Take a Day Off

Chris Staples 17 October 2019



Don't you love those moments of realisation when God is shown to be the architect of all science? I recently read an article titled "A Day of Rest: 12 Scientific Reasons it Works: Most major religions call for a day of rest…science agrees."[1] It cited numerous studies proving the benefits of a regular day of rest. Benefits included reduced stress, greater productivity, better health, restored mental energy, improved sleep and even longer life!

Intrinsically we understand this, yet in our age (and churches) there is a tendency towards constant work, erratic rest and 24/7 availability. We miss the benefits of a healthy rhythm of rest.

The Principle of Rest

God's 4th commandment to Israel was 'Six days you shall labour 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…' (Exodus 20:9-10) and the consequences for breaking this were severe. In fact, failure to observe the Sabbath was cited as part of God's discipline in exiling them. (Lev.26:33-35)

The principle of resting 1 day in 7 was not introduced when Moses received the Law. It's rooted in the origins of man. God rested a day and man's first full day was one of rest. A weekly rest day is not a reward for working hard but a universal creation ordinance.

We know that in Christ the Law was completely fulfilled and, as a result, under the New Covenant, we are no longer bound to keeping a set of Sabbath rules nor is it a question of salvation, which can only be found in God's grace through faith in Christ. Christ is our rest. The issue, however, is that there will always be consequences when we ignore God's ways.

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During the French Revolution, the Republic decided to ignore the Christian Gregorian calendar and institute a 10-day week with 9 days of work and one of rest. It was a total disaster and soon abandoned as productivity dropped, suicide increased and people burned out. In 1974, even NASA was forced to observe 1 day of rest in 7 for exhausted space crews.[2]

Do We Need a Sabbath Day of Rest?

Our complacent attitude to rest is contributing to a society increasingly marked by broken relationships, a rising epidemic of stress, burn-out and anxiety. In my own life, I experienced a total breakdown and am convinced that failure to take this seriously was a major factor. Sometimes God's loving discipline requires us to be forced to stop.

Scripture is littered with the human need for rest. Jesus pulled His disciples away from the constant pressure of need and ministry 'The apostles gathered round 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." (Mark 6:30-31). When Jesus declared Himself Lord of the Sabbath, the ritualistic following of rules was replaced by freedom to enjoy the universal creation gift of a day's rest with Him.

Resting Is Holy

The principle of a sabbath day is perhaps best described as a wasted gift. A day of total rest is an abused gift from God. It concerns holiness and blessing – a day set apart for us in devotion to God and to the receiving and recognition of His blessings. '…the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.' (Exodus 20:11)

If we look at the pattern God gave Israel, we see this gift of rest extended to festival weeks throughout the year in which the people were released from seeking increase, ambition, labour, competitiveness and the pressure of producing things. Good for individuals, family, community and environment. Sounds like something we need today!

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This is not just time off work. This is no mechanical calendar challenge because rest is not taken by us, it's given by God.

The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' (Exodus 33:14)

...they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord... (Isaiah 63:14)

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' (Matthew 28:11)

Five Reasons to Take a Day of Rest Seriously

Here's why:

1. God is serious about it

A day's rest made God's top 10 for His set-apart people. Jesus freed us from legalistic observance with examples of doing good and dealing with emergencies, but He endorsed a day of rest. (Mark 2:27)

2. It's a witness

No other nation rested from work like Israel. We trust God's supernatural provision in 6 days. In a 24/7 world, we value a day of rest in Christ for ourselves and our families above chasing money.

3. It's good for us

Unobserved sabbaths accumulate with consequences. A healthy rhythm of rest brings blessing in better marriages, happier children, improved mental and spiritual health, and greater job satisfaction.

4. It breaks bad habits

In us and in others. Introducing this discipline will require us to break our addiction to technology and the modern tyranny of constant availability.

5. It’s refreshing

It may include time with church family, time to rest in God’s presence, family celebration, physical exercise, and enjoying other activities that refresh us. One thing we should avoid is doing work or even thinking about work!

This day will vary in content with the different rhythms of culture, family and church life but the principle of a devoted day of rest receiving God’s blessing is simple wisdom. In our lives and churches, I believe we need to rediscover the power and blessing of true rest in Christ.

What would you say to the Lord of the Sabbath about how you are using His gift?

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[1] https://www.inc.com/rhett-power/a-day-of-rest-12-scientific-reasons-it-works.html

[2] Quoted in Subversive Sabbath by A.J. Swodoba