



*"It is not as though we do not love God—we love God deeply. We just do not know how to sit with God anymore. We have come to know Jesus only as the Lord of the Harvest, forgetting he is the Lord of the Sabbath as well. Sabbath forgetfulness is driven, so often, in the name of doing stuff for God rather than being with God. The result of our Sabbath amnesia is that we have become perhaps the most emotionally exhausted, psychologically overworked, spiritually malnourished people in history."*

A.J. Swoboda. Subversive Sabbath

Sabbath, in many ways, is the forgotten commandment.

In the Genesis account of creation, there are many things that God declares to be good. There are a few things (namely, men and women) that He declares to be "very good." But there is only one thing that is declared to be *qadosh* in Hebrew, or holy—the Sabbath day. From the very beginning God has set aside one day out of seven for a few specific purposes. We are called to "cease" (the literal meaning of "sabbath" in Hebrew), rest from our labors, delight in the beauty of creation, and worship God. And yet, despite these specific commands, countless Christians (pastors chief among them!) proudly ignore this command.

We are called and commanded to Sabbath. It was one of the most important practices from the life of Jesus, and in our current age of restlessness, only made worse by our digital distractions and consumeristic culture, it is a necessity for us to practice the way of Jesus. We model after Jesus, who didn't just practice the Sabbath one day a week but lived out of the spirit of Sabbath all week long.

Both the teachings in this series and the practices in this booklet will focus both on the why and the how of Sabbath. In our modern world a 24-hour Sabbath can feel overwhelming and impossible, so this series is designed to make it reachable. The specific exercises in this booklet will stretch over the next four weeks and will tie directly to the teachings from Sunday morning. You can find the teachings at [www.yorkalliance.org/sermons-embedded](http://www.yorkalliance.org/sermons-embedded). We believe that it is impossible to gain the life of Jesus without practicing the lifestyle of Jesus, and Jesus intentionally chose to live in community. Therefore,

there are both individual and communal exercises in this guidebook. If you don't currently have a connection to a Community Group or another committed community of believers with whom to engage this material, you are strongly encouraged to get connected to one. You can get more information and sign up at [yorkalliance.org/groups](http://yorkalliance.org/groups).

This practice guide has been developed in partnership with a ministry called "Practicing the Way." I have relied heavily on their materials in developing both this material and the series. Beyond "Practicing the Way," I have tried to cite specific ideas and quotations where appropriate. A few key resources that I have found especially helpful in preparing for this series and would recommend for further study: Garden City by John Mark Comer, Subversive Sabbath by A.J. Swoboda, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly by Marva Dawn, Sabbath as Resistance by Walter Brueggemann, 24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life by Dr. Matthew Sleeth, and Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The weeks will be laid out as follows:

- Week One: The Need for Rest
- Week Two: Sabbath Rhythm
- Week Three: Sabbath Resistance
- Week Four: Sabbath Remembering

As you engage these exercises, let me encourage you at the front end to beware of the parallel temptations of legalism and license. The practice of Sabbath has always suffered from legalism, from the hypocrisy of the Pharisees to the so-called "blue laws" of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, our response to legalism has often been license, disregarding the command of God altogether and replacing a 24-hour Sabbath period with an hour or two at church a few times a month and otherwise, living as we desire.

At the core, Sabbath is remembering that we belong to God. "For Jews, forgetting the Sabbath was akin to forgetting one's entire identity." (Swoboda, pg. 6) In many ways we are those who have forgotten who we are. The practice of Sabbath has the potential to bring our identities back in line with how God created us.

## **Week One: The Need for Rest**

*“Subtracting a day of rest each week has had a profound effect on our lives. How could it not? One day a week adds up. Fifty-two days a year times an average life span is equal to more than eleven years. Take away eleven years of anything in a lifetime, and there will be a change.*

*Subtract over a decade of sleep, work, or education, and the entire character of one’s existence is altered. Unfortunately, it’s not Monday that got mislaid; it’s our Sabbath. If there is to be any hope for recovering the Sabbath, we must first admit that something is missing.”*

*Matthew Sleeth, 24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life*

We live in the midst of an incredible paradox. Just about everyone in our society would say that they are in need of rest, at times even bordering on exhaustion and burnout. At the same time, there is a Biblical command to rest one full day out of every seven, which just about everyone in the church and the society as a whole ignores. Why is rest so elusive?

Our consumerist society is full of products and services being marketed to give us rest. And yet, the economy itself is seeking to monetize our restlessness, creating desire in us for “more” or “next” or “better” that just brings more restlessness. Rest can never come from a product or a service, nor can it come from “more” or “better”: rest comes from Jesus Himself, and the vehicle that He uses is Sabbath. Sabbath is intended to be a 24-hour gift of joy and rest each week that allows us to live out of His rest for the rest of the week.

### **Discuss in Community**

Have somebody read Matthew 11:28-30. Break into groups of 3-4 and discuss the following questions:

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- What do these words of Jesus tell you about His heart for us?
- What are some things in your life that promise to give you rest, but actually don’t truly give rest?
- What are some obstacles that come to mind when you think about practicing the Sabbath each week?
- In what ways do you see the culture around us pushing back on the idea of rest?

Come back together as a whole group and share any insights that seemed to particularly resonate with your group. Then, take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week, consider the following questions:

### **Questions for Community:**

- How does the idea of practicing Sabbath make you feel?
- What activities do you find most restful? What are some activities that really connect your heart to God? How might those activities be part of your Sabbath?
- What are some things that might need to change in your life for Sabbath to become a regular weekly practice?

Take some time to pray for one another. Consider pairing up family units (singles and couples) to help encourage one another in these practices over the next four weeks.

### **Individual Practice**

Because most followers of Jesus (at least in the Western world) no longer practice Sabbath, the goal of this first week is simple: just set aside a 24-hour period to rest and worship. Determine whether your Sabbath will start in the evening or the morning (evening is preferable when possible) and if it will be on Sunday or a different day of the week.

Mark the beginning of the day with a simple ritual of some kind. You could light two candles (one for the Exodus command and one for the Deuteronomy command is traditional) and invite the Spirit to come into your home and bring joy, love, peace, and rest. Or you could pray together as a family, dedicating the next 24 hours to rest in God. You might begin with an evening meal with friends or family members.

Do the same with the end of your Sabbath, using a consistent pattern to mark the completion. You might take a slow, leisurely prayer walk. You might read a psalm and/or share a meal with family or friends. Traditionally the Sabbath ends with the whole family sitting on the floor, lighting a special candle, and sharing 1) the best part of your Sabbath, and 2) what you are looking forward to in the week that lies ahead.

In between, the goal is simple: to rest and worship. It seems easy, but like all good things, it takes practice. Give yourself grace as you learn and grow into this practice, particularly if this is new for you!

## **Week Two: Sabbath Rhythm**

*“Technical civilization is man’s conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn.”*

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Sabbath*

In 2017, when I was given a sabbatical, we took a long road trip. As you might imagine, the preparations for a trip like that are intense! However, the reward for spending countless hours on the details before we left was that we were able to really enjoy our time together without needing to focus on the details since they had already been taken care of. In the same way, preparing for the Sabbath is key to being able to truly engage it.

One of the most counter-intuitive truths about Sabbath is that people don’t rest because they’re lazy. Or, maybe said more kindly, they are unwilling to make the effort necessary to truly rest. The phrasing in Hebrews 4 is quite interesting: “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest...” (Hebrews 4:11) The rhythm of Sabbath affords us the opportunity to prepare well so that we are able to truly enter into that rest.

### **Discuss in Community**

Have somebody read Genesis 1:31-2:3. Break into groups of 3-4 and discuss the following questions:

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- Based on the order of creation, what was man’s first job in the garden? How does that impact the way you view rest?
- How does the regular nature of Sabbath (every seven days) impact the way that you might practice it? How might it impact the way that you live the other six days?

Come back together as a whole group and share any insights that seemed to particularly resonate with your group. Then, take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week, consider the following questions:

### **Questions for Community:**

- How did attempting a 24-hour Sabbath go for you last week? What did you learn?
- What preparations will you need to make prior to your Sabbath? What can you do to make Sabbath special for others in your family unit?
- What are some benefits of going a full day without a phone, social media, or email? Is this doable for you? Why or why not?

Take some time to pray for one another. Consider pairing up family units (singles and couples) to help encourage one another in these practices over the next four weeks.

### **Individual Practice**

Preparing for your Sabbath is one of the keys to making it a meaningful experience. Consider doing the following two things:

First, think through what might be helpful to do a day or two before Sabbath. For instance:

- Go grocery shopping and make sure you are well stocked.
- Pre-make your meals, or at least one meal
- Clean your house/apartment
- Answer all phone/text/email messages
- Plan a rough schedule for your Sabbath, along with making any arrangements necessary for those things to happen
- Determine something you can do to make the day special: special food/dessert, a fun or unique activity, seeing a friend, etc.

Secondly, consider turning OFF your phone and computer for Sabbath. I recognize that this seems radical and crazy in our modern world, but there are so many benefits! When we aren’t tethered to our devices, it’s so much easier for us to be present with God and with one another. Consider putting your tech devices in a special box/drawer so that you don’t even see them! This can feel overwhelming because of our reliance on technology, and it can feel legalistic, but consider trying it for the next few weeks and honestly evaluating the practice.

### **Week Three: Sabbath Resistance**

*"I have come to think that the fourth commandment on Sabbath is the most difficult and most urgent of the commandments in our society, because it summons us to intent and conduct that defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity-propelled society that specializes in control and entertainment, bread and circuses... along with anxiety and violence."*

*Walter Brueggemann, Sabbath as Resistance*

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the people of God were forbidden from buying and selling during the Sabbath, and while we're no longer bound to the letter of the law, there is great wisdom in the practice. In fact, many determine to not even look at something they may want which they don't already have, whether online or in a store window when out for a leisurely Sabbath walk through town. Why? At the heart of Sabbath is the idea of gratitude and contentment.

If we're honest, gratitude and contentment feel unnatural. The constant state of humanity is to want something we don't already have, and that desire cripples our ability for gratitude and drains out our contentment. But gratitude and contentment are deliberate acts. The truth is that most of us have more than enough—far more than we need. However, the 4,000 to 10,000 ads that experts estimate we're exposed to each day tell us a different story. Choosing gratitude and contentment during our Sabbath helps us to live out of that state all week.

#### **Discuss in Community**

Have somebody read Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Break into groups of 3-4 and discuss the following questions:

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- What are some things that we can easily become slaves to in our current cultural moment?
- How might keeping the Sabbath remind the nation of Israel of their freedom? How might keeping the Sabbath remind us of our freedom?

Now ask someone to read 1 Timothy 6:6-10 and discuss:

- Why do you think the thirst for more money is tied to destruction and ruin?
- How can a deliberate decision to not buy or sell on the Sabbath contribute to gratitude and contentment?

Come back together as a whole group and share any insights that seemed to particularly resonate with your group. Then, take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week, consider the following questions:

#### **Questions for Community:**

- How is this practice going for you and your family?
- What are some ways that you would like to practice gratitude and contentment during your Sabbath?
- What typically increases your sense of gratitude? Your sense of contentment?

Take some time to pray for one another. Consider pairing up family units (singles and couples) to help encourage one another in these practices over the next four weeks.

#### **Individual Practice**

As you start to get into the rhythm of practicing Sabbath, consider taking the opportunity to practice gratitude to God and to one another as a community. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Take some time in prayer and journaling, specifically listing the things for which you are grateful.
- Have a meal with your family and friends, and go around the table listing things, people, and moments for which you are thankful. You can make it a game by seeing how many times you can go around the table listing meaningful things (determined by vote) or choose a short time period, like the last week.
- Notice and thank God for ordinary things that become aware of throughout the day: laughter, good food, a touch from a spouse, a smile, a conversation, art, nature, etc.
- Don't shop, window shop, or look online for items to buy. If your mind is drawn to something you want to buy, intentionally pause and remember all that you have, and practice contentment instead.

## **Week Four: Sabbath Remembering**

*"We're not as important as we think. The Sabbath is a day to embrace this reality, to let it sink in, to own it, to celebrate it. To celebrate our weakness, our mortality, our limits. That's why Sabbath is an expression of faith. Faith that there is a Creator and he's good. We are his creation. This is his world. We live under his roof, drink his water, eat his food, breathe his oxygen. So on the Sabbath we don't just take a day off from work; we take a day off from toil. We give him all our fear and anxiety and stress and worry. We let go. We 'remember' our place in the universe. There is a God, and I'm not him."*

*John Mark Comer, Garden City*

When we practice the Sabbath we encounter a space where our limited human nature meets our God-given desire for more. We are made finite, but as Ecclesiastes tells us, we have eternity in our hearts. (3:11) Sabbath is a reminder that, despite our infinite hopes, dreams, and desires, we are finite creatures. Sabbath returns us to humanity with all of its limitations.

But recognizing our limits alone won't lead to rest; in fact, that will lead to overwork, anxiety, and ultimately, depression. Sabbath also recognizes the eternity and infinite nature of God Himself—not just His power, but His love and grace and provision for His people. When we marry our limits with the unlimited love and power of God, we are finally able to rest.

### **Discuss in Community**

Have somebody read Hebrews 4:9-11. Break into groups of 3-4 and discuss the following questions:

- What jumps out to you in this passage?
- What does it look like for us to live the other six days of our lives out of a spirit of Sabbath rest?
- Why might the writer tell us to "strive" to enter that rest? What kind of effort is required on our end?

Now ask someone to read Isaiah 30:15-18 and discuss:

- If in repentance and rest that we experience salvation, then in what areas of your life do you need to repent and rest? (This may need to be a question that you contemplate in silence.)

- If the Lord is gracious and compassionate, in what ways do you need to receive the grace and compassion of God through the practice of Sabbath?

Come back together as a whole group and share any insights that seemed to particularly resonate with your group. Then, take a moment to have someone read through the individual practice below. As you think about engaging this practice this week, consider the following questions:

### **Questions for Community:**

- What are some helpful rhythms that you've already started to incorporate into your practice of Sabbath?
- As you think about this practice, are you excited about it? Dreading it? Why?
- How might the Sabbath practice continue for you and/or your family in the months/years to come?

Take some time to pray for one another. Consider pairing up family units (singles and couples) to help encourage one another in these practices over the next four weeks.

### **Individual Practice**

Take time during your Sabbath this week to process through the following ideas:

1. Welcome the Holy Spirit
  - a. Put away your phone, eliminate other distractions, and get comfortable in your space.
  - b. Invite the Spirit's presence to meet you and guide you.
  - c. Ask the Spirit to help you to be fully present as well.
2. Acknowledge your humanity.
  - a. Take inventory of your heart. Where do you hurt? What do you want right now? Where does your soul feel heavy? Where do you feel stuck? What happened last week that's sitting with you?
  - b. Acknowledge your limitations, failures, strengths, weaknesses and temptations.
3. Notice the ache.
  - a. Pay attention to the longings of your soul.
  - b. Ask the Spirit what you are longing for, what's stirring you, what do you ache for that's good and right?
4. Wait for the encounter. Wait on God and spend time resting in the waiting. Remember His presence will likely be found in the ordinary.