

Work And Rest

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us together to turn back to Exodus 23 and I'm going to read again verses 10 to 12. For six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and life follow, that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat.

You shall do likewise with your vineyard and your olive orchard. Six days shall you do work. But on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman and the alien may be refreshed.

So it's January and Christmas holidays are over, everyone's back to work, children are back to school and everyone's back into routine. And in a way that's nice and we all love routine, but at the same time this time of year can be hard.

Especially when we get back to work or school and we're only there a few days when we feel like we need another rest and holiday again. For all of us, life in 2024 is busy and for many of us every week can feel like a battle to keep our heads above water.

Sometimes that's because of the pressures of work, sometimes it's because there's lots going on at home and sometimes it's just because there can be a ton of little things all coming together. Life is full of pressures, full of demands and full of things that we need to do.

[1 : 30] And because of that I thought that this time of year is a good opportunity for us to think about a topic that's crucial for our well-being, a topic that's essential for our society to function and a topic that runs right through the whole Bible.

It's a great opportunity for us to think about work and rest. It's our title for today and we're going to think about it under two subheadings, separating work and rest, connecting work and rest.

So starting with the first one, from the very beginning a boundary between work and rest is established in the Bible.

You see that in Genesis 1 and 2 it records the creative acts of God set out over six days and then we read that on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.

And that separation follows the pattern that you see in the rest of the creation account God creates through separating, whether that's light from darkness, land from sea, day from night.

[2 : 36] In the same way we see a separation established between work and rest. But it's also important to note that even though God establishes that boundary between work and rest, he also transcends the categories.

Now what we mean by that is the fact that when he separates work and rest he doesn't choose one side for himself. He doesn't say, oh I work and you rest or I rest and now you work.

We see that he participates in both and you have that in the verse before you. It's God who is resting and he is resting from the work that he himself has done.

And you see exactly the same pattern modelled in Jesus. He modelled work. John 17 he talks about the work that he's come to do in Mark 10:45.

He talks about coming not to be served but to serve. And yet at the same time he also modelled rest. He and his disciples came away from the crowd to rest a while.

[3 : 37] He was weary from his journey and was refreshed at the well and after a busy day on a boat he lay asleep on a cushion. And that's telling us that to work is to be Christlike.

To rest is to be Christlike. And so this is where we start to see that this pattern just runs right through the Bible. Whether it's the creation account of Genesis 1 or the life of Jesus recorded in the Gospels.

We see that the boundary between work and rest is both established and respected by God. And a biblical lifestyle is one that recognises and participates in both work and rest.

But this is an incredibly important thing for us to think about today because our lives just now struggle to maintain this boundary between work and rest.

And part of the pressure and part of the struggle to keep those boundaries comes from the culture that we live in today. You're all very aware that we now live in an era of instant communication.

[4 : 45] We now have a mindset and an environment where patience is lower, expectation is higher, people are looking for instant responses. And a developed economy like our own is running 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

And that's just the basic requirement in order for it to continue to function. And all of that's led to a blurring of the distinction between work and rest.

And it's important to recognise that that applies in both directions. And particularly that's because of the technology that's available to us today. So in one direction, it's so easy to take your entire work life home with you in your pocket because it's all available to you on your phone.

So you can be going to bed at 11 o'clock midnight and emails are pinging you from work. And that separation that maybe generations before us had, we no longer enjoy.

But at the same time, your phone doesn't just mean that you can take all your work home with you. Your phone also means that you can take your favourite movies, your newspaper, your sports highlights and all the distractions of social media to work with you.

[6 : 03] And so you might be at work and your phone's buzzing in your pocket, not to get you to answer an email, but to get you to watch a video or to buy something from a shop.

And all of this results in a situation where the categories, the separation between work and rest becomes very blurred. The problem's not just with our culture.

The pressure also comes from our nature. When we talk about human nature, we use a term, a theological term called total depravity.

And that phrase is referring to the fact that sin has affected every single part of life. It's not saying that we are as awful as we could be. It's not saying that. It's saying that in terms of scope, sin has affected every single part of our lives.

That means that sin affects work and sin affects rest. Sin also transcends these two categories. So that means that there's sins that can lead us to overwork.

[7 : 11] So a good example would be pride, where we want the focus to be on our achievements, on our importance. And if we do this and accomplish this and get to that destination in our jobs, then it'll make us feel good about ourselves.

Likewise, we can be driven to overwork by greed, because we just want more. We want more salary, more status, more influence. Or we can be driven to work hard by envy, where we see everyone we work with as a competitor.

And if they achieve anything, then we just think, that's what I want to beat, because I want that for myself. There's sins that can lead us to overwork. There's also sins that can lead us to underwork, to avoid work.

And so laziness can leave us quite happy watching other people carry the burdens instead of us.

Bitterness can leave us feeling really hard done by and kind of locked in this cage of resentment.

And selfishness can lead us to live this kind of double life where we've got one set of standards for ourselves, which is low, and then another set of expectations for everybody else that's high.

[8 : 25] And our sinful nature can easily blur these lines between work and rest. Our sinful nature is going to push us towards overworking, push us towards underworking.

And maybe you're a mixture of both of these things. Despite that, our weaknesses and struggles make us vulnerable to these temptations.

So I'm pretty sure that everybody in here at various times in your life, you struggle with feelings of feeling inadequate. I certainly struggle with that. I struggle with that many times in my life. And it can especially be true in the workplace.

In terms of your work, you can feel inadequate. And that can entice you in either direction. So at one level, feeling inadequate could fuel pride where we pour ourselves into work and we just work harder and harder because we think, well, I just want people to be impressed and to think good of me.

And so we might find some glimmer of self-worth. We're thinking, I'm not good enough, so I need to prove myself. But it can also push us in the other direction whereby our sense of inadequacy leaves us stuck in the mud where all our motivation has evaporated and we're thinking, well, I know I'm not good enough, so what's the point in even trying?

[9 : 47] Similar weaknesses kind of have the same effect. Anxiety can drive us to work hard because we don't want to make mistakes or anxiety can stop us from ever trying because we're too afraid of making mistakes.

Outside us, cultures pressuring us to blur the lines between work and rest and inside our sinful nature is trying to do the same thing. Now, theologically, none of this should come as a surprise because remember we said at the start that part of God's creative work was to draw a separation, a distinction between work and rest.

The fact that this is constantly under attack reminds us of the fact that Satan is not a creator. He is only ever a spoiler.

So if God's creative work involves separating work and rest, then the great goal, Satan's great goal is going to be to undo that as much as possible.

And that also tells us that part of the great restorative work of the Gospel is to reestablish and maintain a good boundary between work and rest.

[10 : 58] And one of the key ways in which the Gospel accomplishes that is through the principle of Sabbath rest. From the very beginning, as we saw, God established a pattern whereby a period of work was accompanied by a shorter period of rest.

And you see that very clearly in the pattern of the Sabbath day, which we read about in Exodus 23. But that passage also shows us that in the Old Testament it was applied at an annual level where there was the discussion about leaving fields to rest every seventh year.

Now, according to this pattern, more time is spent working than resting. But even though it's mostly work, the focus and in many ways the prioritization is given to the rest part of it.

And you see that because the Bible speaks of rest in intensified language. The Bible describes working and then it commands resting.

The Sabbath day is the day that you must keep. It's something that God wants us to do. And so side by side, work and rest complement each other and in doing so, they allow God's created order to thrive.

[12 : 14] And again, you see this balance shown and exemplified in Jesus. And he taught his disciples to maintain that balance.

It's really interesting. If you look at Mark 6:31, he tells his disciples to stop working. He says, come away to a desolate place and rest.

But in Mark 14, he tells his disciples to stop resting because at that point there was work to be done. They needed to watch and pray with him.

And all of this is showing us that the pattern that Jesus is calling us to is a lifestyle of working hard and resting wisely.

And he does that because he wants us to thrive. But in order to see how that happens, we need to think about how we connect work and rest.

[13 : 12] It's not enough simply to separate them. We also need to see how they relate to each other. And here we come across another danger.

Not only can we blur the boundaries between work and rest, we can also quickly forget that they are both mutually interdependent. In other words, in order to rest, you have to work.

In order to work, you have to rest. And so there's two key points that I want to think about. The first I want to say is this. I want to say that rest needs work.

My second favorite meal of the whole year is Christmas dinner. Christmas dinner is just amazing. Turkey roast potatoes, stuffing, pigs and blankets all covered in a monumental helping of bread sauce.

It's an amazing meal, but it is only ever the second best meal of the year. And that's because the best meal of the year is Christmas dinner left over the next day.

[14 : 24] Rest is a little bit like the leftover of Christmas dinner. Not leftovers in the sense that you only rest in the leftover time that you have. That's not what I mean. I mean leftovers in the sense that the whole reason it exists is because something else has come first.

Christmas dinner leftovers can only be Christmas dinner leftovers if you had Christmas dinner the day before. It's always a subsequent. It always comes after something.

Rest is like that. Rest is not a starting point. It comes subsequent to something else. And that's the pattern that you see so clearly in the Old Testament.

Rest comes after six days of labor, a fallow year comes after six years of sowing and harvesting. And a field that's never been harvested can never lie fallow.

And likewise a person that's never worked will not, they'll never experience to rest. And I think it's so important for us to recognize we all love the weekend.

[15 : 25] Reaching the weekend is such a good feeling, but you only get that feeling if you've been at work Monday to Friday. The last day of school term isn't particularly exciting when you're not in school.

And getting into bed at night is miserable if you've spent all day there. And all of this, I think reminds us of a really important lesson about how we pursue rest.

The pleasure and relief that comes from resting rightly, rightly appeals to us. We think, oh, love resting, love just sitting down, love being able to chill out.

And that hasn't appealed. But because it's so appealing, sometimes we want to shortcut our way to it. And that can happen very, very easily, particularly on a day where you've got nothing else to do. On a day that's free and the attractiveness of rest can make us think, well, that's where I want to start. I want to go straight to rest. And probably the most obvious example of how that can work itself out is when you spend that day in front of a screen.

[16 : 32] On a free day, that can be very, very tempting, and especially for maybe some younger people. But it's so important to recognize that if we're doing that, we're shortcutting our way to rest.

And we're in danger of taking rest that's not had the antecedent work that makes rest restful. I hope that makes sense.

The result is that we spend hours doing very little. And the reason it's important to think about this is because when you spend hours doing very, very little on the whole, this is a general, a general thing, you spend hours doing very, very little.

What's the end result? It deenergizes you. In other words, it's not refreshing. It's depressing.

Now, there's always exceptions to this pattern that are sometimes times when you have to spend a day doing very, very little. And I'm not saying that that's not appropriate. It is very appropriate at times.

[17 : 32] But I think it's also fair for us to recognize that there are days when, you know, we're just lured to rest and we think, oh, I just want to go straight to rest. I want to start with rest.

Yet that will often leave us feeling drained. And so that's why it's important for us to think about how we use our time, think about how we use our days.

And to remember that, you know, even on a day off, the relaxation of sitting in front of the fire or watching a movie, that's a great thing to do.

But it's best of all when it comes after a walk or time in the garden or baking or seeing friends or some other adventure that a free day can provide. It's so important we remember that work needs rest.

So rest needs work. Sorry, I knew I'd get this wrong. Work needs rest. I'm not even writing that.

Rest needs work. That's what I'm saying first of all.

[18 : 28] I'm also saying it the other way around. Work needs rest. That's the second thing that we need to highlight.

One of the reasons why the Sabbath principle is there in scripture is because we cannot continue working without it. This is actually like food or water or air.

We cannot survive without it. But not only is it crucial if we're going to survive, it's actually crucial if we're going to thrive. And that's always what the Gospel wants. The Gospel is not just about surviving.

The Gospel is about thriving both in our lives now and for eternity. Part of the reason why the land was rested was so that it could continue to be fruitful and it would be as productive as possible. And probably the example where you see that today most clearly is when you look at elite sportsmen and women. You see them in elite sports. They are at the pinnacle of physical capability. And they are also the people who are most scrupulous about work and rest, about recovering from the activities that they've undertaken.

[19 : 37] So if we're going to work, then we need to rest. And that rest is essential if we're going to thrive.

And that's brought out by a beautiful Hebrew word that appears in Exodus 23 and in Exodus 31. It's this word here, refreshed. Now, they always say don't tell people Hebrew words, but I'm just going to anyway.

The word refreshed is the Hebrew word nafash. And that comes from the same root as the Hebrew word nefesh. In Hebrew, words are basically based on consonants, usually three consonants. So it's the consonant n, the n sound, the f sound and the sh sound. And then vowels get added. So the same consonants is in both the same root word.

[20 : 36] This word nafesh here is the Hebrew word for soul, for life, or for a living being. And you see it here in Genesis 27.

Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And the man became a living creature. That word there is the same word nafesh.

And the reason I wanted to highlight that is that the word that's translated to refreshed, to be refreshed, is meaning, is coming from the same meaning.

And so at a basic level, to be refreshed is to get your breath back. Part of this word means, part of the basic meaning of this word is breath, being refreshed is having a chance to breathe.

But I think that there's a deeper truth being conveyed here. The fact that you've got the word for soul is related to the word to be refreshed, which I think means that we can think of it almost in terms of rest as something whereby we are resold.

[21 : 40] Now what I mean by that is that rest brings renewal to our inner being. And that renewal is life giving.

Rest is what energizes us. It recharges us so that we can press forward and we can fulfill the purposes that our creator has given us.

In other words, being refreshed doesn't just put air into our lungs, it puts renewal into our hearts. And that raises a crucial point.

It's reminding us that rest is not just about recovery. Rest is about preparation.

Rest is looking ahead to something amazing that's coming. And I think that helps us understand why, oh I don't have the verse, I forgot to put it up, wait I mean there it is.

[22 : 43] If you look at Exodus 31, it describes the fact that it's the Lord God who rested and it's God who was refreshed.

Now that's an unusual and a startling claim because one of the things the Bible makes very clear, you can see it from Isaiah 40, is that God doesn't grow weary, he doesn't get tired.

But when it speaks about God resting and being refreshed, I think that's conveying a sense of anticipation. I think it's conveying us to the fact that when God rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done, he's not simply looking back thinking oh wow look what's been made. I think we must never forget that even in that moment, even in Genesis 2, God knew that something even more amazing was coming. And he's looking ahead to the ultimate purposes that he has for humanity.

He's looking ahead to everything that he's going to do through his son. And all of this is helping us to see that rest is forward looking. It renews life and vigor and purpose.

[23 : 58] Rest is always looking ahead to something. And this is where we see such a crucial lesson that is going very, very much against the way many people can think in our culture today.

So often we can think that the goal of work is to rest. So people will go through Monday to Friday, they're just desperate for the weekend.

People will go through weeks and weeks just looking ahead to the next holiday. And for many people the biggest dream that they have in life is to retire and to not have to work again because you think oh the great goal, the reason I work is to rest so that I can get that dream of never having to work again.

Now at one level that's good, there's something great about holidays, there's something great about retirement but it's also the case that these things are never necessarily the dream that we think they're going to be.

What I want us to recognise is that yes, there is a sense in which we work and then rest but what I want us to see is that the Bible also presents the opposite pattern.

[25 : 09] In the Bible and in particular in the New Testament we rest in order to work. And that's reminding us that before sin ever came into the world Adam was working, that was part of God's purposes for humanity from the very beginning.

God made us with that role, that sense of responsibility, that purpose whereby we can work and thrive and be everything He's made us to be and the rest that we need to take is to help us do that. It's to help us thrive as workers serving our Creator. And that's why it's so important that right now we don't find ourselves thinking oh if I can just get through another week, if I can just get to another holiday, if I can just get to retirement we mustn't make that our dream because the realities of the Gospel mean that we have got so much more to aim for than simply to rest.

As we go through into a new week just now we've got so much more to live for than to just think oh I can't wait till Monday to Friday's over again.

Because every day is an opportunity for us to live and thrive and serve the God who's made us and the God who saved us. And it's so crucial that we recognize this that the resurrection of Jesus has inaugurated the new creation.

[26 : 45] God's work of restoration has begun and yes it won't be fully consummated until Jesus returns but He's begun it now. And we as followers of Jesus, if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian you're a new creation, we as the people of God are a new humanity and our lives are to be lived.

Not just longing for the day that we can stop but our lives are to be lived recognizing that God the Holy Spirit is with us and in us empowering us to serve and glorify Him every single day of our lives. And so it means that we don't simply rest in Jesus, we do rest in Jesus as Christians but at the same time we want to be active through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within us.

And this is a key reason why the church does not meet on the seventh day of the week anymore.

And so the seventh day in Genesis 22 and all the way through the Old Testament was Saturday, that's the seventh day of the week and that was the day observed in the Old Testament, it's the day still observed by Jews as the Shabbat.

The Christian church meets on the first day of the week, we meet on Sundays, the day that Jesus rose from the dead.

[28 : 14] And that's the pattern that you see in the New Testament, if you look you see that it's when the disciples, the church got together after the resurrection of Jesus. And one of the reasons why we do that is that the Christian Sabbath today is not simply a day where we rest and recover from everything that happened last week.

It's also a day of refreshment, a day where we are re-energized, a day where we seek for God to charge us up so that we can live the next week of our lives to His glory.

And it's a day where we don't just look back thinking, you know, I'm glad last week was done, it's a day when we look forward with a sense of excitement and anticipation, not just to what the rest of our lives will bring, but to what eternity will bring for all who are trusting in Jesus.

And it's reminding you that Jesus is not bringing you to church to drain you. He's not bringing you to church to make you feel guilty.

He's not bringing you to church to make you feel like you failed. He's bringing you to church to fill you up, to refresh you and renew you and to recharge you because he's got wonderful work for you to do in the week ahead.

[29 : 32] And whatever you're doing, whether it's paid employment, whether it's responsibilities at home or in your community, all of these are means through which God can use you to bring a blessing to other people.

And all of this is reminding us that the church is to be a place of work and a place of rest. It's to be a place of work and a place of rest.

The life of discipleship is to be a life of work and a life of rest. And this is where, I guess this is the big point that I want you all to think about.

So often we can make a relationship with Jesus one or the other. So do you view the Christian life as all work?

In other words, do you think it's all about you doing stuff and achieving stuff and keeping God happy and getting things done and proving yourself to show that you're good enough?

[30 : 38] Or do you view the Christian life as all rest whereby Jesus is just the one you come to if you maybe feel a bit worn out or a bit tired and think, oh, yes, I'll come back to him now.

But then when you're busy, he gets left to one side. Do we just view Jesus as a kind of cushion that we can just lie on from time to time but we only really need to pick him up when we need a break? We can so easily do that.

If you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, we can easily fall into this trap and we must avoid the pitfalls of thinking that the Christian life is all work or that it's all rest.

And the reason we must do that is because on their own, they're both rubbish. All work is not good. All rest is not good. And they both actually end up with the same thing. They both leave you drained. If you work and never rest, it'll leave you drained.

[31 : 35] If you rest and never work, it'll leave you drained. Instead, the Gospel is calling us to be workers and resters. The Gospel gives us reason to work.

The Gospel gives us reason to rest. And this is where we see that Jesus gives us exactly what we need because the world is full of people who feel purposeless and restless.

They feel like they've got nothing to offer and they feel like they've got nowhere where they'll find peace. Jesus gives us both and he brings us together on a Sunday to refresh us, renew us and recharge us and then he sends us out in the week ahead to serve him wherever he will lead us, wherever he will take us.

In the Gospel, work and rest are separated very clearly, but they are connected beautifully. Let's all follow Jesus as workers and resters.

Amen.