

The Pastor's Sabbath

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If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week, we take ourselves far too seriously. The moral sweat pouring off our brows blinds our eyes to the action of God in and around us.

— Eugene H. Peterson

Question: "Do you take a day off?"

Answer: "Unthinkable! In a world where a cobalt bomb might detonate any moment, how can the very people entrusted with the Word of Life to this doomsday population take a day off?"

This interchange took place in a seminary classroom while I was a student. The answer came from a prominent pastor whom, I thought, I had every reason to admire and therefore emulate. Thus, when I became a pastor, I practiced what had been impressed upon me: long hours, seven-day weeks, year after year. Most of my friends and mentors did the same. The only alternative I could imagine was sloth, by far the deadliest of the ministerial sins.

After a few years, pressure from my wife and children got me to take an occasional break. I began to realize I worked far better and got more done in six days if I had a change of pace on the seventh. Remarkable! The arguments and evidence mounted: I was persuaded to take a regular day off.

Then I noticed something (why it took so long I'll never know): my practice was not at all the same as the biblical practice of **Sabbath**-keeping. I had more or less assumed I was being biblical, but actually I stood in stark and utter contrast. My day off was basically utilitarian, a secularized **Sabbath**, making it possible to get more done on the other six days. It was also a commonsense contribution to family harmony and emotional health.

At that point I set out to keep a genuine **Sabbath**.

No other behavioral change has brought so many unintended but welcome benefits to my life of faith and my work as a pastor.

Daily and weekly rest

Sabbath means "quit." "Stop." "Take a break." The word itself has nothing devout or holy in it. It is a word about time, denoting our nonuse thereof, what we usually call "wasting time."

The biblical context is the Genesis week of creation. **Sabbath** is the seventh and final day, in which "[God] rested [*shabath*] ... from all His work which He had done" (Gen. 2:2 nasb). As we reenter that sequence of days when God spoke energy and

matter into existence, we repeatedly come upon the refrain "And there was evening and there was morning, one day.... And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.... And there was evening and there was morning ..." (Gen. 1:5-31 nasb)— on and on, six times.

This is the Hebrew way of understanding day, but it is not ours. Our day begins with an alarm clock ripping the predawn darkness and closes, not with evening but several hours past that, when we turn off the electric lights. In our conventional references to day, we do not include the night except for the two or three hours we steal from either end to give us more time to work. Because our definition of day is so different, we have to make an imaginative effort to understand the Hebrew phrase *evening and morning, one day*. More than idiomatic speech is involved here; there is a sense of rhythm.

Day is the basic unit of God's creative work; evening is the beginning of that day. It is the onset of God speaking light, stars, earth, vegetation, animals, man, woman into being. But it is also the time when we quit our activity and go to sleep. When it is evening, "I lay me down to sleep and pray the Lord my soul to keep" and drift off into semiconsciousness for the next six or eight or ten hours, a state in which I am absolutely nonproductive and have no cash value.

Then I wake up, rested, jump out of bed, grab a cup of coffee, and rush out the door to get things started. The first thing I discover (a great blow to the ego) is that everything was started hours ago. All the important things got under way while I was fast asleep. When I dash into the workday, I walk into an operation that is half over already. I enter into work in which the basic plan is already established, the assignments given, the operations in motion.

Sometimes, still in a stupor, I blunder into the middle of something that is nearly done and go to work thinking I am starting it. But when I do, I interfere with what has already been accomplished. My sincere intentions and cheerful whistle while I work make it no less a blunder and an aggravation. The sensible thing is to ask, "Where do I fit? Where do you need an extra hand? What still needs to be done?"

The Hebrew evening/morning sequence conditions us to the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins his work. As we sleep he develops his covenant. We wake and are called out to participate in God's creative action. We respond in faith, in work. But always grace is previous and primary. We wake into a world we didn't make, into a salvation we didn't earn.

Evening: God begins, without our help, his creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated.

Creation and covenant are sheer grace and there to greet us every morning. George MacDonald once wrote that sleep is God's contrivance for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are awake.

We read and reread the opening pages of Genesis, along with certain sequences of Psalms, and recover these deep, elemental rhythms, internalizing the reality in which the strong, initial pulse is God's creating/saving Word, God's providential/sustaining presence, God's grace.

As this biblical rhythm works in me, I also discover something else: when I quit my day's work, nothing essential stops. I prepare for sleep not with a feeling of exhausted frustration because there is so much yet undone and unfinished, but with expectancy. The day is about to begin! God's genesis words are about to be spoken again. During the hours of my sleep, how will he prepare to use my obedience, service, and speech when morning breaks? I go to sleep to get out of the way for a while. I get into the rhythm of salvation. While we sleep, great and marvelous things, far beyond our capacities to invent or engineer, are in process— the moon marking the seasons, the lion roaring for its prey, the earthworms aerating the earth, the stars turning in their courses, the proteins repairing our muscles, our dreaming brains restoring a deeper sanity beneath the gossip and scheming of our waking hours. Our work settles into the context of God's work. Human effort is honored and respected not as a thing in itself but by its integration into the rhythms of grace and blessing.

We experience this grace with our bodies before we apprehend it with our minds. We are attending to a matter of physical/spiritual technology— not ideas, not doctrines, not virtues. We are getting our bodies into a genesis rhythm.

Sabbath extrapolates this basic, daily rhythm into the larger context of the month. The turning of the earth on its axis gives us the basic two-beat rhythm, evening/morning. The moon in its orbit introduces another rhythm, the twenty-eight-day month, marked by four phases of seven days each. It is this larger rhythm, the rhythm of the seventh day, that we are commanded to observe.

Sabbath-keeping presumes the daily rhythm, evening/morning—we can hardly avoid stopping our work each night, as fatigue and sleep overtake us. But the weekly rhythm demands deliberate action. Otherwise, we can go on working on the seventh day, especially if things are gaining momentum. **Sabbath**-keeping often feels like an interruption, an interference with our routines. It challenges assumptions we gradually build up that our daily work is indispensable in making the world go.

But then we find the **Sabbath** is not an interruption but a stronger rhythmic measure that confirms and extends the basic beat. Every seventh day a deeper note is struck—an enormous gong whose deep sounds reverberate under and over and around the daily percussions evening/morning, evening/morning, evening/morning: creation honored and contemplated, redemption remembered and shared.

Reasons for remembering

In the two passages where the **Sabbath** commandment appears, the commands are identical but the supporting reasons differ. Exodus says we are to keep a **Sabbath** because God kept it (Exod. 20:8-11). God did his work in six days and then rested. If God sets apart one day to rest, we can too. There are some things that can only be accomplished, even by God, in a state of rest. The rest/work rhythm is built into the very structure of God's interpenetration of reality. The precedent to quit doing and simply be is divine. **Sabbath**-keeping is commanded so that we internalize the being that matures out of doing.

The reason given in Deuteronomy for remembering the **Sabbath** is that our ancestors in Egypt went four hundred years without a vacation (Deut. 5:15). Never a day off. The consequence: they were no longer considered persons but slaves. Work

units. Not persons created in the image of God but equipment for making bricks and building pyramids.

Lest any of us do that to our neighbor or husband or wife or child or employee, we are commanded to keep a **Sabbath**. The moment we begin to see others in terms of what they can do rather than who they are, humanity is defaced and community violated. It is no use claiming "I don't need to rest this week and therefore will not keep a **Sabbath**"—our lives are so interconnected that we inevitably involve others in our work whether we intend it or not. **Sabbath**-keeping is elemental kindness. **Sabbath**-keeping is commanded to preserve the image of God in our neighbors so that we see them as they are, not as we need them or want them to be.

Every profession has sins to which it is especially liable. I haven't looked closely into the sins that endanger physicians and lawyers, woodworkers and potters, but I've had my eye on the snare from which pastors need deliverance: it is the sin of reversing the rhythms. Instead of grace/work we make it work/grace. Instead of working in a world in which God calls everything into being with his word and redeems his people with an outstretched arm, we rearrange it as a world in which we preach the mighty work of God and in afterthought ask him to bless our speaking; a world in which we stretch out our mighty arms to help the oppressed and open our hands to assist the needy and desperately petition God to take care of those we miss.

That, of course, is why so few pastors keep a **Sabbath**: we have reversed the rhythms. How can we quit work for a day when we must redeem the time? How can we pause when we have a fire in our mouth? How can we do nothing for a whole day when we have been commanded to be urgent in season and out of season, and there is never a season in which the calls for help do not exceed our capacity to meet them?

Perhaps that is why the **Sabbath** is *commanded* not *suggested*, for nothing less than a command has the power to intervene in the vicious, accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle of faithless and graceless busyness, the only part of which we are conscious being our good intentions.

Of all the commandments, not one is treated with such disregard by pastors as this one. We are capable of preaching good sermons on it to our parishioners, and we take great care to provide them a **Sabbath** of good worship and holy leisure. But we exempt ourselves. Curious. Not many of us preach vigorously on the seventh commandment and then pursue lives of active adultery. But we conscientiously catechize our people on the fifth commandment and without a blush flaunt our workaholic **Sabbath**-breaking as evidence of an extraordinary piety.

Pure preaching but Pelagian practice

Sabbath: uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our own activities so we can see what God has been doing and is doing. If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week, we take ourselves far too seriously. The moral sweat pouring off our brows blinds our eyes to the action of God in and around us.

Sabbath-keeping: quieting the internal noise so we hear the still small voice of our Lord. Removing the distractions of pride so we discern the presence of Christ "in ten thousand places,/Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/To the Father through the features of men's faces" (G. M. Hopkins).

Sabbath-keeping: separating ourselves from the people who are clinging to us, from the routines to which we cling for our identity, and offering them all up to God in praise.

None of us has trouble with this theologically. We are compellingly articulate on the subject in our pulpits. It is not our theology that is deficient but our technology—**Sabbath-keeping** is not a matter of belief but of using a tool (time), not an exercise for the mind but the body. **Sabbath-keeping** is not devout thoughts or heart praise but simply removing our bodies from circulation one day a week.

We are, most of us, Augustinians in our pulpits. We preach the sovereignty of our Lord, the primacy of grace, the glory of God: "By grace are ye saved ... not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9 kjv). But the minute we leave our pulpits we are Pelagians. In our committee meetings and planning sessions, in our obsessive attempts to meet the expectations of people, in our anxiety to please, in our hurry to cover all the bases, we practice a theology that puts moral effort as the primary element in pleasing God.

The dogma produces the behavior characteristic of the North American pastor: if things aren't good enough, they will improve if we work a little harder and get others to work harder. Add a committee here, recruit some more volunteers there, squeeze a couple of more hours into the workday.

Pelagius was an unlikely heretic; Augustine an unlikely saint. By all accounts Pelagius was urbane, courteous, convincing. Everyone seems to have liked him immensely. Augustine squandered away his youth in immorality, had some kind of Freudian thing with his mother, and made a lot of enemies. But our theological and pastoral masters agree that Augustine started from God's grace and therefore had it right, and Pelagius started from human effort and therefore got it wrong. If we were as Augustinian out of the pulpit as we are in it, we would have no difficulty keeping **Sabbath**.

How did it happen that Pelagius became our master?

Our closet Pelagianism will not get us excommunicated or burned at the stake, but it cripples our pastoral work. And it is catastrophic to the church's wholeness and health.

Making good nonuse of time

The technology of **Sabbath-keeping** is not complex. We simply select a day of the week (Paul seemed to think any day would do as well as any other—Rom. 14:5-6) and quit our work.

Having selected the day, we also need to protect it, for our workday instincts and habits will not serve us well. It is not a day when we do anything useful. It is not a

day that proves its worth, justifies itself. Entering into empty time, nonfunctional time, is difficult, for we have been taught that time is money.

Our secularized age is so fragmented that no consensus in the details of **Sabbath**-keeping is possible. We cannot prescribe a practice for each other. But lest the command dissolve into a fog of good intentions, I will risk autobiography. The risk is that someone will try to imitate the details of my practice, or (more likely) will say, "That's sure dumb; I don't see the point of that" and dismiss the whole business on the basis of my inept practice. I excuse my example with Thoreau's precedent: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience."

Monday is my **Sabbath**. Nothing is scheduled for Mondays. If there are emergencies, I respond, but there are surprisingly few. My wife joins me in observing the day. We make a lunch, put it in a daypack, take our binoculars, and drive anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour to a trailhead along a river or into the mountains. Before we begin our hike, my wife reads a psalm and prays. After that prayer there is no more talking—we enter into a silence that continues for the next two or three hours, until we stop for lunch.

We walk leisurely, emptying ourselves, opening ourselves to what is there: fern shapes, flower fragrance, birdsong, granite out-croppings, oaks and sycamores, rain, snow, sleet, wind.

We have clothes for all weather and so never cancel our **Sabbath**-keeping for reasons of weather any more than our Sunday churchgoing—and for the same reason: we need our **Sabbath** just as much as our parishioners need theirs. When the sun or our stomachs tell us it is lunchtime, we break the silence with a prayer of blessing for the sandwiches and fruit, the river and the forest. We are free to talk now, sharing bird sightings, thoughts, observations, ideas—however much or little we are inclined.

We return home in the middle or late afternoon, putter, do odd jobs, read. After supper I usually write family letters. That's it. No Sinai thunder. No Damascus Road illuminations. No Patmos visions. A day set apart for solitude and silence. Not-doing.

Being-there. The sanctification of time.

We don't have any rules for preserving the sanctity of the day, only the commitment that it be set apart for being, not using. Not a day to get anything done but a day to watch and be responsive to what God has done.

But we do have help. **Sabbath**-keeping cannot be carried out as a private enterprise. We need our congregation's help. They need our help to keep their **Sabbath**; we need their help to keep ours. From time to time I say something like this to my elders and deacons: "The great reality we are involved in is God. Most of the people around us don't know that and couldn't care less. One of the ways God has provided for us to stay aware of and responsive to him in a world that doesn't care is by **Sabbath**-keeping. At regular intervals we all need to quit our work and contemplate his, quit talking to each other and listen to him.

"God knows we need this and has given us a means in **Sabbath**—a day for praying and playing, simply enjoying what is, what he is. One of my tasks is to lead you in the celebration of **Sabbath** each Sunday. But that is not a **Sabbath** for me. I wake up on Sunday morning with the adrenaline flowing. It is a workday for me. Monday is my **Sabbath**, and I need your help to observe it. I need your prayers; I need your cooperation in not involving me in administration or consultation; I need your admonitions if you see me carelessly letting other things interfere with it. Pastors need pastors too. One of the ways you can be my pastor is to help me keep a weekly **Sabbath** that God commanded."

And they do it. They help. I don't think there are many congregations who would not help us do it if they knew we were committed to it and needed their help to carry it out.

My wife has been keeping, off and on, a **Sabbath** journal for many of the years we have been doing this. The journal is labeled, "Emmaus Walks." You wouldn't be greatly impressed, I think, if you read the sporadic entries. Bird lists, wildflowers in bloom, snatches of conversation, brief notes on the weather. But the spareness records a fullness, a presence. For **Sabbath**-keeping is not primarily something we do, but what we don't do.

We got the phrase "Emmaus Walks" from Douglas V. Steere, who told us the story of an old Lutheran retreat master he once knew, very Prussian, whose speech was thick with German gutturals. He specialized in men's retreats. As the men would come into the lodge, he would make them open their suitcases, from which he would confiscate all the whiskey. Then he would pair them up and send them off on what he called *ee-mouse* walks.

Steere told us that for a long time he wondered what *ee-mouse* walks were, and then realized one day that the old Prussian drillmaster was sending his men out on *Emmaus* walks: two disciples walking and talking together and Jesus, unrecognized, with them. But afterward they knew: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:32 KJV).

It is this kind of unobtrusive alteration in perception that happens quietly but cumulatively in the practice of **Sabbath**-keeping.

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