



*Rest*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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# contents

## introduction

Living in Sabbath Simplicity 9

## 1. shaking things up

What Jesus Said about Sabbath 15

## 2. resting

A Release from Our Restlessness 27

## 3. reconnecting

A Rescue from Isolation 55

## 4. revising

A Shift from Rut to Rhythm 91

## 5. pausing

A Retreat from Our 24/7 World 129

## 6. playing

An Escape from Workaholism 157

## 7. praying

An Antidote for Self-Absorption 177

acknowledgments 205

reading group guide 207

notes 217

# introduction

## Living in Sabbath Simplicity

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?  
Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life.  
I'll show you how to take a real rest.*

—Jesus (Matt. 11:28 MSG)

Sunday morning. I am groggy, staring out the window over the sink, listening to the gurgle of the coffeemaker and the chirping of the birds outside my drafty window. My children watch *Arthur* on public television, eating Pop-Tarts on the couch. My husband, at the pine table in the kitchen, eats from a cereal bowl resting on the open pages of the *Chicago Tribune* sports section as he reads it—his daily ritual, as critical to his well-being as the coffee is to mine. I pour cream, then coffee—just the smell of it begins to clear the cobwebs in my brain—and gently remind all three of them to get dressed for church soon.

“Mom?” my nine-year-old asks.

“Yes, Aaron,” I say, sipping coffee, leaning against the kitchen counter.

“What do we *have* today?” He’d heard some of his friends saying things like, “I can’t play, I have soccer,” or “I have piano lessons today.” So his question is really, What’s on the agenda today? What do we *have* to do?

“Well, buddy, today is Sunday,” I say. “What do you think we have?”

He chews his Pop-Tart thoughtfully, then calmly replies, “Peace.”

I look at him over the rim of my mug. I set the mug on the counter, raise my arms in silent victory: after several years of trying to make our Sundays a Sabbath, a true day of rest, my kids are getting it. They say values aren’t just taught but caught, and my little boy has just shown me the ball in his mitt.

“You’re right, buddy,” I say, smiling at him. “That’s exactly what we have.”

### real life intrudes

That Sunday, we did have peace. After church, the kids and I (and a friend or two of theirs) had some soup, played board games, hung out. The day was marked more by what we left undone than what we did. On purpose, we did not go shopping, do laundry, do housework, or turn on the computer. I didn’t cook an elaborate meal; we ate leftovers for dinner. When the kids wanted my attention, I gave it. When they didn’t, I read the Sunday paper or a book. We simply relaxed. Well, the kids and I did. My husband, who works as a realtor, showed houses for part of the day.

But during soccer season, which we’re in the midst of right now, the picture looks a little different. Actually, it feels like

we're a different family. This time of year, I'm a stressed-out soccer mom seeking Sabbath. Yesterday, for example, was Sunday. My daughter played in a local soccer tournament. Her game began at 10:30 a.m., which meant she had to be on the field by 10:00 a.m., making it impossible to attend either the 9:00 a.m. or 11:00 a.m. service at church. Parents were required to work shifts at the tournament to help run it, so my husband took an early morning shift, and I took an afternoon shift. Our family moved in all different directions. We didn't rest, really. We didn't connect or even pause. It felt like any other busy day.

So do we practice Sabbath or not? If we have Sundays that sometimes fall apart or don't seem very restful, why even try?

Well, suppose I were telling you about another spiritual practice—say, for example, Bible study—and I told you that studying Scripture had changed my life, that I had encountered God in the practice of reading his Word. But suppose I admitted that there are times I don't understand parts of what I read. That I have not yet fully grasped everything there is to know about the Bible. That I sometimes doubt its veracity, wonder about its relevance. Would you advise me to give up this practice because I have yet to do it perfectly?

Like study or solitude or prayer, Sabbath-keeping is a spiritual practice. Some weeks are better than others, but we continue to practice it because in it, we encounter God in life-changing ways. When we see Sabbath-keeping as a spiritual practice, we realize that we don't need to "institute" it. We simply need to practice it and invite others to join us. We can be intentional without becoming institutional.

But Sabbath-keeping is more than just a practice to draw us closer to God. It is also a command, and not just a minor ceremonial law but one of the Ten Commandments. Now, a number of public-opinion polls in recent years have pointed out that although the majority of Americans say they believe in the Ten

Commandments, most can't name five of them. So if we say we are trying to live biblically, to live according to God's will, what should our Sundays (or perhaps our Saturdays) look like?

I personally have tried to practice Sabbath since the children were small, with varying degrees of success. Much of the time, although definitely not all of the time, it is a day, as my son says, of peace. Of restfulness, of recreation that actually re-creates us. A day which almost always includes some activity, yet remains a respite from hurry and chaos. A day when we focus on one another instead of on our to-do lists. Still, we never have perfect Sundays. Thank God. Because often, what I need to rest from most is my perfectionism.

As I've shared my Sabbath journey in magazine articles and blogs, I have often received uninvited critiques of what I do or don't do. I've been told, among other things, that I should not take my kids to Dairy Queen on Sundays (because it forces the employees there to work on the Sabbath), that I should not let my daughter play soccer on Sundays, and that I practice on the wrong day. I consider these prayerfully. Here's the thing, though. The Bible says nothing about soccer, but it does say you shouldn't light a fire on Sabbath (Exod. 35:3). How many of the people who point fingers at my recreational activity violate the strict biblical rules about Sabbath by using electricity or driving a car (all, according to Orthodox Judaism's strict interpretation of the Bible, prohibited by this passage)?

My goal in Sabbath-keeping is not legalism or empty ritual or even making Sabbath a perfect day. (Good thing, since I'm obviously pretty far from accomplishing that.) In it, I see an opportunity to focus my energy on what Jesus says are the two most important commandments: to love God and to love others. Although our culture often advises us to take time for ourselves, that's not the heart of Sabbath. While time for yourself is nice, the most meaningful Sabbath practices are focused on God and

others. To take a day to put aside our cares and our work so we can just love God and love others—that’s the heart of resting in God, the key to recovering our lives.

As I have wrestled with how to practice Sabbath and talked to others who do, I have noticed that, although the practices vary, they have some things in common. Different people practice Sabbath differently, but no matter how it is practiced, Sabbath allows us to rest, to reconnect with our faith and each other, and to revise the very order of our lives. It invites us to pause, to play, and to pray.

Each of these six aspects of Sabbath—resting, reconnecting, revising, pausing, playing, praying—offers the antidote or cure for the symptoms of our hurried, adrenaline-overloaded, task-oriented culture. This book will examine each in detail.

### living in Sabbath Simplicity

Over the past several years, I have been moving toward what I call Sabbath Simplicity: a sanely paced, God-focused life. Sometimes it seems I am making progress, and other times, as I said, I’m a stressed-out soccer mom. My work, the travel it requires, the kids’ activities, the demands of my husband’s career—all of these seem to conspire to keep us from the joy of Sabbath rest.

But little by little, I’m getting better at stopping. At resting. And at accepting the grace just to do what I can and know that only God is perfect. Sabbath-keeping is a journey, a process. I’m learning as I go along. Just taking time to wonder why I have to *work* at resting is a huge step. I’m finding that if I unplug regularly, I get more done, because my energy and enthusiasm are renewed by rest. I’ve found power, paradoxically, in unplugging.

How, exactly, do we do that? In today’s hectic society, people of all faiths, and even of no faith at all, are longing to take a

break. Most think of rest as a luxury, but it's actually necessary for optimum mental, physical, and spiritual health. Those who have learned to take regular breaks to recover are actually stronger and more efficient.

I first explored the idea of Sabbath Simplicity in my book *Breathe: Creating Space for God in a Hectic Life*. Living a Sabbath Simplicity lifestyle is not impossible, nor is there only one way to do it. But by spending time with Jesus (which for me is the focus of Sabbath), I can rest and receive love that isn't dependent upon my accomplishments or efforts. And since writing that book, I've learned more about Sabbath. I still am on the journey, but I thought perhaps some of what I've learned would be helpful to others. I want to give you the gift of Sabbath-keeping, which has been a life-giving practice for me, one I know will bring you closer to the heart of God.

A final note before we get started. In these pages, I will share our story, as well as the stories of a few other families. I wrote this book over a period of two years or so, often leaving it on the shelf for months at a time. So in various stories, my children will be different ages. They are now eleven and thirteen, but by the time the book is published, they'll be yet another year older. Bear with the discrepancies, which give testimony to the truth that Sabbath Simplicity is a journey, not a destination.

# 1

## shaking things up

### What Jesus Said about Sabbath

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;  
I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

—Jesus (Matt. 5:17)

What did Jesus teach about the Sabbath? Something shifted tremendously in how people followed God after Jesus walked our planet. Although the roots of the Christian faith are in Judaism, the way that modern Christians keep Sabbath, or don't, looks quite different from the way ancient Jews did. Jesus said he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. But really, that fulfillment changed a lot about how people lived out their faith.

Why? We have the same Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus, it seems, created this seismic shift that affected how God's law would be lived out. Sabbath is not the only law that was affected, but that's where we'll focus for now.

## a new yoke

Even when Jesus walked the earth, people were aware that he was shaking things up. The gospel writers often tell us that people marveled at Jesus' teaching because he spoke with "authority."

Commenting on the rabbinic tradition and this idea of authority, pastor and author Rob Bell writes, "Different rabbis had different sets of rules, which were really different lists of what they forbade and what they permitted. A rabbi's set of rules and lists, which was really that rabbi's interpretation of how to live the Torah, was called that rabbi's yoke. When you followed a certain rabbi, you were following him because you believed that rabbi's set of interpretations were the closest to what God intended through the Scriptures. And when you followed that rabbi, you were taking up that rabbi's yoke."<sup>1</sup>

Bell continues, "Most rabbis taught the yoke of a rabbi who had come before them. . . . Every once in a while, a rabbi would come along who was teaching a new yoke, a new way of interpreting the Torah. This was rare and extraordinary. . . . Now imagine if a rabbi who had a new perspective on the Torah was coming to town. This rabbi who was making new interpretations of the Torah was said to have authority. The Hebrew word for 'authority' is *shmikah*. This might not even happen in your lifetime. You would hike for miles to hear him. A rabbi who taught with *shmikah* would say things like, 'You have heard it said . . . , but I tell you . . .' What he was saying is, 'You have heard people interpret that verse this way, but I tell you that this is what God really means in that verse.'"<sup>2</sup>

So Jesus offered this new yoke, which he claimed is easy. But in a way, it seems harder. He often began with "you've heard it said" and cited the Old Testament law. Then he followed with "but I say to you." For example, he said, "You've heard it said, 'Don't commit adultery.' But I say, 'If you look at a woman with

lust, you've already slept with her'" (Matt. 5:27–28, my paraphrase). And, "You've heard it said, 'Don't murder.' But if you call someone a fool or hate them, you've killed them" (Matt. 5:21–22).

Jesus was saying that this is what God really means by that verse. His teaching encouraged people to hold to a higher standard than mere legalism but also helped them to realize that keeping the law perfectly is an impossible proposition. Examining ourselves in light of the spirit of the law, rather than the letter, points us to our desperate need for grace. Jesus exhorted his listeners to examine their hearts, their attitudes, as well as their actions. He challenged his listeners to bring outward practice and inner reality into alignment. This again directed his most attentive listeners toward grace, not more careful legalism.

Here's what I've noticed, though. Jesus never used the "you've heard it said, but I say to you" formula to discuss Sabbath. He didn't, for example, say, "You've heard it said, 'Keep the Sabbath holy.' But I say . . ." And he definitely never said, "You've heard it said, 'Keep the Sabbath on the seventh day,' but I tell you, 'Switch it to the first day.'"

Why is that? Did he say it and it somehow just didn't get written down? Was his teaching on Sabbath edited out of the biblical record?

Jesus did criticize the Pharisees for piling rules onto the people, burdening them with lists of what they couldn't do, not just on Sabbath but in regard to all sorts of regulations and man-made traditions. He accused them of valuing their traditions over the law, saying, "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition," and quoted Isaiah 29:3 to condemn them (see Matt. 15:1–20).

He handed out insults to Pharisees and scribes alike, saying, "You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people

down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46).

While he didn’t use his “you’ve heard it said, but I say” formula to teach about Sabbath, he did find all sorts of teachable moments to instruct his followers, and his critics, about Sabbath. Usually this happened when he defended his choices to heal people, cast out demons, or engage in other questionable activities on the Sabbath. Not surprisingly, he focused on aligning our hearts with our actions.

He did say, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” And he claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. But what does that mean? Does it set us free only from the ceremonial aspects of the law, or from the law entirely?

The thing Jesus seemed to get in trouble for most was breaking the Sabbath, at least in the eyes of the legalists of his day. They watched him closely, seemingly in hopes he would slip up and break the rules, although he hardly seemed interested in hiding his actions from them. In fact, he tried over and over to teach them about the heart of Sabbath, asking, “Don’t you on the Sabbath untie your donkey and let him have a drink, or pull your sheep out of a pit?” to point out that compassion is never against God’s rules (see Luke 13:15; Matt. 12:11).

Norman Wirzba writes, “Jesus does not obliterate Sabbath teaching but reframes it so that we can see once again, with renewed emphasis, what creation’s ultimate meaning is.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus came to die for us, but also to live for us, to show us how to live. He modeled spiritual practices like solitude, prayer, and compassion. If you are someone’s disciple, you try to emulate them, try to live as they would. And Jesus kept Sabbath. Not in the way his culture expected, perhaps. He exercised great freedom. If we are his disciples, we will take on his yoke. We will live in this life-giving rhythm of work and rest. Jesus kept Sabbath in a new way, a way that shook things up. As his

disciples, we can keep Sabbath too. And apparently we're free to shake things up as well.

### Jesus shakes things up

In just the first three chapters of Mark's gospel, we find three Sabbath stories. Two take place in the synagogue, one out in a field. Without using the words "you've heard it said, but I say," Jesus still manages to teach a new way of looking at Sabbath.

Let's look at the first passage.

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all

the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

—Mark 1:21–34

Okay, so what did Jesus' Sabbath look like? He taught at synagogue and cast out a demon. But what were the people more amazed by? It would seem that his teaching was just as amazing as the trick of casting out the demon. Again, the people are amazed by his *shmikah*, his authority. He spoke without foot-notes to a people hungry for truth. Perhaps the encounter with the demon was just his way of getting rid of a distraction so that he could continue teaching. But for the people, it was further evidence of that authority.

But what did the rest of Jesus' Sabbath look like? What did he do? After services, he went over to Simon's house. Simon's mother-in-law was sick, but Jesus healed her. The next sentence says she began to "wait on them," or as the King James Version says, she began "to minister to them."

In the Greek, the word is *diakoneo*, which can mean "to serve a meal" but also means "to minister." It's the same word used to describe the ministry done by a deacon in the church, and the same word used in Matthew 4:11 when, after Jesus' time of tempting in the wilderness, angels came and "ministered" to him. So perhaps Simon's mother-in-law helped her daughter and the other women prepare a meal, but the original text does not appear to mean that she waited on them hand and foot all day. Rather, she was restored so that she could fully participate in the ministry of community in her home. She was free to be an active member of the body, to enjoy the fellowship that Jesus and his disciples shared.

The next paragraph begins, "That evening after sunset." The

Sabbath ended at sunset. But between the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and sunset, there is a time gap in the text. So what happened between lunch and sunset? What did Jesus do then? My guess is that he rested. Maybe he took a nap. Maybe he just enjoyed talking with his disciples or with the women of the house. (Since Simon had a mother-in-law, we can safely assume he had a wife, although she's not mentioned.) The text doesn't say, but is it possible that on that afternoon, Jesus hung out with his friends? That Jesus just rested, in the context of community?

Jesus came to earth to show us a way to live. He taught us how to pray, how to love, how to forgive—by doing it. And in this passage and others, he taught us how to spend time with friends, to enjoy gifts like a good meal and friendship. He modeled Sabbath rest.

### Lord of the Sabbath

Just a few pages later, we find the other two Sabbath stories, which again point us to Jesus' radical revision of the Sabbath code. It's interesting that Mark puts these two stories, which seem to happen on two different days, back-to-back in his narrative.

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

—Mark 2:23–28

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

—Mark 3:1–6

Jesus, being a rabbi, would teach in the synagogue in Capernaum, his hometown. Inevitably, people who needed healing would show up. And Jesus would heal them, and then the Pharisees would get so mad they’d huddle in a corner, like robed mafia leaders, to talk about how they could take Jesus out.

Those Pharisees were schooled in the Scriptures, so much so that they had much or all of the Hebrew Torah (the first five books of what we know as the Old Testament) committed to memory—chapter and verse. So sometimes Jesus alluded to Old Testament Scriptures, perhaps doing that “you’ve heard it said, but I say” thing in a more subtle way. Even the words that Jesus used to heal the man do this. He could have said, “Be healed,” or whatever. Instead he said, “Stretch out your hand.”

The Deuteronomy version of the fourth commandment gives freedom as the reason for keeping Sabbath: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut. 5:15).

I wonder if Jesus intended this man’s “outstretched arm” and his now “mighty hand” to remind the Pharisees of something.

Why did the Pharisees want to kill Jesus? Because he violated Sabbath laws? Because they felt threatened by his popularity? Did they plot against him because he claimed to be the Messiah but didn’t match their preconceptions of a messiah? Was it because they thought his interpretation of Scripture was wrong? Because he exposed their hypocrisy? Whatever the reason, everywhere he went, the Pharisees seemed to show up, looking for ways to accuse him.

You’d expect them to be in the synagogue, but in a field when Jesus and his friends are just walking along? Doesn’t that seem odd? Didn’t they have anything better to do, especially on Sabbath? Like . . . rest? Why were they out stalking Jesus that day? Didn’t that violate Sabbath too?

Could it be that Jesus didn’t have to say “you’ve heard it said” about the Sabbath because he simply showed people a radically different approach to Sabbath-keeping? So radical, in fact, that religious people wanted to kill him?

What was Jesus saying with his actions, his infuriating, confusing actions? Even when confronted for, say, healing someone, he answered in riddles: if you have an ox, he said, don’t you untie him and give him a drink of water on the Sabbath? (See Luke 13:15.) Healing someone, he said, is just untying them from what has held them in bondage. He pointed people back beyond the traditions and rules to the heart of God. He asked them to revise their thinking on what it means to obey God.

Here’s what Jesus seemed to be saying with his actions:

“You’ve heard it said to keep the Sabbath holy, which you’ve done by avoiding certain tasks. But I say to you, ‘Keep the Sabbath by engaging in relationship, by restoring people to community, to wholeness, by setting people free.’”

In John 5, Jesus got even more assertive about being the Lord of the Sabbath. When religious leaders asked why he was working on the Sabbath, he said, basically, it was because he is God. He went to the pool at Bethesda, where he healed a man on the Sabbath.

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”

—John 5:16–24

Jesus claimed to be equal with God; he claimed to be the

Messiah. The religious leaders were furious. He also claimed to be above the law, saying that he could work on the Sabbath because God never stopped working, and that he too could do as God did. No wonder the Pharisees got a bit angry.

As he did with all of Jewish traditional law, Jesus changed the outward expression of Sabbath but did not change its inner spirit, its purpose, which is to point us toward God. Jesus often healed people on the Sabbath, confounding the legalists of his day. Surely healing constituted work, didn't it? But those afflicted with disease not only suffered the pain of their infirmity but were disconnected from community. The man with the withered hand, the woman who was bent over, any number of others who received his healing touch—all were isolated. Considered to be unclean, they could not participate in the life of the synagogue. No one would touch them, because to do so rendered a person unclean as well. Jesus restored their physical health not just to alleviate their pain but to restore them to community, which was a way of restoring them spiritually. And it is this spiritual reconnection and restoration that Sabbath practice provides.

For Jesus, Sabbath provided an opportunity to heal, to restore, to renew, to invite those who'd been left out back into the kingdom. He described his mission on earth with these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19).

What holds you in bondage? Are you a slave to your to-do list? Are you imprisoned by your schedule? Have your activities and busyness become your taskmaster? Are you longing for freedom?

In his Sabbath actions and teachings, Jesus fulfilled this

mission of bringing freedom. And he proclaimed that the kingdom of God is not just for rule-keepers. He flung open the gates of heaven, demonstrating a radical inclusiveness. That is the heart of Sabbath. It is a gift for all people, if only we would choose to receive it.