

Way, Truth, and Life
Deuteronomy 5:12-15
May 14, 2023
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Over the course of the last year two of the three Presbyterian Women circles have been using a PC(USA) curriculum about sabbath, and so I wanted to give us all a chance to reflect together about the meaning and purpose of sabbath. Our text comes from the version of the ten commandments found in Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

¹² Keep the Sabbath day and treat it as holy, exactly as the Lord your God commanded:¹³ Six days you may work and do all your tasks,¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Don't do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your oxen or donkeys or any of your animals, or the immigrant who is living among you—so that your male and female servants can rest just like you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That's why the Lord your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day.

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Next to not coveting or wanting what our neighbors have, I think observing Sabbath is probably the most counter-cultural commandment for us today.

When you get into the nitty-gritty of any of the ten commandments, they are all deeply challenging to our way of life. But the twin engines of our economic life and thus our total way of life are wanting and working. They feed each other in a vicious cycle. We want and we work and we want some more, and deep down, we all know it's killing us and the earth.

And then there's this—this inconvenient commandment with a whole different claim on our loyalty, a whole different framework for life. Rest. A life that revolves around regular rest. A life where rest is not just for the margins, for the leftover time. A life where rest is our starting point and our end point. A non-negotiable.

And notice: it's not rest for the sake of higher productivity later. There are a million books and articles and TikTok videos that promise if you'll do less, it'll make you more efficient! More effective! You'll be able to do more in the long run by doing less!

That is not what Sabbath is about. Sabbath is one whole day a week where we really do less. Not in order to do more. Genuinely less. On sabbath the goal is to do nothing. Nothing.

Which immediately raises the question: what do you mean by nothing?

No house projects? No reading? No cooking? Can I get away with not feeding my children? Just send them out to forage?

The commandment says, “Don’t do any work.” But what, exactly, is work? What about work we enjoy? What about work that makes us anxious to leave undone? What if we just do this one quick thing? What if our leisure causes work for someone else?

It gets tricky. This is why the folks who are most observant have a lot of rules. Because once you start trying to figure out what is and isn’t work, it gets complicated.

I think this is a situation where knowing the why behind the practice can help us sort out the how.

There are two reasons given in the bible for Sabbath. The first, in Exodus, is that we rest because God rested. God did all of the work of creation in six days, and then rested on the seventh. We are made in the image of the God who rested. Why would we think we could or should work more than God? We rest because we’re made to.

If you need a divine permission slip to do less, to say no one day a week, this is it. Rest because God rested. We were made to rest. That’s one reason to practice sabbath.

But there’s another reason. In Exodus it says rest because God rested. In Deuteronomy, which we read today, the reason is different. It says, “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That’s why the Lord your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Rest, says God, because I set you free. Sabbath and freedom are inextricably linked.

Although Sabbath hasn’t always felt like freedom. With our Puritan roots, Sabbath has often felt like a day of Don’t. Don’t read that novel. Don’t play outside. Don’t have any fun.

When it’s like this sabbath can be oppressive. And it used to be that our whole culture was shaped around this kind sabbath. But that changed. The church no longer has the same hold on the national culture. In many ways that has been a good thing—both for the culture and for the church. But it’s made sabbath harder.

Once stores began to be open on Sundays, people who work retail and service jobs don’t get a regular day off. There’s money to be made. Which means that workers have to work. Wealthier workers with fancier jobs have more ability to say, “I’m going to take a day off,” although the pressure to be available is still there. Folks who need every dollar if they’re going to pay their bills—they can’t tell the scheduler, “I don’t work that day.”

Where there’s money to be made, there can’t be rest—for anyone. Work and consumption are completely bound up together. As long as we want to consume every day, someone has to work every day. There’s never a day where all of us are just... free.

One of the most striking things about the sabbath commandment is how inclusive it is. Adults are supposed to rest. Kids are supposed to rest. Our slaves or servants are

supposed to rest—most people don't have servants in any traditional sense today, but how many people serve us each day at the coffee shop, at the grocery store, at the Amazon warehouse? How many people globally labor in near slave conditions to satisfy our all-consuming appetites? Maybe we want to re-translate that today to say, "All workers are supposed to rest." Immigrants are supposed to rest. Animals are supposed to rest. Even the land is supposed to rest.

All of us need rest. It all has to be tied together. Because if some of us rest and others don't, it's no kind of rest at all.

Sabbath, like all of scripture-based life, is something that needs to be lived out communally as well as individually.

The ship has sailed on a culture-wide mandated Judeo-Christian day of rest. And that's a good thing. I do not believe that we want religious practice legislated. But I do think that a sabbath ethic can permeate the sorts of labor laws and practices we advocate for as people of faith.

Someone in bible study Tuesday morning asked about whether companies are mandated to give a day off each week. Not a specific day, just a day. They're not. We do not even have any nation-wide requirements for rest breaks, even as short as 5 minutes. Many states do, but it's a patchwork system. In Virginia workers have no right to rest or meal breaks—no matter how many hours they work.

That would be a starting place for a sabbath ethic. A sabbath ethic could look like generous paid family and personal and sick leave policies, generous paid vacation, and encouragement to take that vacation. It could look like reliable weekly schedules. It could look like wages that support a reasonable livelihood so that people do not have to work multiple jobs to put food on the table.

This is thinking about sabbath expansively, attempting to get at the purpose and meaning of it, the way Jesus constantly pushed people to.

Legislative change can be slow, but many of us also have areas where we have power over others and can shift culture and policy more immediately. If you supervise people, or are on a board, or have another leadership role in an organization, do you advocate for the most generous leave possible? Do you expect the people you have influence over to be available all the time? What would it look like for a sabbath ethic, an ethic of just rest, to shape your organization's priorities?

And then, of course, we want to live into this in our personal lives.

The practice doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful. Pick a day. Christians have often used Sunday. Jews use Saturday. Honestly, our culture is so fragmented that I don't think it matters. If Thursday is the day you don't have to be anywhere, start there. Pick a day and imagine what it would be like to rest that day. What would you do? What would you not do? What would make you free?

The practice doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful. The practice isn't intended to induce guilt. That helps no one. If you can't take a whole day yet. Okay. Move toward rest, an ethic of sabbath—every day. It's not about guilt. It's about freedom.

Because this is the good news: we were made in the image of the God who rests, and the God of liberation is always calling all of creation toward freedom. We were made for rest. We were made for freedom. May we sink deeper and deeper into that promised rest every day of our lives.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023