

The Gift of Rest

One of the staff at theological college where I trained was a workaholic. He used to lead summer camps for young people and had a reputation for sending members of his team home utterly exhausted. The instructions to ordinands going on their first placement were to spend the few weeks working as hard as we possibly could. Once I challenged him about his compulsion for work and inability to stop. "There's plenty about work in the Bible," he replied, "but nothing about leisure."

Right. And wrong. The Bible knows little of our modern concept of leisure and all that goes with it, such as the booming tourist industry or the enormous social influence of T.V. soaps. How the writers of Proverbs would have shuddered at the words of the radio announcer I overheard one Friday, encouraging us all to push off as soon as possible to start the weekend early! No, the Bible doesn't encourage leisure. But in its place is a concept far more powerful and far more important: rest.

Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Exodus 20:8-11

Of all the Ten Commandments, this is the one most difficult to apply for today. The other nine are straightforward; we know that worshipping idols, murder, theft, covetousness

and the rest are wrong. Whatever the Christian's attitude to the Law and legalism, these commandments remain in force. Not so with the Sabbath. Jesus himself worked on the Sabbath. In his time, the day of rest had become surrounded with so many petty regulations that keeping it had become hard work! But it was not merely the excessive legalism of the Jewish teachers which Jesus put aside. When criticised for his cavalier attitude towards the command, his answer was little short of astonishing: "My Father is working still, and I am working."¹

But if, following the example of Jesus, the Christian is not obliged to keep the Sabbath, how are we to interpret the commandment? Here is where the problem lies. For while we campaign to keep Sunday special, we ourselves are divided and confused on the significance of the command to rest. Many Christians, rushing from one meeting to another, find Sunday the busiest day of the week. Many clergy pay no more than lip-service to the idea of a regular day off during the week. We are busy and over-burdened and find it difficult to set aside time to allow the Lord space in our lives. What does it mean, under the New Covenant, to keep the Sabbath?

The Limits to Work

What the commandment tells us, simply, is that there must be *a limit on work*. As well as telling each farmer and employer to stop work, it also ensured that his servants, his employees and even his animals got a day of rest. Nor did the command to rest end with one day a week. The whole economy of Old Testament Israel was based on this principle. Not only must everyone stop work for one day in seven, but one year in seven all the land

¹ John 5:17

was to lie fallow.² Every seven years, debts were to be cancelled and slaves released.³ These principles ensure that Israel was constantly dependent on God's blessing. They had to rely on God to see them through the seventh year by providing a bumper harvest in the sixth. The creditor and the slave owner were encouraged to rely on God's generosity in return for their own.⁴

Nor does the Sabbath principle end there. Every fifty years - seven times seven plus one - came the year of Jubilee, when all land was to be returned to the family which had originally owned it.⁵ Anyone who had lost his land and become a hired labourer, working for someone else, or whose father or grandfather had lost their land, was to be released from his contract and allowed to return to the land he or his father and grandfather had once owned.

The effect of this extraordinary provision was to set a limit on anyone's ability to get rich through success in work. If he had lent money, bought slaves or expanded his landholding, in the year of Jubilee it all had to be given back, and everyone returned to the point from where they started. The sabbath principle governed the whole economy, limiting not only the hours of work, but also the amount which could be achieved by work. And the year of Jubilee, the fullest expression of the sabbath principle in action, was what Jesus announced as part of the salvation he had come to bring.⁶

² Leviticus 25:1-7

³ Exodus 21:1-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-18

⁴ Leviticus 25:20-22; Deuteronomy 15:10

⁵ Leviticus 25:8-17

⁶ Luke 4:19

Work in the Garden

But why should God set this kind of a limit on work? What is there about work which makes it necessary? The answer is to be found in the early chapters of Genesis. First,

"God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it."

Genesis 2:15

In other words, God gave the man a job to do, a creative occupation through which he could bring the garden God had planted to its full potential and make of it whatever he planned. Chapter 1, verses 26-28 tell us that men and women are to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it. The implication is that they are to do so by working. We are to understand work as a *good thing*. It is part of God's good creation and the purpose for which he created human beings. Our experience itself testifies to the truth of this. Work is a source of satisfaction and fulfilment, an opportunity to stretch and prove ourselves, to succeed in a task, to achieve something really worthwhile, to provide for a family, or to serve others.

Because work is so important in our lives, it is an important part of our identity. The work we do helps to make us the people we are. It defines us, not only for other people, but for ourselves as well. That is why it is essential to *stop* being a teacher, a doctor, an engineer, a mother, a factory worker and even a clergyman, not once in a while but regularly, so as to discover who we really are before God.

Gordon MacDonald tells the story of William Wilberforce, the M.P. who worked for twenty years for the abolition of slavery. In 1801, a new government came to office and Wilberforce was rumoured to be in line for a cabinet post. For several days, he became

preoccupied by the possibility, but then came Sunday. In his diary for that day, Wilberforce recorded, "Blessed be God for the day of rest and religious occupation wherein earthly things assume their true size. Ambition is stunted." That Sabbath day, Wilberforce the politician gave way to Wilberforce the man before God. He regained his perspective and was able to concentrate once again on the tasks God was giving him.⁷

Although work is a part of God's good creation, it is crucially affected by the Fall. After Adam's sin, God tells him:

"Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you...In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread."

Genesis 3:17-19

Human work was intended to be done in obedience to and partnership with God. With the relationship between God and mankind severed, work becomes toil, and fulfilment so often gives way to frustration. We never achieve as much as we hope for; lack of time and strength, or lack of co-operation from others threaten to blight our best efforts.

Yet the promise of achievement, satisfaction, success and recognition continues to exercise its hold on us. As a result, work can become a drug, and we find ourselves addicted, submerged in it, unable to do without it. Workaholism poses one of the most significant dangers for the church today. Far too many of our leaders are dominated by the demands and pressures of work, with their perspective distorted by the sense of the importance of their own little bit of the Kingdom. "To work tensely," wrote Karl Barth, "is to do so in self-exaltation and forgetfulness of God."⁸

⁷ Quoted in Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering your Private World*; Highland, 1984; p.173-175

⁸ *Church Dogmatics iii.4* p.552

Dependence on God

The three-fold scheme, Creation - Fall - Salvation, offers a useful way of understanding many aspects of our lives in biblical perspective. The Creation aspect of work is expressed by God's command to subdue the earth and rule over it, and the promise of success and satisfaction which work holds out. The effect of the Fall is summed up on the personal level by the experience of fatigue and frustration, in which fruitful work too often becomes "anxious toil". On the social level, working life is dominated by economics, the "science of scarcity" and a fruitful source of injustice: competition for scarce resources, anxiety against going short, the need or desire to amass enormous wealth as a sign of one's status or value.

Salvation is God's renewing of creation in a richer, deeper way. And God's answer in the plan of salvation to the problem of work is the command to rest. The psalmist writes,

"It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep."

Psalm 127:2

He is not claiming that there is no need to work. He is warning against the attitude of mind in which we become so absorbed in work that we forget God's vital part in it. Unless God blesses our work, it is useless. But God *has promised* to bless our work, in fact he longs to do so. This means that far from feeling we must work flat out, we can afford to relax. We can sleep easily, knowing that God will grant us our proper reward and bring our work to its appropriate fulfilment. The discipline of rest is intended to ensure God's people a correct perspective on their work, to prevent work from becoming an idol to take the place of our relationship with God, and to help us to remain in

dependence on him. In Deuteronomy 12:9, and again in Psalm 95:11, the Promised Land itself is called the people's "rest". It was to be a land in which they would lack for nothing, one in which wheat, barley, vines, fig-trees, olive oil and honey, copper and iron could be had in abundance.⁹ Everything they had was a gift from God, and the command to rest was a constant reminder of their dependence on him for their daily bread.

In the New Testament, this image of the Promised Land as a "rest" is taken up by the writer to the Hebrews, in chapters 3 and 4. Here, the rest is the salvation won for us by Christ on the cross, which means that we can "rest from our labours." We do not have to earn God's approval by good works. In fact, in both Old and New Testaments, rest is an image of salvation as a whole.

Rest Before Work

We claim to believe in justification by faith - yet it is extraordinary how many Christians proclaim by their actions that their real confidence is in their works. They are so busy serving the Lord - and they are afraid to stop in case he isn't pleased with them. They have not yet realised that God calls us to rest *before* he calls us to work.

The story of Martha and Mary illustrates the priorities Jesus looks for. When Jesus came to visit, Martha brought out the best dishes and set to work to prepare a wonderful meal. Meanwhile, Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to him teaching. It is not difficult to imagine the feeling behind Martha's angry words: "Lord, when are you going to tell my sister to get off her backside and give me a hand!" But Jesus answered with a gentle

⁹ Deuteronomy 8:9-11

rebuke: "Martha, you are getting bogged down in all this serving of yours. You haven't discerned the one thing which is most important, as Mary has."¹⁰

Jesus also warns us against the mentality of the hireling, the person who is expected to work for a reward. The prodigal son could see no future beyond that of a hired servant, but his father had other plans. The prodigal was welcomed with the robe and ring, shoes on his feet and the fatted calf.¹¹ Or think of the labourers in the vineyard. They expected to be treated like hired servants: "We've worked harder than these others - we should be given more." But the master refused to bow to their demand. Instead he addresses them as, "Friends..."¹²

When Jesus called his twelve disciples, he called them first to *be* with him, and then to be sent out.¹³ The order is important. They were to be companions first. My wife and I have friend who is a gifted counsellor, but because of a painful back problem frequently finds it impossible to work. After a particularly bad spell, she wrote that God had said to her, "If you never do anything for me ever again, I will still love you just the same."

God does not *need* us to serve him. He loves us just the same. When Jesus was baptised, the voice from Heaven proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."¹⁴ Yet he hadn't even begun! So with us. We are beloved sons and daughters and God does not need us to serve him. But because Jesus was a servant, he offers us the privilege of becoming his fellow-workers, in service to the world. To rest in the Lord, to

¹⁰ Luke 10:38-42

¹¹ Luke 15:17-24

¹² Matthew 20:11-13

¹³ Mark 3:14-15

¹⁴ Mark 1:11

be ourselves with him, has a higher priority in the values of the Kingdom, than does our service.

Accept Your Limits

People today live under the pressure of the ever-increasing pace of life. We race through traffic lights on amber to cut our journey by a minute or so. We despair when the person in front of us at the supermarket check-out gets out a cheque book. We ferry our children from one out-of-school activity to the next. Houses are being designed without a dining area, so rare has the family meal around the table become. Instead, we pack as much into our lives as possible. Convenience meals and on to the next activity is becoming the norm. And most Christians are just as bad as their non-Christian neighbours. We have campaigned against Sunday opening hours and having failed we are beginning to adjust to the new pattern the world imposes on us. Why? Because we did not have rest in our hearts in the first place.

I am convinced that Christians are called to model a different approach to life. Even hard-pressed clergy, for whom seven days are not enough in which to answer all the possible calls on our time, are to learn to live within a framework of rest. But what will this mean in practice?

First it will mean accepting our limits. Every servant of the Lord has limits. Moses was not allowed into the Promised Land. He could only look at it from afar and then hand over to Joshua for the next stage. Elijah thought he was the only one left and that he would have to do it all; but God showed him seven thousand still faithful and told him to

appoint Elisha as his successor. Paul recognised his limits - to preach the gospel in unreached areas. Church building, pastoral work and even baptism was for others.¹⁵

Jesus himself did only what he saw the Father doing, and said only what the Father gave him to say.¹⁶ He accepted the discipline of the Incarnation, a particular human life in a particular historical setting. Today he chooses to work through people with similar limitations. If we are to be his disciples, we have to accept that we cannot do everything that needs doing, nor even all we would like to do. We need to discern our God-given limits and work within them.

We have only so much emotional energy. When we become over-committed, we suffer a drain on our emotional resources which we can't make up, and *everything* suffers, including the things we *should* be doing. In the case of married couples, they are "one flesh." They support one another; it is the total commitment of both which counts. If the husband takes on too much, it is costly for the wife. If the wife goes out to work, the husband will have to support her emotionally. Especially when the children are young, married people should not be expected to achieve as much as singles; and a married man should not expect to advance so fast in his career as he could if he were single.

The Discipline of Rest

The next important practical step is to schedule periods of rest *before* anything else, and not leave them for the possible empty space in the diary. People with regular working hours also need to do this, since so much of our "leisure" time is in fact lived at high speed. To set a limit on working time, to schedule regular periods of rest, is a discipline.

¹⁵ Romans 15:18-20; 1 Corinthians 1:14-20; 3:10; 2 Corinthians 10:13-16

¹⁶ John 5:19; 8:28

And like any discipline, it can be very difficult to keep. Often, a day off can be the most difficult day of all. To stop working can bring to the surface all the fears and false values which drive us for the rest of the week. It may be the inability to say "No", the need to be needed, the desire for success, the fear of offending others, a false over-estimate of the importance of the work we are engaged in. Or perhaps we are driven by a false idea of time, trying to maximise the use of *chronos*, the passing of the hours, rather than waiting for *kairos*, the opportune moment. But taking time out to rest allows all these come to the surface and be recognised. It can be the first step in facing the false values which drive us and thus towards growing in wholeness.

Rest is also something to be *used*. Many of us with families will use our periods of rest to spend time with our spouse or children, working on maintaining close relationships. But rest should also be used for *ourselves*. We need to spend time in solitude, simply being ourselves. We need to accept and make use of God's good creation - play sports, read books, paint, embroider, travel, play or listen to music. It is important to recognise the talents and interests which help to make us the people we are, and give time to them. This is re-creation, the chance to celebrate being the people God made us, to grow in self-acceptance and self-awareness. Is it, perhaps, because we believe we are worthless that we are afraid to rest? The discipline of rest forces us to look to God for our sense of self-worth.

The Gift of Rest

"Much of our acceptance of multitudes of obligations is due to our inability to say No. We calculated the task had to be done, and we saw no one ready to undertake it. We calculated the need then calculated our time, and decided maybe we could squeeze it in somewhere. But the decision was a heady decision, not made within the sanctuary of the soul. When we say Yes or No to calls for service on the basis of heady decisions, we have to give reasons, to ourselves and others. But when we say Yes or No to calls, on the basis of inner guidance and whispered promptings of encouragement from the Centre of our life, or on the basis of a lack of any inward 'rising' of the Life to encourage us in the call, we have no reason to give except one - the will of God as we discern it. And I find he never guides us into an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness."

Thomas Kelly: Testament of Devotion

Rest is not optional; it is God's command. There must be a limit on work, to prevent it from becoming an idol, and to encourage us to work in dependence on God, looking directly to his blessing for its outcome. Rest is a discipline; it is undertaken as a means of conforming ever closer to the likeness of God's dear Son. And rest is a gift; it is part of God's salvation provision, an opportunity for fun, relaxation and to become ourselves.