

Engaged Learning Project

Robert Booth  
Spiritual Formation in Ministry  
April 28, 2009

It is said that Sabbath keeping is not just taking a day off; rather, it is ordering your life around a pattern of working and resting. The day is to be set apart and devoted to rest, play, and delighting oneself in God.<sup>1</sup> As I thought and prayed about what discipline to choose to practice for my engaged learning project, my immediate thoughts went toward solitude and fasting. These are two disciplines of which I feel that I don't have a clear understanding and could benefit from them. As I spent time in prayer, I felt God leading me towards the discipline of Sabbath rather than the disciplines that I originally wanted to do. My immediate reaction was, "God, I honor Sunday. I try to honor you by keeping that day sacred and holy." The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Sunday was one of my busiest days. I preach multiple times, interact with those who attend, and often have spontaneous counseling moments that usually leave me exhausted. I realized that my energy is at an all-time low. I have too many things on my plate. Even preaching has become more of a burden sometimes rather than something that I love. So I realized that God was inviting me practice the Sabbath in my life. I fear that my life would have come crashing down around me, had I not begun this practice.

Biblically, the first occurrence of Sabbath was when God rested, according to Genesis 2:2-3, after He created the world. God then instituted Sabbath-keeping for Moses and the children of God on Mount Sinai in Exodus 20.<sup>2</sup> Exodus 35, Jeremiah 17, and Nehemiah 13 are but a few of the Scriptures that contain details about what the children of God were not to do on the Sabbath. In the Jewish world in biblical times, the Sabbath began in the evening when the family set aside all of the to-dos of the work

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 13.

week. The families would have a meal together, complete with the empty chair at the table symbolizing the presence of God. They were to prepare themselves for the day where they would delight themselves in the presence of God.<sup>3</sup> By the time of Jesus in the New Testament, the religious leaders had focused the Sabbath around what one could not do on that day. The day of delight had become perhaps one of the finest examples of how legalism can destroy the beautiful and wonderful creation of God. Jesus seemed to rebuke the legalistic aspect of Sabbath keeping when He said that the Sabbath was for the people, and not the people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27 ESV).

Historically, Christians have debated the issue of Sabbath observation for centuries. Debates ranged early on from, “what does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy?”, to what day of the week should the Sabbath take place?”. Over time, there was a shift from focusing on God’s invitation to Sabbath to what wasn’t allowed to happen on that day, much like what happened in the New Testament. An example of this is the Puritans. The Puritans believed that good Sabbaths made good Christians.<sup>4</sup> In New England during the 1600’s the General Court of Boston appointed one man per ten families to investigate their homes on the Sabbath to make sure that they were not breaking the Sabbath.<sup>5</sup> Even kissing wasn’t allowed in certain parts of the world on the Sabbath. In 1656, Captain Kemble of Boston was punished by sitting in the public

---

<sup>3</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005). 41.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, “Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice,” *Christian Century* (January 1-8, 1997) 16.

<sup>5</sup> Jewett, 139.

stocks for two hours because he was caught kissing his wife on the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup> Often throughout history, the joy of the Lord's day has been lost.

Some who have taken the Sabbath seriously have ruined it with what Dan Allender calls "legislation and worrisome fences that protect the Sabbath but destroy its delight."<sup>7</sup> In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the ancient spiritual practices. As modern-day Americans, we live in a fast-paced, inter-connected world and, with the advancement of technology, it is easier to stay connected twenty-four hours a day. It seems like spiritual vitality has taken a backseat to media saturation. Communion with God has been replaced with checking email, staying glued to cell phones, and staying in touch with hundreds of people via social networking. While all of this isn't necessarily evil, it can and has become a distraction away from the life to which God has invited us. In response to this crisis in the lives of followers of Jesus Christ, contemporary writers like Wayne Muller, Brian McLaren, Dan Allender, Phyllis Tickle and others have written books inviting readers to take up the ancient practices of spiritual disciplines. Among these ancient practices some good material has been written about the Sabbath. And it is this material that has helped me gain a much needed footing in this area.

As I prepared to start this practice of Sabbath keeping, the first thing that I did after praying and deciding to do this practice was to talk to my wife. If I was going to take a day to practice the Sabbath, I would need her support and her willingness to do this journey together. She agreed that we would do this together. And if it worked, we would

---

<sup>6</sup> Alice Morse Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), Kindle e-book.

<sup>7</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Sabbath*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 13.

implement it in our lives as we attempt to raise our family to be like Jesus. We had several obstacles that needed to be removed. The first obstacle was psychological. What would people think about us taking a Sabbath? Would they think that we were being lazy? Wasn't Sunday the day of Sabbath? Once we decided that taking a Sabbath in our lives was more important than what people thought, the next obstacle was to figure out what day. Sunday was obviously out, as was Saturday, because we have an evening service on Saturday. We also had activities planned for every day and evening. When we looked at our calendars, we began to realize that we were probably too busy. After we rearranged our calendar, we chose Thursday to be our Sabbath. The next actions to decide was what to do and not do on our Sabbath. We looked at several books and articles together and formed a plan. Rather than just "taking a day off", we wanted it to mean something more. We decided that the primary focus for our Sabbath was to get physical and spiritual rest. We began to realize through our reading that we needed to be still and that the heart of the Sabbath is stopping, not finding more things to do.<sup>8</sup> Ministry takes a toll on families, and it became our desire to spend as much of our Sabbath together as possible. We decided that we would disconnect from our ministry world as much as we could.

My wife and I decided that implementing a semi-routine would work for us best as we implemented the Sabbath. So we sleep in a little bit and I get up before anyone else. The writer of Hebrews suggests that the Sabbath is to be a time of rest for God's people (Heb. 4:9-11 ESV). So we made sure that we incorporated that into our Sabbath! We usually have a leisurely breakfast together and a time of devotions. We spend time

---

<sup>8</sup> Lynne M. Baab, "A Day Off from God Stuff," *Leadership Journal* 28 (Spring 2007): 35.

together, perhaps reading or doing things with our eight-month-old little girl. Towards the afternoon, we leave town. The main reason we leave is that our door is frequently knocked on in the afternoon and evening. We live above our church, and the entire community knows that! Rather than grow frustrated at this, we chose to just leave town for the afternoon and early evening. Since it was still chilly outside, we chose indoor activities. Our main desire was to just be together and rest. We don't have an agenda and we don't have a list of things that need to be accomplished. We try our best to refrain from talking about ministry stuff. We also try to turn off our phones, or at least simply monitor the calls. If there is a pastoral emergency, I have staff and volunteers who are more than capable to help out. Eugene Peterson writes that the two important components of Sabbath-keeping according to Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 are praying and playing and we tried to implement that.<sup>9</sup>

There were several additional things that I needed to put down on paper as I finished up my plan for my Sabbath. One was to untether myself from technology on my Sabbath. Richard Swenson in *Restoring Margin to Overloaded Lives* explains that many individuals currently suffer from what he terms Information Fatigue Syndrome.<sup>10</sup> When I read that, I could immediately identify with it. I felt God directing me that I needed to set technology aside as much as possible on my Sabbath. I decided that on my Sabbath I would that I would untie myself from my Mac and not get on Facebook, Twitter or even the internet. In essence I would go on a media fast. I also needed additional time of spiritual refreshing on my Sabbath; therefore, I decided to get up before my family and

---

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Peterson, "Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker," *Christianity Today*, September 2, 1988, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Swenson and Karen Lee-Thorp. *Restoring Margin to Overloaded Lives*. (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999), 41.

spend a few hours with God by myself. I also decided that I would not do Seminary work or sermon prep on my Sabbath. This was a huge adjustment for me. I try to spread my sermon prep and Seminary work throughout the week and to give up a day would simply make more work for the other days. I also consciously try to keep from doing Seminary work on Sunday. But God has helped me to get my work done in five days, and actually feel refreshed and renewed.

After laying out our plan as much as was possible, I talked to my accountability partners about this new endeavor. I was a little nervous about this because I wondered again if they would think that I was lazy. In fact, the opposite was true. They were excited that I was taking this step and told me that they had been growing concerned that I was on the road to becoming burned-out. They told me that they would keep my family and me in prayer and to keep them updated weekly through email.

As our first Sabbath approached, I was excited and a little anxious. I didn't realize how much I would have to work to protect my Sabbath. As soon as we decided that Thursdays would be our Sabbath it seemed that we had picked the worst day possible. I was asked to join a group that met on Thursdays; a couple needing counseling could only meet on Thursdays; and even the phone seemed to ring more often on Thursdays. And of course, when I tried to explain that Thursdays was our Sabbath, I was met with a blank stare. The insinuation seemed to be "What planet did you come from?"

That first Thursday morning, my Sabbath, I got up early and took my Bible and newly purchased journal and went to my quiet spot where I spent some much needed time with God. I poured my heart out to Him and I spent a significant amount of time of just trying to listen to Him. He showed me things of which I was unaware. I was too

focused on ministry. That was something that I didn't realize was bad until that moment. God showed me that I was to the point where I was burned out as was my wife. I walked away from my time with God discouraged and defeated. Here I was pouring out my life to my needy community and I was almost to the point of breaking. It just didn't seem right. Apparently, I needed a Sabbath more than I realized.

That day, I contacted one of my mentors/accountability partners and after we prayed and talked together he recommended that I read two books. One was titled *Mad Church Disease: Overcoming the Burnout Epidemic* by Anne Jackson and the other was *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* by Wayne Cordeiro. Through these books, I came to the realization that I exhibited many of the symptoms of burnout in my physical, emotional, and spiritual health. My mentor recommended that I begin to make drastic changes in all facets of my life. Through prayer and communication with my wife and ministry team I have reduced my ministry workload, implemented a diet and exercise program, and am openly pursuing what else I need to stop doing. I never dreamed that the first direct result of keeping the Sabbath in my personal life would be the very thing that would save my life.

Some other results of intentionally practicing the discipline of the Sabbath were less anxiety producing but very needed. I began to sense peace in my life, a peace that I can't even begin to explain and understand. When Thursdays end and I know that ministry will kick in full throttle, I am not as anxious as I was before. Even though this season of ministry is perhaps the most grueling I have experienced yet, I have this sense that it is all going to be okay.

My level of communication has increased, first of all with my wife. I was too busy and was giving her the impression that I was too busy to hear her struggles. When I discovered this, I began to cry from the depths of my soul. I never meant for that to happen. My level of communication with God has increased. He has been showing me things and giving me insights about Scripture like I have never experienced. My level of communication with my volunteer ministry staff has increased. I don't think that I was overbearing, but I did give them the impression that I was busy. So busy, that apparently one of my volunteers told someone that I was probably too busy to help him out with his problem. While I appreciate them looking out for me, I don't want to give that impression to my staff or church.

My level of joy has increased. My heart is filled with more joy toward my wife as is hers toward me. We spend most of our Sabbath just enjoying our time together - emotionally and physically. We intentionally laugh together, laugh with our little girl as she does new things. And we dream together. We dream of places we want to go and things we want to accomplish, things we want our little girl to know. Thursdays are filled with joy because we make it happen.

Another result has been the opening of my eyes to specific needs in my community and ways that our ministry can address them. I am praying and looking forward to taking our church community to a level of ministry that will be new to all of us. God has used this project to change my life and the reason that I do ministry: to realize that I am not the only one who can "change the city of Lebanon." Through keeping the Sabbath, listening to God, and reflecting, I realize that is an issue of pride. There are other people, even in my congregation of hurting people, who can come along beside

me and we can labor together. Together with my ministry team, we are coming up with creative ways to meet the challenges. I have stepped down from several areas in my ministry. And while that has been difficult and even humbling, I realize that this is exactly what God wants. I don't want to base my ministry on my own strength. Without the help of God, I am nothing,

I truly believe that God wanted me take this class and do this engaged learning project to save my life. My eyes needed to be opened to the danger that I was allowing myself and my family to experience. I really believe that our ministry and influence could have been damaged. I was so busy and I allowed my wife to get caught up in that busyness. And the sad thing is that we were busy doing good things: good things that needed to be done. I was suffering from burnout, and I believe that my wife was very close to that herself.

I realize that there are some who will not understand why my wife and I take our Sabbath on Thursdays. I know that we will face blank stares when we tell our friends that Thursday is our day of rest and play, but we understand the reason. God has given us this precious gift, and I pray that I will never take it for granted again.

(2799 words)

## Bibliography

- Allender, Dan B. *Sabbath*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009.
- Baab, Lynne. "A Day Off from God Stuff," *Leadership Journal* 28 (Spring 2007): 34-37.
- Barton, Ruth Haley. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006.
- Bass, Dorothy C. "Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice." *Christian Century*, January 1-8, 1997.
- Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005.
- Cordeiro, Wayne. *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion*. Bloomington: Bethany House, 2009.
- Earle, Alice Morse. *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891. Kindle e-book.
- Jackson, Anne. *Mad Church Disease: Overcoming the Burnout Epidemic*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.
- Jewett, Paul K. *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971.
- Peterson, Eugene. "Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker." *Christianity Today* September 2, 1988.
- Swenson, Richard, and Karen Lee-Thorp. *Restoring Margin to Overloaded Lives*. Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1999.