

Godly rest

Lesson: **Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (and Mark 6:31-32)**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%205:12-15;Mark%206:31-32>

Do you ever get tired of “balance”? There is a lot of emphasis on “balance” these days. We are supposed to lead “balanced” lives, to find “balance” between work and play and rest. Nutritionists talk of our eating a “balanced” diet. I’m actually a little tired of all the talk of “balance”. I feel as though I’m recovering from a “balance” overdose. It isn’t as though “balance” is such a positive concept, anyway. We rarely talk about balance in things that are unlikely to topple over. The pyramids, for example, are rarely spoken of as “balanced”. Cows, which rarely tip over on their own accord, are never described as having great balance. When we talk about something as being balanced, it is always something that is right on the edge of falling down. Ballerinas on tiptoe need balance; barns do not.

Another phrase that exhausts me is “self-care”. When you’re in a ministry position, or in a helping profession, there’s a lot of concern about self-care. There’s very good reason for that: if you get too tired, or too disconnected from your own needs, you’re likely to take it out on the very people you’ve covenanted to take care of. This happens in families, of course: one person doing everything and in the meantime making life awful for everyone else, or having an affair at work, or having an affair with work, and so forth. I understand it, but I get tired of the ubiquitous journal articles and professional conversations about “self-care”. There are only so many times I want to be one of 10 people sitting around talking about how we take care of ourselves, and expecting praise for doing it.

I’m being real with you. We’ve been getting real the last few weeks. We’ve been talking about how much we want to be a 24/7 spiritual beings, living in God’s presence all the time, receiving God’s blessing and guidance all the time, seeing God working in the world, all the time. We know we want one faith-filled, God-blessed, Jesus-led and Spirit-inspired, real, authentic, life. So during these weeks we’ve been getting real, in the hope of getting Godly. The first week we talked about Godly work. Last week we talked about Godly home. Next week we’re taking a break to sing and pray and be in joyful communion, but then on July 9th we’re finishing this series by talking about living as a Godly community. It’s all hard, because it’s all new, so we’ve been getting real with each other about our struggles and difficulties with work and home, in order to get Godly with each other.

This week, we’re talking about Godly rest. I have just finished telling you how tired I am of balance and self-care – or rather, the topics of balance and self-care – and here we are talking about Godly rest. For years, I confess to you, I was one of those people whose motto was, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” I didn’t want to miss anything, and there was a lot to be done. I’m a hard worker and a devoted friend, so sleep and rest seemed like a big waste of time. Maybe you’re like that – too excited by the world to want to put it down.

Maybe you’re one of those people who is working 60 or 70 hours a week at a job you don’t like (or two jobs you don’t like) and then working on projects or caring for a partner when you get home. If you’re one of those, you probably wish you got more rest, but haven’t figured out how to squeeze it in.

Maybe you’re a worrier, or have what Buddhists call “monkey mind”: your brain is too busy for rest to come easily. Or maybe you’re avoiding thinking about the hard stuff; or afraid of sitting still in the awful silence of your hollow soul.

What seems to prevent you from resting? Really resting?

Have you ever taken a vacation, and come back more exhausted than when you left? Or sat down at the end of a hard day to zone in front of the TV, and wound up more jangled than every? Or tried to read a magazine or a book, but found yourself flipping the pages faster than Evelyn Wood® speed readers?

That's because your vacation, your television-watching and your reading weren't restful. You were trying to escape, but you weren't looking to rest to do it.

Resting isn't about sleep, or vacation, or time off, though sleep and vacation and time off all matter, and are important for self-care and balance. Resting is about a quiet mind, a sense of security, a joyful heart, and hope for tomorrow. Resting is about trust. Resting is about being aware and safe in the presence of God. Resting is being aware and safe in the presence of God.

When God ordained the Sabbath day, when she gave us a designated day of rest, God did not say that we were to do nothing. God didn't say, "Enter thy TV room and gaze at thy flashing blue screen." God did not tell us to sleep all day, or hurriedly pack for a vacation. That's not what Sabbath rest is about. Listen to the commandment again: "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do."

The Sabbath, the day of rest, is a day to be kept holy, a day to keep a Sabbath for God. But it's not just about honoring God, about remembering to worship and praise God. God didn't make the Sabbath for God's own self. Listen to our scriptures again, which give the reason for the Sabbath: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

Why would God command us to observe the Sabbath day because we had once been slaves? What's the connection between Sabbath — that is, Godly rest — and having been slaves?

There are approximately 28 mentions of the Sabbath in the scriptural law (the first five books of the Bible) that talk about how to keep the Sabbath, that is, what to do on the Sabbath. There are lots of other specifics that speak of rituals and such, but the key is that phrase about not working because God brought you out of Egypt, that is, out of slavery, and that the Sabbath should be kept for worship, scripture study, and fellowship.

Our Scripture clearly equates worship, study, and fellowship with Sabbath rest. Why? Because it is through worship, study, and fellowship that we practice encountering God. The purpose of Sabbath is to learn to encounter God. We learn to be in the presence of God. And it is in the presence of God that we find true rest. It is by resting in God that we find a quiet mind, a sense of security, a joyful heart, and hope for tomorrow.

When Jesus came along, he and his disciples got into trouble for working on the Sabbath. In the book of Matthew, chapter 12, they get in trouble for picking grain on the Sabbath. In Luke, chapter 13, and John, chapter 5, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Bible readers have argued for centuries about what these passages mean. Some (capitalists, mostly) have said that Jesus and his disciples doing all this meant that the rules of Sabbath no longer need to be followed — that the day of rest that the Lord ordained is now just like any other day. Others have said that these stories show that some kinds of work are just more important than resting on the Sabbath. But this week, studying our Scriptures and thinking about Godly rest, I've come to believe that these interpretations aren't quite right.

It's not that Sabbath no longer matters, or that some works are more important. It's that the purpose of the Sabbath is to rest. And rest is about having a quiet mind, a sense of security, a joyful heart, and hope for tomorrow. Resting is being aware and safe in the presence of God. God ordained the Sabbath so that we would spend a full day worshiping, studying, and learning from being with loved ones and beloved community so that we would be formed and shaped into awareness and trust in God. The purpose of Sabbath is to make us aware of God, and to help us to rest in that presence.

"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."¹ Because your God brought you out of slavery — whether it's enslavement to sin, to addiction, to self-loathing, whatever it is — you can rest. We were slaves to sin and death, we were slaves in Egypt, and God brought us out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. So we can trust in our God, and rest in that trust.

And Jesus said, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. ... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ... And why do you worry about clothes? Consider the lilies of the field — how they grow. They neither labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you."² Trust in your God, and rest in that trust.

When the disciples came back to Jesus, having spent the day teaching and healing and doing the work of the Lord, they "gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place."

The disciples went away to a solitary place with Jesus. They rested in the presence and awareness of God. But the story continues: after a long day of teaching and healing and serving their God, they go to a solitary place with Jesus — but they do not go on retreat or take a vacation. In fact, the writer of this gospel Matthew says "But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them." The disciples and Jesus had gotten into a boat to go to a solitary place to rest but the crowds ran ahead and got there first. "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. ..." and when they were finished, "Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ... Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand."³

The disciples had worked all day. They expected to go to a solitary place to rest. But they found their rest in the presence of God in Jesus Christ. They even found their rest while serving others.

They rested in the One who brought them out, taught them, healed them, fed them.

They rested in the One through whom they knew the loving presence of God.

They rested in the One God who brings you and me out of slavery to brokenness, history, and sin.

¹ Deuteronomy 5:14

² Matthew 6:25-30, *excerpted*

³ Mark 6:30-44, *excerpted*

They rested in the One God who provides for everything we need, and a whole lot we don't.

They rested in the One God who gives real security that cannot be taken away.

They rested in the One God who is the giver of joy to a broken heart.

They rested in the One God, the only One, whose entire being is hope for tomorrow.

My friends, the Sabbath was made for humankind⁴ so that we might learn how to rest in the neverending, unconditional, superabundant, extravagant love of God, who will provide for all your real needs, in whom we trust and live and find our best, most Godly selves.

Resting is about a quiet mind, a sense of security, a joyful heart, and hope for tomorrow. Resting is about being aware and safe in the presence of God. Remember the Sabbath, keep it holy, and find your rest always in the knowledge that you are a child of a loving God, and a disciple in the ever-living daily experience and presence of Jesus.

Find your rest in God.

Amen.

⁴ Mark 2:27