

## The Rest of the Story

May 28, 2023

Who's ready for summer break? Everyone but the mom's of little kids. Let's face it, we live in a busy world. Family life is busy. My son is graduating from High School on Friday and we have been running to all the "last concerts", awards ceremonies, graduation parties that you can imagine. And we're not even involved in youth sports anymore. Some of you aren't even here to listen to this sermon because you are at a baseball tournament. I get it. And single parents are my heroes – I do not know how you do it. It's a hectic time of year.

And I start with talking about how busy families are because that traditionally has been the place you seek *shelter* from the busy world – right? You remember the Andy Griffith show when they'd just sit around on the porch on the weekends and strum a guitar? That's science fiction today. Family *adds* to the business that is already grinding us down at the work place.

Now, I know that, as a diverse congregation, we all have somewhat different relationships to work, just like we do to family. There are people here, for example, who are out of work and would love to have more work. But what I hear the most from folks is that the bigger problem here in a place like Austin is

not getting enough work, but getting enough *rest*. People are just worn out. In fact, the number one reason I hear from people who have been sporadic in church attendance is, "I've been so busy at work" – with "Our family has been so busy" a close second.

So I want to address this morning a situation that I have been seeing for quite some time and I don't think it's healthy for us and, at the same time, the Bible has some pretty clear instruction for how to deal with it. So we're going to talk about finding rest. What I have cleverly titled "The *Rest* of the Story" – because when you blend dad jokes with pastor jokes, you get a nuclear level of corniness! But the reality is, even when we have down time, we've forgotten how to rest. And it's killing us.

That's not hyperbole. The ability to deeply rest is a life or death thing. No one can do without it, but it is not natural, it is not simple, it is absolutely difficult, and it takes an enormous amount of discipline and practice. Probably more so that at any time in history. Why would that be? Why would that be so hard? We have to look at our modern situation. Let's do that briefly. The modern situation means the eternal human need for rest is enormously aggravated. Let me give you four trends.

a) More and more, at least in Western culture, **jobs are insecure**. Jobs, whole departments, if they don't perform, if they don't turn profit, they're eliminated. I don't think there has ever been a culture, ever been a place, where job security was so bad outside of a total economic collapse. My brother-in-law was just telling about a presentation he made to his boss about using a new AI process he had created to streamline his work. And he said his boss turned white and said, "You know if you do that it's going to cost 500 people their jobs?" But at the same time it would be the "efficient" thing to do. Efficient for whom?

b) **The work/life paradox**. I'm saying big things in kind of a nutshell here. In the decade from 2010-2020, there was all of this research done on the fact that where it used to be that people making the money at the top of a company used to make maybe 10 or 20 times what people at the bottom of the company made, now it's more like 100 to 200 times. And increasingly, people who make large amounts of money are expected to put in enormous numbers of hours. Not measuring efficiency necessarily, just sheer number of hours logged.

And then the pandemic kicked in and we still don't know which way is up. The "great resignation" is real. A lot of people have just said, "No thanks." And so, many companies can't actually get enough

workers now. Which means other people are left doing even more work in many cases. But it's never been harder to navigate this mythical work/life balance. And that's in large part due to...

c) **Technology**. Ah, technology. Nowadays you can work anywhere, which means we work *everywhere*. It means you can't stop work from spilling out into every nook and cranny of your life. Are we working from home or living at work? It's harder and harder to tell. We haven't yet even begun to explore the psychological tensions of this new mobile lifestyle.

We were out in West Texas a couple of weeks ago and stayed in an old house that had been turned into an Air B&B. I asked the kids if they knew what this was. No idea. Ari guessed a place to hold a statue of Mary. Us old timers might remember that this is where the *one telephone in the house* was plugged in. If you wanted to talk, you came here. If a teenager wanted to get frisky on the phone with their crush, they had to do it in the living room in front of mom!

Now, we carry the phone around in our pocket. It never leaves us. Anybody remember having to "bring files home from the office"? Don't make me laugh. It's all in the cloud. What do you want? I can get it for you in 15 seconds. And that's what some of your bosses want. Any day of the week.

I once counseled a couple having relationship problems and one of his issues was that she couldn't seem to resist answering texts while they were having sex. Which sounds like an article from *Cosmo*, I know, but real lives of a pastor! Our time saving devices are costing us so much time.

d) There is **enormous psychological and social pressure** on work to be fulfilling. This is a little more complex. Cultural analysts have said, and there's pretty much universal agreement on this, that whereas traditional societies said you got your meaning in life through your family and through basically fulfilling a fairly prescribed social role, either as a mother or father or brother or sister or husband or wife or son or daughter – that's where your identity came from.

Work wasn't as important in a situation like that. You just needed to find a way to make a living because family was what everything was about. But we're the first culture in history that says you define yourself by deciding what you want to be and attaining it. *Then* you have significance. So we're chasing something even bigger than a paycheck – and more elusive. The dark side of "You can be anything you want to be in life" is "whatever you are now...you could be *more*". And that chase is exhausting, not just to the body, but to the soul.

Now each of those are troublesome on their own, but you put A, B, C and D together and it means our modern society has created the perfect storm when it comes to finding rest. We need it more than ever, but are less capable of finding it. And our busyness is costing us something precious. In his novel, *The Second Coming*, Walker Percy poses the question, "Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses an airplane?" And the answer for too many people in our world is "yes".

Percy describes such a life: "Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream." (Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*, 124). I don't want that to be true of my life. And I know that you don't either.

Now, I'm a history major, which means I think we can find most answers to our present problems in the solutions of the past. And I believe that's the case here as well. You see as much as the modern world has exacerbated the problem, it hasn't *created* it. This is an ancient problem as well – an issue of human nature – which is why the Bible addresses it.

Because the scriptures seem to anticipate that human beings will always tend to push things to the limit. I think that's because we're made in the image of God – who *is* omnipotent, all powerful. So we think *we* can be as well. But unlike God, we're also *fallen*, which means that the image of God in us is marred. And so we wind up pushing our limits in unhealthy ways.

So God says to us over and over again, “I know what you're capable of, but I didn't create you to live that way all the time. I didn't create you to live at your limits, just like you didn't create a car engine to run at the highest RPM's constantly. It will burn up...and so will you.” And so God, in His wisdom, mandated some limits into the Scriptures in the form of commands. See, God's rules aren't to ruin our good time, they are for our long-term good – I think the parents among us can understand that.

And predominantly I think these commands revolve around three areas where human beings tend to push their limits the most. Three areas where, if left to our own devices, we would crash past the safety barriers and wreck our lives on the rocks of existence. One is money – God knows that human nature, left to its own devices, would spend everything today on itself with no regard for tomorrow or for anyone else.

And so the main correction is God's command of the tithe. “Don't live on 100% of your earnings. Trust me with 10% off the top and then I'll help you live on the 90% better than you could on the whole. Because it's a matter of trust in the end.” But we're not talking about money today.

The second danger zone is in morality. Like a wet paint sign on a park bench, something in us wants to reach out and touch the forbidden. So God gives us behavioral commandments. “Yes, don't commit adultery because the fruits of that will spoil your families, your society, your bank accounts and your soul. But I'm going to tell you to actively avoid even lust. Don't let yourself get into the place where if you give into one temptation there's no turning back from the ultimate consequences. Build some moral margin into your life. Live by, not just what you can get away with, but live with wisdom and restraint.” But we're not talking about that one today either.

God builds margin into our *money* through the tithe. God builds margin into our *morality* through the ethical commandments. And, thirdly, God wants to build margin into our *time* through the command of Sabbath rest. And that *is* what we are going to spend time talking about today. It's rule number four on God's Top Ten list, (**Exodus 20:8**) “*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*” It made the Ten Commandments.

By the way – and it’s a moot point because the bill failed to pass the legislature this week – but some of you have asked me about what I think about forcing schools to post the 10 Commandments in classrooms. My standard response – as it was the *last* time they tried this – is, I think that’s a bad idea, but maybe we should try putting them up in *churches* for a start.

Now, the truth is, the Sabbath command is one that is repeated in all of the world-wide Abrahamic faiths, including Islam. But lest you think that Sabbath is some kind of Old Testament thing, or Jewish thing, the New Testament sets us straight that this is still in affect for Christians, **Hebrews 4:9**, “*There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;*” So this morning I want to talk about the what, the why and the how of keeping the commandment to “*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*”

First of all, quickly, **What is a Sabbath?** It comes from the Hebrew world *Shabbat*, which first appears in **Genesis 2:2**, “*By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.*” The word translated “he rested” is *Shabbat*. Now, this sabbath rest comes in three forms in the Bible – three sabbatical principles. The first, and most well known, is a day. To keep the Sabbath means to rest one day out of seven.

Now, *which* day is not really the point. People get very legalistic about this. “Oh, it has to be Sunday, right?” Well, the word *Shabbat* is where we get our word “Saturday” – actually we get it from a blend of the Jewish and the pagan day to worship the Roman god Saturn. And yes, for observant Jews, Sabbath *is* Saturday. But we are not observant Jews. Pretty quickly in the church, with the growth of the gentile converts, the Sabbath day shifted to Sunday partially in recognition of the resurrection of Jesus.

But here’s the thing, like all symbolic rituals from the Old Testament, when they come over to the New Testament, they often get changed to demonstrate their true purpose. Jesus *fulfills* the Old Testament. It all points to him, so he is allowed to change it. So for example, Jesus changed the Passover meal into what we now practice as Communion. Same thing with kosher laws – Jesus says you can eat that hot dog! - same thing with water baptism, animal sacrifices, all kinds of ritual practices.

So one aspect of keeping Sabbath is to make one day out of seven a day of rest, but the emphasis is not on the specific *day* of the week, but the *rhythm* of one out of seven. But there are two other sabbatical principles. The second is a rest for the land. In Leviticus chapter 25, the farmers are commanded to let the land rest - “lie fallow” – once every seven years. Current environmental principles show us the wisdom of this. You need to let the nutrients in the soil replenish themselves.

So Sabbath means on *day* out of seven, one *year* out of seven, and then thirdly, that same chapter of Leviticus describes the command for a “Year of Jubilee.” Every 50 years – the year after seven sets of seven years – all debts were to be canceled, everyone gets a fresh start. There is no evidence, by the way, that Israel *ever* kept that, one even once. But it is always talked about as the kind of thing we can look forward to when God’s Kingdom on earth finally looks like His Kingdom in Heaven. We still long for that kind of equity, justice and mercy.

So that’s what Sabbath *is*, a principle about observing a set pattern of rest from work. Let’s talk about **Why we should keep the Sabbath?** And there are two reasons given in the Bible. The Ten Commandments appear in two different books of the Bible and in each we are given a different explanation for *why* we should keep the Sabbath. Let’s start with Exodus, because we’ve already alluded to that one.

The first explanation for Sabbath is the **Argument from Creation**. Let’s read the whole thing, **Exodus 20:8-10**, “*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.*”

That’s the command, now here’s the reason, **V.11**, “*For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*” So we rest on one day out of seven, because that’s what *God* did. It’s not that God was tired – God doesn’t get tired – but God was showing us that we were created for a pattern. Work, yes, work is a good thing. Do it unto the Lord. But then rest. Take a day to celebrate what you’ve done before you move on to the next thing.

That’s how God designed you. And if you violate a design, there will always be problems. You can substitute chocolate sauce in your car instead of oil – because you own it – but don’t act shocked when it blows up, because that’s not how it was designed. You were designed for rest – one day out of seven. I had this beaten into me at my first pastoral job. I was an associate pastor at a mega-church in Missouri and we worked *very* hard. In fact, at first, I had a tough time keeping up and I would sometimes come in on my day off – a Thursday – to catch up.

Now, I had assumed the boss would appreciate that. But when my senior pastor caught me in the office on my day off, he would actually read me the riot act. He said, “Anthony, what you’re really doing is saying that you’re better than God. It’s a pride thing. And it’s a lack of trust. God gives you the grace to get done in six days what needs to be done, but you don’t trust Him in that. And so you are living in willful disobedience to God and He can’t bless that.”

And he was right. I’ve never forgotten that lesson. And I’m very good about observing my sabbath to this day. I’m not good at very many disciplines, but I tithe and I keep the Sabbath. I have come to understand how God designed us. My wife will tell you that’s probably the thing she most appreciates about Pastor John. Because pastors are notorious for overworking and neglecting their families – it’s not exactly a 9 to 5, weekday gig.

So the first biblical explanation for Sabbath is the argument from Creation. The second is the **Argument from the Exodus**. Now, not from the *book* of Exodus, this can be confusing, but from the event itself. The second command for Sabbath is listed in the book of Deuteronomy and there are some similarities, but a different explanatory focus.

**Deuteronomy 5:13-14**, “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey...*” – rest your ass! – “*...or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do.*” That’s the same. Now looks at the reason why.

**V.15**, “*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*” God says, the reason you deserve some sabbath rest is because no one gave you a day off for 400 years! Slaves don’t get days off. Slaves work when they’re told to work.

And the reality is, we have many freedoms in America today, but yet we *live* like slaves. A slave is just a commodity, just a means of production. And God says to His creation again and again, “No! You are more than what you do. Your life has meaning, not because you are productive, your life has meaning because I love you. I value you. I desire relationship with you. You are more than just what you do.”

This is a real problem in modern society. We boil people down to just what they do. We do it to ourselves. This is why unemployment hits – especially men – so hard. Because beyond just the financial and provisional dynamics, there’s the psychological angst of “Who am I if I’m not a…” fill in the blank. So Sabbath is a counter-revolution that tells you to find your identity in being a child of God first and foremost. You are not *just* a teacher. You are not *just* a programmer. You are not *just* a buyer. You are not *just* a pastor. You are not a slave.

So before you can begin to practice keeping the sabbath, you have to understand what this is all about. Only that knowledge will give you the ability to avoid the dual traps of legalism and neglect that work together to rob you of the divine benefits of sabbath rest. You have to learn to say to yourself, “This is an act of liberation. This is a slave uprising. My work does not define me. Christ defines me. I am not defined by how many customers I get, how much money I make, how well I’m doing this, how expert I become. I am not. I’m taking time off today. I’m taking time off tonight. I’m taking time off this week. I’m not going to even think about it because I am not a slave.”

Listen, in our fallenness, we tend to turn God’s commands into a bummer, but they are really a gift when we properly understand them. With understanding comes wisdom. When I was a kid, my mom would force me to have nap time, and I hated it more than anything! But now? My Sunday afternoon nap is one of the highlights of my week! I got some wisdom. I got some understanding. I’m less foolish that I was. Let’s be less foolish together.

So that’s *what* sabbath is and *why* sabbath is, let’s get down to the nitty gritty...**How do we keep the Sabbath?** And I’m going to keep this part short, because part of the problem with this is how it always tends to get abused through legalism. Every generation turns it into something it’s not supposed to be. You see it in Jesus day, and you see it on our own day. What is meant to be for our benefit, becomes just another means of control. The focus shifts to what we *can’t* do, rather than what we can.

Even Jesus faced this problem. The religious leaders of his day were constantly getting on him about what he would do on the Sabbath. Once on a Sabbath, Jesus healed a man - how great is that? – it’s a miracle! And it says that afterwards the religious leaders went out and plotted how they might kill him. For *healing* a guy? They were so focused on the rules, they’d forgotten the principles completely. So Jesus had to remind them, **Mark 2:27**, “*Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”*”



This is a blessing, not a curse. It's not about a bunch of rules. Let me just give you one "*don't*" for your Sabbath. Just one. On the day that you choose to set aside as your day of Sabbath rest...and again, the day doesn't matter. Mine is Thursday. I hope you know Sunday is not a day of rest for Connor and me? Whoever wrote the song, "Easy Like a Sunday Morning" was *not* a pastor! No, your Sabbath should be the one day a week that you avoid anything having to do with that thing the world would say defines who you are.

So, on my Sabbath, on Thursday, I don't do anything pastoral. Unless there is an emergency – the Bible itself talks about when you have "an ox in the ditch". So if you're being rushed to the hospital, you *better* call me. But if it can wait to Friday, please let it wait until Friday. Because I need to remember that I am more than *just* a pastor. So I avoid anything vocational on my Sabbath.

What would that look like for you? If you're a teacher, don't grade papers on your sabbath. If you're in management, don't check your work email on your sabbath. If you're in retail, don't go anywhere near that store on your sabbath. Listen, sabbath is different than just a day off – some of you might get two days off a week – that's a luxury, the Bible has no concept of a two-day weekend. I often work several hours on Saturdays, but I guard my Thursday.

And when something comes up – key meetings or something – that I just can't avoid, I switch it. I will trade off a Wednesday for a Thursday sometimes. But the key is have one day when you can remind yourself that you are more than what you do. Be intentional, or it will never happen. The world – our modern world – will never give you a sabbath, you have to take it. Carve out one day that is different from all the other days.

So that's the only don't. Don't do anything related to your job unless it is a true emergency. Then *do*...whatever it is that makes it a day of delight. Let me give you three things that should define your sabbath. And again, I'm not going to go into details, because I don't want to make it legalistic, but here are three general principles that all start with "C": Curiosity, Coziness and Care.

**Curiosity** asks, "Is there more?" Now, you can ask that with two motivations, greed or wonder. If it's greed, nothing will satisfy and that will never lead to rest, just grinding ambition. But if the heart is motivated by wonder, we will wind up in a what feels more like play than work. It might require effort – maybe even stringent effort – but the end result leaves you feeling more alive.

Now, everybody is different. I like to read on my day off – not church stuff – history and literature and non-fiction. Learning makes me feel alive. For others reading is a chore. Look, working in the yard, for my mom, having her hands in the dirt brings her closer to God. It energizes her. When *my* hands are in the dirt, I feel like I'm digging to hell. I don't like yard work. It takes energy away, so I do that on a different day than my sabbath. Again, everybody is different, but don't just lie around, explore. Deanna and I have taken up kayaking on Ladybird Lake, that's a joy for us. Whatever that means for you.

Then next is **Cozy**. Cozy means that while we are being curious about any number of subjects, we are doing it in our pajamas or in a hammock or on a leisurely stroll through the woods or the park. There's an element of chill to this. If you're exhausted coming out of your sabbath, you might not be doing it right. But again, one person's cozy is another person's crazy. So there's no right way to do it. Just find what makes you say, "Ahhh."

Finally, the sabbath is a day for **Care**. Care means to tend to something with diligence and delight. To care for a plant is to provide it with good soil, food and sunlight. To care means I check in regularly to see if there are any brown spots on the leaves. So maybe you take care of yourself physically – workout.

I workout on my sabbath. Get some rest. Sleep in. Or get the kids off to school and go back to bed. But take care physically.

Take care of yourself relationally. This is not hermit in the cave day – although solitude can absolutely be a part of it. But Deanna and I use it as a date day. We enjoy each other's company. Maybe you have friends over for dinner. For some people that may take energy away, but for some of us, that's refreshing.

And be sure not to neglect the spiritual care. That's a vital part. I said I don't read church stuff on my day off, but I still will read devotional things, because I need to take care of my *own* soul, before I can minister to yours. Now, most of you will probably use Sunday as your Sabbath. That still works best in our culture for many people. Not too long ago we had blue laws where the state enforced it for you.

So coming to church is a great way to start things off. Even volunteering – that's not really work if you don't do it full-time. But gathering in religious community has traditionally always been a part of the sabbath practice of the people of God. So body, spirit, mind, emotions; What do you need to take care of yourself? Life is a marathon, not a sprint. Take care of yourself and you'll go further, faster.

Speaking of that, let me close with a great illustration I heard a few years ago. In one of my seminary classes, my professor had once served as the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Victoria, Texas. It was one of the first Presbyterian churches in Texas - founded in 1838. So he was there for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church and he was going through some of the archives when he came across this story.

It seems that one of the founding members – this was pre-Civil War remember - wrote about her family's journey West. She was a little girl and her family hitched up the wagons and followed hordes of other pioneers from back East as they headed out to new frontiers. It was a land rush to Texas.

And her father, being a devout Christian, would always stop their caravan on Sundays. They would just worship and rest. And his daughter was so upset because she would see scores of other wagons just passing them by. And she would say to her father, "This is foolish. We're falling behind. Everyone is going to get there ahead of us and all the good land will be taken." She was very anxious. But her father just said, "We are going to honor the Lord's principles."

And a funny thing happened. She writes that as the months went on, they began to pass many of the wagons that had previously zipped on ahead. You see, when they were talking time out to rest as God commanded, guess who else was resting? Their horses! Their mules. Remember all that emphasis of the commands for your *animals* too. And they passed by broken wagons and lame horses until, as it turns out, that they were one of the *first* to arrive in Texas and they settled on the best land in Victoria and founded the church there.

I close with that story because we all of us can get tempted to say, "Yes, this Sabbath idea sounds great, but there's just no way I could do that. Anthony, I'm sure that's fine for you as a pastor and all, but you don't understand my industry. It would never work for me." Ok, but my job is just to remind you of what God says. And God says, you were not made to run without rest – body, soul, mind and spirit. Maybe you can't afford *not* to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

When it boils down to it, it's always going to be a step of faith. Even for pastors. In fact, in my experience pastors tend to violate this as much as anybody. I like to point out that this is the one command that pastors will *brag* about breaking. "I'm just too busy for sabbath rest." Even pastors have to make a choice to obey God's principles. So I want to close out by making an announcement about my own step of faith...

(Announce my sabbatical for June/July of 2023). SWFF sabbatical policy; 1 month for 5 years, 2 months for 10, 3 months for 15. In 2018, we took off for three months and I wrote my dissertation in Scotland. But that's been 5 years ago – can you believe it? So now it rotates back around to a month. In 2025, Pastor Connor will be eligible for his one month Sabbatical. But right now it's my turn.

- ✓ What it is. (Sicily)
- ✓ What will happen while I'm gone (Connor and the elders have a plan and we need you to be a part of that plan.)

What can you do?

- ✓ Pray for us. Going back to the loss of Deanna's mother last Fall and continuing through the loss of our nephew three weeks ago – and a myriad of other things, some you know about and some you don't – but I am about as tired, emotionally, physically and spiritually as I have been in 20 years. What started as a good idea is now an absolute necessity. And I think God in His foresight knew that.
- ✓ Help carry the load while are gone.
  - Helping Hands
  - Sound Booth and ProPresenter
  - The Ministry of Butts in Seats!

But we fly out June 7, so that means next week is *Ask the Pastor* and then...I'll see you in August.

Let's pray...