

I. Intro: “Sabbath” *(walk around to ask questions)*

A. **What comes to your mind when I say that word?** Can anyone give me a quick mental association you have with that word? *(solicit)*

1. *Repeat & affirm ...* recall hearing stories of very strict Sabbath keeping in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House books (no running, no shouting, no laughing, no games, forced times of quiet reading)

2. Our responses to “Sabbath” vary a lot, ranging from

- a) Some who don’t really know what I’m talking about, to ...
- b) Some who understand it enough to know they’re not living it, to ...
- c) Some who think they understand it & live it out, to ...

d) Some who really are finding meaningful Sabbath practices on a regular basis *(return to pulpit)*

3. Today begins 7 Sundays of a series on “Putting God First”, focusing on probably the 2 most valuable resources we have at our disposal: time and money.

- a) For the 1st 3 Sundays, we’re examining how Sabbath time in our lives can help us put God first
- b) Then the final 4 Sundays will help us to put God first in our finances

B. Back to subject of Sabbath, for nearly all of us, if we don’t find it irrelevant, Sabbath is something we struggle with as Christians

Dan Allender is a professor at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. He has written an excellent book titled Sabbath, to which Velma introduced us pastors. Listen to how Allender describes answers some of his graduate students gave to a brief questionnaire about their Sabbath practices & convictions:

In response to the question, “If you don’t observe the Sabbath, what do you suppose has kept you from doing so?” – The typical answer was, “I’m too busy. It would infringe on my work, schoolwork, socializing and free time.” One person wrote, “I know I need to chill out and get a break, but something always comes up on Sunday, and I tend to let the demands of what I’ve not finished last week pile up to get done that day.” [Allender summarizes that]Sabbath, if it is considered at all, is a break, a down day to rest. And as much as we know we need rest, we also know that we need to tie up the last week and prepare the canvas for the week ahead.

(Dan B. Allender, Sabbath, Thomas Nelson, ©2009 , p. 19)

I bet some of you can relate to these views.

C. Contrary to what you may think, our struggles to actually keep Sabbath are not testament to how hard working we are.

1. It's not because we're overworked that we don't observe the 4th commandment. It's actually the opposite.
2. We don't keep Sabbath because we're too lazy! (myself included)
 - a) We're too lazy to properly prioritize God in our lives. We're unwilling to do the hard work of saying NO to good things that are not the best things.
 - b) We're unwilling to say NO to the seductive voice of our society that says, "You can't afford to miss out on this opportunity" ... the voice that asks us, "Can't you squeeze in just one more commitment?"
 - c) We're unwilling to do the hard work of trusting that God actually will provide for what we need in six days so that we don't have to force it to happen on the seventh.

II. So what are we talking about for 3 Sundays when we say "Sabbath"?

A. I'm reluctant to provide a single, authoritative definition of Sabbath, because making it just one practice to the exclusion of others borders on the very legalism that I hope we will avoid

1. For a basic and workable starting point, Tilden Edwards, in his book Sabbath Time, says he's referring to Sabbath as *both a special day of the week, and a special quality of time available daily.*

(Tilden Edwards, Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians, Seabury Press [1st ed.], ©1982, p. 5)

2. I think most of us might at least agree on understanding it as a holy day set apart from work & dedicated to God
3. If we're ready for something to really blow up our pre-existing notions of Sabbath, listen to the way Dan Allender describes the core of what God intended Sabbath to be:

The Sabbath is an invitation to enter delight. The Sabbath, when experienced as God intended, is the best day of our lives. Without question or thought, it is the best day of the week. It is the day we anticipate on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday – and the day we remember on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. Sabbath is the holy time where we feast, play, dance, have sex, sing, pray, laugh, tell stories, read, paint, walk, and watch creation in its fullness. ... (Allender, p. 4-5)

4. Friends, that hasn't fully soaked into most of our minds & hearts if we've grown up in quiet somber Christian traditions where taking Sabbath seriously unfortunately meant robbing ourselves of much of the joy and the light of resurrection life in Jesus Christ!
5. Sabbath is for celebrating a God who delights in us & wants us to delight in God's good gifts.

B. Maybe it's easier to name some things that Sabbath is NOT ... call it "Sabbath mythbusters"

1. A set of behavioral do's and don'ts ... not a bunch of rules
 - a) which is why it's beside the point to be stuck on black-and-white questions like, "Does it have to be Sunday?"
 - b) In stories like the one we heard today in Mk. 2, Jesus clearly debunked legalistic approaches to Sabbath
 - c) If you're looking for a simple cookie-cutter approach to what behaviors are right & wrong for Sabbathkeeping, I'm not giving it to you & the Bible's Sabbath teachings weren't meant for that either

2. Not same thing as attending church
 - a) This has become a common misconception ... Although worshipping God with others at church is usually a healthy part of Sabbath observance, it's no guarantee.
 - b) You can be physically present @ church & still violate Sabbath by your high anxiety and bringing work with you so you can "multitask"

3. Not same thing as "family time"
 - a) In our private individualistic world, we sometimes think our families can perfectly substitute for a faith community
 - b) I think you heard me once quote some anonymous theologian who said, "Mennonites don't worship God, they worship their families."
 - c) Just because a family spends time doing things together doesn't mean their activities honor God or foster a Sabbath spirit

4. And finally here's perhaps the biggest myth to bust: Sabbath is not merely a break, a day off to get us ready for working again
 - a) That kind of language betrays an attitude that believes normal life ("real life") is only to be found out in the secular world, at work, and in actively doing busy things
 - b) We are selling Sabbath short if we think it's only for "recharging our batteries" so we can go back and join the ratrace for another 6 days
 - c) Sabbath is about resting in the Lord because we need it, because God wants it for us & because God deserves this loving attention from us
 - d) Tilden Edwards has said, "*'Using' Sabbath time as preparation for something else, even for something good, is [an] inadequate motive that will prevent full resting in the Lord.*" (Edwards, p. 51)

5. **Speaking of motives**, let's look at some of our common motives for entering Sabbath

III. It's a fair question to ask, "Why do we want to rest?" When we enter into Sabbath or something we think is Sabbath, what tends to motivate us?"

A. Tilden Edwards identifies 3 main reasons pushing us to seek Sabbath rest. (Edwards, p. 50)

1. As I name them, I invite you to ask yourself if this is what motivates you ...
2. These motives have some positive sides to them, but more often I see in Christians the negative effects of these motives for Sabbath

B. Possibly the most common Christian Sabbath motive is law

1. We observe Sabbath because it's right there in the 10 Commandments. This is obedience due to obligation. It is an external thing, based on "shoulds" and "oughts"
2. Clearly this can & often does lead to legalism, which is a constant problem where Sabbath is concerned
3. But before we dismiss law as a valid reason for Sabbath observance, let's not forget one thing: God did command us to observe Sabbath. They are not "the 10 suggestions"
 - a) Sabbath is just as much one of the 10 Commandments as the prohibitions against idolatry, stealing or adultery.
 - b) If we shrug & say violating the Sabbath is basically inevitable for Christians in today's demanding world, would we be equally casual in saying it's also inevitable to worship other gods, steal or commit adultery?

C. A 2nd motive for Sabbath is entertainment

1. Sometimes we want Sabbath rest because we simply want and need enjoyment in our lives. The positive side of this motive celebrates the goodness of our bodies and other parts of God's creation
 - a) This is about listening to gorgeous music ... watching a sunset over Lake Michigan ... savoring a delectable well-prepared dinner ... cuddling by a fire on a cold winter night
2. A shadow side of Sabbath for the sake of entertainment is when we cannot fully live in the present
 - a) Sometimes we don't truly enjoy the gifts God gives because we're afraid something unpleasant will interrupt our rest
 - b) Entertainment as a motive for Sabbath can also lead to a very selfish sense of Sabbath, where it's all about me and my own enjoyment of my Sabbath

D. A third motive for Sabbath is escape

1. We use this when we cry out, "I just need a break! I can't work all the time!" & of course there's truth in this.

2. But escape can also destroy a holistic life

a) In our world we're constantly looking at our activities as EITHER work or play, EITHER secular or sacred, EITHER serious or silly, EITHER "on the clock" or on my own time.

b) But God's work in the world is not so easily described as always on certain days, in certain places & activities, and never in others

c) In reality, there is no such thing as secular time and sacred time ...

No such categories as time for God and time for human activities

ALL TIME IS GOD'S TIME, in God's hands ... Despite our language of "saving time or killing time", time is not a resource we can destroy or possess like we possess objects or buildings

3. With the time God gives us, all of our lives are to be lived in 2 basic modes that are not opposites of each other but complementary
(PPT of 2 modes of lived time) *(Name some of the pairings)*

Living out the time God gives us In 2 complementary modes

Sabbath	Ministry
Letting go	Engaging/taking on
Being	Doing
Contemplative	Active
Floating	Swimming
Enjoying God	Working with God
Spontaneous	Calculating

From Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, Seabury Press, ©1982, p. 41-42

a) Can you learn to view every activity, any day of the week, ideally as either Sabbath or Ministry, no matter how mundane?

IV. You may wonder what Sabbath looks like for me & how I got started with it ... (blank PPT)

A. When did my first real awakening come to the radical gift and the radical demand of Sabbath?

It came when I was a seminary student in Elkhart with 2 small children. I was doing a part-time ministry internship @ Walnut Hill Mennonite Church under the supervision of my friend Steve Thomas. One Sunday between worship & Sunday School, Steve asked how my semester @ AMBS was going. He casually but pointedly said, "I hope you're not doing your studies on the Sabbath ...". I sheepishly had no answer for him, because of course I was studying on the Sabbath! This was graduate level work! I had papers to write, & thousands of pages to read, while still trying to be a good dad with 2 beautiful little kids. Sunday afternoon & evening were prime time to catch up on these things, or to finish the assignments that were due the next day.

But I couldn't get Steve's gentle but burning words out of my head. After all, as a full-time student, this was my work. This was my calling and I was serious about it. So how could I not take seriously God's call to stop working one day a week for the purpose of being more available for God and my family? How could I claim to devote myself fully to studying the Bible and Christian ministry, while deciding that one of those 10 commandments didn't really apply to me because I had too many important things to get done on the way to being a pastor?

Soon after that day, I did stop studying on Sundays. Not cold turkey, and not 100% for the rest of my seminary years. I still fudged occasionally on Sundays. But my pattern changed. How I organized my studies in the rest of the week & especially Saturdays changed, in order that I could be more free to spend time with God, with my wife & kids, with friends and with myself. It was enough of a freeing, life-giving experience, that I knew I never wanted to go back to my old, driven time patterns.

B. Let me briefly describe, for better or worse, what Sabbath typically looks like for me:

1. To begin with, on Mondays, I don't do church work (unless there are crises or emergencies)
 - a) I don't go into the office & don't check email or make church-related phone calls
 - b) I don't attend ministry team meetings: If a meeting I normally go to is set for a Monday, they either proceed without me, or they schedule it for another day.
2. Actually my Sabbath often starts Sunday afternoon or evening
 - a) I may take a nap, watch a football game on TV, or gather with Janette & some friends for relaxing food and conversation.
 - b) On Monday morning I sleep an hour or 2 longer when I can

Text: Exo. 20:8-11; Mk. 2:23-28

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- c) I may pick up my Bible or a devotional reading, or leisurely read the newspaper
- d) Knowing that some domestic activities done while she's at work will please my wife, I may clean up the kitchen dishes & countertop & start some laundry. I don't have to do these things, I usually want to.
- e) On Mondays I pay our bills & record expenses.
- f) I sometimes mow lawn & sometimes not (If it sounds relaxing & enjoyable, I do; if it feels like an obligation that has to get done, I avoid it)
- g) In nicer weather, I'll take a one- or 2-hour bike ride
- h) I honestly don't avoid all shopping & purchases, but I do examine if those purchases will lighten my heart, or if they're just another necessity
- i) Sometimes I'll play around on guitar if I feel like it

C. I am not a perfect observer of Sabbath ... I will admit there are pros & cons to what I do for Sabbath:

1. Here are some things I feel good about in my Sabbath observance:

- a) This is a long-term sustainable habit ... it's become the rhythm of my life for past 17 years
- b) Sabbath has helped me avoid what would probably be ministry burnout by now if I hadn't chosen to be more serious about it
- c) On Sabbath, most of the time I look for & appreciate beauty, silence & solitude. This day feels different & more life-giving than any other day. I always look forward to it.
- d) Church people have respected & supported my Sabbath observance almost always

2. Having named these positives, there are also some growing edges I must confess about my Sabbath practices:

- a) Sometimes in my default attitude, Monday is still nothing more than a "day off" or a day for "recharging my batteries"
- b) If I'm honest, some of my Monday activities, like recording expenses & paying bills, do not feel like delight, but more like duty ... sadly, I feel kind of trapped in this pattern that seems difficult to change
- c) Even when I have the time, within myself it's hard to give myself permission for delight

There's a responsible rules-follower inside me that always sees something else that "needs to be done"

With my personality, sometimes I have to work hard at relaxing

D. As I conclude these glimpses into the good and bad of Sabbath in my life, let me also add a disclaimer from all of us pastors

1. Every one of us pastors has regular Sabbath practices that we value and take seriously
2. And every one of us also struggles to truly observe Sabbath as a holy day of delight, different from other days, as God intended.
3. Do not aim to be just like us in your own Sabbath practices. Instead aim to go beyond us & inspire us ... please.

V. Conclusion

A. "Sabbath":

1. It's a word God did not mean for us to ignore or minimize. God commanded it after all.
2. But this command came from a gracious loving God who sent Jesus to help clarify that Sabbath is meant to serve us and not for us to serve the Sabbath
3. So on this the Lord's Day, as you ponder what this command means for your busy life, God is asking each of us, "Will you remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy?"

B. One of the best ways you can put God first in your use of time is to stop thinking of the days & hours of each week in a false either/or way:

1. as either "work time" or "play time", either "ordinary time" or "God's time"
2. Instead I invite you to approach each day with a prayer that looks forward to either Ministry or Sabbath, or maybe both.
3. Let's pray now such a prayer, *"God, you gave me the breath I'm breathing and the years I've lived. My time is not my own, but it's yours. Strengthen me for the active work of ministry, and let me joyfully receive Sabbath from you as a celebration. Amen."*