

Growing Closer

Week 7: Sabbath

Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 16, 20:8-11; Mark 2:27-28

Dr. Kevin Maurice ---- July 14, 2024

It is so good to get to be here and worship with you. Thank you to Michael and the band for leading us in worship. Let's hear it for them—that would be great—they do such a great job leading us. [*Congregation applauds.*]

This summer Pastor Matt has been teaching through a series on the spiritual practices, or spiritual disciplines, called *Growing Closer*. And each Sunday has been an exploration of a different one of those spiritual practices. These are fundamentals of the Christian faith; how a Christian man or a Christian woman can live out and experience their faith. But these disciplines are not a checklist where we have to complete everything so that God is happy with us. They're given to us. These things are gifts from God and they're for our good.

And the reason for them is our relationship with Him. Our relationship with God is renewed, it's restored, it's reconciled through Jesus. That relationship is why we practice these spiritual disciplines.

In our first week together, we studied Matthew 11. In Matthew 11 Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Rest for your soul ...

Up at Boston College there's a beloved philosophy professor named Peter Kreeft. And Dr. Kreeft often tells his students that, outside of the Bible, outside of the sacred scriptures, the most important sentence that's ever been written is this one from St. Augustine: "**You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.**" God, You have made us for yourself, and our hearts will be restless until they find true rest in You.

In our teaching time today, the final Sunday of this *Growing Closer* series, we're learning how to find our rest in Him. How do we find rest in Jesus?

So, we're going to study a spiritual practice that is intentionally, purposefully, given for our rest. In the past five years I've grown to love this spiritual discipline. And as I've become disciplined about doing it, it's transformed my life. It's been one of the most important things that I do each and every week.

So, today we're talking about practicing a Sabbath. And here's our outline for how we explore the Sabbath. What is it? Why should we do it? And then, how do we do it? So, what is the Sabbath? What's the purpose behind it? Why do we need it? And then, how do you practice it?

What Is the Sabbath?

So, what is the Sabbath? And if you would, please join me in opening your Bibles to Genesis 2. In the Book of Genesis, God tells us all about how He created the universe. Genesis 1: In the beginning God creates the heavens and the earth and everything in existence. God speaks and light comes to exist. He looks at it and He says, "It's good." God creates the stars and our sun and He looks at it and says, "It's good." God creates planets, including this one, and He looks and says, "It's good." And then, God fills our planet with plants and animals and creates people. At the end of six days of creation in Genesis 1:31, God looks at everything that He's made, and He says, "It is very good."

And then we get to Genesis 2. And if you're able, would you please stand with me as I read from God's Word. This is Genesis 2, starting in verse 1: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all His work that He had done in creation." Thanks, you can have a seat.

God rested. The word "sabbath" comes from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, which means "stop" or "rest." And in Genesis 2, God is the first person to ever do that. God finishes His work and then He chooses to rest.

And if you notice, after each day of creation, day one through day six, God looks at what He made and He calls it good. But then we get to the seventh day, and He doesn't do that. What does He do instead? He blesses the day. And the Bible says He made it holy.

This is the first thing in the entire Bible that is described as holy. Just think about that for a second. Every galaxy in existence, all the stars, the sun, the moon, our planet, plants and animals and people---nothing else in Scripture is labeled holy until we get to the Sabbath.

One anthropologist says that this is such a radical departure from any other religion or creation story. Because the mythological mind would expect that after God creates heaven and earth, the next thing He would do would be to create a holy place, a holy mountain or a holy river or a holy city, somewhere where humans, where the mortal, could experience the divine.

But that's not what God does. It's significant—there is no significant place in the entire creation story. Even the Garden of Eden is not described as holy, because it's not about a place; it's about a person.

There's no holy place; there's a holy God, and He creates a holy day. And this holy day that's set apart, this sacred day, is called the Sabbath. The stop. The rest. The Sabbath is a day of rest. Six days of work, twenty-four hours of rest. That is God's design for His creation.

And when you think about it, outside of God ordaining this rhythm—six days of work, one day of rest—there is nothing inherent or obvious about a seven-day week.

Have you ever wondered that? Why do we organize our weeks in these seven-day increments? If you haven't, that's okay. But French revolutionaries in the 18th century were wondering that. Led by this guy named Maximilien Robespierre, the leaders of the French Revolution wanted to rid their culture and their country of any trace of God. And so, they took the famous cathedral Notre Dame and renamed it the Temple of Reason. They reordered and renamed all the months of the year. And they instituted a ten-day week—very mathematical, very orderly—nine days of work, one day for rest. What could go wrong?

It was a catastrophe. In France, during that time, every industry, all agriculture—it all decreased. You know what increased? Depression, murder, and suicide. The first that Napoleon Bonaparte changed when he took power was to go back to the Christian calendar and the seven-day week. Even Napoleon got it right.

The point is that this rhythm, this six-plus-one, seven-day pattern of work and rest, is woven into the tapestry of creation. It's what we're made for.

The next time that we see the Sabbath in the Bible, it's in the Book of Exodus. About one month after God has rescued His people out of slavery in Egypt---Egypt, a place where all they

knew was work—no rest---God leads His people into the wilderness. And He's provided everything that they need. He gives them food, He gives them water.

And in Exodus 16 Moses gives the people instructions for how they're supposed to gather and collect all that food. Moses tells them, "You have six days, and you can gather as much food as you need. But on the seventh day you are prohibited from gathering it. In fact, God's not even going to provide it on the seventh day." And then the most thing is what Moses says here: **"See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath."**

God hasn't even given laws to His people yet. But God gives them the Sabbath. He created rest. He rested. And then He gives us rest. It's a gift. It's a gift, it's for our good. It's a day of rest.

Why Should We Observe the Sabbath?

So, that's what the Sabbath is. Now why should we do it? What's the purpose of it? Why should we stop and rest?

And there are countless reasons, but let's just start with the most obvious one in the Bible. It's a really good reason. God tells us to. Or more precisely, God commands us to. In Exodus 20 God gives His people a set of laws. We call them the Ten Commandments. And the fourth commandment, the longest one in the entire Bible, is about the Sabbath.

Exodus 20, starting in verse 8: **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep 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 ... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."**

Isn't it amazing that God cares about His people so much, these people who are former slaves? All they knew in their former life was enslavement to this Pharaoh. And in that kingdom, they worked till they died. The people's lives were not their own. They were slaves to a tyrant.

And God comes to the rescue. And He doesn't just free them from slavery. Again, He cares about them, and He says, "I'm your king. And in my kingdom, there's still work to do. Good work is still good. But I order you, for your good, to rest."

The Sabbath is a day of rest. Our king commands it and it's for our good. Work for six days and the stop working for one.

Now when I talk to people about practicing a Sabbath—when I talk to Christians about practicing a Sabbath, I usually get a series of questions. And one of the most common ones is, “Well, isn’t that just an Old Testament thing?” Or “Wasn’t that just for Jewish people?” Or even I’ve heard, “Well, Jesus got rid of all the legalism stuff.”

And the question I like to ask in return is, “Why is this the only one of the Ten Commandments that we interpret that way? Why is this the only one of the Ten Commandments that we as Christians have kind of decided, *Oh, it doesn’t apply to us anymore.*” It’s our forgotten commandment.

Because just think about it this way. If I stood up here and told you, *You know what? All week I’ve been in the garage and I’ve been tinkering. I’ve been building idols out of wood or stone and I’m going to set them up and I’m going to worship them,* you would not tell me, *Hey, good for you. You’re done with all that legalism stuff.*

Or if I said, *Guys, I am struggling with stealing. I’m committing a lot of murder lately,* no one is saying, *Yeah, that’s Old Testament stuff.*

But what if I said, *I’m passionate about my work. I love my job and I’m striving to provide for my family and save for the future. I find my identity in what I do at work, and so I’ve gone forty days straight without taking a day off. For the past forty days I’ve been meeting with people, I’m counseling them, I’m always checking my e-mail, I’m picking up my phone anytime somebody calls, I’m visiting people in the hospital, I’m planning mission trips and events, and I’m preaching and I’m teaching. Forty days straight—no rest.*

Sadly, in many churches (but thankfully, not in this one) I would be rewarded for that. This is the only commandment that I might get a bonus for breaking. It’s the only one.

Now let’s be absolutely clear. Jesus does reframe the Ten Commandments. The law is fully realized in Christ. And it’s not our obedience to the law; it’s our relationship with Him that saves us.

But look at what Jesus says about the Sabbath. Mark 2: **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath.”** The Sabbath is made for mankind. Remember, it’s a gift before it’s a law. It’s not just a rule. It’s not just a ritual. It’s for our relationship.

And yes, Jesus does rebuke religious leaders who have become myopic and legalistic about practicing it. But nowhere does Jesus say to stop doing it. With every other law, Jesus says He is the fulfillment of the law. And He reveals the heart of the law, not just the letter of it.

But then He amplifies the law. So, Jesus says it's not just about murder; it's about anger. It's not just about adultery; it's about lust.

It's not just about a day off; it's about the state, the condition of your heart and of your soul. *Are you able to rest, not in what you do, but in what I have already done?*

Jesus never says, *Don't practice the Sabbath*. He emphasizes why we should. The King commands it. It's for our good, because the Sabbath helps us remember our relationship.

It's a holy day. It's set apart for no other purpose than to rest and remember our relationship with God. Sabbath is a day to stop and to remember that He has rescued you, He has saved you—not from slavery to a former king, but from sin and death; not because you worked for it, but because He did.

Practicing Sabbath requires us to surrender to our King. Because the truth is, if we only stop working when we feel like we're done with all our work, we will never work.

If we refuse rest until it's convenient, we will never rest until we die. And what Sabbath does is melt that artificial urgency that we put onto our lives. And it frees us from this need, this compulsion to feel finished.

Now please hear me. When I say “work,” I don't only mean a nine-to-five. Work is what you get paid to do. It's also not just what you get paid to do. Work is your job, but it's not only your job.

Work can be any of the things that we do in life, the things that we pour ourselves into, the things we place our identity in, the things we spend time and energy and worry on.

Even if you are out of work and you don't have job but you're searching and you're interviewing and you're applying and you're investing and you're practicing your skills, that's work. Or if you're a student, you're not getting paid for that, but that is work. Parents, so many of the things that we do for our kids—not the keeping them alive and feeding them—not the survival stuff—please keep doing that every day of the week---but many of those extra things that we do that we tack on to the calendar, those things turn into work really fast.

And let's be real---we are a culture that loves to work, especially in a church like this. We kind of enjoy that grind. We're so busy, even if we don't want to be, or even if we say we don't want to be. Yet we keep adding more and more.

And we are busying ourselves to death. We're burning ourselves out. We're slaves in this Egypt of our own busyness, and we're doing it to ourselves. Because we can work anywhere, so we work everywhere, all the time.

Remember when working from home was such a perk? What happened? We all kind of learned that this means that we're always on call. There are no boundaries. There is no work/life balance because you eat and sleep in your office. Your desk is literally in your bedroom.

This device [*pulls out a mobile phone*]---we all keep them in our pocket. It's this relentless tether to work. And it feels like this superhuman ability: we can check e-mail all the time, we can send that message instantly, we can read that new report, we can follow up on that lead, we can apply for the next job, we can study for our test. We can do more and more and more. It's in the palm of our hands. **But at what cost?**

And sure, you can turn it off at the dinner table or on the weekends or at church. But you'd be a lot more productive if you didn't. So, we just keep logging hours. We're always connected to work as long as the battery is charged.

And more than ever, Americans are describing these feelings of being exhausted and anxious and burned out and stressed and lonely and numb. And we're weary and we're depressed. You name it. Our hearts are restless.

And remember our quote from St. Augustine. Nothing in this life apart from God can satisfy our inmost desire, this longing for Him. But what do we do? Where do we often try to find a remedy for this restlessness? It's in our work. So, we just keep getting stuff done. We lead these lives of hurry and busyness, and the cycle just continues, and it spins out of control.

Without a Sabbath, we're so much more likely to forget who God is and who we are. And we convince ourselves that we are the ones who carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. And we start to believe that the outcome of the story depends on us.

But we are limited, little beings. And God can accomplish so much more than what we could ever imagine, and He can do it with or without us.

So, what if we learned to stop? What if we committed to one day of rest each week? And I'm talking about real rest. What if took a day to remember that God is King and He is on His throne and He is in control? And we can just be still and know that He is God ... and we are not.

Many of the women at Grace this summer in their Bible study are reading a book called *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. It's by a pastor named John Mark Comer. He's a great author. It about this idea of the unhurried life. And in another one of his books, he writes about the Sabbath. And forgive me, this quote is a little long, but it is so good. Comer writes:

“Sabbath is an expression of faith. Faith that there is a Creator and He’s good. We are His creation. This is His world. We live under His roof, drink His water, eat His food, breathe His oxygen. So on the Sabbath, we don’t just take a day off from work; we take a day off from toil. We give Him all our fear and anxiety and stress and worry. We let go. We stop ruling and subduing, and we just be. We remember our place in the universe, so that we never forget ... There is a God, and I’m not Him.”

Our King commands us to rest. It's for His glory. It's for our good. And Sabbath is not just a day off. It's a day that's saturated with purpose. It's a day for rest and to remember our truest, our ultimate relationship with our King.

How Do We Observe the Sabbath?

So, how do we do it? What do we do? What are we not supposed to do? What does the Sabbath look like? And here's what you do—the very first thing. Stop. Stop working. If you work Monday through Friday and you have weekends off, that's great. Make sure you stop. Practicing Sabbath is about infusing intentionality into your time off.

So here's what you do. You pick a day, one day, one twenty-four-hour period of time, and you put some boundaries around it. You put up some walls, and you refuse to work. The Jewish people's practice of Sabbath is from sundown to sundown, Friday to Saturday. So, maybe you do that. Or maybe you do evening to evening Saturday into Sunday. And if you do that, you can incorporate church and worship and being a part of this community into your Sabbath. That's great!

But for a lot of people, weekends are week-ENDS. Maybe your schedule isn't Monday through Friday. Maybe you work on weekends, or it changes.

Or parents: Saturday and Sunday—that's when your kids are home. You can't rest. When sports and practices are in full swing and you're just feeling like an Uber driver but you're not getting paid for it ...

And so, your day of rest, your Sabbath, does not have to be the weekend. Pick a different day. Just be sure to stop working.

I work on Sundays. And listen—I love my job, I love Grace, I love all of you. But this is still work. And so, my practice of Sabbath is from about 5:00 pm on Sunday to about 5:00 pm on Monday. And here's how—I try my best—to stop. I close my computer and put it in my bag. Sometimes I leave it in the car, especially if I'm feeling this desire like, *Ahh, I've still got stuff to get done*, I leave it away. Put your phone on Do Not Disturb. Or even better, turn it off. As best you can, put the past six days of work behind you. Put the upcoming six days of work ahead of you. And just be present in that moment. And you trust God with all the stuff that didn't get done or still need to be done. You trust Him with it. On the Sabbath, you stop.

And then, after you've stopped, you're free to rest. That's when you can rest. One of the most practical reasons to start a Sabbath at sundown is because you get to start with sleep. You get to go to sleep knowing that there is no work for you on the other side.

I've got a good friend whose favorite Sabbath practice is his Sabbath nap. He takes a nap every time he does a Sabbath. And he said, "Kevin, I used to feel so guilty about taking a nap. I used to feel so guilty because I had all this other stuff I could be doing." But he says, "Now I've got kids in school, and I put my head on that pillow, and I feel no guilt." Doesn't that sound nice? He is sanctifying his sleep. That's pretty cool.

A. A. Milne, the author of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, wrote: **"Don't underestimate the value of doing nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering."** Sabbath is made for man. Sabbath is made for woman. So enjoy it! Rest.

But you don't have to be asleep. You don't have to be sedentary to be resting. You can also do restful things, life-giving activities, healthy hobbies and pursuit. Those activities that take a backseat to all the busyness and worry of life---on the Sabbath, prioritize those things.

Use your Sabbath to do those things that you feel guilty about because you could be working instead. So, on my Sabbath, I like to go for a long run. I just go for a long run. I like to

spend time outdoors, I like to spend time in nature. In the evening I like to cook, try out a new recipe.

And those things, even though they're activities, even though I'm doing something, they refresh my spirit. They're good for my soul. They allow me to be more present and focused. And I get to remind myself that I'm not just what I do. There's more to me than that. In fact, it reminds me of my relationship with my King.

So, here's what you can do on your Sabbath—life-giving activities. So, play music. Or sit down and put on that vinyl record and listen to the A side and then get up and turn it over and listen to the B side. Go find all the ingredients for spaghetti carbonara or Pad Thai and learn to make it at home. Write just for the sake of writing. Read just for the enjoyment of it. Go for a long drive through the Texas hill country. Play basketball or tennis or go for a hike or ride your bike or go fly a kite. (I feel like Dr. Seuss.) If it's soul-resting, if it's life-giving, it is a worthwhile pursuit on your Sabbath.

So stop, then rest, and then, finally, remember. Remember the relationship for which you were created. Remember your Savior Jesus who is the Lord of the Sabbath.

It's fun getting to close out this series talking about this spiritual practice, because on the Sabbath you could include all those spiritual disciplines into that day. And so, you pray without an agenda. You just talk to God, or you listen to God throughout the day. Read Scripture and just remember who God is and what He's done for you. Listen to worship music. Let truth saturate your ears. Or sing out loud. You can do that as you're doing those restful activities. Maybe one of the most important things is you could do this in community, so with a roommate or with friends or with your small group or with your spouse or with your kids.

If you're single, create this pattern of Sabbath that roots your identity, that roots your singleness, in who Jesus is. And then find people to do that with. Parents, help your kids to practice a Sabbath. You want to be a hero as mom or a dad? Outlaw homework one day of the week. You're not allowed to do it. Make sure there are no scheduled practices. Or you know what? Skip them. Model this. Teach it. Help them to stop, rest, and remember that they are more than what they do. That is so important for kids, for young people, for all of us.

Spouses, if one of you works in the home and one of you works outside of the home, help each other to preserve the Sabbath. Find rhythms of rest, especially if you're living in the chaos that is life with children. Gently—I'm going to say that word again—very gently encourage your

spouse and ask them, “Does this really need to be worked on right now? Is this something that you have to work on right now?”

My wife Kate is really good at asking that question. “Hey, is this something that has to happen right now?” So, embolden your husband. Embolden your wife to let go of work and simply be.

There are two other practices that I like to do on my Sabbath to remember my relationship with Christ. I like to inaugurate my Sabbath day with two things. The first thing is I like to light two candles. And I light one candle as a reminder to rest. And it doesn’t always happen. It’s rest from work. And it’s rest for my soul, and I rest with God. And then I light the second candle to remember---to remember that there is a God and I am not Him. And I remember who Jesus is and what He’s done for me. And I just remember that I’m a son of the King.

And usually as I’m lighting those candles, or right after, I like to pray a Jewish Sabbath Prayer, or, at least, my version of it. It goes like this: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe. You have given me the Sabbath to rest and to remember.” And then I just spend some time in prayer. And I talk to God, and sometimes it’s just a moment. Sometimes it goes longer than that. But that’s how I initiate. That’s how I inaugurate. That’s how I step into my Sabbath day.

You know, so often we feel like we have to be doing something to worship God. We have to be singing, we have to be serving, we have to be doing. What if the greatest act of worship and surrender that you are called to every single week is just to stop working and to rest and to remember your relationship with Jesus?

I’m telling you, I love this spiritual practice. It has revolutionized my journey with Jesus. It’s changed my life here on earth. It’s called a spiritual practice—it takes practice. It takes some getting used to. It’s not always easy. But it’s a command from our King, and it’s for our good, for our souls.

I’ll close with this story. Once upon a time in the land of Oz there lived this woodcutter who fell in love with this woman, and he wanted to marry her. He wanted to provide a home for her. And so, the woodcutter set out to start building this home. He started chopping down trees, but it was hard work, and it was going slow. So, one day he was offered this enchanted axe that

was going to help him work twice as hard in half the amount of time. And so, he accepted this gift. And it quickly turned into a curse.

The next day as he was chopping down trees he was going faster and faster and the axe slipped, and he cut through his leg. But undeterred and in love, determined to finish this house, he limped off to his friend the tinsmith, who fashioned him a shiny new leg made out of metal.

The next day he's working, he's chopping and chopping, and slips again and slices off his other leg. He's not a very good woodcutter. But he does the same thing. He goes to his friend the tinsmith who replaces that leg. Back he goes into the forest with two shiny new legs.

Over the course of the next week the woodcutter felled half the forest. He's working at this feverish pace, and he had more accidents. First, he lost his left arm and then he lost his right arm. He even lost his head. But each time his friend the tinsmith was able to replace the wounded flesh with cold, hard metal.

Each day the woodcutter became less human. But he was more efficient than he ever was. The only thing that was still him was his torso.

Finally, the woodcutter just needed one more tree---just one. He was going to use it to make the doorway for his house, the one he was going to carry his bride over on their wedding day. So, he swings the axe, but it bounces and hits him right in the chest. So, he crawls to his friend one last time. And the tinsmith replaces his chest with metal.

The woodcutter now gleamed in the sunlight. He was more durable, more capable, more efficient, more productive than he had ever been. But now he had no heart. He forgot all about the house that he was building. He forgot all about why he was building it. He forgot all about who he was building it for. And so, he lost the love of his life. Because he was a man without a heart. The man had become a tin man.

Grace, let's not become tin men and tin women, people who work a lot but who love a little. Let's not forget our first love, the love that we were created for. And so, let's appreciate hard work for what it is, but let's learn to stop and learn and rest and remember that we are more than what we do. We are more than what we accomplish.

God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. So, take the gift that is the Sabbath and rest in Jesus.

Would you please pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we thank you for who you are. God, we thank you for loving us, for caring about us, for rescuing us from sin and death; and, God, for continuing to care about us, our souls. God, help us to rest in the truth, in the security, in the peace of knowing that we are Your children, that You love us as a Father. And it's not because of what we do for You; it's because of who we are in You.

God, help us to be men and women who would live lives that are not burdened with busyness, that aren't hurried. Help us to live lives of the Gospel, the good news that we have a King who came to earth, who died for us, so that we could have a relationship with Him. God, we pray this week, and in the weeks to come, that we would find rest; that we would rest in You. We pray these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.