The Work We Never Rest From

Michael d'Offay 31 March 2016



I've often struggled to rest well on my day off. At times, I have seen friends (in ministry specifically) 'burn out', because they have not rested properly. In my fear of burn-out, I've sometimes avoided doing good and loving people in my holiday time, or my day off.

It seems crazy, but these are some of the things I have wrestled with in finding the work/rest balance.

I was reading John 5 recently, and the story of Jesus' confrontation with the Jewish leaders on the Sabbath brought afresh to me that having a day off (Sabbath) does not mean we are to cease from all kinds of work.

> But holidays and rest periods do not mean we stop loving God and loving people.

The Jews and Sabbath

The religious leaders of Jesus' day had an extremely high view of the Sabbath. It was a day of rest where the Jews were commanded to worship God and rest from their work. The Sabbath

day became a distinctive mark of their Jewishness. Like circumcision, it was something that distinguished them as the people of God, as those distinct from the work-obsessed and wealth-driven cultures of their day.

They wanted to safeguard the day and so added in extra regulations beyond what the law required – similar to someone who puts up an extra wall around their property to protect it.

Unfortunately, the regulations were so detailed that it lost the heart of what the Sabbath was meant to be. The system in Jesus' day was legalistic and petty. They created 39 categories of what 'work' means and each category was filled with sub-categories, such as limiting the amount of steps you could walk and the amount of letters you could write.

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Jesus and Sabbath Work

Jesus comes along in John 5 and he offends the Jewish leaders of his day by 'working' on the Sabbath. At least, that is what it appears to be in their eyes. The Jews accuse Jesus of undermining the law and breaking the Sabbath.

What did Jesus do? He showed love and healed someone.

But here is the interesting thing: Jesus did not deny their accusation. In fact, He seems to incite them. Verse 17 says, 'But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'

Jesus admits to 'working' on the Sabbath, and in fact states that His Father constantly works, all the time! The Lord, however, did not break the law but rather their legalistic interpretation of it.

> Jesus went out of His way to heal, love and forgive others on the Sabbath.

Christians and the Sabbath

To digress slightly, what should our attitude be towards the Old Testament Sabbath laws? We don't need to keep the Sabbath specifically. Christians are not commanded to obey it. This is because we are under a different covenant, and the New Testament indicates that what marks us out as the people of God is our love for one another, rather than keeping the Sabbath (see

Romans 14:5). Jesus Himself has become our Sabbath rest (see Colossians 2:16-17, Hebrews 4), and in Him we rest from our works.

But as a principle, the value of the Sabbath as a day of rest is still an important one. God Himself modelled it for us in the Creation story. He didn't need to rest, since God never gets tired or loses energy! But He chose to rest as a model for us to follow, since we do tire and need to find a regular rhythm of work, play and rest.

> Even on our Sabbath days of rest as Christians, we are to keep on doing good.

Doing Good As We Rest

In making time to rest, there is a type of work that we are never to stop doing, which Jesus modelled for us. Even on our Sabbath days of rest as Christians, we are to keep on doing good. This is what Jesus did. The works He did on the Sabbath were works to build up and redeem. Jesus went out of His way to heal, love and forgive others on the Sabbath.

There is wisdom in managing ourselves and blocking off time to get away to recharge. I believe in the importance of that. But holidays and rest periods do not mean we stop loving God and loving people. This kind of work always blesses God, others, and it will refresh us as well.