

Rest, Redefined



Rest is a powerful word. For some it is held in contrast to work, work being the oppressor of what we consider our real lives. For others it's an illusory promise held like a carrot at the end of a stick. In this essay I'd like to address what questions surrounding rest we, as people of God, should be asking and considering in our communities and personal lives. My aim is that by thinking through the issues discussed here, we would develop our ability to rest as God intends, because rest matters. It's more than just a good idea, it's a part of God's plan for us.

Work

The opposite of rest is unrest. I suppose that many would expect work, rather than unrest, to be the antithesis of rest and inasmuch as they view work in negative terms that may make sense. But that is not only unhelpful - it may be harmful. When I say "work", I mean to include any activities that we see as needful of our energies. To work is simply to expend one's energies. This can be a job, school, mowing the lawn, solving some problem, helping a friend, etc.

Through a process unknown to me, work in American culture has come to be seen negatively by most. Have you ever been sitting leisurely on your sofa one Sunday afternoon, only to realize you have work or school in the morning? What is the feeling you have at that moment? I do not wish to delve into the complex social, political, and economic factors that may have contributed to this because I don't believe they are

especially helpful in understanding how we might redeem work in our present culture. It's probably more useful to ask ourselves the question, "How does God view work?" Scripture provides us excellent insight into this question and the answer will provide a framework for understanding rest and the role God intends it to play in our lives.

The word "work" is used more than 500 times in the Bible with a vast majority of those occurrences being positive; even God's creation of the cosmos is labeled "work", God's first communication to Adam and Eve includes the command to subdue the earth. God placed Adam in the Garden specifically for the purpose of having him work in it (see Gen. 1 & 2). If work were evil, bad, or undesirable, why would God have made it a part of his initial "very good" creation? God delights in his work, he created the cosmos by working, and he is working this very moment (John 5:17). The only point at which it may be said that work is bad is when the means to the work or the ends of the work are contrary to the plans and desires of God. Otherwise, work is good!

So what accounts for our viewing work in such a negative light? Brokenness. Every part of us is affected by sin until the redemptive *work* of God begins to move us to wholeness. We must ask ourselves the questions, "Do I view work in a positive light? Do I see my work as a way to glorify God? Am I working as God works or as the world works?" These questions are pivotal in coming to a right

view of work, developing a *love for* work, and they are also essential for keeping work in its proper place in our lives. There is a great deal more that can be discussed here, but suffice it to say God loves work and we should too.

Unrest

I suggested in the previous section that unrest is the antithesis of rest. As I conceive of it, unrest is the presence of anxiousness, disturbance, stress, or uneasiness in our lives. This state is temporary for most, marked by peaks and troughs, but for others it has come to dominate their very identity. It is troubling to me the amount of unrest that I find present in myself and others who are called to the peace marked by the indwelling Spirit of God. We scamper from activity to activity: job to school, home to errand, harried by a constant state of unrest. In a game of Checkers, we are like the one who moves haphazardly, moving directly into spaces where the number of pieces on our boards will be reduced, and hurling our back row forward as soon as possible in hopes that in some way we might mitigate our losses. We're un-centered, we're missing a great many blessings, we've deafened our ears, and the most disconcerting thing of all is that we think it's *normal*.

How often do you hear someone communicate to you that they are stressed? How often do you feel that way or say it? We have a problem: we think it's perfectly acceptable to be this way, and so we take absolutely no steps to fix our problem. We even take pride in being busy and stressed out as if our value is dependent on all the things we're getting done! What I want to suggest to you is something I first heard Brennan Manning say in *The Signature of Jesus*. He remarked, "Simplicity of life does not depend upon simplicity of environment. The real problem lies within. Outer

distractions reflect a lack of inner integration...our life in Christ is meant to be lived out of the Center." This provides a good backdrop for us to discuss the real issue at hand: rest.

Rest

Rest is *not* the absence of work per se, but rather the presence of something else entirely. It is not

uncommon for people after a long week of school or work to look forward to the weekend.

Neither is it uncommon for those same people to feel like their weekend flew

past them as they trudge into work or school Monday morning. Stop and ponder, why is it this way? I suggest it's that people don't know how to rest.

For many people, rest means one of two things: entertainment or lack of purposeful activity, but I contend that rest is neither. Our understanding of words is imperative to our ability to experience reality. Our faulty definition of rest prohibits us from experiencing it as it is meant to be.

So what is "rest"?

Rest carries with it two primary traits: pause and refreshing. *Anapauó* is the Greek word that is primarily translated "rest" in the New Testament. This word implies the idea of reposing after hard work, and it also is used interchangeably in many New Testament translations to mean "refresh"; for instance, Paul remarks that some of his fellow workers in the gospel who tended to his needs had "refreshed (*anapauó*) [his] spirit" (1 Co. 16:18). The most common Old Testament word for rest is the Hebrew word *nuach*. The word *nuach* has two other dimensions that

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may shed light on the concept of rest, namely settling and being quiet. In Exodus 20:11 it is said that after God created the cosmos he rested (*nuach*) on the seventh day. This word is used to speak of God *settling deeply* after his work. Think of a man who has just taken to planting an entire garden in the heat of the day, settling deeply is best conceptualized as him sitting down in the cool of the shade in a comfortable chair and drinking a cold glass of water while he surveys and enjoys his work. It is not as though God had abandoned the world and left it to its own devices by resting, rather he related to it in a different way, as we should when we rest. You'll note that rest is implicitly linked to work in both the Hebrew and the Greek. And you'll do far better to note that resting well requires working well, and working well requires resting well. They share a cooperative relationship; when you separate them, both languish.

It would be remiss of me not to briefly mention Sabbath here. Whatever you believe about Sabbath, I think it's fair to suggest that God intended

Sabbath to be a gift to his people, a time for them to rest (pause, refresh, settle deeply). As Jesus remarked, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." God likes for us to rest and knew we wouldn't take it upon ourselves to do it well, so he helped us out and made it a command. But it seems to me that much of Western Christianity has largely abandoned the notion of Sabbath, labeling it an irrelevant vestige of archaic Judaism. I think that is a mistake. Here, I'm not making a statement that certain practices should be normative to the Christian experience. Rather, I seek to

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ask whether we've taken seriously the fact that God instituted the Sabbath for very real conditions that still exist today, namely that we still do physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual work. In short, God cares for us and so he desires for us to have real rest. We must see the need for rest on God's terms and not our own. To equate rest to entertainment or doing nothing is to miss the need for the kind of rest that "puts in". Rest is not primarily about doing what you wish to do, or having fun. If it has become that for you, you may be missing out on the rest God intends for you due to the faulty definition mentioned above. What we need is time that is focused on refreshing our body, soul, and spirit. Even if you do not *feel* hampered or stressed, you still need rest.

Consider the rare condition of someone who can feel no pain. Some might consider this to be a great gift, but it is a very dangerous gift indeed. The man with such a condition can step on a rusty nail and be unaware of it. He feels no pain and so he takes no action to remedy his injury. The wound will, no doubt, be infected and cause many health problems, perhaps even kill him. So it is with many of God's people. Numbed by work, school, entertainment, and a great many trivial pursuits, they have lost the sense of what real life feels like. They are in need of spiritual attention and don't have the spiritual sense to realize it. This may be due to a lack of rest, and possibly lack of good work as well.

You may be asking yourself, "so...what now?" Below, I suggest a few ideas to consider if you'd like to rest as God intends.

1. Rest doesn't come easy and it's not cheap. "Wait, what? I thought rest *was* the easy part!" Well, it ought to be, but we've done an excellent job of botching it. It should come as no surprise to you that we are proficient at taking good things God gives us and making them hopelessly useless

and broken. God handed us an apple, we tried to use it as a football instead of food, and we told him it was a dumb football and didn't fly well. We've missed the point of real rest, but such is the logic behind our broken attempts to practice it. So if you want to learn how to rest, you first need to realize that it will take discipline and sacrifice on your part. Separating yourself from your work and the many seductive distractions that comprise your everyday existence is not easy. You must learn the grace of saying "no". You will not fall into rest, or stumble upon it, you must *find* it; rest must be reclaimed before it is to be enjoyed.

Have you ever felt like there wasn't enough time in the day, as if life was passing you by at break-neck speed? Then you've probably rarely, if ever, found a spot to sit still and quiet, making it your job to listen rather than speak. Time slows in such times. That doesn't sound fun, it doesn't sound interesting, and it certainly doesn't sound entertaining. But, then, that's because we've conflated entertainment and rest. Being entertained is *not* what rest is about. Rest is about stopping and settling deeply. The Spirit calls us into this kind of quality rest, but it must be learned and cultivated.

2. Rest takes real time, regularly. Have you ever planned rest into your schedule? If the answer to that question is no, then you may be guilty of thinking rest will find you. It won't. Taking the time to plan rest into your schedule is not only practical, it's Biblical. Without going any further into the Sabbath discourse above, I'll just say that God wanted rest for his people, and he wouldn't have had to command them to keep Sabbath if it was something they would naturally do anyway. If you want rest you need to find a day, a time, or times that you purposefully rest. And I don't mean vacation: If you're a person with the means, you may think you can simply focus on working when you're in town and resting when you take trips out of

town. And while there's certainly nothing wrong with vacationing, the mentality of only being able to find rest in geographical escape is faulty. We need "vacation" here; we need it regularly. We need to be able to be content where we are and find rest. Rest shouldn't be an oasis in a desert; it should be a bottle of water as we walk a path.

3. Rest isn't selfish. Maybe you're starting to really connect with what I'm saying. You might be thinking, "You know what? I do need rest. I deserve it. Shoot, God commands me to do it. I need to do this for me." Well, kind of. But be careful. Avoid extremes. Rest does *not* mean that you just do what you want to do, as we've established above. The law of love and the life of Christ in the Spirit that we've been given presides over our rest. Jesus himself had this argument with the Pharisees. On the Sabbath a man who had a shriveled hand stood before him. With his opponents watching, Jesus questioned them as to whether it was right to heal someone or not on the Sabbath. According to their tradition of Sabbath, the

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answer was clearly no. But Jesus healed the man in front of them all and in doing so taught us a valuable lesson about the rest God wants his people to engage in: it should not suspend his law of love nor our purposeful action. When we rest, it should be as people who, in our rest, show supreme priority to loving others.

4. Rest is meant for those who really work. Work is inextricably linked to rest. If you are a poor worker, you'll be a poor rester. People who do not put themselves wholly into their work do not experience the fullness of good rest because they have not really expended

their physical, mental, and/or emotional energies. Colossians 3:23 says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” The goal isn’t burnout; it’s using the fuel God’s given you to go as far as he’s asked you to. The one who works half-heartedly is akin to a runner running an 800 meter race only to get to 700 meters and quit. There’s no shame in a runner who gives it her all and ends up in last place. The only shame is in not finishing, not trying, and not having the mettle to completely give oneself to a task. People who use the full tank God’s given them on a daily basis find that he fills them right back up when they rest, and their heart and mind feel full because they know they work for the Lord. Be aware, though, that this is a balance. You must avoid burnout (a problem typified by using your own fuel instead of that given by God), as well as atrophy (not working hard), and negligence (not working well). As a side note to the college students I love so much: if you find yourself without much to do regularly, I suggest asking a spiritual mentor to advise you on where you can be working. There *is* work to do, the question is, are you willing to do it? If you were told that someone needed help getting to and from school, would you take it upon yourself to wake up early and take them? Or is the job “not worth your time?” There is always work, and a good day is a day spent working hard and well without neglecting other important areas of our life like friends and family.

5. Rest is a rhythm.

We need to develop sustainable rhythms of life. Be intentional about making and keeping a schedule that includes planned rest time. People who don’t keep structure in their schedules usually find themselves stressed. Find a balance between rest and work that is healthy. There may be seasons where more work and less rest is required, and vice versa, but keep to a plan. In doing

so you’ll be able to rest well and work well consistently.

6. Rest takes surrender.

One of the most common questions I hear about rest is “what do I do?” It is a question that, at once, is funny and also sad. It’s funny because it’s like someone asking me to tell them what their favorite kind of food is, and it’s sad because it reminds me of children of the industrial revolution era who had to work full-time at such a young age that they had no concept of play, fun, or relaxation. Rest is doing what fills you up, centering on God, and combining the two in meaningful ways. If it’s a walk that finds you enjoying the weather and praising God for his good creation let it be that. If it’s catching up with a close friend and talking about life, let it be that. If it’s reading a good book, sitting on your porch with some iced tea, riding a bike, getting alone time, etc. let it be that. But let those activities find you deeply settling, keying in to the presence of God. The surrender part comes when you say “no” to unwarranted distractions, eschew business, fight laziness, and realize that for all your work and labor, there is only one important thing: life in Jesus. Give up your self-importance, your need to feel like anything is yours, and rest in God. I want to add a note here about the American notion of work. It’s perfectly acceptable in our culture to work long hours in order to “provide for our family”, but what does your family really need? Is it more things? More money? More space? Or more you? Beware of the draw of comfort and money that replaces quality time with people we need to be present with.

I hope you’re now drawn to ask more questions about what good rest looks like in your life. Share your questions with a friend or mentor, pursue rest the way God intended it, and it will find you as the gracious gift God intended it to be.