

The Most Overlooked and Persistently Broken Commandment

Group Leader Podcast - Episode 6

Welcome back to the Group Leader Podcast. Hope you had a great 4th of July and were able to rest and enjoy it.

Speaking of rest, we're in the middle of summer, the time of year when most of us take our vacations. We take off a few days or a week, pack the car, stay home, or buy a plane ticket, and plan to relax.

Maybe you've already had yours or you're still looking forward to it.

When you imagine your vacation, you usually have visions of putting your feet up, maybe with a paperback novel, and just retreating from the normal busyness of life. No emails, no reports, no commute.

But if you're like me, your best intentions aren't quite enough. While you may have had plans to rest, instead you fill the day with activities, rush from one attraction to the next, and spend your free time swiping on your phone or binging Netflix.

All of a sudden it's the night before you leave to go home and you realize you experienced little to no rest at all. In fact, you feel a bit more tired than when you left.

Sound familiar?

Vacations are just one example of how many of us overlook and persistently break one of God's commandments: the commandment to Sabbath rest.

What is Sabbath?

What is Sabbath rest? The concept of Sabbath is one with which most people are familiar, even if only vaguely. That's because one of the ten commandments, the fourth, is, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8).

Before I knew what Sabbath meant, I thought of it as a "holy day," or the day where you went to church. But the biblical understanding of it is much deeper.

We first see the Sabbath in the opening pages of the Bible. After the initial six days of creating the heavens and the earth, animals and humans, the Bible tells us that God took the day off.

Genesis 2:2-3 says,

“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.”

There are several important things to note here. The first is that God established a weekly rhythm of work and rest. Regardless of whether you think the “days” of creation of literal or figurative, God clearly set aside one of those periods of time to rest from work, and those periods are referred to as days.

One of those days is to be set aside for rest. Because of some New Testament passages that we don’t have time to go through, we understand the Sabbath to be one day of the week, but it doesn’t matter which one. For most people Sunday works well, but for me it’s on Fridays since that’s my full day off.

Second, God blessed this day of rest and made it holy, or set apart. God spent six days working and chose to set apart the seventh as a day to reflect back on the work he had done and enjoy what He had created.

And third, this narrative makes you wonder what’s going on. Why did an all-powerful God who spoke creation into existence out of nothing need to take a day of rest. Did He really need to?

Well, no, He didn’t need to, which means He *chose* to. From the beginning, then, Sabbath rest has been a choice. Something we enter into of our own free will.

What God was really doing here was modeling something He wanted us to do.

This is what you see when you read the fourth commandment mentioned earlier in its full context. Here it is:

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ 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.” (Ex. 20:8-11 ESV)

As a reminder, the narrator there was God himself. So God is giving us more insight into what He means by Sabbath rest.

The first thing He tell us to do is to “remember” it, or observe it. That’s the direct command that most of us overlook and persistently break, which will become clearer to you as we keep going through this.

Second, God tells us we have six days to work, just like He did (v. 11), but the seventh day we are to set aside to enter into Sabbath rest “to the Lord.” We are not the focus of our Sabbath day, though there’s nothing wrong with enjoying it. God is. And that means when we follow the rhythm of work and rest that God has established we’re actually honoring Him in the process.

Lastly, we see a new dimension to the Sabbath, that we are to consider other people’s work as well. True Sabbath rest means we relieve others around us of the burden of work as much as possible, and allow them to enter into rest as well.

If you remember the timeline we just traced, you’ll notice that God’s example of working six days and resting on the seventh came before the Fall of Genesis chapter 3, where sin entered the world. So Sabbath is something we were created for and are called to as part of our design, not just as a way of living in a sinful world.

We were created in God’s image, and the rhythm of work and rest that He established for us is part of our nature, not just helpful advice.

So what is Sabbath?

It’s, “real rest, in harmony with with one another, our Creator, and all of creation.”¹ It’s a day, “To delight in the life you’ve carved out in partnership with God, to delight in the world around you, and to delight in God himself. Sabbath is a day to pull up a chair, sink into it, look back over the work of the last six days, and just enjoy.”²

Can you remember the last time you felt like that?

Odds are you can’t. When I first started thinking about the Sabbath I realized I had never really entered into the kind of rhythm we just talked about - the kind of rhythm God wanted for me.

I started to realize that it was leaving me to operate out of a deficit with my wife, children, coworkers, and you guys. And I came to see that God has a better way for me to live so that I could start to operate out of abundance instead of a deficit.

Before we get to some practical ways we can live out the Sabbath in our lives, I want to take a few minutes to look at why we often overlook the command to rest.

¹ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 92

² John Mark Comer, *Garden-City*, p. 186

Why we overlook the Sabbath

I'm going to be drawing pretty heavily from a recent book by Andy Crouch called *The Tech-Wise Family* (which is a fantastic book) to walk through this.

Human beings are designed to function and thrive according to a rhythm of work and rest.

Work was around before sin entered the world, and work is what God told Adam and Eve to do when he commissioned them to cultivate the earth and make something of it (see Gen. 1:28).

“Work is the fruitful transformation of the world through human effort and skill, in ways that serve our shared human needs and give glory to God.”³ Work involves many things including wisdom, physical and cognitive skills, cooperation with our fellow workers, and even courage, since we work in a fallen world full of risk and effort.

On the other hand, rest, as I mentioned earlier, is a time where we enjoy the fruits of our labors and cultivate gratitude for the good *things* of creation and the good *God* of creation.

Work and rest are meant to provide the pattern for weekly life as a human. We see this in a different way on a daily basis with our need for sleep. As a father of three kids ages 5, 3, and 1, I can attest to the importance of that rest for living a flourishing life.

That beautiful rhythm of work and rest, where each one fuels the other, is not one most of us experience though.

“Instead of work and rest,” Andy Crouch suggests, “we have ended up with toil and leisure - and neither one is an improvement.”⁴

Crouch describes toil as a poorer, lesser version of work characterized by fruitless labor - the kind that leaves us exhausted, with nothing valuable to show for our effort.⁵ Toil demands more and more from you while producing less and less of anything with lasting value.⁶

If you're like me, you know exactly what he's talking about.

Crouch goes on to say, “If toil is fruitless labor, you could think of leisure as fruitless escape from labor. It's a kind of rest that doesn't really restore our souls, doesn't restore our relationships with others or God. And crucially, it is the kind of rest that doesn't give others the

³ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 83

⁴ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 84

⁵ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 85

⁶ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 87

chance to rest. Leisure is purchased from other people who have to work to provide us our experiences of entertainment or rejuvenation.⁷

Instead of work and rest we have settled for toil and leisure.

You've probably sensed this in your own life. I know I have. It's not uncommon for me to get to the end of the day and feel completely exhausted, not physically, but emotionally and mentally. If I spend too much time staring at a computer, scrolling through Twitter, or drowning in the never-ending stream of breaking news I feel completely drained.

When we feel like that, what do we do next? Well, we're tired and feel like vegging, so we flop on the couch and turn on Netflix to zone out for an hour or two...or three.

At some point we overcome the inertia of letting the next episode autoplay and we turn it off and collapse into bed for the night. But when we do there's often this nagging feeling (and often guilty sensation) of having spent our time in vain.

So why do we do it? Why do we continually settle for toil and leisure instead of the work and rest we were made for?

Because we don't really trust God.

Think about it. Why would God ask His people to completely opt out of an entire day of producing and creating? Why would God ask us to spend an entire 24-hour day enjoying what we've accomplished and giving thanks for what He has given us?

It's because God knows our hearts. Our deepest desire as sinful humans is to be our own gods. This was the lie Adam and Eve believed in the garden, that they could know everything just like God and determine for themselves what was best for their lives.

We believe that same lie today when we tell ourselves we have to answer emails every day of the week, we have to always be available, and we have to always be efficient and effective. We want to control others' perceptions of us - we want to be the highest producer, number one in sales, most admired on social media - because the affirmation of others feeds our lie that we're in control of our lives.

Or many times our own sense of self-worth is tied to how much we feel we've accomplished. If that's you, you probably find it hard to be happy if you're not busy, hard to feel good about yourself unless you're checking things off your list.

⁷ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, p. 87

Do you see what's going on? We fail to take one day a week to rest because we don't really trust God to provide for us the other six days. We don't think He'll actually help us get everything done or provide us with a sense of satisfaction and meaning.

We don't trust that He knows what's best.

So we overlook the need and desire to rest. We keep letting work spill over into the weekend, keep answering the phone at the dinner table, keep going, going, going.

And we know we're doing it. This is why so many people have resigned themselves to a work for the weekend and save for the vacation and early retirement mentality. It's the only way we can cope with the way we're overworking.

So what we do about it? If we're tired of feeling burned out, how can we find rest?

How to start a Sabbath rhythm in your life

Well, several things, but before I go through those things I need to make a disclaimer here. Sabbath rest, like anything in the Christian life, should not go the way of legalism, where we put a burden on top of the salvation Christ offers through grace alone in faith alone.

So what I'm going to go through are certainly not commandments. Instead, think of them as suggestions; helpful advice from a fellow Sabbath breaker.

Two years ago I was a father of two young kids, a full time pastor at Meck, and part-time seminary student on nights and weekends. Monday through Thursday was for work. Friday was for schoolwork. Saturday morning was for the family. Saturday night it was back to work, then again on Sunday morning, and the whole thing started over again.

Noticeably absent from that routine was time with my wife and kids, and time to rest.

One night I collapsed on my bed to read a bit before bed and I read about one man's modern day version of Sabbath with his family - and it took my breath away. I had never experienced anything like it, and I desperately wanted it for my life and my family's life.

Here's what I read:

[On Friday,] we gear up, shop, plan, clean, finish up — like we're getting ready for a holiday. It's like having Christmas once a week. The last few hours of Friday afternoon are always a bit stressful but mixed with a lot of anticipation.

Right before Sabbath starts, I walk through my pre-Sabbath ritual. I go into my home office, clear off my desk, put away my to-do list, power down my computer, turn off my phone, and put it all in the closet.

Then twenty minutes before sunset, we all circle up in the living room as a family. We follow a few ancient Sabbath traditions: [my wife] and the kids light the candles of Sabbath...We read a psalm and then say a prayer to invite the Spirit of Jesus to take us into a posture of rest and worship.

Then we eat. A lot. Dinner was made earlier in the day, so all we have to do is set it on the table and dig in. We take our time. Talk about the highlight of the week. Have friends or family over. Have seconds. Dessert. It's so good...

Then after dinner we relax. Read. Sit by the fire in the winter. Go for a walk in the summer. Before I put the kids to bed, I read to them from the Scriptures. [My wife] and I usually spend some...quality time together and go to bed early. We call it reverse sleeping in.

My body is in a rhythm now, so by nine p.m. on Friday night, I'm making my way toward bed. There's no TV or anything digital, so the house is quiet and at peace. I am quiet and at peace.

Saturday morning I wake up — whenever I want. I'm not a morning person, so it's usually not that early. I just let my body wake up when it wants to. But after going to bed so early, I feel like a new man.

After I greet my family, I make coffee...and go into my study to read. I start in the Psalms, then Jesus in the Gospels, then the Old Testament, then the New Testament. I take my time. I'm not in a rush. I think, pray, listen.

...When I'm done, I get my three kids on the couch. We drink hot cocoa and read some more from the Scriptures. Then we say a prayer, asking God's grace over the day. I used to do some light exercise but not anymore. I just rest.

After a shower we put on some nice threads and walk to brunch or donuts at Blue Star down the street. We order whatever we want. We eat our way through the Sabbath, and when it comes to diet, anything goes.

After brunch we come home. The kids go down for a nap. [My wife] usually goes on a bike ride to get coffee with a friend. I take a few hours to get my introvert on. I read and journal and think about the week behind me and the week ahead of me. Usually, most of my afternoon is spent on the couch with a novel.

Later, I play Legos with the kids or walk them down to the park or whatever sounds life-giving at the time. Then as the day winds down, we go on what my son...calls "a praying walk." We just saunter around the neighborhood and thank God for the last twenty-four hours of peace.

By the time I'm walking back up the stairs to our house, I'm already looking forward to the next Sabbath. And every week, as the day unfolds, something strange and mystic happens. Right around nine or ten in the morning, *I get my soul back*.⁸

It took two years, but wife and I have finally gotten ourselves in a similar rhythm. We're not perfect. We spend some time in leisure instead of rest, and still give way to toil, but more often than not we're rested come Saturday morning.

I want to share what it took to get us there in hopes that it'll inspire you to find your own version of Sabbath rest.

Convincing

The first step in getting us in a rhythm of rest was convincing - first myself, and then my wife - that we needed it and were commanded to do it. I followed much the same logic as what I covered earlier in my own mind, then shared it with my wife.

If you've got a family, you've got to spend time here. Make sure they know what a Sabbath is and why it's important to your family. Otherwise you run the risk of resentment if they don't get what's going on. You'll find your family wants to keep going as much as you do, so it's not always easy to get them to rest, just like it's not easy to get ourselves to.

Once I had my family on board, we moved on to the second step: planning.

Planning

You can't experience rest without planning for it. To get everything you normally do in seven days done in six is difficult, and, honestly, overwhelming at first. But my guess is you'll find what we did - that many of the activities and tasks you're doing throughout the week are either unnecessary or can be done at other times.

I used to mow the yard on Fridays - not anymore. That's my Sabbath day, so now I do it on Saturday. Grocery shopping as a family on Fridays got moved to mom doing it with the three kids on her own Thursday afternoons. (See, told you it would take some convincing.)

⁸ John Mark Comer, *Garden-City*, p. 231-232

Did either of us like moving those two tasks or the many others that we usually did on Fridays? No, of course not. But we knew, and have since found, that it's the better decision. You can work a little bit harder each day when you know there's a full day's rest ahead of you.

Planning naturally involves looking at your schedule. You'll want to look for tasks you need to move, appointments you can reschedule, and ways to make everything fit together. This is painstaking, but so, so worth it.

As you're looking through your schedule and requests start to come in from friends or family to go do something on your Sabbath day, you'll find yourself dealing with the third step: saying no.

Saying no

As Christ followers, we have to say no to some good things so we can say yes to the best things. Sabbath is no different.

You'll think of a theme park you want to take the family to, a relative will want to meet you somewhere, a friend will want you to do something with them. But if you're going to find rest, you're going to have to say no.

Not to everything, and not to everyone. We've decided that we're happy to spend that time with friends or family, but we will only do that if the time can be spent in rest. Since we've got little kids, that usually means having people over to our house, going to a park, or sharing a meal.

But people aren't the only thing we have to say no to.

Almost no technology

These days the hardest thing to say no to isn't a person, it's our devices - our always-on technology that bings and buzzes and beckons our attention away from what or who is in front of us.

For me personally this was one of the hardest things about the whole process. I love technology, and Fridays were when I usually had some time to use it. But I continually found myself wasting my time on surfing the internet or checking Twitter, knowing I had spent the time in vain.

Our devices inherently pull us out of the embodied, physical world around us. They allow us to do so many wonderful things and connect with so many people, but no matter how good our technology is it can never produce the life-giving rest God designed us to experience.

Our smartphones and tablets and Amazon Echoes and the like are sold to us under the guise of making everything easier and freeing you up to work less, but do we really believe that at this

point? They're selling us work and rest, but what we're getting is toil and leisure. That's for another episode though...

What we normally do is leave the phones in a cabinet so they're out of sight. The ringer is on so we will get phone calls from family or friends if needed, but no one really uses their phones to make calls anymore so it's pretty quiet. If we leave the house we'll bring a phone with us to take pictures of the kids or to have it for emergencies, but we're not on it.

The kids don't watch any TV or spend any time on devices. My wife and I leave the phones put up and the computers away during the kids' nap. Sometimes we'll watch a movie at night once the kids are down, but most often we just spend the time talking or reading.

It's tough to make that commitment, but it's so refreshing to remember that there's a world all around us full of wonder and beauty if we just stop to pay attention.

Worshiping

If all we do is stop doing everything, we haven't really observed the Sabbath the way God intended. In the fourth commandment God explicitly states that we are to remember the Sabbath day "to the Lord." The Sabbath day is something designed to benefit us, yes, but more importantly it's designed to bring God glory. And the way we bring God glory is by worshiping Him.

This is a longer conversation than we have time for, but suffice it to say worship can be done in lots of ways. Worship is not just the handful of songs before a weekend message. Work can be worship. Parenting can be worship. Gardening can be worship. Painting, walks in the woods, all of these things can be worship.

That's because worship is less about what we do and more about who we do it for. Worship is when we turn our hearts, minds, and attention to God, reveling in His character and the salvation He offers us through Christ.

So on a Sabbath day, spend time doing something that stirs your soul. Something that causes you to slow down, look up, and remember the God who made you and is giving you breath right this very minute.

Read the Bible. If you already read it each day, read it longer. Take a long walk in the morning or at night. Bake those cookies you love and savor the smell. Invite the friends over that fill your heart with joy.

Find something that turns your heart towards the Lord and just enjoy it.

Trusting

The last, and most important, step you have to take is trusting God. I say the tech thing was hard for me, but really this was the hardest. And I'm sure it will be for you too.

To find a life-giving rhythm of work and rest you have to come to a place where you trust God. You have to trust Him with your schedule, your family, your rest, and, yes, even your productivity.

And that's really what God is after - your trust and your worship.

Most of us think money is the hardest thing for people to trust God with. I think it's time. We know we're finite creatures who will get to the end of our lives before we know it. And one day of every week our God asks us to trust Him with the most important commodity any of us has - time.

If you can trust God with your time, you can trust with anything.

Conclusion

So, are you willing to cultivate a Sabbath in your weekly schedule? Are you ready to do the hard work to get there so you can enjoy the rest you were made for?

I'm recording this on a Thursday. That means tonight when I get home my Sabbath officially starts. I'll walk in the door, hug my kids, then say, "Guys, guess what tomorrow is?!"

Then for a minute or two I'll watch the kids scream and run around the house in excitement as they shout, "Sabbath!!!"

I pray that you find the same joy from establishing a rhythm of work and rest in your life.

Email me if you have any questions, but you won't hear from me until Saturday.

Take care.