

The Heart of God//Justice from Genesis to Revelation
Part Nine - God's Justice and Sabbath Rest

November 10, 2024
By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Secrets of the Sabbath

Jesus is Jewish and as a Jewish man kept one of their strangest sacred rituals: the Sabbath.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sings of the Sabbath:

"Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at *the sanctification of time*...The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans or Germans were able to burn..."¹

The Sabbath is sacred because of God's command, yes, but also because the Sabbath is a matter of Justice.

The Sabbath keeps us from being slaves.

Part 1: Sabbath as Justice

a. Give 'em a Break (or Slaves No More)

Deuteronomy is presented as the liberator Moses' 'last lecture.' He recounts many of the details of the first four books of the Bible, but sometimes with subtle shifts in emphasis.

In Deuteronomy 5 he recounts the 'Ten Teachings/Commandments', when he gets to teaching 4, the Sabbath, he gives a different reason than the Exodus. The Exodus said the Israelites should rest because Yahweh rested on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11; Genesis 2:1-3). Moses tells the Israelites to keep the Sabbath because they were slaves in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12).

Moses is giving the practical reason for the sanctity of the Sabbath, a justice reason. Slaves are not in control of their time; they are dehumanized by ceaseless toil. A day of rest, not just for the Israelites but for their slaves, animals and the foreigners among them, undoes this dehumanizing act of slavery.

The Sabbath keeps us from being slaves and treating other people like slaves.

This makes Sabbath keeping an act of resistance and defiance. Cole Arthur Riley, an African American woman and descendant of enslaved people, writes of the Sabbath:

"When we rest, we do so in memory of rest denied. ...When I rest my eyes, I meet those ancestors and they meet me, as time blurs within us...They tell me to walk away like they couldn't. Rest is an act of defiance...It's the audacity to face the demands of this world and proclaim, *We will not be owned.*"²

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, pg. 8.

² Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*, Pg. 156-157, quoted in Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, pg. 35.

b. People/Piety

Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees over the Sabbath sometimes leads to the misinterpretation that Sabbath keeping is not for Christians. In Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus' disciples are picking grain as they walk through a field on the Sabbath and the Pharisees chastise them for it.

The Pharisees had complex commandments they had put on top of the Sabbath command to 'cease from work' as an attempt to define work. Jesus challenges them for chastising the disciples, not about whether to keep the Sabbath but on *how*.

David, while on campaign and hiding from Saul, ate the consecrated bread only for priests (1 Samuel 21:1-6). The Priests work on the Sabbath in the temple. Jesus says, I am greater than that temple and Lord over the Sabbath, as in, I know what the Sabbath is really for and means.

"The Sabbath was made for people and not people for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27)

Jesus' challenge against the Pharisees was most likely on the basis of justice issues. Jesus and his disciples were hungry, homeless and wandering. Yes, God wants people to rest. But should this command stop the poor from being able to care for themselves? No.

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:7/Hosea 6:6a). Jesus quotes the prophets to remind the Pharisees that people are more important than piety. Not that piety doesn't matter, proper piety is supposed to make us more loving towards people, to increase our desire for justice.

The Sabbath keeps us from being slaves, even to the Sabbath.

Part II: Sabbath Engagement in Justice

a. Slaves No More (for the People in the Front)

Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees continues in Matthew 12:9-14. In synagogue he sees a man with a 'withered hand' and knows the Pharisees want to see if He will break Sabbath by healing—because by their interpretation you could only treat life-threatening wounds on the Sabbath. Jesus says the Sabbath is a day to do good.

This passage can be abused and used to jettison Sabbath keeping from our lives and leads some of us to re-enslave ourselves to 'the good'. Those of us in 'helping professions or paid ministry are often the most guilty of being 'too important' to keep the Sabbath or take a break.

Paul says in Romans 8:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

This tension between 'sonship' and 'slavery' is on display in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Elder Son, upon hearing the party for his brother's return, says to the Father with anger:

'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' (Luke 15:29b-30)

The Elder Son sees himself as someone who is 'slaving' for the father.

Henri Nouwen writes:

"When I listen carefully to the words with which the elder son attacks his father—self-righteous, self-pitying, jealous words—I hear a deeper complaint. It is the complaint that comes from a heart that feels it never received what it was due."³

Nouwen's note questions the Elder Son's statement. Is he really doing all this for the Father? Or is it for the rewards he thinks he deserves? I imagine that the reason the Elder Son never got the goat he talks about is because he never asked for it.

Many of us never rest or enjoy life because of the fear Paul described above. We adopt the 'slave spirit' of the Elder Son, enslaved to our fear about not being important enough, not being provided for, or that if I don't do it nobody else will.

But the Sabbath is given to us to keep us from being slaves, even to 'the good'.

b. Faithfulness > Fruitfulness

The sabbath keeps us by helping us learn a complex mathematical proof:

Faithfulness > Fruitfulness

My friend Dan gave something like this equation at a morning meeting just a couple weeks ago, he said Faithfulness is in our control, fruitfulness isn't.⁴

I had another friend who learned this lesson the hard way. He'd been part of starting a discipleship school that blew up. He'd put his life into ministry and had almost nothing to show for it.

He prayed in frustration and lament: God, I've given you everything and got nothing to show for it. Just show me some fruit.

And he felt that still small voice of God respond: You're not a harvester. You're a ploughman.

As in, you're not gonna see the fruit. But keep working.

Out of this he wrote this kind of defiant—marginally cheeky—anthem about being a ploughman, he sings:

"Aint' gonna sit around waiting for the harvest
my head's like flint my eyes like fire
I have seen so many fields lying fallow
gonna let my plough go row by row."

And finally, the bridge is just a simple line: "The seed you sow will grow, you gotta live by faith."

³ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, pg. 72.

⁴ Dan Sczebel at Men's Day Thursday—you should go!

In Mark 4:26-29 Jesus tells a mysterious parable about a Sower who sows seed and then the seed grows 'all by itself' whether he 'sleeps or gets up'. Telling this parable on the heels of the Parable of the Sower seems to be a balancing image. Yes, we need to bear fruit, but that fruit is not always in our control. And, sometimes, God needs some of us to be plough people, people who will—to riff on the Greek Proverb—plant trees we will never see the fruit of.

That phrase 'whether he sleeps or gets up' feels like permission for the Sabbath. A reminder that we can unplug and step away and good things can happen, even if we're asleep.

Ruth Haley Barton writes:

"Our resistance and/or dismissive attitude toward sabbath is often related to an unwillingness to acknowledge and live within the limits of our humanity, to honor our finiteness, to confront the nasty lie that we are indispensable."⁵

The Sabbath keeps us from being slaves, but it also stops us from believing the lie that we're superheroes or gods too.

Kept By God's Rest

Wendall Berry writes in one of his poems about the Sabbath:

The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.

Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
Your will, not ours. And it is fit
Our only choice should be to die
Into that rest, or out of it.⁶

The implications of this are not to keep the Sabbath, but let the Sabbath keep you. Four ways to begin are:

a. Plan to Just Do Something (It Will Probably Help)

Full day Sabbath may feel impossible right now, but that doesn't mean you can't do something.

If your concern for Sabbath keeping is falling behind, it's the experience of most Sabbath-ers that their work actually *gets better* when they Sabbath. God resting on the seventh day shows that God wrote rests into the symphony of creation. We need rest to do our best.

b. Find Your No

Make a list of what you *will not do* on the Sabbath. Most who practice agree that work notifications count as work and the news cycle rarely leaves us feeling rested.

⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, pg. 97

⁶ Wendall Berry, "Sabbaths 1979 II"

c. Take a Lower Grade

Abraham Joshua Heschel asks:

"Is it possible for a human being to do all his work in six days? Does not our work always remain incomplete? What the verse means to convey is this: Rest on the Sabbath as if all your work were done. Another interpretation: *Rest even from the thought of labor.*"⁷

If you start to Sabbath, accept that something will just not get done and that may be the point. Jacques Philippe writes:

"Identification of the self with the good one is able to accomplish leads to spiritual pride: consciously or not, we consider ourselves the source of that good, instead of recognizing that all the good we are able to do is a free gift from God."⁸

So maybe God wants you to take a lower grade and leave the house a mess sometimes, just to remind you He loves you regardless of your ability to produce.

d. Give the Gift of Rest

Sabbath is not just for us, but for those who are under our care as well—at work, at home, or wherever. We should enforce and uphold livable rhythms of work and rest.

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, pg. 32.

⁸ Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom*, pg. 123.

Discussion Questions:

Open Up

What is your experience with the Sabbath?

Dig in

Re-read **Deuteronomy 5:12**

- How could a culture of 'Sabbath keeping' speak to an overworked and overstressed world?
- What do you feel you might be 'enslaved to', what would it look like to 'Sabbath' from that thing?

Re-read **Matthew 12:1-14**

- How do you engage in acts of piety, like the Sabbath, without losing the big picture of God making you a more righteous and just person?
- What examples have you seen of people 'enslaved to the good' in ministry? What are the negative consequences of this enslavement?
- Where in your life may God be calling you to faithfulness without necessarily seeing the fruit?

Challenge

- Keep a Sabbath this week. Plan ahead of time, especially concerning what you *won't* do. I recommend staying off the internet and turning off your phone for a start.

Prayer

- Pray for just rhythms of work and rest around the world. Ask that God relieve you of the burden of carrying the world. Feel free to pray about any other concerns that have come up out of your discussion.