

MILLIGAN COLLEGE

THE SABBATH PARADOX: SUSTAINING MINISTRY THROUGH
SABBATH

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BY

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Ministry today seems to demand too much from a person. Exhaustion and burnout run rampant within the church. The full and abundant life that Jesus promises in John 10:10 is laughable in the face of the pressure of daily ministry. Forty-five percent of pastors say that they have experienced depression or burnout that has caused them to take a leave of absence from ministry.¹ Is there no sustenance in the Lord's work? Is burnout the inevitable result of a life lived in service to God? Pastors and leaders in the Christian church today face the challenge of ministering in a way that is *both* effective *and* sustainable. It is easy and far too common to minister in a way that is *either* effective *or* sustainable, but God seemed to have a different plan for humanity when he established the Sabbath. If the explicit commands of God for his people are to be taken seriously, the active practice of Sabbath also needs to be carefully considered and observed. However, the Christian motivation to practice Sabbath is not only subservient obedience. Sabbath is also a rich and generous gift by which God's people are invited to be refreshed and restored. Central to the discipline of Sabbath is a confounding paradox. By rhythmically resting from work in obedience to God's law, more and better work is able to be sustained. On the surface, this idea seems counterintuitive and irrational, but the Sabbath is defined by this paradox. In order to better obey the commands of God and trust in his provision for the lives of his people, Sabbath observation becomes absolutely imperative. The Sabbath is both a command and gift from God that necessitates trust in God's provision and restores ministry to be effective and sustainable.

The Christian's motivation to observe the Sabbath is twofold. The Sabbath is not merely a command or simply a gift, it is by nature both. It holds blessing for all parts of life. As

¹ H. B. London and Neil B. Wiseman. *Pastors at Greater Risk*. Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2003. Print.

Christians, observing the Sabbath is obedience to God's law. As humans, a desire to live life in the healthiest and fullest possible way does not seem to stem from observing the Sabbath, yet the paradox redeems defies conventional wisdom and provides refreshing rest to those who would cease working. Even though these distinctions between humans and Christians are ultimately false dichotomies, it is important to acknowledge that the responsibility to obey God is accompanied with legitimate physical benefits. Ministers and those working in the church are thus compelled like all Christians to observe the Sabbath. They are first and foremost Christians and must be committed to the commands and gifts of God before they can ever be concerned with their occupation as a minister. In the same way, Christians who do not work in the church are obligated to observe the Sabbath as well so that their own ministries, different though they may be, might be refreshed and restored in order to continue effectively and sustainably. All Christians must allow God to restore them physically so that their ministry with spiritual purpose and meaning may continue to be effectively carried out in their limited earthly bodies. Sabbath is the mediating discipline that unites these ideas into one opportunity to obey God's commands and be refreshed in his gift of restoration. Frances Rice McCormick, in a summary of Karl Barth's reflections on the Sabbath, adamantly demands that the theologian and minister be "concerned with their own being even as they serve the community through human thought and speech."² The call to vocational ministry has the potential to create a hypocritical superiority complex that encourages distance and separation from commitment to God's commands and gifts. Aside from being an incredibly dangerous situation for the health of the Church, a life and ministry that are distanced from the way God set out for them to be conducted do not provide for effective or sustainable ministry. Ministers bear the responsibility as Christians to explicitly

² Frances Rice McCormick, "Sabbath Rest: A Theological Imperative According to Karl Barth," *JAAR* 62 (1994): 539-540.

obey God's commands, but they also bear responsibility to "live a life worthy of the calling [they] have received."³ To what kind of life is God calling the workers in his Church? It does not seem like this call should result in an empty shell of burned-out ministry. Instead, God offers a life of ministry that is perpetually refreshed and restored, one that joins in his own delight and freedom by celebrating Sabbath.

The majority of books and articles concerning the Sabbath fail to encompass or even consider the broad scope of Sabbath.⁴ Most of them can be quickly classified according to which prescribed motivation for Sabbath observation they choose to emphasize. Some literature debates the nature of God's command to observe and remember the Sabbath, while there is another strong faction of literature that casts Sabbath into the realm of human convenience. While both of these conversations are important, they cannot truly reflect scriptural Sabbath if they are taking place independently. To separate Sabbath command and gift is to distort the beautiful paradox of their inseparable union. As is observed in Jesus' New Testament interactions with the Pharisees, it is all too easy to fall into the sin of over-legislating the Sabbath. Though intentions may be sound, this kind of legalism results in the loss of the purpose of Sabbath. Sabbath is not intended to be a burden of rules, but a gift and restorative celebration of rest. On the other hand, Dan Allender notes that there is also great danger in focusing solely on the benefits of Sabbath for the individual human being at the expense of remembering that it is a command from God.⁵ Sabbath can then become self-serving, almost directly opposed to the original expression of worship with God. Without a firm grasp on both elements of Sabbath, it

³ Eph 4:1 NIV

⁴ Dan B. Allender, *Sabbath*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2009), 6.

⁵ Allender, *Sabbath*, 6.

remains impossible to gain a complete understanding of the importance and meaning of the Sabbath.

In approaching this topic, I initially attempted to bifurcate the Sabbath for the sake of rhetorical organization. I had anticipated that Sabbath in the Old Testament could be easily classified as command and that Sabbath in Jesus' teachings could be characterized as gift. As I began to scratch the surface with preliminary exegesis of Exodus 16 and Luke 6, my tentative outline went quickly out the window. It is overwhelmingly clear in Scripture that Sabbath is at all times firmly a command, yet an inexplicable gift of restoration and refreshment. There is no way to separate these two. Each accompanies the other. Though frustrated at first, I was eventually struck by the profound truth here encompassed. Sabbath is never simply a command or simply a gift. They are bound together, the gift is a command, and the command itself is a gift.

Scriptural teachings on Sabbath clearly illustrate the importance and origin of this paradoxical reality. Sabbath is a central and unifying motif throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. God himself observes the Sabbath and he instructs his people Israel to do the same. It serves as one of Israel's defining characteristics throughout their history. In the New Testament accounts, Sabbath is the subject of several of Jesus' teachings and interactions; he demonstrates that Sabbath rises above systematic regulations yet fulfills God's intentions in creating this day of rest. Throughout Scripture, Sabbath as a command and Sabbath as a gift are inextricably woven together. To attempt to wrest them apart is to distort the purpose and fruit of Sabbath. Though they are not the origins of the different motivations for Sabbath observation, there is still value in examining Sabbath in both the Old and the New Testaments. Considering the

connection between command and gift throughout the Old and the New Testaments unveils a more complete understanding of the nature of Sabbath.

Old Testament Installation of Sabbath

The Old Testament recounts the story of God's work in the world through his people, Israel. God goes to great lengths to establish Abraham's descendants because they are to be the vessel through which God will pour out his blessing upon the earth. Present from the time of creation, Sabbath rest is a foundational part of the way God has set out for his people to conduct themselves. Sabbath is first recorded as a command from God in the book of Exodus while Israel is wandering in the wilderness, depending on God for their survival. In chapter 16, Israel receives from the LORD manna and quail each day. Because God provided each morning and evening, the people of Israel were not permitted to store any of the manna or quail overnight. They were forced to rely on God for their literal daily bread. However, there was one day on which they were allowed to collect double the allotted amount of heavenly provisions. This was the day before the Sabbath, on which they were not to go out to gather food for themselves. Instead, it was to be "a day of Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD."⁶ This kind of Sabbath observation stands in direct contradiction to the Israelites' conditioned inclinations to store up their own provisions and be the source of their own stability. While the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, observing the Sabbath would not have been a feasible idea, bound as they were by the burden of work and production.⁷ Their system of living was such that they were dependent on their own work for their daily bread. They attempted to gather extra food in the wilderness that they might provide for themselves, but the food would spoil overnight and they would be again forced to rely solely upon God's provision. Israel was forced to "withdraw from

⁶ Exod 16:23 NIV

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus* (vol. 1 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*; ed. L. E. Keck; Nashville: Associate Press, 1994), 815.

the empire in order to remember that the true bread comes from God and that God willingly provides it, more than enough...”⁸ This was the central expression of their Sabbath. Sabbath for God’s people was, from the beginning, “trustfully organized around God’s unfailing generosity.”⁹ It was a day on which Israel’s inability to provide for themselves became a testament to God’s faithful provision.

The second time God commands his people to observe the Sabbath, he helps them to see the way in which it functions to refresh and restore them, even as he is refreshed and restored. Exodus 20 includes Sabbath keeping as the fourth commandment given to Israel by the LORD on Mount Sinai. Codified next to other, more conventional commands such as “You shall not murder,” and “You shall not steal,”¹⁰ Sabbath is clearly a high priority in God’s plan for the way his people should live. This logic stands in stark contrast to many modern views of the Sabbath that would allow it to free-fall down the priority list of spiritual disciplines. Sabbath’s positioning within the overall sequence of commandments intimates its relationship to the other laws. The first three commandments concern Israel’s relationship with God, making it clear that the LORD is their God and that they are not to worship any other gods. The final six commandments function as laws to govern Israel’s interpersonal interactions. Its position is intentional, casting Sabbath as a connecting point between the two distinct groups. Sabbath is a

⁸ John W. Sonnenday, “Unwrapping the Gift of Sabbath,” *Practicing our Faith*, Nd. Accessed November 19, 2013, www.practicingourfaith.org/unwrapping-gift-sabbath. Note here that Sonnenday’s use of “empire” is in reference to the system of self-reliant provision which would have marked Israel’s subservience to Egypt. The empire system provided only when Israel labored. They did not necessarily like the system, but there was no other way to secure food. Israel has consistent difficulty transitioning to trust in God’s unconditional provision instead of the work of their own hands. Exodus 16 documents just one example of this struggle.

⁹ Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, 813.

¹⁰ Exod 20:13-15 NIV

bridge that connects Israel's relationship with God to Israel's relationships with each other; God invites his people Israel into his own process of restoration.¹¹

Norman Wirzba calls special attention to the way that God himself observes the Sabbath day during creation. The Sabbath day that God commands for his people in Exodus 20 is clearly connected to the example he set by resting when he had finished creating everything in the world.¹² Part of Exodus 31 retells the Genesis 1 account of God's own Sabbath rest in creation. Sabbath is not an optional activity or an empty formality in either instance.¹³ The LORD is not portrayed in either text as one who is above keeping the Sabbath or immune to the burden of endless labor. In fact, Walter Brueggemann emphasizes that God was refreshed on the Sabbath.¹⁴ Exodus 31:17 suggests that God was not merely energized again, but literally "lived, souled, and given more of [his] own self."¹⁵ This concept speaks not only to the nature of God, but also to the nature of Sabbath. God is a god who is willing to expend his own self on behalf of his Creation, and Sabbath is a process and practice by which even the LORD, the creator of the universe, must be refreshed and restored. Walter Brueggemann here notes that even God finds necessity and occasion for Sabbath, reinforcing the absolute importance of Sabbath observation.¹⁶

¹¹ Allender, *Sabbath*, 5.

¹² Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 31.

¹³ Exod 31:17 NIV.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, 929.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, 12. Though not proper English, Brueggemann explains that the Hebrew is not quite perfect either. The author has simply made a verb out of the noun meaning life or self to indicate the way that God really had expended part of himself in the act of creation.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, 929. This same "celestial Sabbath" is evident in the Exodus 16 account where God ceases to produce food for Israel on the Sabbath day in observance of his own Sabbath.

Looking at the creation account in Genesis sequentially, it would seem that Sabbath rest is simply a break after the pinnacle of creation, man, has been completed, but Wirzba suggests differently. Instead, God's rest is the culmination of creation, for God was not finished until he had observed his Sabbath day.¹⁷ Brueggemann expresses a similar idea, "Rest is not recuperation for the next day's work, but is the goal and climactic event of all creation, the point of it all."¹⁸ Both Wirzba and Allender focus on the Hebrew word which is translated "rest" in these passages, *menuha*. Allender translates *menuha* as "joyous response, tranquility, or delight," as an invitation to celebrate Sabbath by joining in the sheer delight of God's creation.¹⁹ Wirzba describes *menuha* in this way,

In the biblically informed mind, *menuha* suggests the sort of happiness and harmony that come from things being as they ought to be; we hear in *menuha* resonances with the deep word *shalom*. It is this capacity for happiness and delight, rather than humanity, which sits as the crowning achievement of God's creative work. It is as though by creating *menuha* on the seventh day God gathered up all the previous delight and gave it to creation as its indelible stamp. *Menuha*, not humanity, completes creation. God's rest or *Shabbat*, especially when understood within a *menuha* context, is not simply a cessation from activity but rather the lifting up and celebration of everything. Here we see God in a most personal image, like a parent frolicking with a child and in this joy and play

¹⁷ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 33.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, 924.

¹⁹ Allender, *Sabbath*, 12.

demonstrating an abiding commitment to protect, sustain, encourage, and love into health and maturity the potential latent within the child.²⁰

It is God's *menuha* that refreshes the souls who choose to engage in Sabbath. This Sabbath represents the place of restoration from which all creation might be refreshed, a statement of God's provision for and commitment to this people, the expenditure and refreshment of God's own self in his creation, and the extension of God's *menuha* to his creation.

New Testament Teachings on Sabbath

If the Old Testament records the establishment of a Sabbath day for Israel, Jesus' teachings in the New Testament are a restatement and clarification of Sabbath's meaning and purpose. Through Exodus, the LORD is shown to carefully observe his own law of Sabbath by his patterns of work and rest. Jesus, God incarnate, also lives according to the same Sabbath principles. Despite Jesus' adherence to his father's will and command, most of Jesus' teachings on the Sabbath were surrounded by controversy. His practice of Sabbath clearly conflicted with the rampant legalism that distorted the Sabbath worship of his day. The Pharisees and other keepers of the Jewish law had created boundaries around the law in order to ensure its safekeeping. However, Jesus' Sabbath practices seemed to stand in direct contradiction to these Jewish laws that claimed to protect the LORD's Sabbath. Sabbath itself was intended to be the boundary, separating a day of rest and refreshment from the six working days of the week. In multiple passages, Jesus is confronted concerning his actions on the Sabbath, and each time Jesus' response indicates an element of the "divine intention" of Sabbath that transcends the petty laws created by the Jews in an attempt to protect it.²¹ Jesus makes it clear that the laws that had been developed to accompany God's original command of Sabbath no longer reflect

²⁰ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 33.

²¹ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*. (vol. 35A of *Word Biblical Commentary*; ed. R. P. Martin; Dallas: Word, 1989), 257.

Sabbath's original intent. They focused on the command of Sabbath, forgetting that Sabbath is also a beautiful gift from God. Jesus' example brings the broader conception of Sabbath as both command and gift back into focus and eminence.

The gospel of Luke describes two situations in which the synagogue leaders and Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus in a violation of the Sabbath law. In Luke 6, Jesus defends his disciples who were eating grain as they walked through the fields on the Sabbath. This was a technical violation of Jewish law. In response to the resultant Pharisaic outrage, Jesus draws a comparison between himself and King David who consumed consecrated bread from the house of God when it seemed to be in direct opposition to the law. By making this connection, Jesus insinuates that there is deeper understanding of Sabbath rest that the laws of the Jewish leaders do not take into account.²² In an intentional act of defiance, Jesus then heals the man with a shriveled hand in front of the Pharisees, also a violation of the Jewish law. In much the same way, Luke 13 records Jesus healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath day. She is completely restored to health on the Sabbath, yet the synagogue leader watching cannot celebrate with her. He can only see the legalistic borders which Jesus has crossed in order to perform this miracle. Jesus scathingly flings the man's own hypocrisy into the harsh light of honest scrutiny. Jesus is not fooled by his façade of piety and compliance with the law. He knows that the self-righteous Pharisee would sooner break Sabbath law to save his own cattle than to bring healing to the people around him as far as he is able. Jesus' response is a striking statement about the relationship between the Christian responsibility to obey the law and placing a priority on serving others.²³ As John Nolland notes in his commentary on the gospel of Luke, "Jesus' approach to Sabbath keeping is governed by the conviction that love of God is inseparably linked

²² Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 257.

²³ Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 262.

to love of neighbor.” This overarching law of love for God and for one’s neighbor puts to the side the pharisaical concerns for the letter of the law for the sake of loving God’s precious creation. Sabbath observation, then, as observed throughout the Bible, is a beautiful union between God’s command and God’s desire to invite his people to share in his delight. Intrinsic to Sabbath rest are trust in God’s provision, deep-seated refreshment that mirrors God’s own *menuha*, and a renewed focus on loving God’s creation.

The Sabbath Paradox: Effective and Sustainable Ministry Today

Armed with such an understanding of Sabbath, the overwhelming number of ministers that experience exhaustion or burnout is baffling. It does not make sense why ministry is so difficult to sustain when God has given a gracious invitation into his *menuha*. This invitation can refresh the burdened minister, bringing healing and restoration each time Sabbath is celebrated. Regular Sabbath worship is vital in order to be consistently immersed and reconnected to God’s power that is “making all things new.”²⁴ To observe Sabbath is to be made new each week. Consistent Sabbath rest creates rhythm in life; Sabbath ceases to be a simple engagement once every week. The importance and significance of life in between Sabbaths is increased.²⁵ The Sabbath elements of gratitude and trust begin to overflow from the Sabbath day into the rest of the week. Wirzba refers to this integration as “Sabbath moments of praise and thanksgiving” in which God’s *menuha* is celebrated or noticed in daily life, outside of the Sabbath day.²⁶

²⁴ Rev 21:5 NIV. Revelation 21 and 2 Corinthians 5 both detail the way that God is in the business of reconciliation. He is in the act of restoring people to himself, redeeming them from their sins and commissioning them to embark on their own missions of reconciliation in their communities. Sabbath is the expression and weekly reminder that God is always seeking to restore and make new his relationships with his people.

²⁵ Dorothy C. Bass, “Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice,” *CC* 114 (1997): 12.

²⁶ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 157.

This beautiful integration of Sabbath-mindedness into daily life empowers ministry to maintain the tension between effective and sustainable efforts. Ministry, however, seems more often to bounce between two extremes, the first of effectiveness and the second, sustainability. At the first extreme, the minister will have the incredible short term ability to mobilize people, fully invest in the community, and selflessly serve the congregation. However, despite consistently making important gifts and contributions to the church, the minister who is enslaved to the ghost of immediate and perpetual advancement can never simply cease working to engage in *menuha*. It is no surprise to see that this trajectory results in pastoral burnout. Similarly, the second extreme limits the vision and mission of the Church in the world. If a minister prefers to remain spiritually and physically in his personal comfort zone, ministry will be quite sustainable. It is comfortable and simple, but it does not reflect Jesus' own ministry on Earth.²⁷ Therefore, ministers must find a way to hold these two extremes in continual balance on this spectrum. To succumb to one extreme or another is to fall out of balance with God's plan for sustainable ministry. An old saying of the Jewish nation, "More than the Jews have kept Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews," is also applicable to the ministerial context.²⁸ As the Sabbath mindset shapes the way life is lived, Sabbath will cease to be an obligation and instead it will become a lifeline back to God's boundless provision.

Sabbath, as God's gift to humanity, enables his people to live lives of ministry that are both effective and sustainable. The process of continual restoration and refreshment that is found when engaged in God's *menuha* brings sustenance and life to ministry itself. More

²⁷ Jesus seemed to make a regular habit of ministering to people who are hard to reach. See Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4 or Jesus healing the woman who had bled and been unclean for 12 years in Mark chapter 5. He disregarded the way that the social norms of the day would have dictated his action, acting instead with unbridled love for the people around him.

²⁸ Bass, "Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice," 13.

importantly, it has effect of refocusing and centering life and ministry around God's heart, creating effective ministry.²⁹ It is a restorative process in interpersonal as well as divine relationships that necessarily originates and culminates in the person of God himself, even as he himself is being restored on the Sabbath.³⁰ With such a rich invitation to rest and delight in creation, why is Sabbath observance forgotten and distorted today? Dan Allender describes, quite humorously, how ridiculous it would be for someone to brag about breaking God's law by murder or adultery, and yet it is commonplace to boast about how busy life is, about an absolute lack of margin or sleep deprivation.³¹ It is quite unsettling to realize the way that Sabbath has fallen from the priority list in many American churches. Why is this? Why is the Sabbath difficult to keep?

Aaron Wymer, a pastor and preacher in East Tennessee, describes his personal struggle to observe Sabbath as a fight. He feels his schedule and the people around him pulling at him, threatening to roll over and swallow the margin he has created each week for Sabbath rest. Jonathan Edwards, the renowned 18th century American preacher, saw corruption of Sabbath rest in the culture around him and advocated vehemently against the disintegration of proper Sabbath observance.³² Despite the vast differences between these two men, they each have a firm grasp on the absolute importance of protecting the Sabbath for the sake of healthy and sustainable ministry. Sabbath does not simply occur without the intentional and concentrated will to do so.

²⁹ Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 34.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, 929.

³¹ Allender, *Sabbath*, 6.

³² Robert W. Caldwell III, "Call the Sabbath a Delight: Jonathan Edwards on the Lord's Day," *SJT* 47 (2005): 192.

Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, the trouble we have with observing the Sabbath is our collective reluctance to trust in its maker. To cease working for an entire day requires a humble recognition that the world will go on without our active labor. Dorothy Bass speaks strongly against this prideful reasoning, “To act as if the world cannot get along without our work for one day in seven is a startling display of pride that denies the sufficiency of our generous Maker.”³³ Abstaining from the burden of commonplace labor in Sabbath observation reminds us that we are instead to trust humbly in God’s provision, just as the Israelites did. We are perplexed and confused by the paradox of Sabbath. It defies all conventional and practical wisdom. We can perhaps see that a day of rest could contribute to our sustainability over time, but it is more difficult to believe that this Sabbath rest actually increases the effectiveness of the work we are able to do. Karl Barth contends even further: Sabbath is “precisely necessary for the sake of the duration and continuation...of work.”³⁴ By participating in God’s *menuha*, ceasing our efforts to provide, we experience new life and we share in the creation process again, surrendering to trust God’s complete provision. By resting from our work, no matter how noble, *menuha* restores us to be able to return refreshed and able to work more effectively. This Sabbath Paradox exemplifies God’s relationship with his people; he invites us to place our trust wholly in him and then provides avenues by which he may pour out his blessings out upon us if we choose to honor his command.

God’s command of Sabbath is inseparable from his promise of a full and abundant life in his son Jesus. Therefore, ministers must examine their own Sabbath observation. It is imperative that they periodically put aside reliance on their own work with intentionality so that they are able to trust freely in God’s provision and presence in the world. God’s *menuha* is free

³³ Bass, “Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice,” 15.

³⁴ McCormick, “Sabbath Rest: A Theological Imperative According to Karl Barth,” 546.

to experience and engage, the delight he intended for his Sabbath day is available to those who would choose it. In order to honor God by being the most effective Christians, ministers, and Christian ministers we can be, let us then release our desire for control by surrendering lordship of our lives to God. Then, and only then, as Sabbath-mindedness fills our lives with thanksgiving and praise in celebration of God's *menuha*, we can proceed to consider what it means to be ministers in Christ's church.

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