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A Gift With Purpose

Exodus 20: 8-12

Karl Barth, the greatest and most influential twentieth-century theologian, introduced his discussion of Christian ethics by offering an exposition of the meaning of keeping the Sabbath holy.

Barth is revered among theologians for his creativity in approaching old topics,

but even by his standards, this was a stunning innovation. Most modern Christian theologians – and most modern Christians – relegate keeping the Sabbath to a decidedly minor emphasis, casually dismissing this commandment as steeped in legalism.

But Karl Barth asserted that we cannot attempt to live ethically and show Christ's love to others until we have first connected with the divine source of all love.

Ironically, though Jesus was often accused of being a Sabbath breaker, he had great respect for the gift of sacred rest. The Scriptures record him as frequently breaking away to take a sabbatical from the masses and commune with his heavenly Father.

Modern humans complain, "We don't need all the trappings of worship to do that.

We have no need for organized religion. Just let us love people – that will prove we love God."

But our Lord knows us better and counsels otherwise.

Our Lord suggests that we sequester ourselves in a closet and commune with our God through prayer.

If we try to practice the divine love amidst the harsh reality of life without first grounding ourselves through communion with God we will ultimately practice a love that becomes truncated, myopic and shallow.

To prepare ourselves for living God's love amidst the pressures of real life, our Lord counseled us to take advantage of the gift of sacred rest.

Simply put, our God does not give us a gift without a purpose, and if our Scriptures are to be believed, our Creator gave us the gift of sacred rest from the very dawn of time. From the very dawn of time!

According to the Bible's understanding of creation, as part of the creative process,

God did an astounding thing: God ceased to do!

God, who supposedly is the Source of all energy and power and time – the God who allegedly needs nothing! – God stopped!

The Bible makes very few statements more astounding than this one: "On the seventh day God rested." The God who called into being heaven and earth, relaxed.

In so doing, God built relaxation into the very structure of life, even into the life of God.

On the seventh day God relaxed. God stepped back. God savored.

God pronounced benediction: "It is very good."

From the dawn of time God engrained sacred rest into the very structure of creation.

In truth, I am not much of a photographer, but I have always known that the pictures that really matter are the ones that you carry in that "wallet of your mind."

When I hear the word "Sabbath rest," the image that comes to my mind is that of my mother's father, though he has been gone from this earth for over thirty years.

He knew how to take advantage of the gift of sacred rest, for he was an accomplished front porch sitter.

I can still see him on a Sunday afternoon with his feet propped on his front porch rail drinking lemonade, savoring creation. There was a peace to his demeanor that said with God, "It is very good."

There was something about the contented look on his face that invited you to go inside and find one of my grandmother's colored metallic glasses and fill it with ice and lemonade

and go out on the porch and sit down in a rocking chair and rest with him.
He understood the nature of the Sabbath gift.
God relaxes and on the Sabbath God invites us to relax, too.
Our Creator is really saying to us, "Relax with me! Rejoice with me in the goodness of creation!"
Even as a child I knew I could not approximate my grandfather's penetrating intelligence or pristine character.
Yet I could be somewhat like him when I sat beside him and rocked.
Likewise, we are never closer truly to mimicking the behavior of God than when we rest with God by taking advantage of the sacred gift of the Sabbath.

Some years ago there was a commercial featuring an obviously over-worked mother being nagged by her daughters to take them to the beach.
The mother refused, stating a fact that she believed to represent the end of the conversation: "No, I have a client." The youngest of the daughters, obviously chosen by central casting for her fetching innocence, interrupted her mother, asking, "Mom, when do I get to be your client?"
As expected, the question hit home.
The girl's interruption made the young mother realize what really was important in her life, and she replied, "You have five minutes to get ready to go to the beach."
The little girls started scurrying around the house to the sounds of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

The theme of this video vignette was "interruption."
Likewise, the gift of the Sabbath is God's intended interruption of our lives.
Of course, one must understand that the Sabbath weds two concepts together
The Sabbath is an *interruption* of our normal routine, yes, but it is *God's* interruption.
Plenty of people do restful things on the Sabbath, but they do not necessarily do restful things in conversation with God.
They realize that the Sabbath is meant to be a day to party, but they don't realize that it is meant to be a divine party.
The Sabbath comes from a word meaning "to cease, to desist."
The Sabbath is the interruption of God's time into ours.
God knows that we are so consumed with our projects, so worried about "time," so fixated on mundane matters, and so God places a Stop! sign into our lives every seven days.
It is important to realize that this Stop sign has been placed before us by God, and we should gaze upon it in wonder and gratitude.
God sticks a Stop sign in front of us to say, "I know you are serious about whatever it is you are serious about – but don't take yourselves too seriously!"

But if the gift of the Sabbath is telling us not to take ourselves too seriously, it is also reminding us to take God's grace all the more seriously.
By reminding us to rest from our labors, God reminds us that we are not going to earn our way into God's acceptance by our workaholic ways anyway.
I remember taking a Southern Lit final from a college professor whose exams were notoriously hard. It was a long final, and all the other students had long since left, but I still had a half-hour to go, and I was scribbling away as hard as I could, trying to craft a creative and incisive answer to a tough question. The professor who knew me well from several previous classes, looked at me gently and said, "Richard, it's alright . . . turn it in." I looked up, dumbfounded. "What?" I asked. "Turn it in," he said again, with a smile.
Who was I to argue with the professor? I rose, handed my paper to my teacher and walked out. I was puzzled initially, but then I realized what he was saying. I had had this professor for several classes. He knew my work, knew my passion for the subject -- and he also knew my handwriting.

He didn't want to read any more of my scribble than he had to, I'm sure.
More importantly, he knew that nothing I was going to write in the next half hour would change his acceptance and appreciation of me. He had already valued and affirmed me.
Likewise, in calling us to cease and desist from our labors our Lord is reminding us that none of us is going to work our way into the divine Kingdom anyway.
None of us is going to earn the admiration and acceptance of God through our works of righteousness.
God already accepts and affirms us – and God commands us to accept this acceptance by simply resting.
The gift of the Sabbath is an expression of God's grace.
After all, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!

The Sabbath is God's gift of rest, God's party, God's interruption, and God's expression of grace.
But the Sabbath is also God's act of judgment.

The Sabbath has the power to clear our vision and clarify our values.

A great way to envision this aspect of the Sabbath is to think of yourself walking along a beach on a hot July day and watching people build sandcastles.

Some of the sandcastles are simple and crude.

Others are intricate, detailed, painstakingly crafted by engineers who can think of nothing better to do on their vacation than craft sand structures with working moats and crenellated battlements.
Then the waves come in. Swooooosh!

It doesn't matter how intricate and impressive are the best of the sandcastles, the wind and water leave them all featureless lumps of wet sand.

Eventually the waves erase every trace of them altogether.

The Sabbath is God's wave, sweeping in from time to time to remind us not to be too fixated on that which is mundane, trivial and doomed to pass.

The Sabbath is God's judgment of the ephemeral by the eternal.

The Sabbath reminds us we are made by the eternal for the eternal.

The Sabbath is meant periodically to take our vision off our sandcastles and lift our eyes to see the great horizon of our being.

Ponder again that extraordinary phrase: "And on the seventh day God rested."

Think about the portrayal of God that is offered there: God creates; God creates; God creates; God creates; God creates; God creates . . . God rests.

What does that tell us about the nature of God, about the nature of life?

It suggests to us that even God knows there is a time for patience. I confess,

I am a firm believer that juicy homegrown tomatoes are telling evidence of the reality of a good God, and I think many years back to when Melissa and I decided to grow tomatoes in our backyard.

Our children, who were very small at the time, eagerly volunteered to help in this enterprise, offering to dig the holes, plant the seeds and provide ample water.

But having done so, they were deeply disappointed.

They supposed there to be an instantaneous correlation between planting and harvesting.

They were disturbed to find that growth required a process of patience.

What do you mean we have to wait months?

In truth, they didn't. As soon as little green knobs of tomatoes came forth,

they grabbed them and rushed inside saying, "Now we've got tomatoes to eat."

(That may be why none of them eats tomatoes to this day.)

By contrast, God creates; creates; creates; creates; creates; creates . . . then God rests.

God gives creation breathing space, time to grow, time to mature, time to live.

Nothing of value is instantaneous. Any achievement of grandeur requires the cultivation of patience.

Finally, my friends, the Sabbath is an invitation to establish a habit.

The Sabbath is a day, yes, but it also functions to habituate us to experiencing communion with God as a daily part of our lives.

In other words, the Sabbath is one day dedicated to giving us opportunity to commune with our Creator, but the Sabbath also teaches us that we can create Sabbath moments in every day of our existence.

We find that we can enjoy the gift of the sacred rest by opening little Sabbath gifts daily, and in building the opportunity for communion with God into the structure of our ordinary schedule, we prove the truth of a theological principle articulated centuries ago by Thomas a Kempis:

we know best those with whom we commune most.

If we build the experience of Sabbath into the daily fabric of our lives, we may not be able to prove the existence of God

as a scientist might prove a hypothesis in a laboratory,

but as we build communion with God into the structure of our existence,

we find that we know the reality of God in much the same way we know the reality of our best friend.

The experience of God that the Sabbath day brings us

invites us to make this experience of communion with God an essential element of every day of life.

We welcome back to our fellowship this day a tired group of young people and their counselors.

They have been busy this week building a Habitat House at John's Island, South Carolina, near Charleston.

They left looking like a youth group; they returned looking like a punk rock band.

But I like punk rock bands.

This group has been creating, creating, creating,

creating a house, giving the gift of shelter to someone in need.

But now they have come back to us to enjoy the sacred rest

and remember in whose name they have been creating,

and to remember for whose Kingdom they have expended such effort.

This is the day for them to claim the promise of our Lord,

“Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

Our God says to us, “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.”

For in so doing, the Sabbath is a gift meant to make us holy ourselves.

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Part Four in a Series