

Worship - Practices that Address the Most Important Thing (Sabbath)

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 15 May 2022, 4th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 95; Exodus 20:8-11; Hebrews 4:1-11

A survey last year of office workers found that over half of the Australian respondents had experienced burnout in the last 12 months.¹ The stresses of the pandemic have contributed significantly to this, but another researcher, Jonathan Malesic, suggests there is something deeper going on. Earlier this year he published an article entitled: 'Your work is not your god: welcome to the age of the burnout epidemic'. Malesic argues that burnout is a characteristic of our age.

Textile mill workers in Manchester, England, ... two centuries ago worked for longer hours than the typical British ... worker today, and they did so in dangerous conditions. They were exhausted, but they did not have the 21st-century psychological condition we call burnout, because they did not believe their work was the path to self-actualization. The ideal that motivates us to work to the point of burnout is the promise that if you work hard, you will live a good life: not just a life of material comfort, but a life of social dignity, moral character and spiritual purpose. Our problem, according to Malesic, is that we've allowed work to become our god, but work fails to deliver on those existential and spiritual promises, because, of course, it can't. It's just work.²

God has called us at St George's to be the Light on the Hill. Our mission is to see people DRAWN to the light of Christ, TRANSFORMED by the light of Christ, and SENT out to shine the light of Christ. 2 weeks ago we began a new sermon series called, *Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life*. This series focuses on that second movement in our vision - to see us TRANSFORMED by the Light of Christ. It's a series on spiritual disciplines - ancient practices that help us connect with God and open us to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. In that first sermon we looked at how as human beings we're made to worship the true and living God. We're made to love the One who first loved us. Our problem is that we worship things which are not God - like work. Each week in this series we'll look at a letter of the acronym WORSHIP. And we'll explore one practice, one spiritual discipline that we can put to work at home. I've tried to pick disciplines that can be points of resistance to the particularly corrosive aspects of our culture. These will help us swim against the tide, to connect with God and to hold out the light of Christ to those

¹ <https://www.thechainsaw.com/australian-workers-burnout-lockdowns>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/jan/06/burnout-epidemic-work-lives-meaning>

around us. Today we're looking at worship, that is practices that help us focus on what is most important, and we look at the practice of the Sabbath.

Worship

GK Chesterton writes,

“The crux and crisis is that men found it natural to worship; even natural to worship unnatural things ... If man cannot pray, he is gagged; if he cannot kneel, he is in irons.”³

We're made for worship. To worship is to give our ultimate devotion to something. It is to love, to trust and to obey that thing. We can place our ultimate devotion in all sorts of things: work, money, success, comfort, approval, family, a person, a hobby. But none of these will satisfy our souls. Worship them and they will leave us empty because we are made for the true and living God.

Psalm 95 invites us to come and worship God.

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD.

And the Psalm gives us 5 reasons why we are to worship the LORD as our God.

First, he is the one who saves us.

Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

Second, he is above all other so-called gods.

For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Third, he is the one who created this world.

The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

Fourth, the LORD is not only the creator of this world, he is one who made us.

Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

Fifth, we belong to him and he cares for us.

For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Finally the second half of the Psalm is an extended warning, reflecting on Israel's history.

Today, if only you would hear his voice, "Do not harden your hearts..."

To worship then reminds us that God is God. We are not. Neither is anything else. He alone is our salvation. He is above all other gods. He is our Maker. We belong to him. He cares for us. Practices that lead us to worship are ones that focus our attention on the beauty of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They remind us that he is the source of all that is

³ From *The Everlasting Man*, quoted in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, p25

Good and True and Beautiful. They invite us to delight, adore, praise, rest in and respond to God. They call us to hear his voice and not to harden our hearts.

At the centre of the spiritual disciplines of worship is our corporate worship on a Sunday. The single biggest thing you can do to worship God and to cultivate a heart that worships God is to make it a habit to be here Sunday by Sunday, week in, week out. Putting church on Sunday before sporting games, birthday parties, family events, uni assignments, personal preferences, in our sorrows and joys, is a beautiful act of worship and devotion to God. It is a discipline that helps us focus on God as the most important thing. And when we come, we can pray that, wherever we are coming from, that God would open our hearts to meet with him in the body of Christ.

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered loney ... stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing. ... The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God.⁴

Sabbath

However, the spiritual discipline I wanted to explore today to help us worship is the Sabbath. We'll look at Why keep the Sabbath, What keeping the Sabbath does and How we can keep the Sabbath.

Why keep the Sabbath

In his article 'Your work is not your god', Jonathan Maselic gives the example of Tristen Lee, a millennial PR worker. Lee tells "a too-familiar story of how long hours, lack of sleep, no real time off, and excessive rent keep her in the grind."

I remember speaking to a friend who was an actuary. He said he measured his day in minutes and could tell you how much each minute cost. I have to say that having grown up as a missionary kid in PNG where what mattered was people not time, I find this kind of statement almost incomprehensible. We prize productivity and efficiency. We live in a 24/7 world. The internet, email, smart phones, social media. They all mean we are always accessible. It's hard to switch off. The boundaries between work and home are blurred. I know this is true for many of you who do lots of voluntary 'work'. I know it's a problem for me.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper Collins, 1954:18-20

In Exodus 20 God gives Moses the 10 commandments, and the 4th commandment is this:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. **9** Six days you shall labour 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. **11** For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

I wonder whether this is the most neglected of all the 10 commandments. Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”⁵ Why keep the Sabbath? Not because it’s a law, but because we need it. Because we need to Worship and Rest.

Exodus says that we are first of all to keep the Sabbath because God rested from his work of creation on the 7th day. *Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

God has stitched a rhythm of work and rest into creation. Work is from God and for our neighbour. But there is a limit to our work. God himself rested on the seventh day and so as his image bearers we too are called to rest each week. This is not just for believers. It’s for all people (even the foreigner’s residing in your towns). We need to down tools. We need to rest and recharge. Sabbath helps us see there is more to life than work. To rest one day in seven is to honour God.

In Deuteronomy Moses again rehearses the 10 commandments. But the reason given for the Sabbath is different:

Remember that you were slaves Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.⁶

Deuteronomy pictures the Sabbath as a reenactment of God’s rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt. There they were not people, but units of production. Keeping the Sabbath is a declaration of our freedom. It says you are not a slave. Conversely, anyone who can’t obey God’s command to keep the Sabbath is a slave.

Why keep the Sabbath? Because we’re made to worship God. He rested, and so can we. He has rescued us, so we are no longer slaves but can rest.

What does keeping the Sabbath do?

⁵ Mark 2.27

⁶ Deuteronomy 5.15

Keeping the Sabbath is a celebration of Creation. Through rest we're renewed to work. On the cross Christ said "It is finished". Through him salvation is accomplished, and so we can enter into God's rest. Hebrews teaches us that our rest is a foretaste of the new creation, a participation in the eternal rest of God.

Keeping the Sabbath invites us to accept our limitations as blessings from our infinite Creator. As we honour our limits and we honour the infinite God who rests. If the idea of practising a Sabbath makes you think, "but I won't be able to get everything done!" Good! That's exactly what it's meant to do. Because you can't. Sabbath reminds us that we are dependent upon God. It is an exercise in trust. I lay down tools because I trust that God will provide for me and for those I love. I trust that God is the one who keeps creation going. He will keep the little patch of creation he has given me to tend going too, so I can rest.

That's true for church too. Jesus says, "I will build my church."⁷ 1 Corinthians 3 says that it's God who gives the growth.⁸ I have to keep reminding myself of this. I'm preaching this sermon to myself before the rest of you. I confess that I have not kept good boundaries around my Sabbath, and that that has flowed into how I lead church and the culture that we have. Each of us needs a day of rest. For some of us on Parish Council that means having at least a day without St George's things. It may be that we as a church need to do less so that we can more enter God's rest each Sunday.

Keeping the Sabbath is also an exercise in thanksgiving. It reminds us that because we are not necessary, everything we have is a gift from God. Keeping the Sabbath can help move our hearts from complaining and bitterness to gratitude.

How to keep the Sabbath?

Let's get practical. How can we keep the Sabbath?

Here's one of the most helpful and challenging quotes I read on this.

Sabbath is not dependent upon our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are finished. We do not stop when we complete our phone calls, finish our project, get through this stock of messages, or get out this report that is due tomorrow. We stop because it's time to stop.⁹

Here's some concrete things.

- 24hrs
- Sunset to Sunset (or more) - so that you can begin with restful sleep

⁷ Matthew 16:18

⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:6-7

⁹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, IVP, 2005: 40

- Go to bed early
- Pray for Christ to give you a deep and refreshing sleep in his arms
- Enter sleep as an act of worship
- Imagine you are laying your head in his lap as you lie down
- Ideally Sunday, so you can worship with the family of God. Sabbath is an exercise in worship. Re-centring us on God. Church is vital to that.
- If it can't be Sunday, then try for the same day every week so that you can get into a rhythm
- Communicate what day your Sabbath is to others so that they won't expect you to answer emails and so forth.
- Planned
 - How can you intentionally leave school and work behind?
 - Maybe you need to end your pre Sabbath day with prayer handing your work with it's burdens and responsibilities to God
 - Clearly mark the time - maybe lighting a candle. A great way for kids to get involved
 - Plan restful and re-creational activities, not just vegging out
 - Rest that is the opposite of how you work (Heschel quote)

A man who works with his mind should sabbath with his hands, and a man who works with his hands should sabbath with his mind - Abraham Heschel

- Walks, enjoying creation, a conversation with a friend, making love, games with your kids
 - Enjoy a meal with family and friends. Food has always been part of the practice of Sabbath. Friday is my Sabbath and we have pizza night at our house.
 - Don't try and pack things in. Take your time.
 - Don't do all the household jobs that need doing. You might not be getting paid, but it's still work!
- Electronic Sabbath - No email. No Social Media. Maybe even no TV! Turn your phone off or on silent. Maybe put a voice message on.

Keeping the sabbath is an act of worship. It helps resist the idols of self sufficiency and productivity. In the sabbath we taste the eternal rest of God. We celebrate the completed work of Christ for us. Let me finish with 4 questions for reflection. What makes it difficult for you to rest on the sabbath? How does keeping a sabbath enhance your enjoyment of God? What makes a sabbath nourishing for you?

What happens to you when you go without regular rhythms that allow you to rest in God?