

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:  
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES  
(3) DISCIPLINE OF REST**

Matthew 11:28-30

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February 21, 2010

**PROLOGUE**

Adams was a committed Christian. His boss wanted him to work every Sunday. To make matters worse his boss tried to use Scripture to justify it. "Doesn't your Bible say that if your ox falls into a ditch on the Sabbath, you may pull him out?" "Yes," replied Adams, "but if the ox fell into the same ditch every Sabbath, I would either fill up the pit or sell the ox!"

**SCRIPTURE**

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. {29} Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. {30} For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV).

**THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

The Bible tells us to "live as free people" (1 Pet 2:16 NRSV). In order to do this we need to be like Jesus. The process of learning to become like Jesus is called discipleship or spiritual formation. It requires that we pay attention to what God is doing in our lives.

Attention requires discipline. Spiritual disciplines are time-honored practices that help us pay attention and free us to embrace all of life as an act of faith.

Jesus gave priority to the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. Other disciplines are implied or expressed, but these three are essential.

Most people who teach on spiritual disciplines agree that Scripture and prayer are necessary. There is less agreement, however, on Sabbath-keeping. I suspect that those who say Sabbath-keeping is not necessary may be doing so as a reaction to a legalistic view of the Sabbath. Spiritual disciplines are supposed to "free" us but Sabbath-keeping sounds like an oppressive obligation.

I would argue that Sabbath-keeping *is* necessary, not only because it is one of the Ten Commandments, but because it keeps our spirituality from being an isolated and private exercise disconnected from the community of faith and the world. Sabbath-keeping can help us to live as free people if we view the Sabbath like Jesus viewed the Sabbath and

practice it as the discipline of rest.

Scripture and prayer were not isolated components in the life of Jesus. They were integrally related to the everyday fabric of his life and ministry. This was especially so in his disciplined practice of observing the Sabbath. Luke tells us:

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom (Lk 4:16).

The Sabbath was intended to make clear on one day what is true on any day, that is, God is in charge and can be completely trusted. Jesus rescued the Sabbath from the false notion of a burden and elevated it to the status of gift. It is an expression of God's grace whereby we are renewed as persons made in his image and we rest in his love.

## **THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

### **(3) DISCIPLINE OF REST:**

The discipline of rest is not only based on the command of God but also on human need. God knows what we need and what is necessary for our well being. After all, God is the one who created us in the first place. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing (C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*).

We need God, which means we need to spend time with God. The Fourth Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day," is God's gift to us to help meet our greatest need.

### **1. SINS AGAINST TIME**

Sabbath-keeping or the discipline of rest is about time. It takes time to love God. It takes time to love others. Eugene Peterson makes this observation:

"The incredible shoddiness in personal relationships that characterizes our culture is, more than anything else, a consequence of sins against time. For intimacy requires time. Affection requires time. Without time, neither the best of intentions nor the highest standard of living penetrates the human relationships by which we realize our dignity and our worth. And the outrageous adolescence in religion that is the scandal of our churches is, more

than anything else, a consequence of sins against time. For maturity requires time. Worship requires time” (Eugene Peterson, *Leadership Magazine*).

The neglect of worship makes us spiritually weak just as the neglect of food makes us physically weak. Missing a few meals or missing a few Sundays will not have much of an effect but a prolonged abstention from either is serious.

I realize I am preaching to the wrong crowd with this message. After all, you are in attendance at worship - and I praise God for that! But people in general, even many church people, give worship a low priority in their lives, letting almost anything else get in the way. Perhaps you heard about the golfer named Jones who was twenty minutes late at the first tee one Sunday morning, and the other three members of the regular four-some were almost ready to start without him. "I agreed with my wife," explained Jones, "that this Sunday I'd toss a coin to see whether I played golf or went to church. Heads, I played golf. Tails, I went to church. And you know fellas, I had to toss that coin forty-three times before it came up heads."

In Jesus' day, the religious party known as the Pharisees had hundreds of rules regarding the Sabbath. No one was supposed to work on the Sabbath. But in addition to ordinary employment, they defined other kinds of work in the most extraordinary ways: carrying a burden, writing letters and healing were some of the things that were forbidden. So they spent endless hours arguing whether a person could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a terrible sin if he went out with a needle in his garment, whether a woman might wear a wig, or if a man could go out with artificial teeth, or even if a father could lift his child on the Sabbath Day.

Jesus dismissed all these extra rules. He and his disciples walked on the Sabbath, picked heads of grain on the Sabbath and Jesus even healed people on the Sabbath, which really angered the Pharisees. When challenged about this Jesus said to them:

"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”(Mark 2:27-28 NRSV).

In other words, it was meant as a gift to be enjoyed, not a burden to oppress.

The Church has not been exempt from this tendency to turn the Sabbath into an oppressive experience. From time-to-time in history we have added extensive rules concerning what we can and cannot do on Sunday. By the way, is Sunday the Sabbath?

The word Sabbath means “to cease.” The idea was that for one day in seven you would cease from your labors. After awhile the word came to mean “seventh” and so only the

seventh day was regarded as the Sabbath. In our culture that would be Saturday.

But Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week, or what we call Sunday. It became known as the Lord's Day even before the New Testament was completed (Revelation 1:10). Very early in the life of the church the Lord's Day was accepted as the fulfillment of the meaning of the Sabbath. However, there are groups today, such as Seventh Day Adventists, who specify Saturday as the Sabbath. But If I understand the Apostle Paul correctly (Rom 14:5-6), it does not matter which day we set aside provided there is a day.

When it comes to the Sabbath there are two extremes to avoid. On the one hand, the complete neglect of worship. On the other hand, a legalistic and morbid interpretation of the Sabbath. But even if we avoid these extremes, it does not necessarily mean we are keeping the Sabbath.

We practice the discipline of rest whenever we enjoy being in the presence of God. One of the ways to enjoy God is by thanking him for what he has done for us. The Ten Commandments were not intended to be a way to earn God's favor but a way for God's people to appreciate their redemption. The Sabbath is a way to delight in what God has done for you. Coming to church is not about getting something out of the service, it is about giving something back, giving thanks back to the One who redeemed you. Are you here today to delight in what God has done for you?

## 2. REST AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

It is vital that we remember the Sabbath. But does this mean that we should have laws that enforce it? Such things are part of our history and are known as "blue laws."<sup>1</sup> The first blue law in America was enacted in the early 1600s and required church attendance.

But legislation is not the answer. Forcing people to worship gains nothing. Worship must come from the heart.

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<sup>1</sup>The origin of the term is uncertain. It has been said variously to have originated in the color of the paper on which a code of laws for the early New Haven, Connecticut, colony was printed or to have derived from the concept of being "true blue" to the law. Whatever the origin, these measures, which are based on the biblical injunction against working on the Sabbath, have been traced back to fourth-century Rome, when Constantine I, commanded all citizens, except farmers, to rest on Sunday. The first blue law in America was enacted in the Virginia colony in the early 1600s and required church attendance. About three-fourths of the states still carry on their books laws imposing some kind of Sunday restriction on such activities as retail sales, general labor, liquor sales, boxing, hunting, or barbering, as well as polo, cockfighting, or clam digging.

Nevertheless, Sabbath-keeping does speak to our times. For it assumes that human beings need rest and thus it is the most fundamental of all labor laws. In the second listing of the Ten Commandments, which is found in Deuteronomy 5, God reminds his people that formerly they had been slaves in Egypt working seven days a week but now that they were his people that would change. No one was to work seven days a week, not a free citizen, not a servant, not employees, not immigrant workers, no one.

From the point of view of productivity, making people work seven days a week is not smart. Study after study has shown that people who are given time off consistently out-produce those who do not take time off over intermediate and long-term situations.

But this is not a productivity issue. Rest is a social justice issue. People are not things to use up and discard. The denial of rest is de-humanizing, de-moralizing and just plain wrong. Whenever and however we treat people as less-than-human, we have entered into a great and shadowy malevolence.

Humans need rest. And creation needs rest. Animals are mentioned in the Exodus listing of the Sabbath and more explicitly in the Deuteronomy listing. Elsewhere we read of giving the land rest. God gave us a good earth. We are caretakers of the earth. In Genesis we are told that human beings are to tend and keep the earth (Gen 2:15). The word “keep” is a translation of a Hebrew term that means to guard something in order to protect it from harm. In other words, we are to use the earth without destroying it. How have we done? Unfortunately, we seem to be destroying almost as fast as we are using.

The care of creation needs to be a vital concern for Christians. Tony Campolo writes:

“...We are to take what God has provided, nurture it, care for it, and enable it to produce more than might be otherwise expected. Irrational abuse of nature is not permitted. Ignoring our responsibility to protect nature and failing to nurture nature to abundance are clearly sins. According to the Scriptures, as interpreted by the followers of Calvin, we are not only to preserve nature, but we are to make it even more beautiful and fruitful than it was when we received it from God” (*How to Rescue the Earth without Worshiping Nature*,” Thomas Nelson, (c) 1992, pp. 24,25).

### 3. CELEBRATING A FULL REST

As you can see, the discipline of rest has far reaching implications. But it is also a practical way to mature in Christ. The best way to practice the discipline of rest is to celebrate a full Sabbath.

The first thing we need to do for a full Sabbath is foster an attitude of celebration in

worship. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath was referred to as a festival (mow'adah, Lev 23:2) and meant to be a joyful time (Is 58:13-14). If this was true in an age when people were still waiting for the promise of God, how much more for those who know this promise has already come true in Jesus Christ.

Contrast this with what Amos the Prophet heard God say about worship:

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies” (Amos 5:21 KJV).

What eloquence. Apparently, Amos believed that God thinks joyless worship really stinks! Let us heed the words of Paul who said:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”(Philippians 4:4 NIV).

The second thing we need to do is make the Sabbath a day of prayer and play. This matches well with the two reasons for the Sabbath given in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. In Exodus the emphasis is on creation and worship. In Deuteronomy the emphasis is on liberation and rest. Unfortunately, many people keep only half a Sabbath. The Puritans emphasized stern religious practice and prohibited any recreational activities. Moderns tend to emphasize leisure to the neglect of worship and prayer. But half a Sabbath is not healthy. We need a full Sabbath. Not just worship, not just leisure, we need prayer *and* play.

My inspiration for this is John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer. On Sunday mornings in the church in Geneva he led the people in prayer. On Sunday afternoons, he went out and played skittles. He was criticized for this, but biblically speaking he was right on. He celebrated a full Sabbath. If you want to practice the discipline of rest then celebrate a full Sabbath – a day of worship and rest, prayer and play.

## **CONCLUSION**

Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping are the three foundational disciplines. Three represents balance. For example, it is the minimum number of legs needed to maintain a stool. Take away one of the legs from a three-legged stool and the stool falls. Take away one of the three primary disciplines from discipleship and your discipleship falls. We need Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping.

Spiritual disciplines free us from distraction, fear and selfishness. Scripture gives us focus. Prayer gives us courage. Sabbath-keeping connects us to the community of faith and the world.