the God who works; the God who brings order out of chaos, forming and filling the earth to be his dwelling place. But it cannot be missed that the God who works also rests. What does it mean that God rested on the seventh day? And as those who bear his image, what should that rest look like for us?

To begin talking about Sabbath, we need to first talk about our Christian culture's rejection of it based on a misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching in the gospels (specifically Mark 2:26–28). Many Christians have taken this passage as Jesus rejecting or opposing Sabbath. Many well-meaning Christians note, "Jesus didn't keep Sabbath, and the New Testament never explicitly teaches Sabbath observance." But Jesus isn't anti-Sabbath but is clearly showing the misinterpretation and abuses of it. Jesus' point is to correct Sabbath observance, not to set it aside. As Jesus said,

"The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath."

Mark 2:27

Christians are clearly not obligated to keep Mosaic covenant law. We are under the Law of Christ—so does that mean we are free from keeping the Sabbath? It depends on what we mean by free. First, the Sabbath shows up long before Mosaic Law. Sabbath shows up in the beginning, in the creation account, before the fall, before sin, before the need for the Law or law keeping. So the subject of Sabbath keeping is deeper than a question of law keeping or law breaking, and seems to speak more about human well-being and a way of life rather than a religious observance, or a day off for the people of Israel. What if, by Christians rejecting Sabbath keeping, we are actually cutting ourselves off from part of what it means to be human and from what it means to be made in the image of the God who rests on the seventh day?

1. **What is the Sabbath? What is its purpose?**

- A. There are a handful of key passages on Sabbath for our study and consideration (Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 16:20:8–11; Deut. 5:13–15; Matt. 11:28–30; Heb. 4:1–16).
- B. The first mention of Sabbath is found in Genesis 2 and comes at the end of the creation account, as we just read,

"Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."
- C. Considering the image of God—We cannot miss that the Genesis creation narrative begins with God working and ends with him resting. In these six days, God forms and fashions the cosmos to be a beautiful dwelling place, then he himself rests and inhabits that dwelling place to enjoy it with his creation.

- i) The final stanza of this creation narrative introduces us to the ultimate climax of the creation narrative—the Sabbath day. This day communicates that the cosmos is finished, that the Creator is pleased with his work, and as an expression of his pleasure, he rests. The Idea here is not just that of God ceasing from his creative work but of him taking up residence in his creation, sitting and resting on his throne over the cosmos.
- ii) I have made the mistake of focusing my attention on the work of God in creation and highlighting the creation of humanity as the pinnacle of God’s creative work, and I do believe it is. But I’ve come to see that the pinnacle of the narrative is the Sabbath on the seventh day.

“The ancient Rabbis taught that on the seventh day, God created Rest—tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose—rest, in the deepest possible sense of fertile, healing stillness. Until the Sabbath, the creation was unfinished. Only after the birth of Rest, only with tranquility and rest, was the circle of creation made full and complete.”

—Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy Lives*

- a. It’s also important to note that though all of the creation is said to be good, it is only the seventh day that is made holy. In fact, it is the only thing in all of the creation narrative to be sanctified.
 - iii) If we take what is seen here in Genesis 2 as a principle, it would seem that Sabbath rest is not just about ceasing from work, but about finding contentment in life and enjoying the work that we have cultivated and accomplished. Just as God created the world and then sat back and took it all in—like an artist stepping back from his canvas to behold, to delight in, and enjoy the work that was done. So also, God invites you and I to join him—to rest from our labors and to enjoy the works of our hands, the beautiful world that he created—to savor it, to take it in, to delight in both creation and Creator.
2. The next time mention of the Sabbath shows up in the biblical narrative is in Exodus 16, in the giving of manna from heaven, and Exodus 20, the giving of the Ten Commandments—God’s basic instruction for his society. The Sabbath command and instruction found in these passages was a legislated merciful day of rest from Yahweh. It was given to Israel as an act of mercy—to give rest to all within Israel’s society, from the rich to the poor, the powerful to the weak, the insider and the outsider, all the way down to even the animals. Reading the commandment, you can clearly see that it’s much more than a day off. It seems to be more about following Yahweh’s own pattern and rhythm.

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

—Exodus 20:8–11

- A. This command is about aligning our rhythm with God’s, it’s about observing his way and being like him in his righteousness and justice, in his love and mercy; it’s about protecting all within Israel to receive the blessed rest of Yahweh’s own life from the greatest in society all the way down to the lowliest beast of burden.
3. The third time Sabbath observance shows up in the narrative is when Moses reintroduces Sabbath to the next generation of Israelites. In Deuteronomy 5:12–15, he ties the Sabbath directly to their freedom from slavery in Egypt.

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

—Deuteronomy 5:12–16

- A. Here, Sabbath observance is an act of resistance and subversion. It’s a weekly physical declaration to ourselves and to those around us against the tyranny of work. Sabbath declares we are more than the products we produce. We are more than our work—we are not slaves. This had a very practical observance for Israel—they were to observe, to remember their slavery and their salvation, their story, their identity—by resting on the Sabbath.
4. When we come to the New Testament, we see that true Sabbath rest is found in finding rest, being with, and learning from the Lord of the Sabbath—Jesus Messiah. Jesus said,

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

—Matthew 11:28–30

- A. Leading us back to the Genesis ideal—it isn’t just a day off to rest, but a day to find deep rest in and with our God.
5. And finally, the writer of Hebrews shows us that the heart of Sabbath is about kingdom anticipation that Jesus has made possible for us since he himself has finished and rested from his work of redemption.

“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. 11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.”

—Hebrews 4:9–11

- A. From the beginning, Sabbath was pointing to the fullness or *Telos* and purpose of the Creation—God with his people, enjoy his wonderful creation. That peace and Shalom of God—everything in its right place—God as king, us under his teaching and care, ruling over and enjoying the wonderful creation that he created for us ...
- B. So now we can observe Sabbath in anticipation of the New Creation—anticipating and looking forward to the rest that the people of God will enjoy for all eternity in the New Creation, through the finished work of Jesus our Messiah.
- i) Sabbath is a sanctuary in time and a disposition of the heart when we set aside all of our week-day concerns and devote ourselves to rest and spiritual enrichment with the Lord of the Sabbath
 - ii) Sabbath is an act of resistance against our consumeristic, product producing, discontented culture—we are more than our work, we are more than producers—we are image bearers meant to enjoy our Creator and to enjoy the labor of our hands.
 - iii) Sabbath is to rest physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. To remember the things of God—his nature, his presence and power; his provision and blessings.
 - iv) Sabbath is a day to be renewed through feasting, resting, worship, and play.

- v) Sabbath is a practiced anticipation of the New Creation. And it's supposed to last a whole day, 24 hours—beginning at sunset, going into night and then the next day. Following the pattern of creation—evening and morning ...

6. **Why do we need Sabbath?**

- A. **We need the healing rest of Sabbath.** Many Christians for too long have objected to Sabbath observance—solely on the reason of legalism—we are not obligated to keep the Sabbath. But have you ever stopped to realize that Sabbath shows up in the beginning as a pattern for humanity to observe? Again, what does it mean that we bear the image of God with both works and rests? If the Creator rests from his work, how much more his creatures who are finite and limited?
- B. Not only is this in the beginning of the pages of Scripture and in the context of what it means for humans to be image bearers of God, but God put this command into the bedrock of his society! It is part of the Ten Commandments—Christians don't set those other commandments aside, why this one? Maybe because we don't see how it matters morally, or how it fits with all the others?
- C. But all you have to do is walk into Barnes and Noble or browse Target's book section or search Amazon for health and wellness—you will find an endless amount of books written on the subject of rest, holistic health, stress, anxiety, burnout, etc. **To rest is part of what it means to be human; God has been telling us from the beginning, and our human hearts just endlessly search for the rest that only Jesus can bring ...**
- D. It's fascinating to note that many of Jesus' healing miracles, and some of his most powerful ones at that, were performed on the Sabbath. Maybe the Spirit of God is speaking through these Scriptures trying to communicate to us—that the Sabbath is a time for deep healing—both physically and spiritually, as we commune with the Lord. A time to restore both body and soul—in anticipation of the day when God will make all things new and heal our broken and tattered bodies forever.

7. **We need the Counter Formation—to the image and purposes of God that Sabbath produces.**

- A. Many neglect to rest or do not have the opportunity to rest, given the patterns of their lives. With the advance of technology, people can work anywhere and anytime. In 2014, *The Economist* reported that 60 percent of people who use smartphones are connected to their offices for 13.5 or more hours a day. We can only imagine what that percentage and number is currently at now. Since Covid 19 and the shelter-in-place order, we are even more connected to technology than ever before, and there seems to be no clearly defined boundaries in place between work and personal life because most people's work is taking place in the midst of their personal life.
 - i) When was the last time you turned off your phone for a few hours or disconnected from technology for a day; spent time in the backyard to enjoy the sounds of nature; went on a walk, just to process your life, to talk to your spouse, children, or friend, or to talk with Jesus? When was the last time you sat down to read for the simple pleasure of it? When was the last time you intentionally, even defiantly, did some act like sitting quietly, relaxing, took time to ponder, or stopped to take in the view—to show, to observe, and remember that you are not a slave to your work or to our consumeristic, slavish culture? Sabbath observance is a regular practice of this truth
 - ii) In a fast-paced society like ours, we don't often take the time to stop and consider how our rhythms and priorities are shaping our identities and values. (I would say that it is intentionally designed so that we won't stop and consider what is happening to us and who we are becoming by our habits and daily rhythms.)
 - iii) A day off is usually a time to either wear ourselves out in pleasure or to catch up on errands, things around the house, yard work, or binge watch the latest series. Where is time for reflection and contemplation, for focused gratitude; when do we truly rest?

iv) **This is why we need Sabbath.** When we set time aside to stop, to make time sacred, to consider God, his provision and blessings, who he has made us to be, to consider and enjoy the fruits of our labor, it is transformative.

- a. How we treat our bodies that have been made in the image of God matters; how we live within the creation matters; how we see ourselves matters greatly. We are not created as slaves, made to do God's work, but we were created as image bearers of God to have joyful fellowship and friendship with him; we were created as partners with him in his kingdom work, and that matters for what it means to be human. How we live out that truth has radical ramifications for our identity, our value, and purpose, and it's a way of life that can make a huge difference in our society.

In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods. Such an act of resistance requires enormous intentionality and communal reinforcement amid the barrage of seductive pressures from the insatiable insistences of the market, with its intrusion into every part of our life from the family to the national budget ... But Sabbath is not only resistance. It is alternative. It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devours all of our "rest time." The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God.

—Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*

8. **We need the reminder of God's grace in physical ways.**

- A. Sabbath observance forces us to remember that we are in every way recipients of God's mercy and grace. We are not sufficient in ourselves; we grow weary, we need to recharge, we are not infinite and omniscient. Only God alone is infinite and in his unfailing love and faithfulness—he sustains us. Sabbath can be a deep reminder of this truth that we easily forget.

The Sabbath teaches us grace because it connects us experientially to the basic truth that nothing we do will earn God's love. As long as we are working hard, using our gifts to serve others, experiencing joy in our work along with toil, we are always in danger of believing that our actions trigger God's love for us. Only in stopping, really stopping, do we teach our hearts and souls that we are loved apart from what we do.

—Lynn Baab, *Sabbath Keeping*

- i) Sabbath helps break the endless cycle of doing and finding our identity in our activity. Sabbath helps us to practice and prioritize being—being with God, being with others, being at home with ourselves. Simply being human
- ii) Sabbath is a physical and practical way we say:
 - a. I am not a slave.
 - b. I am a recipient of grace!
 - c. My health, healing, and wholeness matters to God.
 - d. I was made to enjoy life—God made the world for us!
 - e. I am more than the products I produce. My family, my employees, my neighbors are more than the products and work they produce.

9. How do we observe Sabbath well?

- A. I would encourage you as an individual or as a member of your family to seek the leading of the Spirit in this regard. Begin with this question: where do I need to focus first? Where do I need rest? Take small steps; trying to do everything all at once rarely makes for healthy growth in the long run.
- B. Sabbath observance is about ceasing from our normal labors, but be careful that it doesn't become a day that kills joy. (Maybe go Marie Kondo—*What Sparks Joy??*)

“The idea that by saying no to making some things happen, deep permission arises for other things to happen. When we cease our daily labor, other things—love, friendship, prayer, touch, singing, rest—can be born in the space created by our rest. Walking with a friend, reciting a prayer, caring for children, sharing bread and wine with family, friends and neighbors ...”

—Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in our Busy Lives*

- i) **Good questions for personal application:** What refreshes me? What brings joy, gratitude, and worship?
 - a. Talk to other Christians and members of our church and leadership to get ideas of how to observe Sabbath well.
- ii) Seek these four principles in observing Sabbath:
 - a. Take time captive—Cease from your normal day to day routine—make this time sacred, observe, and practice unhurried rest.
 - b. Remember who you are—created by God, made in his image, for fellowship with him, saved by grace, loved supremely.
 - c. Enjoy what you have—you have so much—be content, be thankful, rest and revel in God's provision with your friends and your family. Celebrate that together.
 - d. Seek the presence of God—The Lord of the Sabbath. Cultivate unhurried intimacy with Jesus and with your Father, through the Holy Spirit.

Communion: As we come to the table of the Lord, we come as a people who need healing, who need rest, not just physical but even deeper than that. We need rest for our souls, the laying down of our burdens of sin, of trying to prove ourselves to God and to others, of trying to fill ourselves apart from our Creator. And so we come to this table to be reminded that the Lord Jesus Christ has made a way for us to enter into that rest, and to rest in his work on our behalf—his body given for us, his blood for the remission of our sins. So this morning, we invite you to come to this table in response to Jesus offer:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

—Matthew 11:28–30

Come. Eat, drink, and be satisfied.

Prayer: Gracious God and Father, in six days you formed and fashioned this world for our pleasure and your glory. On the seventh day, you finished your work by resting. You also blessed and hallowed the seventh day, setting it aside as a day of rest. Teach us, Lord, what this means for us. May our lives not be primarily formed by the demands of our work, the expectations of our culture, or the compulsions of our feelings. Rather, may our lives be formed by you, by your example, by your truth. Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen.