

# AN INVITATION TO REST

---

*EXODUS 20:8-11; DEUTERONOMY 5:13-15*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

*BY: RYAN DUECK*

*AUGUST 14, 2016/13<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

We are in the back half of summer. Summer is a time when the church is notoriously empty. Some of you have already been on summer holidays. Many are away right now. Our family is preparing to leave for a holiday next week.

Summer is about slowing down and resting.

Today, we're going to talk about Sabbath.

Most of us know that we are commanded to rest—that taking one day a week for worship and restoration is a biblical imperative.

But I think we also know that it's easy to be legalistic about things like the Sabbath. We see that Jesus showed little regard for deeply entrenched Jewish laws about Sabbath-keeping.

He healed on the Sabbath, he picked heads of grain for his hungry disciples on the Sabbath to show how the leaders of the synagogue had misunderstood and misinterpreted and abused what the Sabbath was for. It had become a burden for people, as opposed to something that brought life and healing.

So how are we supposed to understand the biblical invitation to rest in our day? What is the idea of Sabbath supposed to do?

How do we approach an understanding of the Sabbath for our lives that doesn't fall into the Pharisaical trap of legalism and piling burdens upon already burdened people, but

also doesn't fall into the trap of imagining that Sabbath-keeping is something that we don't need and that we weren't made for?

---

Well, for the answer to that we need to back to the beginning, to the Old Testament, back to the Ten Commandments in particular.

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments: one in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. The passage in Exodus describes the first giving of the Ten Commandments, while the passage in Deuteronomy is the re-telling of them as the Israelites prepare to enter the land of Canaan.

The two versions are virtually identical, except for on the fourth commandment (which is also, interestingly, the longest of the ten commandments).

What we quickly see in both versions of the Ten Commandments are the themes of keeping the Sabbath holy and the theme of rest. Somehow, our resting is a means of keeping the Sabbath holy.

Did you notice a difference in the two passages you heard this morning?

The two passages were very similar, both describing the fourth of the Ten Commandments. But there was one very important difference that we need to pay attention to.

Did you notice this?

The "what" is the same in both passages. Honour the Sabbath. The difference is in the "why."

In **Exodus**, the Israelites are commanded to rest and to keep the Sabbath holy *because of who God is and what God has done*. God rested therefore you also ought to rest.

The creation of the world itself involved rest, not because God was wiped out or had ran out of ideas or anything like that.

Rather, rest is healthy and God wanted to model for his image-bearers healthy ways of living and working.

Rest was built into the very structure of creation as a way of getting our attention! In Exodus we are reminded: God rested, and you must rest too.

In pointing to the fact that God rested after creation, the writer is reminding us, ironically, that we are not God.

If God, who is perfect and powerful and infinitely resourceful and does not have the limitations and weaknesses that we do, rested, *how much more* should we, who are not perfect, who have profound limits on our power and resources, and who have many limitations and weaknesses, rest?

We are commanded to imitate God to remind ourselves that we are *not* God and to stop trying to *be* God by pretending that unless we keep frantically working the world will fall apart.

In Exodus, we are commanded to rest because rest is part of how the world was made and we are invited to be a part of this. God modeled it for us. I like how Mark Buchanan puts it in *The Rest of God*:

*God, knowing both our need and our folly, took the lead. He set the example. Like a parent who coaxes a cranky toddler to lie down for an afternoon by lying down beside her, God woos us into rest by resting.*

So, in Exodus, the commandment to rest is grounded in our remembering of who God is.

In **Deuteronomy**, rather than pointing to the creation of the world, we are directed to a liberation story.

Remember.... You were slaves, you were never given a day off, you were treated like meat. You were considered of no importance. And you were set free—the Lord brought you out of this dehumanizing situation with a mighty hand.

*Therefore....* You are commanded to observe the Sabbath. You are commanded to rest. You are commanded to consider yourselves as God considers you—not divine, but not mere cogs in the economic wheel of an empire, either!

Life is not about frenetic activity. We were created for work, certainly, but not *just* work.

We were created to enjoy the work of the Lord (in creation, in our fellow human beings) and the work of our hands. We were created to need and enjoy rejuvenation, restoration, renewal, and relaxation.

That's how human beings "run best." It's how we were put together. The need for rest is in our DNA and Exodus tells us that this is a *good thing!*

Sabbath-keeping can be a kind of protest against a 24/7 world that treats human beings like producing and consuming machines. It can be a living witness that we are much more than this, that we were *made* for much more than this!

So, we have two very good reasons for keeping Sabbath—one because of who *God* is and how *God* works, and the other because of who *we* are and how *we* work.

---

It's also very clear that we live in a culture that doesn't do Sabbath. We don't understand or acknowledge our need for rest.

Many people in our culture are chronically over-scheduled, stressed out, anxious, depressed, and forever scrambling to do enough to "get ahead."

We have more gadgets and toys and computer programs to organize our lives and communicate with one another from anywhere in the world, but the result is that we feel like we must always be available. We become slaves to our machines.

The time all blurs together—increasingly the divisions between "work" and "play" are becoming obsolete.

We're not very good at resting.

Maybe one of the reasons why the fourth commandment is the longest and has the most explanation around it, is because God knew it would be the hardest of the ten for us to keep.

Don't murder? Relatively simple for most of us. Rest? That's a little harder...

I don't know about you, but I find rest difficult.

We haven't even left for holidays, but I already look ahead to September and I see a very large "to do" list and a very full schedule. I see work and football practices and swim club and piano lessons and meetings and writing assignments and how Naomi and I will coordinate our schedules and.... It's easy to feel overwhelmed and to wonder where on earth there will be time for *rest* in there!

I'm guessing that many of you have peaked ahead to September and have similar sentiments. Perhaps you are wondering where you are going to find the time to do everything that needs to be done. Perhaps you are already feeling weary.

I think that all of us need this double reminder from Israel's past that learning how to take a Sabbath, to rest, is not something we do if we can get around to it.

It's not something we'll see if we can find time for. It is not something we do to reward ourselves once the work is all done. It isn't a prize we get for doing all of our work well each week.

It's something that we insert into the rhythms of our live as an acknowledgement of how we are made and what we have been set free from!

It is God's gracious provision for our needs as human beings.

And it's worth remembering that Israel was initiated into the importance of Sabbath-keeping during one of the most precarious times of their existence.

They knew nothing of air-conditioning or minivans or laptops or summer cabins. They were a tribe of desert nomads, often short of water and food, not really knowing where they were going or what would await them when they got there.

And in this context, they are commanded to rest. To take one day to *just stop*.

Sabbath is God's invitation to rest, to enjoy time with our families, to enjoy creation, to pray, to reflect, to read, to cease from the activities and tasks and obligations and distractions that can so easily come to dominate our days, weeks, months, and years.

The gift of Sabbath is God's reminder that we are not machines. Just like in the Deuteronomy passage, we are commanded to rest in order to remember that we are not slaves—even if our slavery is self-imposed!

There is always work to do. And work, at its best provides fulfillment and meaning and contributes value to the world around us.

Even in the church, there are programs that need volunteers, there will be meals to plan, kids to teach, music to learn and practice, etc.

But we work better when we work within the parameters God has given us. We work better when we deliberately, consciously, and intentionally honour God and ourselves by resting.

We work better when we have allowed the two truths of Exodus and Deuteronomy...

1. We are not God
2. We are not slaves

... to become a part of the very foundation of how we look at our lives and our relationship with God.

---

I should know this by now, but it can be a dangerous thing to go online the Saturday night before a sermon.

I ignored my own advice last night, and I came across the following quote from William Willimon, a well-known author and bishop in the Methodist church:

Preachers, when you finish off your sermons, and you fold them up and put in your bible, stop and ask your self this: 'Did Christ have to die for this sermon to be true?'"

I read the quote again and looked at the sermon that I was about to preach this morning. My first instinct was to sigh and say, "Well, probably not." And then I began to squirm a bit about the merits of what I was going to say this morning.

On the surface of it, there's nothing about paying attention to the rhythms of rest and renewal that we have been created for that required the death Christ. The texts we have focused on this morning were both written well before Jesus arrived on the scene.

Jesus didn't have to die so that you and I could learn how to rest. Did he?

But then I thought about a conversation I had with someone while up in Calgary this weekend with my dad. I was sitting in the hospital when my phone buzzed with a message from someone who I wouldn't say that I know terribly well, but who I have periodically had conversations with

(This is one of the "benefits" of being a pastor in the online world—I quite regularly get emails or Facebook messages from people I know or from complete strangers who feel free to invite me in to join conversations that have been taking place in their heads for years!")

Here's what this person said:

Hi Ryan. I have struggled my whole life with feeling like I am right with God. When I hear things like "you have to turn from your sin and turn from your self and turn to God and you will be saved" I tend to hear that I have to "do something" to be saved. But isn't the truth of the Gospel that we can't do anything so God does it for us?

This person went on to say that they had struggled their whole lives with feeling like they had repented frequently enough or sincerely enough or whether they had given up enough for God.

And I looked at these words on my phone again last night and I thought about the theme of this sermon, I thought, "Maybe Jesus *did* have to die for this sermon to be true."

So much of our unwillingness to rest—whether from physical work or from the restless sense that we are never measuring up to what God demands from us—has as its root the assumption that we have to keep *doing*, that God's love and acceptance and approval in the end depends on what we're able to come up with on our own.

The cross of Jesus Christ says that this is not true.

At the cross, Jesus says, “It is finished.” All that is necessary for salvation, for human redemption and restoration and flourishing has been done. We can cease our frantic striving and trying to measure up. We can give up the hopeless task of trying to earn what is given to us as a gift.

This is what I typed into my phone as I sat in the hospital in Calgary yesterday, as I thought about a person who had struggled their whole life with never feeling like they were doing enough.

Fundamentally, Sabbath-keeping is an act of *trust* in the God of creation, the God of liberation, and the God of redemption.

We trust that God is God and we are not. No matter how busy we keep ourselves, we cannot do God’s work.

We trust that we are not as indispensable as we think we are, that the world will keep on turning without our frantic activities for 24 hrs.

We trust that on the cross, in the person of Jesus Christ, God has demonstrated once and for all what he thinks of our value.

To rest—physically, in the ceasing of activity or spiritually, in the deepest parts of our soul—requires trust.

I close with a wonderful quote from Buchanan’s book. He tells the story of the following conversation between Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon:

Philipp Melanchthon turned to Martin Luther and announced, “Today, you and I shall discuss the governance of the universe.” Luther looked at Melanchthon and said, “No. Today, you and I shall go fishing and leave the governance of the universe to God.”

This is our invitation.

Let’s work joyfully and enthusiastically at the things God has given us to do and gifted us to do.

But let's also be sure to remember: we are not God... and we are not slaves.

And we are loved prior to us doing anything to deserve it.

Amen

