

Rest & Recreation | REST

The *Wheel of Suffering* is a core concept of Buddhism. Less of a *religious* belief, it's a philosophical insight into how our *desires* and *attachments* fuel an existential unhappiness, by trapping us in an endless loop of always wanting what we don't have—how the endless craving for *more* drives us into a kind of insanity, chasing satisfaction we can never actually achieve. In the West, we use a more sophisticated term. We call it *The North-American Dream*. A never-ending treadmill that keeps us running, chasing; fooling us into believing we're inching closer to the life we truly desire, while never actually reaching it. This endless craving for more drives everything we do: our *work, relationships, spending habits, intellectual pursuits...* even our *faith*.

This month, in a series we're calling, *Rest & Recreation*, we're asking what it might look like to step off that treadmill and step into the life God wants for us. We began by examining Jesus' invitation to bring our tired and weary selves to him, to recover our souls by realigning our lives with his, learning from him the unforced rhythms of grace. Biblically, these *rhythms* are rooted in an ancient practice called, *Sabbath*—an idea so core to God's design for life, it's woven into the very fabric of reality, the natural cadence of the cosmos—a weekly rhythm culminating in a day of *rest* and *recreation*. It's a rhythm that starts, as we learned last week, with the radical idea of *stopping*—powering down, finding the off-switch, and engaging in intentional *inactivity*.

Now, while the primordial seed of Sabbath-keeping is sown on the Bible's *first* page—as *God rests on the 7th Day of Creation*—the weekly practice of Sabbath isn't commanded until much later. In Exodus 20, as one of the Ten Commandments, God instructs Israel to **“Remember the Sabbath”** (Ex:20:8), suggesting Sabbath was, at least in concept, enough of a thing by that point that God merely had to *remind* Israel to *remember* it. Now, you may recall that, as God was giving the Ten Commandments to Moses at the *top* of Mount Sinai, Israel was breaking

most of them at the *bottom*, in part by worshiping a golden calf. As a result, God made Israel wander in the wilderness for 40 years (*actually, according to Deuteronomy 2:14, it was only 38 years*) until that entire generation died out, at which point—*38 years later*—Moses repeats the commandments to the *next* generation. In Deuteronomy (which is Greek for, *second* or *repeated law*), these newly remastered and re-released commandments are virtually identical to the original, with one glaring exception—the Sabbath-command, which receives 3 significant edits.

As you look at them side-by-side, you will immediately notice the first edit:

EXODUS 20:8-10

Remember 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.

DEUTERONOMY 5:12-14

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.

In *Exodus*, they were to **remember** the Sabbath; in *Deuteronomy*, they're told to **observe** it. The change may seem minor, but consider this: it's one thing to *remember* my wife's birthday; it's another thing to *observe* it—one thing to *remember* what the rules of the road are; another thing to actually *observe* them. Moses is calling them not just to *awareness*, but to *action*—to not just *remember* Sabbath, but actually *practice* it—to put it in the calendar and commit to it.

There's actually a bit of wordplay built going on here. The Hebrew word for *observe* here is, *shamar*; translated elsewhere as *diligently keep, be in charge of, maintain and cultivate*. It means to *stand guard, protect, preserve and pay attention*. Far from a *passive* word, *shamar* implies important, meaningful *work*. In fact, *shamar* is one of two words used in Genesis for humanity's original *job description*. In **Genesis 2:15**, we read that God "**put the human in the Garden of Eden to work [abad] it and take care of [*shamar*] it." This wordplay goes even deeper—the word *put* (as in, *God put the human in the garden*) is the word, *Nuach*, which in Hebrew literally means, *rest*. So, God *rested* humanity in the Garden to *work* it. *Rested to work.***

If it comes as a surprise that we were created to *work*—that *work* is embedded in God’s design for life and part of the Eden-*blessing*—it may be that we’re only familiar with the *other* kind of work, connected to the Eden-*curse*. After sin wiggles its way into the story, God says that now,

“Through painful toil you will eat food from [the ground] all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you... By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground.” (Gen 3:18-19)

These are two kinds of *work* in the Bible: *sacred restful work* and *painful sweat-of-your-brow toil*.

The *first* is easy and light—life-giving, unforced collaboration with creation. The *second* is hard labour, work that goes against the grain of creation, that’s never done, leaving us weary and tired.

The practice of *Sabbath* is God’s way of giving us weekly rest from our sweat-of-your-brow work, of disconnecting us from the Wheel of Suffering. But it’s also an invitation into restfulness in all our work—practicing intentional inactivity *one* day a week, so that all our activity on the other six days flows from a deep connection and sacred partnership with the Spirit. This is what Jesus was demonstrating when he supposedly *broke* the Sabbath. In John’s Gospel, Jesus heals a guy whose been unable to walk (John curiously adds) for *38 years*. Alarms should be going off—*remember Deuteronomy?* This guy’s life was a reenactment of Israel’s wilderness-wandering, only instead of wandering, he was in forced-rest. Since it happened on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders tried to use the healing to discredit Jesus. Even though *healing on Sabbath*, is never forbidden in the Bible, by *their* rules and traditions, Jesus was *working on the Sabbath*. But he responds,

My Father is always at work to this very day, and I too am working... Truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. (John 5:17,19)

For Jesus, Sabbath wasn’t a surface-level set of rules for one day a week; it was about a deeper reality—*resting* in the activity of God. As Jesus *observed* what the Father was doing, he

simply joined in, revealing that true sabbath-rest isn't what you do or don't do on a certain day; it's cultivating a deep connection with God, becoming a conduit of the Spirit's work, so our work is merely the outflow of what God is already doing. Observing the Sabbath is learning to observe the Spirit's work in us, so we can live and work, not by the sweat of our brow but in sacred union with our Creator, flowing with creation, not against the grain—always serving; never *slaving*.

But if you're like me, this kind of *rest* takes *work*. It's not as easy as just taking a day off, crashing on the couch, mindlessly scrolling, or taking a nap; *resting* is more than just *stopping* or *sleeping*. In her book, *Sacred Rest*, board-certified doctor of internal medicine and Jesus-follower, Dr. Sandra Dalton-Smith, identifies *seven types of rest* we all need: physical, mental, emotional, sensory, creative, social and spiritual. This means *rest* can look like a going for a hike, reading a good book, listening to uplifting music, switching off your screens, journaling to untangle your thoughts, enjoying a cup of tea with a good friend, or spending time in prayerful reflection. True *rest* is personal—what restores *you* will very likely look different from what *someone else* finds restful. It's about what nourishes *our* bodies and replenishes *our* energy reserves, so we can find both *rest* from our work, and deep *restfulness* in our *work*. Since this kind of *rest* takes *work*, we can't leave it to whenever we happen to *remember*; we need a plan to practice and observe it!

This brings us to the *second* and *most substantial* edit to the original Sabbath-command, which is all about the reason *why* we sabbath. While the original commandment was rooted in the *Eden* story, Deuteronomy now links Sabbath to the story of the *Exodus*. Take a look:

EXODUS 20:11

For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

DEUTERONOMY 5:15

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.

As a new generation prepared to go into the land promised and provided them by God, a land they hadn't *cultivated* or *worked* for, Moses reminds them of their history as *slaves*—as people bred in captivity, oppression, and forced labour. Exodus 1 reveals the work-conditions:

They put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so, the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. (Ex 1:11-14)

Talk about the Wheel of Suffering! Over-worked and never-paid—an endless loop of pure, painful sweat-of-your-brow toil. And notice what all this forced-labour was for: *store cities*—giant warehouse-cities, built to hoard Pharaoh's surplus stuff. As Moses urges Pharaoh to let the people go, to release them from their toil and suffering, look at Pharaoh's response:

“Why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work!” Then Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working.” That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people: “You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working... Lazy, that's what you are—lazy! ...Now get to work!” (Exodus 5:4-18, selected)

Ever worked for *that* boss?! Ever *been* that boss? All work; no play. Working through your break; seeing days-off as *lazy*. Always pushing harder, faster, but never *achieving* enough, never *doing* enough, *selling*, *earning* or, being *enough*. Never *enough*. And it's not just Pharaoh-like overlords; it's the spirit of Pharaoh in all of us—that little voice telling us we are what we do, that our productivity, paycheck, and possessions define us. That our successes are never enough and our work is never finished. That we'll be happy after the next promotion, pay-raise, or once our business levels up. But it's a lie—the North-American *fantasy*! Because the more we achieve and acquire, the more our appetite grows, leaving us more unsatisfied. *The wheel of suffering.*

THIS is the new rationale for practicing Sabbath; a way to push back against our endless desires and attachments, the never-ending treadmill of producing and consuming yet never able to *do* enough, *have* enough, *be* enough. Sabbath says, “*enough is enough!*” It draws a weekly line in the sand—*this far and no further*. John Mark Comer, in his *Practicing the Way* course on Sabbath, describes sabbath-rest as an act of *resistance*. Resistance against how the world works, against being enslaved by our work, whatever form that work takes; whether you’re a full-time student, a part-time volunteer, a retired mall-walker, stay-at-home parent, or a fortune 500 CEO.

If there are 7 types of *rest*, Jewish tradition identifies 39 types of *work*—everything from bread-baking and house-cleaning to plowing a field or tying a knot—all banned on the Sabbath. This may seem excessive, but there’s a purpose in the prohibitions. When it comes to dos and don’ts, *do*-commands limit you to only prescribed activities—*do the dishes, do the laundry, do your home-work*—but *don’t*-commands leave far more flexibility. If I say don’t work (*no chores or errands*), don’t use screens (*no computer, phone, or TV*), and don’t spending money (*no stores or restaurants*), those parameters leave a lot of room for life-giving activity. The *Don’ts* are healthy boundaries, intended to keep us from slipping back into *non-life-giving* activity.

And the point here isn’t to get overly-legalistic about how we Sabbath. It’s *identifying* what helps us *rest*, and *eliminating* what keep us *restless*. It’s not about adding all kinds of extra requirements to our already-busy lives; it’s removing the constant demands we live with every day, safeguarding us from slipping back into *work*-mode. As you consider setting a time for your Sabbath-rest, maybe begin by brainstorming the kinds of parameters that might govern your Sabbath. Try crafting your own personal to-*don’t* list, personalizing your Sabbath, tailoring this sacred time to your unique wiring and personality. What will be off-limits? Which of the 7 types

of rest do you need to focus on? How can the gift of an empty calendar free you up to be filled by God, filled with joy and rest, filled with what fills you. A Sabbath built *by* you and *for* you... well, *kind of*. This actually leads us to the third and final edit to the Sabbath-command.

As a kid, I loved watching re-runs of Gilligan's Island. If you've never seen it...

Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale—a tale of a fateful trip that started in a tropic port, aboard a tiny ship. The mate was a mighty sailin' man, the Skipper brave and sure, five passengers set sail that day for a three-hour tour—a three-hour tour.

But that's *not what happened*. The theme song continues, revealing that the weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed, run aground on an uncharted desert island, stranding the 7 characters: Gilligan, the Skipper, the millionaire and his wife, a movie star... *and the rest*. At least, that's how the song went when the show first aired in 1964. The *rest* referred to two additional characters, played by B-level actors at the time, initially considered supporting cast. But by the second season, Bob Denver—the actor who played Gilligan—insisted the entire cast share top-billing and the song was changed, replacing, “...and the rest” with “*the Professor and Mary Ann*.” That's essentially what happened to the Sabbath-commandment in Deuteronomy.

The third and final edit to the original Sabbath-command is about *who* Sabbath is *for*.

EXODUS 20:10

You shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

DEUTERONOMY 5:14

You shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, **nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, **so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do.****

The Season 2 Sabbath theme-song changes, “...and your animals” to “*your ox, your donkey*”—the *Professor* and *Mary Anne* of the Ten Commandments. Why *these* two animals are named, at least on the surface, is that the *ox* and *donkey* were the two main beasts of burden in

the ancient world. But more importantly, while oxen were religiously *clean* animals, donkeys were seen as *unclean*. Oxen were sacred offerings in worship; donkeys were seen as worthless even for *food*; only valued for the *work* they did. But there's an even deeper idea here. As *clean* and *unclean* animals, they symbolized *Israelites* and *Gentiles*—the *chosen people... and the rest*.

Naming *both ox and donkey* is God's way of saying Sabbath is for *insiders* and *outsiders* alike; ensuring we *all* get the *same* rest—a flattening of the entire social structure; one day each week—citizen, foreigner, slave, free, female, male, human, animal—no hierarchy; no exceptions. Sabbath isn't a perk for the wealthy who can afford a day-off; it's a weekly *holiday*, no matter your paygrade. A weekly *holy-day*, regardless of your religion. It means, for one day each week, that person who works for you, *doesn't*. If you act like you *own* them, Sabbath is a weekly reminder that you *don't*. That a day-off that means my employees work overtime *isn't sabbath*. That a night out requiring restaurant and theatre staff to bust their butts for minimum-wage *isn't sabbath*. That an all-inclusive resort where underpaid staff overdeliver luxury *isn't sabbath*. Sabbath is liberation theology lived-out, proclaimed and practiced in a universal offer of *rest*.

Sabbath is more than a day off; it is important, meaningful work requiring more than just a haphazard attempt to *remember*—it requires intentional planning, effort, and consistency to *observe* and *practice*. It's an act of resistance against the North-American nightmare of being slaves to our work, against the Wheel of Suffering and the endless craving for more—a reminder that we don't work for Pharaoh, that we are human-*beings*; not just human-*doings*, created in the image of the God who self-identifies as I *AM*; not I *DO*. And Sabbath is a way of honouring that image of God in *all* human-*beings*—of advocating for Eden-like equality for all people. One day lived in anticipation of the *one day* when we'll all be welcomed into *eternal* Sabbath-rest.

As the band comes to lead us in a song of response...

Imagine for a moment with me if we could become that kind of community—of deeply-rested people who, when asked how we’re doing, don’t have to debate between answer with *busy* or *tired*, but instead live fully replenished and refreshed, aligned in sacred union with the Spirit, enjoying sabbath-level restfulness in all our work and play, and inviting others to come find rest with us. A community that embodies Jesus’ invitation to come, weary and tired, and recover our souls. Because I’m beginning to wonder if a communally lived-out vision of physical, mental, emotional, sensory, creative, social, and spiritual rest might just be the most impactful gift we have to offer a world of restless souls, seeking satisfaction but never finding it—an end to our endless cravings; a mass-exodus from the Wheel of Suffering. Sacred rest for all.

May the God of Sabbath fill us with his peace, and may our restless souls find rest in him.

[*selah*]