

Work and Rest

Part 2 – Rest

“By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done.” Genesis 2:2

What a staggering concept to grapple with, that the infinite, all powerful creator of the universe rested from His work. Just as God exemplified the principle of work, He also exemplified the principle of rest. He established for us the rhythm and pattern of life that we need, that is ultimately most productive and which most fully brings honour and glory to Him.

“Since God rested after his creation, we must also rest after ours. This rhythm of work and rest is not only for believers; it is for everyone, as part of our created nature. Overwork or underwork violates that nature and leads to breakdown. To rest is actually a way to enjoy and honour the goodness of God’s creation and our own. To violate the rhythm of work and rest (in either direction) leads to chaos in our life and in the world around us. Sabbath is therefore a *celebration of our design.*” Tim Keller

In Exodus 20:9-11 the fourth commandment says “Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God,”

God does not just suggest that rest might be a good idea, if we can fit it into our busy schedules, but He commands that we accept rest from His hand as a gift, because He knows that we need it and cannot function for long without it. He blessed it as holy to give us the opportunity to worship Him and to acknowledge our dependence on Him, not on ourselves, for the provision of our needs.

The Lord Jesus calls us to rest in Matthew 11:28-30 *“Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

Rest is more than physical rest, it is rest for the soul, a ceasing of agitation, striving and anxiety; a rest in God that brings peace to the soul. It is rest for the heart as we safely give to God all our deepest desires and plans; all those nagging disappointments and fears, and leave them with Him. It is rest for our spirit as we relinquish control to God, submit to sharing His yoke in a spirit of gentleness and humility as we keep in step with Him.

Vines Expository Dictionary describes this rest –

“Christ’s rest is not a rest from work, but in work, not the rest of inactivity, but of harmonious working of all the faculties and affections – of will, heart, imagination and conscience – because each has found in God the ideal sphere for its satisfaction and development.”

“Then, because so many people were coming and going and they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them – “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest””
Mark 6:31.

The Lord Jesus both taught and exemplified to his disciples the need and value of rest. There will always be needs to be met, there will always be unfinished tasks and there will always be pressure from people. Jesus saw the needs but he was also aware of the disciples need for rest – time away from the work, away from the pressure of people, to experience solitude, quietness and probably just the opportunity to eat without hassle. The words “come with me” also meant that this was to be time alone with the Lord and thus a time for spiritual renewal.

John chapter four records an incident, which demonstrates the Lords understanding and identification with our human limitations as well as the opportunities that may arise from a place of rest. Jesus was on a journey walking through Samaria. It was hot, dusty, the middle of the day and he needed rest and a drink. Verse six says “Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour”

Tony Horsfall comments on this incident in his book “Working from a place of rest”.

“In a flash I saw the tremendous significance of these simple words and realised something quite staggering in its implications. *Jesus was doing nothing*. He was having a rest, taking a break, giving himself a breather. Sitting on the edge of the well, he was pausing and giving himself permission to stop and simply be.

Then, just as quickly the thought came to me that *everything that happens in this story happens because Jesus was doing nothing*. The fact that he is resting, taking some time out, is what gives him the opportunity to ‘waste’ time with the Samaritan woman who comes to the well while he is sitting there. Because of that life giving conversation, not only is her life changed but the whole Samaritan town experiences revival. None of this was premeditated or planned. It is a purely spontaneous event, dependant on the fact that Jesus is doing nothing.”

His conclusion is that we can learn to work and minister from a place of rest. That as we cease to strive and strain to achieve our goals in our own strength, we make time and space in our lives to sense what God is doing. We co-labour with God, collaborate with the Holy Spirit, which means that we work in a way that is both efficient and effective.

“Do we rest to work or work to rest? The answer is neither. With the Bible’s God centred ethic we work for the glory of God and we rest for the glory of God. The goal is not simply a balance between work and rest. The goal for both is the glory of God. This is liberating. It gives value to both work and rest. Neither is simply a means to the other. Both are to be relished, enjoyed and used for God’s glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Tim Chester

Although we long to have this God centred ethic of work and rest in our lives, there are times when work can get out of perspective. Sherman and Hendricks suggest some of the signs that we might pick up on:-

When work is out of perspective

If work defines us and we fear or feel uneasy in non-work or unstructured situations e.g. days off or holidays and most of all the thought of retirement.

Work always expands to fill the time available and in many jobs is never done. But the danger is when we find ourselves getting up earlier to start work earlier and then leave work later, not as a one off to meet a deadline, but as a continuous style of life it is unsustainable.

We leave work physically, while being unable to leave work emotionally – “the car is in the garage but the engine is still running”. Work may take 50% of your time but 95% of your emotional energy. Sleep patterns may be disrupted.

We feel guilty about taking time off or about relaxing. Busyness has been raised to a virtue.

There is over-anxiety about providing for the family and for the future instead of trust in God.

Times of worship and fellowship with God and with other believers tends to get pushed out. Sabbath rest may be seen as a luxury we can't afford.

Creative and restorative interests outside of work may be neglected, as work carries on at home during the evenings and weekends due to the “always on” technology culture today.

Work becomes more and more about seeking money and material possessions as we fear falling behind in the “rat race” endemic in our culture.

Work fulfils a need to be in control, and to be successful.

We are driven at work by the need to be liked or to impress the boss.

Our sense of significance and importance comes from working *too* hard.

Ultimately family relationships and our health may suffer.

Tony Horsfall writes “If our need for love and approval is not met in God, it can easily find expression through our work. We can find ourselves working too hard to achieve success so that we feel better about ourselves, and to gain the approval of others. We can find ourselves unable to establish healthy boundaries in our lives because we are afraid to say ‘No’, so we end up taking on more and more responsibilities.....We drive ourselves to the limit and work ourselves to the bone because of the reward we get - a feeling that we are loved, accepted and worthwhile *because of what we do.*”

This helps us to understand that the opposite of rest is not work but busyness. Tim Chester describes busyness as doing more than God expects. That the 24 hours in the day that God has given us is not too little, but that we are trying to do too much. That we haven't come to terms with the fact that we are finite and limited. We are limited in time, in physical strength and energy, as well as emotional capacity. Of course these limitations vary both from person to person and with age and health.

In his book “The busy Christian’s guide to busyness” Tim Chester explains that although some of the pressures that we feel to be busy come from outside of ourselves, most come from within. We are busy because we are working hard to meet the desires of our own hearts. He seeks to identify how these desires of our hearts create the pressures and drives within us:-

- “I’m busy because I need to prove myself.” The lie is justification by work. The truth is justification by grace.
- “I’m busy because of other people’s expectations of me.” The lie is that pleasing other people matters more than pleasing God. The truth is that God is my master and I am accountable to Him.
- “I’m busy because otherwise things get out of control.” The lie is that I can be in control. The truth is that God is in control.
- “I’m busy because I prefer being under pressure.” The lie is that I work better under pressure, busyness has become a place to hide. The truth is that God alone is my refuge.
- “I’m busy because I need the money.” The lie is that material possessions can satisfy. The truth is that God alone is the one who can satisfy the deepest needs of my heart.
- “I’m busy because I want to make the most of life.” The lie is that self-fulfilment is the priority. Living as if this life is all there is. The truth is that God is our hope – we have a better future and an eternal future.

Tim Keller also speaks about this need for perspective “We get away from work in order to replenish our bodies and minds. Resting, or practicing Sabbath, is also a way to help us get perspective on our work and put it in its proper place. Often we can’t see our work properly until we get some distance away from it and re-immense ourselves in other activities. Then we see that there is more to life than work. With that perspective and rested bodies and minds, we return to do more and better work.

But the relationship between work and rest operates at a deeper level as well. All of us are haunted by the work under the work – that need to prove and save ourselves, to gain a sense of worth and identity. But if we can experience gospel rest in our hearts, if we can be free from the need to earn our salvation through our work, we will have a deep reservoir of refreshment that continually rejuvenates us, restores our perspective, and renews our passion.”

The ‘Always-on’ culture

“We live in an Always-on culture: we spend our lives online, connected to the web and to each other through our phones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers, and plenty of other devices besides. Most of us are so immersed in our online world that we barely question the impact it has on our faith – or even whether it has an effect at all. The amount of time we spend online and how unquestioningly we do so doesn’t necessarily make it wrong, but it does highlight something of the power this technology can hold over us – and of our implicit priorities.” Guy Brandon

Guy Brandon goes on to explain that this 'always- on' culture means that there are no longer any clear lines between home and work anymore; we have the ability to work from anywhere, anytime. "It's the fact that work barely has defined hours any more. Work follows us around on our mobile devices and computers."

It also means that it takes over what appears to be our leisure time "It's strange that many of us spend all day staring at screens in the course of our paid employment, then come home and stare at a screen for a few more hours to unwind." Guy Brandon

The amazing fact is that with all the wonderful ways that modern technology and connectedness can help us in many areas of our lives we are the most stressed, busy, worn out and discontented of any previous generation. Richard Swenson comments on this:-

"The best thing to remember about time saving technologies is that they don't. Instead, they consume, compress and devour time. All the countries with the most time saving technologies are the most stressed out countries, an assertion that's easy to prove."

Guy Brandon goes on to give us several hints on rest in our 'always- on' culture:-

- *Re think rest*, understanding it both as part of worship and as a gift God has given you to enjoy, whether that is on a weekday off or at intervals throughout the day. Take time out from computers and phones unless there is a specific (and good) reason to use them.
- *Reclaim the day of rest as a hallmark of Christian faith*. Set aside distractions and make sure you spend time deepening key relationships. Eating together is often a good way of spending quality time with people, but make these meals phone free time!
- *Enforce rest at your workplace*. If you are a business leader, cultivate a culture of rest outside of office hours, wherever possible. At the same time, ensure you have a clear policy of what constitutes acceptable internet practice at work. Allow colleagues to disconnect outside of work by not expecting responses to emails and messages late in the day or out of hours, until the next day.
- *No working vacations*. If the purpose of the Sabbath was to rest, not just for rest sake but as a way of honouring God and connecting with other people, this is something we should bear in mind throughout the year. When you take a holiday, make sure it is really a holiday!
- *Carve out time for God*. See Deuteronomy 6:6-9, this is an encouragement to meditate on God's word at intervals through the day, when we have spare time, e.g. the daily commute, mealtimes, before going to bed - time that we now spend on our phones and computers.
- *Plan our time to make sure we have time*. The nature of 'always-on' life means we can do things on a far more ad hoc basis than we used to. This can lead to a 'just in time' mentality, leaving everything to the last minute, even plans to meet up with friends, visits to family, buying birthday or Christmas presents, because we think that we can just buy them on line. This can lead to additional stress, wasted or lost time and may fail to communicate value and care to those we love.

Sabbath Rest

“Whatever happened to the Sabbath? A practice that was once integral to Christian living is now largely neglected in Western Christianity, submerged beneath the waves of relentless activity and buried under the weight of secular mind set, which sees each day as the same. In letting go of the Sabbath, we have lost something very precious. It is time to restore to our lives one of God’s greatest gifts of grace.” Horsfall

So says Tony Horsfall, but do you agree with him? We live in a culture in which Sunday is for shopping, catching up with household chores or unfinished work. Where it is almost impossible to pursue a sport or athletic endeavour seriously without involvement on a Sunday. Even as Christians, Sunday is often one of the busiest days of the week with church activities and responsibilities filling the time. At the other extreme we may remember Sundays with rules, regulations and prohibitions about what was allowed or permitted ‘on the Sabbath’, which may have made it feel anything but joyful and restorative.

Sherman and Hendricks see these as human distortions to be avoided:-

“There are two main corruptions of the Sabbath principle. One is to ignore it completely, to make it a day of work like the others, to fill it up with doing all the things we failed to do on the other days, the other is to turn it into a legalistic requirement, which in our culture often means filling it up with activities at church, in the mistaken belief that God demands that we give Him one day out of seven, as expressed through church involvement. Sadly Christians today are falling into both these traps.”

Ruth Haley Barton in her book “Sacred Rhythms” sees Sabbath keeping in a very different light:-

“Sabbath keeping is more than just taking a day of rest; it is a way of ordering one’s life around a pattern of working six days and then resting on the seventh. It is a way of arranging our life to honour the rhythm of things – work and rest, fruitfulness and dormancy, giving and receiving, being and doing, activism and surrender. The day itself is set apart, devoted completely to rest, worship, delighting in God. But the rest of the week must be lived in such a way as to make Sabbath possible e.g. paid work contained to five days a week, household chores, shopping etc. completed before the Sabbath comes or they must wait.”

But of course the Christian church moved worship from the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday as a commemoration of the resurrection on the first day of the week. Horsfall would say that acknowledging and practicing Sabbath does not mean that it must be a certain day of the week but that it is a God given principle to ensure that we make regular time for rest, reflection and time with God.

Why is Sabbath rest so important?

- *It honours the limits of our humanness.* According to Ruth Haley Barton “It is to honour the body’s need to rest, the spirit’s need for replenishment and the soul’s

need to delight itself in God for God's own sake. We are creatures and God is the Creator – the only one who is infinite.” She goes on to say that we need to recognise and live within our limits physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

- *Sabbath rest is an act of trust.* It is the recognition that we are not indispensable, that it is God not us who keeps the world going around. The act of ceasing from our work helps us to remember that it is God who ultimately provides. We can rest because God is in control, not us and it is His work not ours.
- *Sabbath is a declaration of our freedom.* It was part of the reason for the commandment to observe the Sabbath in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 that the Israelites should remember that it was God that brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Tim Keller writes that as Christians, Sabbath is a way for us to declare our freedom, not from slavery but from the expectations of our culture, the tyranny of our work and our own insecurities that would cause us to feel guilty about taking time off.
- *Sabbath rest reminds us not to worry.* In Matthew chapter 6 Jesus taught his disciples not to worry or to run after material things in their work but to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness first. This is part of the way that Sabbath rest helps us to come away and to regain perspective.
- *Sabbath rest is a way of establishing and demonstrating our identity in Christ.* Sabbath rest was a sign of the Israel's distinctiveness as God's chosen people, just as for us, it is a way of living distinctively for Christ and strengthening our identity as His people. The theologian, Marva J. Dawn writes “Sabbath is about *embracing*, about taking hold afresh of the values of the gospel and applying them to our lives. It gives us a reminder that we are God's people and that we are called to live distinctive lives as representatives of the kingdom of God. This is one reason why meeting together with others is integral to a Sabbath way of life.”
- *Sabbath rest allows us time to listen to God.* It is an opportunity to review what God has called us to, what we are doing and the direction He wants us to take in His service and to be strengthened for it.
- *Sabbath is about celebrating.* Marva J. Dawn recommends “Sabbath should be a day that includes fun and festivity, for these are some of the ways in which we can restore our souls. Worship is part of this, for worship should help us to rejoice in God and to gladden our hearts as we do so. The day can be filled with good music, the enjoyment of beauty, with the fellowship that comes through a shared meal and time to talk with one another. It is not a day for sadness but for gladness, when we experience the *shalom* of God – the sense of wholeness and well-being that is found when our lives are in harmony with God.”

The great enemy of Sabbath rest is that we become either rigid and legalistic about it or we trivialise it. When Jesus clashed with the Jewish religious authorities concerning his observance of the Sabbath, he said “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27-28. By this response he was not abolishing the Sabbath but rather re-interpreting the Sabbath as a gift of God's grace for our wellbeing and blessing.

The scriptures are clear that we should not seek to prescribe what rest is for other people or judge them for their use of the Sabbath. We must avoid a return to the bondage of rules and regulations and identify what constitutes rest for us, as Tim Chester says “Some people find gardening a chore; while others find it relaxing. You will know what activities you find restful.”

Leisure – Right or wrong?

Tim Chester writes about how our views of work and leisure can become polarised “Two contrasting views of work and leisure are evident. One is what we might call ‘the work centred ethic’: work is good and leisure is bad or work is central and leisure is peripheral....the second view is ‘the leisure centred ethic’. The Greeks and Romans aspired to a life of leisure free from work. This ethic is making something of a comeback in reaction to our contemporary workaholic culture.” His conclusion is that both ethics are equally exploitative of one group in society or another and neither ethic is ultimate. Instead we are to have a Biblical, God centred ethic of both.

“As Christians, we have a strong theology of work but virtually no theology of leisure, and yet both are important in healthy living.....Christians are very ambivalent when it comes to leisure. There seems to be a deep seated fear of wasting time, an aversion to anything that is not directly productive or spiritual. There is a suspicion that enjoying leisure is giving way to the ‘flesh’, that somehow it is worldly and may lead us to sin.....Hobbies are seen as diversions not only stealing our time but also leading us away from being fully committed to God. Pastimes are regarded as irrelevant, the choice of those who have nothing better to do. No wonder we struggle to take a day off and feel guilty when we have time on our hands.” Tony Horsfall

The Lord Jesus obviously did not share these fears and guilt:-

“The apostles then rendezvoused with Jesus and reported on all that they had done and taught. Jesus said “Come off by yourselves; let’s take a break and get a little rest.” For there was constant coming and going. They didn’t even have time to eat.” Mark 6:30-31 (The Message)

We looked at these verses earlier in connection with Jesus’ awareness of the needs, yet his indication that at that time the needs of the apostles for quietness, solitude and refreshment was more important. The context was that they had just returned from a busy, demanding preaching mission and were now again surrounded by people.

This captures something for us about what leisure means. It communicates the idea of time to spend, convenience, opportunity, a time or season to give yourself to something.

The Oxford Dictionary describes leisure as free time at one’s own disposal, not occupied, deliberately without hurry or haste.

We often think about leisure as something that we do that is not work, a hobby or activity that we are involved in, or even a place that we go e.g. a leisure park. But the idea here seems to be that leisure is not something that we *do* but rather the *pace and space* of our

lives and what we choose that to be. For example in the verse Mark6:31 Jesus recognised that the disciples had no chance even to eat i.e. no space, no convenience, no opportunity, so he initiated that they came away with him for that space, time and rest. It was a choice that was made in the face of enormous pressures on them from the needs and desires of the people.

Tony Horsfall speaks about the way our thoughts and attitudes towards time have been influenced:-

“Most of us in the Western world have formulated our attitude towards time in the context of the industrial modern world. We have grown up with the view that ‘time is money’ (Benjamin Franklyn). This is the dictum that shapes the way business and commerce operate. It means that we must never waste time but must strive for efficiency and make the very best use of it. Time is a resource, a commodity to be managed to make us more productive and thereby more profitable. This thinking has given rise to the 24/7 culture in which shops and businesses want to trade without boundaries to maximise their efficiency and increase their incomes. Most of us are steeped in this way of thinking, and the church, by and large, has bought into the time management philosophy of ‘get more done in even less time’. All this makes us want to do things more quickly; to speed life up and to cram in as many tasks as we can into our day. We want to ‘redeem the time’, to make good use of the hours we have, to be as busy as everyone else.”

He would suggest that Ephesians 5:16 ‘redeeming the time’ or ‘making the most of every opportunity’ (NIV) has more to do with rescuing our view of time from the market place and setting our priorities by a different value system.

Horsfall would describe leisure for a Christian as being:-

- Leisure is time to enjoy God and His creation
- Leisure is about freedom – what we choose to do, rather than because necessity requires us to do it
- It is an attitude, a state of mind, a condition of the soul, about feeling calm, at ease and becoming relaxed.
- It is an opportunity for reflection – enriching the mind, strengthening the body, restoring the soul and renewing the spirit.
- Leisure is about rest and recuperation, putting back into us what the day has taken out. What will accomplish this is individually chosen.
- Leisure has three components – relaxation, recreation and play. These are progressive, moving from the place where all we want to do is to sleep, have a bath or read a book to the place where energy is restored and we are able to enjoy fun, laughter and play.

The need for margin

This idea of building adequate leisure into our lives will only happen if we are willing to recognise our limitations and to live a life with margin. Richard A. Swenson in his book “Margin” describes it as “the space between our load and our limits. It is the amount

allowed beyond that which is needed. It is something held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. Margin is the gap between rest and exhaustion, the space between breathing freely and suffocating. Margin is the opposite of overload.”

Horsfall also refers to this need to recognise our limits –

“The great danger is this, that we do not always realise when we are overloaded. Each of us has our own capacity for load bearing and, along with it, our particular threshold. We suddenly find ourselves becoming angry, defensive, emotional and upset. While some people have an outburst, some turn inwards and withdraw in sullen despair. Sometimes we can recover our composure but sometimes we can’t, and that is when we realise how seriously overloaded we are. Burnout does not send a calling card. It creeps up unawares and takes even the most resilient of us unawares. The price we pay for overloaded living should be obvious – inner tension and unhappiness, strain on relationships, poor health, decreasing motivation, breakdown, spiritual lethargy and so on – and yet we continue to push ourselves too hard.....The inability to say ‘no’ to others robs us of the freedom to say ‘Yes’ to what God wants.”

Psalm 127:2 reminds us of another area where we need to live with margin “In vain you rise up early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat – for He grants sleep for those He loves.”

Swenson describes sleep as God’s idea; that He created us with the necessity for sleep and that we should regard it as an ally not an enemy. To need a reasonable night’s sleep should not be thought of as an embarrassment, a waste of time or something to feel guilty about but as a restorative gift.

Horsfall describes sleep as a vital way of coping with the demands of life. A good night’s sleep ensures that our input exceeds our output and prevents us from becoming overwhelmed. To accept God’s gift of sleep reminds us of our human limitations and our dependence on God for our work, since He is ultimately responsible.

Having margin allows us to have time to spare for the unexpected, the unplanned and the interruptions that will inevitably come our way.

“Having little margin means that we have little time for the unexpected, and God is often in the unplanned moments of our lives. It means also that we have little time for people, passing them by in our hurry to get to our next appointment....In our haste to do things for God, we may miss the real opportunities to do His will that come before us.” (Horsfall)

Living and working from a place of rest does not mean that we live a life of self-indulgence or idleness, in fact just the opposite is true, as Tony Horsfall explains “...it becomes a launch pad for a life of active service. We live with a new openness to people, responding in faith and obedience whenever a door of opportunity opens to us. We work hard but not in our own strength. We have times of busyness and find ourselves stretched but always seek to remain centred on God. We give ourselves unsparingly to other people but know how to take care of our own souls as well. Living in the rhythm of God’s grace, we find that our lives are like the burning bush – on fire but not consumed.”

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Questions for discussion:-

1. How do you respond to the biblical mandate to rest? Do you have a tendency to feel that rest is less important to God than work? Why is that?
2. Do you resonate with any of the signs that work is getting out of perspective?
3. If it is true that the opposite of rest is not work but busyness – what inner desires and outer pressures do you experience that cause you to be too busy?
4. Do you think that technology (the 'Always on' culture) has resulted in a blurring of work and rest for you and your family?
5. What attempts have you made to keep control of technology from consuming your time and detracting from rest?
6. What do you think about the concept of 'Sabbath rest'? Is it something that belongs to a past generation, a luxury that we can no longer afford or a precious gift of God's grace for our wellbeing?
7. What would you include in a day of 'Sabbath rest'? What would you avoid?
8. What part does leisure play in your life? Do you find yourself resistant to the idea of leisure? What do you do for relaxation, recreation and fun?
9. Would you consider that you have margin built into your life or are there areas in which you feel overloaded? Do you get adequate rest and sleep? Do you have space and time for the unexpected and the unplanned?
10. As you look at the life and teaching of Christ in the gospels - what can we learn about what it means to work and minister from a place of rest?

