

WORK AND REST FOR LIFE

SERIES: KINGDOM WORK



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The Search for Utopia

We've all heard of the lost city of Atlantis. We've heard about this large, lush island abundant in natural resources like gold and silver. A city inhabited by very moral people. Atlantis was a utopia where the people lived in harmony both with each other and the exotic animals that roamed the land.

Plato wrote about Atlantis in 360 B.C. His is the earliest recorded tale of Atlantis that we have. Plato's story so captured the imagination of his readers that stories of Atlantis have been passed down through the centuries.

Some have believed that Atlantis was an actual island, now sunken and hidden in the depths of the ocean, just waiting to be discovered. Countless expeditions have been made to find this lost city, and its riches. As recent as 2010, a professor at the University of Hartford led a team of researchers on a quest for Atlantis. They believe they found Atlantis off the coast of Spain. Others believe Atlantis is simply a legend, a fictional place Plato made up. But whether fact or fiction, the idea of Atlantis still captivates.

How many books and movies have come out in the past few decades about searching for, living in, or the destruction of a utopian society? We are drawn to the idea of a mystical, idealized place where we can have personal fulfillment, peace in society, and harmony with the earth. These stories captivate us because they touch on a desire deep within us, a to desire to find something or someplace that is better than what we have here and now.

I think we have our own Atlantis. That we, in our time and place—21st century Americans in Silicon Valley—are constantly searching for a utopia that is just beyond our reach. We can all imagine it. We talk about it all the time. Everyone who works, works toward it, but none of us is quite there. Our Atlantis is the utopia of “work-life balance.”

I recently sent out a survey to PBC moms who work, not just in their homes managing family life, but outside of the home with local companies. I wanted to assess their needs to know how the church might minister to them. Almost every woman polled said that the greatest challenge in her life was time management. Our working moms feel like they have slim or no margins in their lives. When asked what being successful means to them as a working mom, most of them made a reference to this ideal of work-life balance.

I'm sure many of you can relate. Work-life balance is the talk of many work places and a common topic across vocations. I understand why, but I find the idea of work-life balance inherently flawed.

Have any of you ever scratched your head at this phrase? To say “work-life balance” creates a dichotomy between work and life. It implies that work is something very different from life, that when we are working, we are not living. It may even lead us to think that work is a kind of death. But we know this is not true. Work is a part of life. I think what we are really searching for when we talk about work-life balance is a work-rest balance.

Regarding our time, work and rest are the two major building blocks of life. Life is the whole. Life, both with a healthy balance of work and rest, and time to nurture important relationships is really what we are after. In fact, that combination sounds like the abundant life that Jesus offered his disciples.

Work and Rest for Life

We cannot legitimately have a sermon series on work without discussing rest. Life, as God established it, is a rhythm of work and rest. In God's economy, these things should not be disconnected. In reality, they are interconnected. Rather than seeing work and rest contrasting one another or even warring against one another, God made them to complement one another. Work enhances rest and rest enhances work. They are both part of the sacredness of life.

Today we'll look at some of the biblical fundamentals of rest. We'll see that rest is a holy thing, a radical act, even an essential spiritual discipline. Maybe if we understand the fundamental, spiritual value and benefits of rest, we will make changes in our lives. Changes that will lead to work-rest balance and to more of that abundant life we are seeking.

Let's see how rest began, way back in the creation story.

Rest is Holy Ceasing

Genesis 1:31-2:3:

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2 And 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. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

God's main action on the seventh day was to rest or to cease, specifically this means to stop labor. But notice what else God does on the seventh day—he blesses it and declares it holy. This day is now set apart in a special way. This day is the first thing declared holy by God.

I often hear people retell the creation story in a way that makes the sixth day—the creation of human beings, and the completion of creation—the high point. Certainly, everything created on days one through six was amazing, miraculous, good and very good! But I think we can make a case that the language of the creation story reaches its highest point in chapter two verse three when God “blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” This blessing and holiness coincide with God's rest. Or put another way, rest is a holy ceasing, and it is blessed.

When I look at all the elements of the seventh day—no work and lots of rest enjoying creation—these seem like the essential elements of a good party. Can you look back at this seventh day and imagine God celebrating? He's created a tremendously beautiful world. Now he's stopped to take it all in. He knows the joy of rest that comes from very good work.

So it seems to me that rest as God established it is not just ceasing for ceasing's sake. Rest allows us to look back and celebrate what work has brought about. God, in his infinite creativity and ultimate power, could have kept creating. He didn't need to stop; he chose to stop. He drew a finish line, looked back, and declared his work very good. Then he took a full day to rest and celebrate the fruit of his labor.

Do we follow God's example in this way? Can we cease and celebrate our good work?

Cease and Celebrate

I think this is going to be a problem for most of us. There's always more work we can do. There's more to strive for. There are things to fidget with until the project or product is perfect. There's an upgrade to make; new, innovative features to add to version 8.0. Higher grades, bigger scholarships, better scores on annual reviews, and more awards to chase after. And, of course, at the end of the day, the house could be cleaner. The kitchen was due for a renovation a good 30 years ago. Oh, and have you see the clutter filling the closets and garage?

How can we stop when all of this work is waiting for us? When can we imagine something better? When we know we are capable of greater things? Ceasing and celebrating is no easy task.

I've told you before that I consider myself a recovering perfectionist. When I say this, there are usually a few chuckles, but I'm not trying to be funny. Perfectionism was a real problem for me. I've always had high expectations for myself, and specific ideas about how my world should be.

As a child, my mother would deliver clean, folded laundry to my room, and it was my job to put it away. But first, I would shake out the clothes and refold them in a particular way, the way I felt was best, so they fit in my dresser drawers just so. That's when mom first grew concerned about me.

Before I went into ministry, I was a training actress and vocalist. I was mortified when I forgot a line or didn't perform as perfectly as I had practiced. I would be haunted by minor mistakes for months.

As a college student, I worked my self into a messy puddle of exhaustion trying to get straight A's. It didn't help that my freshman roommate was an actual genius. She would cram for two hours late the night before an

exam and get an A. I would study for hours each day during the week leading up to the same exam and get a B. It was infuriating. I worked so hard, cared so much, and did well, but I was never satisfied with my efforts. So I pushed harder and worked longer and socialized less. And I was very tired, anxious, and lonely. It's sad to think of how much pain and anxiety I created for myself. Does anyone resonate with this?

Why is it so hard for us to give ourselves permission to stop? Why are we so difficult to satisfy?

God shows us a better way. Work hard. Declare a finish line. Look back and acknowledge the good work you've done. Cease and celebrate. But there is more. The next significant passage about rest comes in Exodus 20.

Rest is a Command

Exodus 20:8-11:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Reading only these few verses, it's easy to hear this as a suggestion. But if you know your Bible well, or if you look at the context, you realize that this is the fourth of the ten commandments.

The commandments were God's work of shepherding his people, helping them shape their lives around his values and priorities. Eight of the ten commandments are prohibitions that start with “you shall not.” This fourth commandment is only one of two that is a positive command. Rest was not something to be avoided, but to be valued and practiced. In fact, rest was so valued by God, so holy, that he made it essential to the life of his people. He made it a command.

The instruction to “remember” the Sabbath day is significant. Remember is a big-time Old Testament verb that often gets watered down in translation. When modern English speakers hear the verb remember we

define it as a mental recall of something from the past. But in the stories of the Old Testament, to remember was linked with radical action. When God remembered his people in times of oppression or desperation, he did something powerful or miraculous. For example, God heard the cries of his people when they were slaves in Egypt. Exodus says that God remembered his people and rescued them.

God uses the same verb when he later gives his people the law. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” This is not a passive request. He's not asking his people to think fondly of a past event. This is God calling them to action, action as radical as his own!

Like God rested after creation, his people are called to rest. They were commanded to set aside all of their work for a full day. No one was exempt, no matter their work, role, status, or age. Everyone was to stop and follow God's example of rest. This was their radical act of devotion to God. The Sabbath day was now theirs to keep.

Have you ever thought of rest as a radical act of devotion? Or as an act of joyful obedience? Most people I know talk about rest in two ways. Some complain about how overwhelming their schedule is and insist that they don't have time to rest. Others have reached a point of exhaustion or collapse, but they talk about rest as a burden or inconvenience.

People of God, we need to do better than this. And we can start by righting our perspective on rest. From the creation story, we know that rest is as sacred as work. Now from the law, we learn that rest is a radical act of devotion to God. With these truths as our starting place, we can rejoice that God created a pattern of work and rest. We could start talking about rest as something special that we get to do. And then it would be much easier to make rest a non-negotiable in our lives.

I'm convinced that when we choose not to rest, we are somehow missing out on a more blessed way of living. I think God knew that if we stubborn, fallen humans had to figure out life on our own, we wouldn't choose rest. Left to find our way, we'd keep working and working until, eventually, our work would enslave us. Then the beautiful creativity of work would be lost to drudgery and oppressive workaholism. And so God didn't just ask his people to rest, he commanded them to rest. God made rest one of his fundamental laws, knowing rest is what we need but not what we'd choose.

Somewhere in the middle of my college career I talked with my cousin Krissa on the phone. She was a year ahead of me in school in Minnesota. During our conversation, she mentioned how she was practicing Sabbath. That shocked me. I didn't know any Jesus-followers who practiced Sabbath. I thought that was just for Jews. I asked my cousin more about what she was doing. She talked about setting aside a whole day for rest, and how refreshing it was. That it was hard work at first to make room for rest. But she gushed about how it blessed her.

We eventually hung up, and I went about my week, but I couldn't get our conversation out of my head. What if this Sabbath idea could help me be healthier? What if it could lessen the damage done by my perfectionism? So I decided to give it a try.

I started mapping my life around God's pattern of six days of work and one day of rest. And let me tell you, that was NOT easy to do as a college student. I used to study seven days a week, but that was no longer an option. I stopped working at sundown on Saturday and resumed work after dinner on Sunday.

At first, I hated that Sabbath day. It seemed empty and useless, like a huge dresser with no clothes in it. I spent the whole day anxious about the to-do list waiting for me, and fretting over the potential dip in my grades.

But then, gradually, I learned how to fill my Sabbath with good things. I worshipped at church well rested and fully focused, instead of groggily worrying about getting back to school to study. I enjoyed my hobbies again both because I had time for them, and because I learned to release myself from the feelings of guilt I normally had when I played.

Sabbath keeping was truly a spiritual discipline, but eventually, it also became a thing of great freedom and joy. Shedding overwork meant that I had room in my life to practice simply being, rather than always doing. In this big, weekly pause, I got a clear look at my unhealthy habits and attitudes. As painful as that was, God and I did some good work for change. Eventually, Sabbath became the day I felt God's love most keenly. And it was the day I could focus on loving him in return. And that prepared me so well for the workweek ahead.

Friends, God has called us to work and rest. Are you doing both well and with intention? Or has work, whatever your work is, taken an unhealthy place in your life? Remember that rest is both for you and for God. It is a radical act of devotion to God. Are you ready to

obey the calling to rest? I encourage you to think and pray about that question this week.

Rest to be Sanctified

Let's turn to one last passage together and see another critical aspect of rest.

Exodus 31:12-13:

And the Lord said to Moses, 13 "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.'"

All of the law God gave his people was for their good. Now we hear the Lord say that Sabbath keeping is a sign that God sanctifies his people. The verb for sanctify is the same verb translated as "made holy" and "keep holy" in our previous two passages. The longer I reflect on this passage, the more I realize that rest is not just a sign that God sanctifies us, but that rest is also a tool God uses to sanctify us.

How exactly does rest make us more holy? If you look at the Bible's teaching on Sabbath as a whole, you come to realize that rest is an exercise in dependence on God.

I said before that we humans have a propensity to overwork and push ourselves too hard for too long. Here's the problem when we work without ceasing—we ignore our limitations. God certainly created us with incredible capacities to imagine, to build, to solve problems, to nurture others, to fix, to invent, and to lead, but as humans, we do have limits.

We can launch shuttles to the moon, but we did not and cannot hang the moon or the stars. We can design batteries that last for days, but only God's power is eternal. Of course, we cannot do everything! Please hear this—you will not always achieve everything that you can imagine or dream about. And you can't always excel in every way, in every season of life, even in the things that are your gifts or talents! There are simply circumstances, and seasons, and people beyond your control.

When we ignore our limitations and just keep working, aren't we playing the role of God? When we work without ceasing, isn't this a sign that we are trying to control the outcome? Ultimately, if I don't stop to rest, then I am at risk of buying into the great lie that I am the Creator of my abundant life.

There are others of us who overwork not out of an inflated sense of our abilities or of our ambition, but because we feel inadequate. We don't feel like we are enough, so we hope our work will make us enough. We keep working because we have to prove ourselves to others, to ourselves, and to God. These friends wonder, how will God love me if I don't prove I'm worthy of love?

So here's the Good News: God gives us rest as a powerful antidote to both arrogance and inadequacy. Rest is our opportunity to shed our foolish arrogance and surrender our desperate striving to God. Sabbath leads us to God's throne, and it's there that we can surrender our bootstraps. Before a God who is love, there's no question of our being worthy!

Living out God's pattern of work and rest is uncomfortable for sinners. All that surrender chafes at first. But the rewards are great. Sabbath keeping put us in our place, in a good way. That big pause allows us to allow God to complete the work he wants to do in us.

Have you ever made bread from scratch? If you have, you know that first, you have to work the dough. You beat it smooth, knead it, and eventually punch it. But at some point, you have to set the bread aside and let it rest. When the bread is resting, that's when the yeast works its magic, and the bread begins to rise. And that's how you get those deliciously fluffy and wonderfully rounded loaves.

Apply this image to your life. You can beat and knead and punch away in your work, and that's great; that's part of the process. But when you stop and rest, God acts like yeast in your life. He mysteriously and miraculously works for you and in you. He uses rest to help you grow. He sanctifies you.

We realize that we can't achieve or control everything, but that's okay. What God wants to happen will happen. God is for us. God has the power to supply all our needs. Being dependent on the Creator is the best way to live. So my high-achieving, hard-working friends, do you need to rest? Are you ready to practice depending on God?

When I prepared this sermon, I decided I didn't need to make a case that regular rest is good for us physically and emotionally. That's just common sense. But I hope that this introductory look at God's design for rest has

helped you see that rest is good for you spiritually. Rest can deepen your intimacy with God. It can give you a healthy perspective on work, on the state of your soul, and on life as a whole. Rest is your opportunity to celebrate all of your good work, and it has the added benefit of preparing you for more good work. And all of this is to the glory of God!

There's so much more we can learn about rest from the Bible. But this is a good place to start. Today, I've asked you to examine yourself to see if you need to rest or if you need to rest more intentionally. If your answer was yes to any of my questions, then I encourage you to go to the Lord in prayer, confessing your need to rest, and asking God to help you establish better patterns of work and rest in your life. Why don't we do that now?