

“*SABBATH ECONOMICS*”

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Genesis 2:1-3; Leviticus 25; Luke 6:5; Hebrews 4:9-11a

The story is told of a European explorer who was determined to make his destination across rivers, hills, and undergrowth in short order. He drove his porters day after day, dawn till dusk, until one morning his porters simply refused to move on. Despite his spirited remonstrations, they sat anchored by the baggage. Annoyed, he turned to the chief porter, asking him what the matter with these people was. The porter replied, “They are stopping here till their souls catch up with their bodies.”

I don’t know if the story is true but we can relate to its lesson. Swept up in the frantic, hectic, chaotic current of our society to do more, be more, get more, achieve more, we awaken one day to the realization that our souls have been left somewhere back along the way. Our core values, our cherished relationships, our peace of mind, our appreciation of wonder and beauty and God, left behind. Our souls need time to catch up with our bodies.

Long ago, God understood this need and made provision for it; a provision that I’m sure we’ve all heard about from our religious training, but I’m not so sure we really understand the critical nature of, to our lives and health. I’m talking about the concept of *Sabbath*.

Sabbath is more than the name of a day of the week. It is a concept woven deep into the fabric of God’s order of life.

We find it at the heart of the Bible’s Creation narrative. “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

Now not only do we find Sabbath front and center in the Bible’s Creation narrative, it is at the heart of the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy (that is, separate from all the rest). Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.”¹

Sabbath rest is at the heart of the Creation of God and the Law of God, and also woven deeply into God’s ethics of civic rule and rhythmic seasons of life.

In Leviticus 25, you find not only a Sabbath day, but a Sabbath year, each seventh year, when the ground gets a rest from cultivation, when those who have sold themselves as slaves or indentured servants are freed, when the poor and all God’s creatures can gather and eat freely from the volunteer produce of the fallow land. And there is the Sabbath of Sabbath years, after seven, seven year cycles: the fiftieth year, known as the *Jubilee* (taken from the Hebrew *Yobel*: the *rams horn* blown to proclaim the festival’s beginning), when all land sold out from under a family was to be returned to that family, when slaves were to be emancipated, when all debts were forgiven, when the playing field was set even again and all God’s children got a fresh start.

The Sabbath concept is woven into the **Creation**, into the **Laws of God**, and into the civil and seasonal fabric of Hebrew society and something else: It is at the heart and soul of Jesus Christ’s mission to this world.

¹ Exodus 20:8-11

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."

Every Jew would have understood what Jesus was talking about: the *year of the Lord's favor*, the year of freedom and release and emancipation, was the Jubilee! And here Jesus sets it as the core of his mission, message and motive.

"Come to me all who are weary and oppressed," he preached, "and I will give you rest." What is that but the invitation to Sabbath rest?

"The Son of Man," he said, "is Lord of the Sabbath."

Here's something yet more to consider: It's not just the children of God, according to the Bible, that God wills to send Sabbath rest:

"For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to drudgery, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."²

Here's the point I'm working up to: God thinks this idea of Sabbath is so important, He **built it** into Creation, **commanded it** in the Law, **sent Jesus** to proclaim it, and paid with a Cross to procure it for all God's creatures. And if the whole idea of Sabbath rest is so important to God, and so central to God's counsel for our wellbeing, then perhaps we ought we to take it more seriously than we do in our frantic day and age.

"So there remains a **Sabbath rest** for the people of God," said the writer to the Hebrews. "For the one who has entered God's rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest . . ."³

That's what it takes to enter into God's Sabbath rest: diligence, discipline; and all the more in our present culture and day when so many forces around us conspire to steal our Sabbath away.

I must admit to you, and Debbie will confirm, that this is a hard discipline for me to keep on my day of rest. The cellphone rings, the e-mail comes, and I'm back at work again. As if God's world might quit spinning, as if God's cause might suffer, if I should take that one day away from my labors. You too?

I tell you, it is the Devil in our culture that wants to steal this blessing away from us: The Devil in our work schedules, our children's schedules, even in our frantic recreation schedules that conspires to steal away one of God's most important gifts: the gift of Sabbath rest.

Alright, so we know the Bible says, we "ought" to do it. But why ought we to do it?

This first of all: It's time to *recharge*.

Think of yourself—your physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual energy system—like a checking account. When you keep writing checks on your account, what do you eventually have to do? You have to put something back in. Otherwise you end up with an overdraft. God says we need a day a week when we cease writing checks on our energy account and take time to put in a deposit. Now we can get away with overdrafts for a while: but sooner or later payback comes in the form of exhaustion or injury or illness. I learned something about this back in high school before I had any religion.

² Romans 8:19-23

³ Hebrews 4:9-11a

I learned it, as I learned so many of life's lessons, in sports. In those days, at least in Illinois, there was an athletic rule that an athlete could not work out on Sunday. If a coach was caught working with an athlete on Sunday, they could both be disqualified for the season. Well, twice in the eight years of my diving career, I and my coach broke the rules and met to work on on a Sunday. Both times, I was injured that day. I figured out after those two incidents that I needed the one day off a week to perform my best.

We think we get ahead when we put in another day and we think we lose ground when we take the day off from our pursuits. But is it true? Could it be that our overall effectiveness is more diminished when we skip the Sabbath than when we take it?

Years ago, I read and filed away the story of one of the greatest tractor manufacturers in this country's history, a guy named R.G. Le Tourneau. During World War II, Le Tourneau and his company were commissioned by the US government to design and build a huge, very complex, earthmoving machine for the military. A time limit was put on its production. He got his experts together. They had invented many huge tractors but nothing of the size and complexity now ordered.

They held meeting after meeting but could not solve a number of design problems. So Le Tourneau called a meeting in New York City of all his manufacturing designers and engineers. They met all day Friday, all day Saturday until late Saturday night. Then one of them said, "Well, boys, it's getting late, we'll have to knock off till first thing in the morning."

"Not me," said Le Tourneau. "Sunday is my Sabbath; the day when I rest and go to church."

"But the design is due by Monday morning," they reminded him. "Well you fellows can stay here and fool around with this problem if you want to, but I go to church on Sunday and I advise you to do the same. I'm going to put this problem on the back burner of my mind and let it simmer there while I take a day with God."

So he went to church. All of the sudden, during the service, clear and distinct and in perfect outline, the solution suddenly came to his mind. He grabbed one of the church bulletins and quickly drew a rough picture of the design. As soon as the worship service was over, he rushed back to the hotel where his associates were working and said, "Here is the solution to your problem."⁴

How many times something similar has happened to me: that it was while I was resting my mind, while stopping the pace, while worshipping God, that some of God's best ideas came through to me. A Sabbath does that: it sets apart a time to recharge our energy, our creativity, to retune our creative headset.

Here's something else Sabbath does: Not only to *recharge* us, it is time apart to *refocus* on what is really important and who is really the source of all wisdom and life and resources. It's easy to fall into the mindset that if we don't stay at it, the world, or some small part of it will cave in. And so we end up taking more and more of the world on our shoulders as if the world depended on our untiring efforts, as if our business depended on our untiring efforts, as if the church depended on our untiring efforts, as if our success or prosperity depended on our untiring efforts.

Recently, I saw a poster in someone's office that read: "If you haven't got an ulcer, you're not carrying your share of the load."

In New York City, in front of the Rockefeller Center in New York City is a huge sculpture of Atlas straining under the weight of the world. You've probably seen it at the beginning of NBC News. Across the street, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, is a stained glass image of Jesus holding the world in his hand.

⁴ A story told by Norman Vincent Peale of one of the congregants of his church.

Sabbath is a day to remember who holds the world, a day to remember whose we are, and whose world this is, and whose business we do, and whose resources we manage.

It's the lesson we remember when we set aside a day to stop and listen and worship: "He's got the whole world in his hands." A time of recharge. A time to refocus. And finally: A time to *reset* the playing field.

Years ago, I used to play a number of popular video games. I found that I became so obsessed with them that I quit, except for maybe the one on my cell phone. Here's the thing about video games. When you screw up, you can push a button and reset the game. You get to start fresh with all your lives or all your turns. The Sabbath Day, one day a week, the Sabbath year, one year in seven, and the Sabbath of Sabbath years, the Jubilee accomplishes just that similar thing in God's economy. It is a time **when all debts** are forgiven, **when all sins** are commuted, **when everyone** who has gotten bemired in debt along the way, gets a fresh start. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," at the heart of the Lord's prayer we pray every Sunday, is a Sabbath prayer! We come here to clear the slate of all our debts and when we in turn forgive all the debts owed us.

"So there remains a **Sabbath rest** for the people of God." Do you need to enter into that rest more fully this morning? In your time use? In your financial priorities? In your core values? "Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest..." Such Sabbath rest isn't something we just aimlessly wander into; particularly in this hectic day and age.

Starting next week, we are bringing a study series to our church entitled "Sabbath Economics." The whole point of this series is to help us make progress in this discipline; help us see how to weave the concept Sabbath into all our lives: our businesses, our investments, our families, our habits, in practical ways.

You might think that with a title like "Sabbath Economics," this is just about money. Perhaps it may help us to get a broader meaning of that word "economics." "Eco" comes from the Greek *Oiko* which means household. The second half of the word also comes from Greek *Nomos*, which means manager or steward. *Economics*, in its most fundamental meaning, is the *management of the household*. Of whose household? Of God's household. Of God's world, of God's Creatures, of God's children, of God's Church, of God's affairs in our own lives and families. Sabbath Economics is about bringing the rule of peace and rest and faith into all our management of God's affairs, in that part of God's household over which God has granted us stewardship.

Are you interested in getting more of Sabbath into all your affairs? Then this class is for you during the second worship hour. If you can't make this class fit your Sunday morning schedule, it will be offered again Wednesday nights next fall.

Let's pray.

O God, in restless living we lose our spirit's peace.
Calm our unwise confusion, bid thou our clamor cease.
Let anxious hearts grow quiet, like pools at evening still,
till thy reflected heavens all our spirits fill.

Teach us, beyond our striving, the rich rewards of rest.
Who does not live serenely is never deeply bless'd.
O tranquil, radiant Sunlight, bring thou our lives to flow'r,
less wearied with our effort, more trusting of Your pow'r.

We grow not wise by struggling, we gain but things by strain.
We cease to water gardens, when comes thy plenteous rain.

O, beautify our spirits in restfulness from strife,
enrich our souls in secret with abundant life.