

## ***Finishing Well: Sabbath***

It is so good to be back at Faith. We had a great time away, but we were really ready to come back. We feel like our sabbatical was just right in terms of length of time and in terms of the things we experienced. In case you're newer to this church, Faith gives its pastors a three-month sabbatical every seven years or so. Brenda and I have just wrapped up a sabbatical that focused on "finishing well" - in our marriage and as a pastor here at Faith.

I am going to take three weeks to share three of the core things that God has impressed upon me in relation to "finishing well": rest, work, and seeking God's face. There is certainly a unique application in these areas for me, but the Scriptures urge every believer to pay attention to these areas of our lives. Today we are talking about rest and Sabbath. [October 11th we'll host a seminar on finishing well; more details to follow.]

In May I re-read the book *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan. The book title is a play on words: unless you experience the "rest" of God, you won't experience "the rest of God" (i.e., you'll not experience new and different aspects of His character; you'll be stuck spiritually). One statement he made stopped me in my tracks. He wrote, "I don't think it's possible to benefit from a sabbatical if you've never learned to keep Sabbath." [Sabbath and sabbatical have the same root - meaning "rest."] The idea is that on sabbatical you do daily for several months what you do one day a week on your "Sabbath."

Public confession: In my entire adult life, I have never practiced a weekly Sabbath (a day of rest as it is depicted in Scripture). I've taken a regular day off, Monday, but it's mostly recovery after a strenuous weekend. We each have different circumstances that make Sabbath keeping difficult and inconvenient. For me (and most pastors), the challenge is that I work on Sundays; I need to observe Sabbath on another day of the week. Over the course of the summer I gained a growing conviction that observing a weekly Sabbath is one component of my finishing well as a pastor and husband.

Technically speaking, Christians don't observe the old covenant Sabbath; we don't claim that you need to observe what the Law teaches about Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. In the book of Acts and early church history we see that the church transitioned from worshiping on the Sabbath (Saturday, the 7th day of the week) to worshiping on the Lord's Day (Sunday, the 1st day of the week, the day Jesus was raised from the dead). Even though it's not always called Sabbath, Christians down through the ages have agreed that the OT pattern of setting aside one day a week for rest is good and wise and ***necessary***.

### ***Two Key Texts about Sabbath-keeping:***

This morning we are going to consider the two primary passages in the Old Testament that commanded Sabbath keeping. As we'll see the second passage builds upon and adds to the first.

**Exodus 20:8-11** The first is found in Exodus 20:8–11. This is the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.

The root of the term Sabbath simply means “to cease” or “to stop” (Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, p. 23). The Sabbath was a day in which they ceased doing what they normally did, namely “work.” The Sabbath was holy - set apart and dedicated to God. It’s not that they could ignore God the other six days; it’s that they focused their attention on God most fully on the Sabbath.

The primary way you “broke the Sabbath” was by doing on that day what you did every other day. If your work involved farming the land, you broke the Sabbath by planting and cultivating and harvesting. If you managed a household, you broke the Sabbath by lighting a fire in your home (see Ex. 35:3). The Sabbath was different, set apart.

We see that the seventh day was designated as a Sabbath. On that day, nobody could do work: not you, not your son or daughter, not your male or female servant, not your cattle, and not the traveller who happens to be staying with you. You would need to plan and prepare your household so that you didn’t have to work on the Sabbath.

Notice in verse 11 that Moses’ rationale for the Sabbath is tied to the creation week.

11 “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

God didn’t rest on the seventh day because He was exhausted from creating people and animals and trees and oceans. He “rested” on the seventh day because His creation was complete. He ceased working because He had accomplished everything He set out to accomplish. This verse quotes from Genesis 2:3 when it says that the Lord “blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

The children of Israel, created in the image of God, imitated Him by remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy. The children of Israel may or may not have felt like they accomplished everything they needed to accomplish the previous week; that wasn’t the point. The point was that since God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, they should adopt the same weekly pattern. Sabbath provided a rhythm to their week (really to their lives). You’ve probably noticed that there is something numbing about every day being the same week after week.

Being “blessed” and “made holy,” the Sabbath was a good gift from God to be enjoyed. Throughout the OT, when the people violated or abandoned the Sabbath, it meant that

something had gone wrong in their souls. They were rejecting a good gift from God. The same thing is true in our day.

You probably know how it feels when you give somebody a gift they don't really appreciate or want. Years ago I made a simple wooden puzzle for a friend. About a year later I was at a garage sale in his neighborhood and I saw that very puzzle at his neighbor's house for sale. It really wasn't a big deal; but I did feel a twinge of disappointment that my friend really didn't value the gift. That experience makes me wonder how God feels when we say "thanks but no thanks" to the gift of Sabbath.

I have slowly but surely become convinced that a weekly Sabbath is a gift from God that I need to receive; it's blessing from God that is really important for Brenda and me in terms of finishing well. What became painfully clear the first month of sabbatical (May) was that I had no clue how to rest. Instead of enjoying the time off, I found myself getting anxious about the things I would need to do when I got back from sabbatical. It turns out that I was doing on sabbatical exactly what I had done on my day off for years: thinking and worrying about what I needed to accomplish that coming week.

It's not that I am such an important, productive person that I couldn't afford to slow down; it's that I become an anxious person that I couldn't slow down. And I realized that it's really a type of arrogance when you live your life thinking, "God rested on the seventh day, but I've got way too much to accomplish to take a weekly Sabbath." Mark Batterson points out that on Sabbath "we imitate God so that we stop trying to be God" (p. 87).

Brenda and I have purposed together to do a Sabbath each week. Our plan is to spend Saturday mornings together as our Sabbath. I've designated Friday evening to Saturday evening as my Sabbath, but Brenda and I have decided to spend Saturday mornings together as our Sabbath time. We'll do some reading (from the Scriptures and/or from a spiritual book of interest) and praying; we'll walk the dog together; we'll cook breakfast or lunch together; we might even take a nap to the glory of God. Generally speaking we will do anything we might find refreshing during that time - anything that's not work (i.e., the things we HAVE to do). There will be exceptions - weddings, family obligations, etc., but that's our plan.

Slowing down and putting aside a to do list is as hard for Brenda as for me. But we want to learn how to slow down and cultivate quiet hearts and to simply rest. We want to imitate God who worked for six days and rested on the seventh.

Let's look at a second passage, **Deuteronomy 5:12-15**, which restates the command to keep the Sabbath. The word "Deuteronomy" means "second law"; it is a restatement of the Law given to the children of Israel before they entered the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 5 is a restatement of the Ten Commandments. Verses 12 through 14 are very similar to the Sabbath commandment given in Exodus 20:

12 'Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 'Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a

Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

But notice what Moses adds in verse 15. Their Sabbath observance was tied to their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, not to the creation week.

15 ‘You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

When they were slaves in Egypt, they couldn’t have observed a Sabbath even if they wanted to. They were at the mercy of the Egyptians who were increasingly harsh taskmasters. We aren’t really told whether the children of Israel ever got a day off in Egypt; the impression we get from Exodus is that days off were few and far between. And so, as a reminder that they had been delivered from such harsh, oppressive conditions, the Lord commanded them to observe the Sabbath day.

And so the Sabbath wasn’t some burdensome requirement God laid upon people who would prefer to work seven days a week. Rather, the Sabbath commemorated that they had been **delivered** from such conditions. They were no longer slaves, so they shouldn’t live as slaves who were required to work 7 days a week. And they shouldn’t force their children, their servants, their animals, or their guests to live as slaves either. Sabbath was a weekly declaration that God had delivered them from slavery with “a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Through Sabbath keeping we make the same declaration: I am not a slave to my work; Jesus is my Master, not my work. Next week we’ll talk about work; interestingly, hard work and Sabbath rest go hand in hand.

I don’t know how all of this sounds to you. Some of you already practice a weekly Sabbath; you probably think I’m a loser for being 55 and only now developing some convictions about Sabbath keeping. Others of you probably think that keeping Sabbath is completely unreasonable given your circumstances (e.g., small kids, your work, etc.). Others of you might think that not being productive is just a waste of time. Or maybe you don’t really feel any need for a day of rest; your life is working pretty well without keeping Sabbath. Or maybe this is the first time you’ve ever heard the idea that Christians might set aside a day of rest.

Whatever the case, listen to this observation that Mark Buchanan makes about neglecting the rest that Sabbath might provide. He contrasts the rest that sleep provides with the rest that Sabbath provides.

The tricky thing about Sabbath, though, is it’s a form of rest unlike sleep. Sleep is so needed that, defied too long, our bodies inevitably, even violently, force the issue. Sleep eventually waylays all fugitives. It catches you and has its way with you.

Sabbath won't do that. Resisted, it backs off. Spurned, it flees. It's easy to skirt or defy Sabbath, to manufacture cheap substitutes in its place - and to do all that, initially, without noticeable damage, and sometimes, briefly, with admirable results. It's easy, in other words, to spend most of your life breaking Sabbath and never figure out that this is part of the reason your work's unsatisfying, your friendships patchy, your leisure threadbare, your vacations exhausting.

Even though we may not fully understand it ahead of time, a life without a weekly Sabbath is less than the abundant life God wants to give us.

### ***How do we begin practicing Sabbath?***

The biggest, overarching suggestion/challenge is:

***"Let yourself fall in love with this day."*** This is a recommendation that Ruth Haley Barton makes in her book *Sacred Rhythms* (p. 138). If Sabbath is going to be life-giving, it's going to have to be more than an obligation (something we do because we're supposed to). If it's merely an obligation, you'll probably be grumpy and anxious because you'd rather be doing something else. The suggestion is to let yourself fall in love with this day to the point where you yearn for this weekly time where you enter into a time of rest and refreshment. I see the beginnings of this yearning within myself. It's a brand new thing for me to decide ahead of time that I will enter into a time of rest and refreshment.

Honestly, it never occurred to me before this summer that I might fall in love with the Sabbath and Sabbath keeping. I think I assumed that Sabbath keeping would be a drag. . . What if I couldn't watch football on Sunday (or in my case Saturday) afternoons?!?! I think I've not trusted that everything God urges upon us is ultimately good and satisfying and nourishing - even the hard things. And so I'm beginning to fall in love with this day.

If you're like me, you'll probably have to begin practicing Sabbath keeping in order to fall in love with it. So I'd recommend that you decide ahead of time that you'll practice a weekly Sabbath and then enter into it with anticipation. For most of you, Sunday will probably be your day of rest, the day that is different from all the others.

***What to exclude from the Sabbath: The things you HAVE to do.*** Generally speaking, Sabbath is the day when we are given permission to stop working, to stop doing the things we HAVE to do. This doesn't mean you don't change the baby or feed the kids. But it does mean that you have permission to turn off your phone and not check email. Email is often someone else's to do list for you: "Think about this issue and get back with me," or "Find this piece of information and send it to me," etc. On the Sabbath we aren't at the mercy of other people's requests and demands. On Sabbath we aren't trying to be productive or to pull our weight or to get things done. On Sabbath we have permission from God to rest from all those things. Sabbath is a day to put aside obligations, competitiveness, others' expectations, self-importance, anxieties, and ambitions.

This doesn't mean that Sabbath is a day to be selfish. Jesus' favorite day to heal people was apparently the Sabbath; Jesus wasn't selfish on the Sabbath. This doesn't mean we have to have a rigid list of things we "shall not" do. And it certainly doesn't mean that we look down on others who do things on their Sabbath that we don't do on ours. So try not to overthink what it means to stop doing the things you have to do.

***What to include on the Sabbath: Whatever refreshes you and restores your soul.***

If you're a follower of Christ, worship would be an obvious source of refreshment. When a person becomes a Christian, s/he becomes a worshiper. In worship we turn our hearts and minds and bodies toward God. If your Sabbath celebration is on Sunday, I hope you find our times of corporate worship to be refreshing for your soul. If you intentionally enter into Sunday as a Sabbath, you may find that our times of corporate worship are more refreshing than before. Instead of taking an hour and a half to zip into worship and then get back to your busyness, you may find that you enter into our times of worship more fully and seamlessly and intentionally. You may find it easier to express yourself to God and to hear His voice in worship.

Examples of other things you might incorporate into Sabbath: a nap, a walk, a feast (enjoying your favorite foods), sit under a shade tree and read a good book, write a letter of encouragement to a friend or family member, reflect on the past week (things for which you're thankful, ways you've seen God work, answers to prayer, etc.). Some of you might establish rituals (weekly habits) that would be life-giving. Others of you might prefer to change things up every couple weeks. There really aren't any rules.

I know some of you are wondering, "Can I mow the grass on my Sabbath? In one sense I 'have' to mow the grass, but in another sense I find it refreshing." Really, there is no list of authorized activities that are permitted or forbidden for the Christian on the Sabbath. If you want to mow the grass, mow the grass and evaluate whether or not it was life-giving, whether or not your soul was refreshed. Just be honest before God. Don't worry about getting everything right; just enter in and let God lead you.

**Conclusion.** Remember that Sabbath is a good gift from God - a gift He gave us because it's good for us and glorifying to Him. Therefore Sabbath is something to be received and enjoyed. That seems to be the core challenge for most of us. My encouragement to all of us is to "Taste and see that the Lord is good" in relation to Sabbath. If we allow ourselves to fall in love with the Sabbath, eventually we will fall more deeply in love with the Lord of the Sabbath.

Recommended Reading:

***The Rest of God***, *Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* by Mark Buchanan  
***Sacred Rhythms***, *Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (esp. chapter 8 on Sabbath)