

Christianity and Sabbath
Hebrews 4:1-11
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We keep making the same mistake over and over again. We perceive the gifts of God as acts of deprivation, the Lord's blessings as burdens. When people follow this pattern in other areas of life, we clearly identify their behavior as sick.

A young woman approaches a dinner table filled with the finest foods her family can afford. Roast beef and mashed potatoes, green beans and a garden salad, strawberries and dinner rolls adorn the table like ornaments on a Christmas tree. She slouches in her chair and says, "do I have to eat?" If she follows this pattern meal after meal, the family recognizes the girl has an illness.

In the evening, a father returns home from his job. His wife is happy to see him and his toddler runs to his side. Both approach to greet him with hugs and kisses but the man pushes them away, goes into the darkened basement and turns on the t.v. If the affections of his family are continually rebuffed with the question, "what do you want from me now?" his wife will identify his behavior as symptomatic and seek help.

It is 2:00 a.m. and the eight-year-old is still roaming the house. He was read a bedtime story, kissed and hugged and given an end of the day drink of water at 8:30 p.m., then tucked in between cool sheets and loving told, "Good Night." Moments later, however, he was up again, screaming at his parents, "I don't want to go to bed." Over five hours have passed and he still refuses to sleep. Several consecutive nights of that behavior will cause his parents to seek the help of a pediatrician or an exorcist.

Food, affection, sleep are all good gifts. When a person treats them as obligations to avoid or restrictions to rebel against, something is wrong with that individual. He or she needs help to once again see these benefits of life as blessings.

Sabbath is one of the greatest gifts God has ever offered us. Yet rather than celebrate the privilege of Sabbath, we have often warped it into a burden on our lives.

Recently, our family toured Colonial Williamsburg. On our trip through the recreated town, we visited the wig maker. He described the time-consuming process involved in crafting a wig and then said that because the officials of the colony recognized how much time it took to make a wig, they granted wig makers an exception to the Sabbath laws which governed every other artisan. He said, "Everyone else is required by law to attend church a minimum of twice a month, only wig makers are allowed to work every Sunday." I was struck by his choice of words. Church attendance is *required*, working seven days a week is *allowed*. Even in the eighteenth century we spoke of God's gifts as restrictions.

One of the ten commandments addresses the joy of Sabbath. Moses, in an exceptional conversation with God, received ten commands, ten pieces of wisdom that God offered to liberate us from the ravages of our destructive habits and sins. The fourth commandment was given to free us from anxiety. Our tendencies to work all the time and stay in motion every waking hour are rooted in our insecurities. We fear that if we don't keep working,

we won't have enough or we won't measure up to the expectations placed on our lives or we won't achieve our goals so we burn the candle at both ends. In an attempt to slip our lives out of that noose, God said that we were to cease all our labor one day a week and center our thoughts on the total security we have in the grace of God.

Suppose your boss came to you tomorrow and said, "I think you're getting a little stressed out by all the pressure of this job. Your skin is ashen, you've bitten your fingernails down to the nub and I haven't heard you giggle in a month. From now on, I want you to take a day off every week and don't even think about this job. Sing a hymn, say a prayer, share a meal with you family right in the middle of the day, read the words of Jesus, receive the encouragement of your brothers and sisters in Christ, get inspired, recenter yourself on the relationships that really matter in life." Would you respond, "Ah boss, do I have to?" Seriously, if you would, that is an indication that something is off balance within you and you probably need some help.

God commanded us to rest and recenter our lives in God's grace one day out of every seven. God's command is a gift. Instead our spiritual ancestors turned it into a burden. They developed a complex set of regulations on what could and could not be done on the Sabbath and then imposed the restrictions on the community. A person literally had to go to school to learn all the rules that had to be followed on the day of rest.

Jesus came along and celebrated the Sabbath. When the religious officials criticized Jesus for doing some things on the holy day that were banned in their rule book, Jesus announced that the Sabbath was not created to be a burden of limitation but a blessing of liberation. Rather than forbid people to take a walk, cook a meal, help a friend, heal the sick or respond to true emergencies, Jesus said to celebrate the day as a time to rest from our labor, deepen our relationships with each other and recenter our lives in the grace of God.

As beautiful as a Sabbath day is, however, it pales when compared to the deeper meaning of a Christian Sabbath. For a Christian Sabbath is not focused on a single day of the week. The author of the book of Hebrews helps us understand that Christian Sabbath is a way of life. Christian Sabbath is a gift from God intended to free us from a TGIF or better put, a TGIS rhythm of existence. I'm sure you are familiar with the phrase Thank God It's Friday. Our culture uses it to express the relief many of us feel when our work week finally comes to an end. We plod through the hours, Monday through Friday with the goal of simply making it to the weekend. We drag ourselves home Friday night and thank God we don't have to go back until Monday. All week end long we try to refuel for the drain the work week will place on our lives. Then Monday, we push ourselves back into the rat race, once again, counting the days until Friday.

Spiritually, we could follow the same pattern with our Sabbath day. Monday through Saturday, we could engage life as obligation, drudgery, competition, exhausting activity, stress and destructive habits, then shout Thank God It's Sabbath and try to jump start our spiritual lives with one day of rest and worship. Then on Monday, we could turn our faces toward the daily grind and enter into the wilderness again.

Instead of that routine of despair, Hebrews says we can live each day centered in the Sabbath rest offered by God. Christian Sabbath, Hebrews says, is not about whether we are working or not. It is about whether we are trusting God or not. To help us understand the richness of the gift God is offering us, Hebrews refers back to the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. He says, they never entered the rest God had for them because they never learned to trust the Lord. They were willing to follow God through the great acts of liberation from Egypt but then lost their faith out in the wilderness and wanted to return to the bonds of slavery. Because they would not trust God's leadership, Hebrews says, they lost the privilege of entering the rest God had planned for them.

Note that the idea of rest had little to do with the Promised Land. The people eventually settled in the Promised Land, but they rarely experienced the rest God intended for them to know. If you read the books of Joshua and Judges, you will find that the turmoil known by the children of Israel increased in Canaan, not diminished. They

made the same mistake you and I make. They falsely believed that possessions would bring them peace, but possessions simply heightened their anxiety and made them even less likely to trust in God. The point of the journey to the Promised Land was not to provide the people of God with land but to teach them how to live in a fully trusting relationship with God. The good news, according to Hebrews, is that it is still possible for us to enter the rest, the Sabbath life that God has created for us. We simply have to learn to trust God, Sunday through Saturday of each week.

I know by personal experience that trusting God is challenging. One of the preeminent preachers in the United States, Thomas Long writes that we often joyfully respond to God's casting call and put our lives under the Creator's direction. As our lives unfold, however, our anxiety begins to tell us, "This play is going nowhere. God's drama is the theater of the absurd without purpose or meaning. Don't kid yourself; all this pain and sacrifice and suffering is a waste. You can do better than this sad melodrama. Write your own play."

The other day I rode a roller coaster with Jacob called Apollo's Chariot. Before I boarded, I surveyed the entire track of the ride and thought I was prepared for what was about to come. From my vantage point, it seemed the coaster rose slowly to a height just below Heaven's gate and then plummeted to the rooftop of hell before coasting to a reassuring stop. I was wrong. The radical rise and fall I observed was followed by a series of unseen corkscrew turns, teeth bleaching speed and spleen bruising jolts. Halfway through the ride, if I could have bailed, I would have. I just kept telling myself, "although you were surprised by this course, the person who built this and the people now running it, know every twist and turn and will see to it that you arrive safely home."

We often begin our journey of discipleship thinking we know what to expect. Surely the experience of conversion and baptism will call for a radical rush of spiritual adrenalin, but then, we assume, things should settle in and be far more soothing. Much to our surprise, however, there are always unsettling drops and rolls that we didn't foresee. The temptation is those jarring phases of the ride is always to abandon God's leadership and find something that seems more concrete to trust. Hebrews says if we give into that temptation, we will miss the opportunity to live in Christian Sabbath, to live at rest.

Instead, in those moments of wavering and doubt, Hebrews says we must learn to accept a great gift. The gift of assurance that God created this ride and knows every twist and turn and will see to it that one way or another we safely arrive at our spiritual home. When we trust in God every day, the book of Hebrews says, each day becomes a foretaste of glory, a preview of how it's going to be when we enter our eternal rest with God in heaven.

The poet David Whyte says that the antidote to weariness is not rest, it is wholeheartedness. The author of Hebrews would say that wholehearted trust in God is the only way to find a lifetime of Sabbath, a lifetime of Christian rest.