

God-Given Rest Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Introduction

Over the past two years of the pandemic, we have encountered a lot of challenges as a society. One area of challenge has been how we work. For some, you have changed your place of work. For others, you have changed the manner of your work. Many of us have learned how to conduct online meetings, which you may or may not hate with the passion of a thousand fiery suns.

With such changes, our lives have undoubtedly changed as well. For many of us, our work will probably never look quite the same again. And for some, this could be unsettling because work plays an important role in our lives. And with the changes, if we are not careful, we can fall prey to despair, disappointment, and quite frankly exhaustion and burnout. As many of you have learned, with the changes forced upon us by the pandemic, the line between our work life and family life has shifted. It is tough to leave things at the office when the office follows you around in your pocket or purse.

We feel the need to be always plugged in. We fear missing the email or the text message. Many of us wake up in the morning and the first thing that we do is look at our smartphones to see what we have missed. We seem to always be working. Our most common response to how we are doing when people ask is, “Busy.” To quote one author, “We wear our busyness as a badge of honor.”

All of this can lead to finding our identity in our work. Maybe you experienced this when the pandemic first hit, and your companies were not ready for fully remote work. So, there you were, just waiting, feeling worthless, because you were not doing what you normally did on a regular basis.

In a sense, work becomes like a religion when we find our identity in it. Derek Thompson, in *The Atlantic*, wrote about this phenomenon in his article, entitled, “Workism is Making Americans Miserable.” In the article, he talks about the “Gospel of Work,” which is rooted in the belief that “work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must always encourage more work.”

At one point, Thompson addressed the length of work hours by some, stating

Perhaps long hours are part of an arms race for status and income among the moneyed elite. Or maybe the logic here isn’t economic at all. It’s emotional—even spiritual. The best-educated and highest-earning Americans, who can have whatever they want, have chosen the office for the same reason that devout Christians attend church on Sundays: It’s where they feel most themselves. “For many of today’s rich there is no such thing as ‘leisure’; in the classic sense—work is their play,” the economist Robert Frank wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*. “Building wealth to them is a creative process, and the closest thing they have to fun.”

Such an attitude toward work as a source of our identity and fulfillment in this life is antithetical to God’s intention for us. As we will see, God certainly intends for us to work and to work hard (for that matter), but He also frees us from the tyranny of finding our identity and purpose in the things that we create, manage, produce, and steward. He calls us to a rhythm of work that reminds us that He is ultimately the One who takes care of us, and He gives us rest to reflect on His provision.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

¹² Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.

¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work,¹⁴ 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 ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ 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. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Exposition

Because it has been a while since we were in the book of Deuteronomy, I want to highlight again the importance of understanding these commandments in the context of the LORD's redemption of His people. If you look back at Deuteronomy 5:6, you will read the LORD's words to the His people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." It is this redemptive act by the LORD that makes the people His people. It is not their obedience to the law that makes them His people. It is God's grace that makes them His people. This is so important to remember because we are going to be tempted at times to think that it is our conformity and obedience to God's commandments that makes us His children, but that is not true. We are God's children because of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

We, therefore, ought to obey not as people who are attempting to earn out place in God's family, but rather as those who already belong to God by His grace and understand that as His children, we are called to reflect His righteousness and holiness in our lives. Thus, as we return to this study of the 10 commandments in the book of Deuteronomy, please remember that it is not our obedience that makes us children of God. It is the grace of God that makes us his children. Then, as children who already belong, we are called to reflect the values of our new family, not so that we might remain His children, but because He has forever made us His children and as His children, we delight in reflecting the nature of our gracious and good heavenly Father.

So, with that review, we can turn our attention back to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, and consider what we, as God's children, might learn from this passage this morning. Let's work through the passage together.

First, we find the commandment: "¹² Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you." The commandment is stated positively, unlike the previous three commandments, which were prohibitions. The Israelites are told to "observe the Sabbath day," which is the action that God is calling them to as His children, and then he explains the manner in which they are to carry out the action, which is "by keeping it holy." To keep the Sabbath day holy is to recognize that it is unlike other days.

In Exodus 20, which is the first time we see specific details about the Sabbath day in the context of a legal document, the Israelites are told that they are keep it holy because by doing so they were reflecting the actions of their God who created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh day. This seventh day was a day of reflection on the creation that took places over the course of the previous six days.

Here in Deuteronomy 5:15, the reason for keeping that Sabbath day holy is expanded beyond a reflection of God's creative example and extends to a reflection by the Israelites on their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. So, here again, we see an emphasis on remembering the redemption of God's work on behalf of His people. This is what the LORD their God had commanded them according to verse 12.

In verses 13-14, the details of how to keep the Sabbath day holy are provided for the people. They are, as verse 13 says, to "labor and do all their work" for six days, then, on the seventh day, cease from their work, because the day is to be committed to the LORD. But the command goes beyond just the work of the individual who is receiving the command. It extends beyond to the work of others over whom we have some degree of authority or leadership. Notice what verse 14 says, "On it (that is, the seventh day, which is to be a sabbath to the LORD), you shall do no work, but neither should you make your children or your employees or your animals work. They should be given an opportunity to rest just "as you do."

But why? Verse 15 answers, saying, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt." In other words, you ought to treat others as you want to be treated. Remember that there was a time in your life when those brutal Egyptian taskmasters gave you no rest from your work. They made your work hard. They made your life miserable. And God, in his mercy, redeemed you from such an existence. But He did not redeem the Israelites from oppression just to become oppressors themselves. He redeemed them that they and their household and others in their community might enjoy the fruits of God's merciful redemption.

This commandment, then, called the Israelites to things:

First, the Israelites were to be busy for six days, working hard, creating, moving forward as a people. They were not to be lazy or complacent. Just as God had worked for six days to create the world, they, too, were called to work hard for six days. But on the seventh day, just as God rested in order to contemplate on his work of creation, so His people were to rest, worship the LORD, and enjoy the work of their hands from the week before without worry or guilt. They were to work hard, rest, and worship as God's people.

Second, the people were to provide freedom to "those who were dependent on them," remembering that they had been slave under harsh oppression.¹ Thus, this sabbath command had a humanitarian element to it that provided rest for people who were at risk of exploitation and oppression.

Jesus would talk about this humanitarian element in the Sabbath in His encounters with the religious leaders of His day. In Mark 2:23-28, we read of Jesus "going through the grainfields" with his disciples on a Sabbath day. While walking, they were picking some heads of grain, but this scandalized the Pharisees who witnessed it. The Pharisees said to Jesus, "Why are your disciples doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" Jesus responds by pointing to the example of David who ate the consecrated bread with some of his companions when they were hungry.

¹ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 302.

Jesus' point was that the hunger and need for food for David and his companions was a more pressing humanitarian need than the consecration of the bread. Jesus concludes his interaction with the Pharisees by highlighting this humanitarian purpose for the Sabbath, stating, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

For the Pharisees, they were more concerned with the holiness of the day than the needs of Jesus' disciple to eat. The controversy gets amped up as the story of Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees goes on. Eventually, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of breaking the sabbath command because Jesus was willing to heal people on the Sabbath. So, again, we see this tension come out. The Pharisees were more concerned with the sanctity of the day than the well-being of the people. But that does not mean that Jesus didn't care about the sanctity of the Sabbath day. Instead, He cared about the purpose behind the sanctity of the Sabbath day, which, was to provide rest from labor. The Sabbath day was meeting a need in the lives of the people. It was not an end in itself, but rather was aimed at providing people with rest from their weekly labors, reminding them that they were no longer slaves.

You see, the Pharisees cared more about the form of Sabbath observation than the purpose of the Sabbath day. They were worried about how far someone could walk (a Sabbath's day journey) instead of being worried about the well-being of people, which was the intention of the command from the beginning. They thought that mankind was made for Sabbath observance instead of Sabbath observance being made for mankind. And, to quote another preacher, they had made guarding the Sabbath command its own kind of work.

The Sabbath command for God's people originates in the context of Exodus 16, where the LORD is giving Moses instructions about the manna and quail that He is going to provide for the people. For six days, the people would gather just enough food for the days, but on the sixth day of the week, the people would gather enough food for two days, because on the seventh day, the people were to observe a Sabbath to the LORD. Unlike the other days of the week, the double portion of the food that was gathered on the sixth day of the week would not spoil on the seventh day. The people would have everything that they needed because God had provided for them.

Thus, from the beginning, the Sabbath day was a reminder that God provided for His people. He would give them everything that they needed. They could rest. They could cast their anxiety upon Him because they knew He cared for them.

So, when Jesus allowed His disciples to eat on the Sabbath and He healed on the Sabbath, it was **not** because He was breaking the commandment. Instead, He was fulfilling the intention of the Sabbath, which was to provide for people in need. People in need of rest. People in need of sustenance. People in need of healing. The Pharisees cared more about the day than people. Jesus cared about people because He knew that this was true intention behind the Sabbath day to begin with. In other words, Jesus' provision of sustenance and healing on the Sabbath was an embodiment of the day's intention. He was providing for the people what they needed!

Conclusion

The Sabbath was given not as a burden for the people, but as a blessing, to provide space in their week for rest, worship, and reflection upon God's work and their own as His people. It was a regular reminder of redemption, which the people desperately needed, given how prone they were to forgetfulness.

The Sabbath command reminded the people that their work was important, but not ultimate. Their identity was found in their relationship to God as His children, not in their abilities to produce. Contrary to the gospel of work that many have fallen prey to within our society, the gospel hinted at in the Sabbath command of Deuteronomy 5:12-15 is that God provides His people with rest so that they might be reminded of their purpose as His people in light of His redemption.

Application

What might we apply to our lives from these verses in Deuteronomy 5:12-15?

First, God designed us to work.

As our passage told us, we have six days in a week to work. While at times, we might be tempted to think or believe that work itself is a result of the sin in the world, that is not the case. Work is a good thing. Now, our work is certainly harder and more frustrating because of the sin in the world (see Genesis 3), but that does not mean that work is a bad thing. As we read in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we should do it for the glory of God.” In Colossians 3:17, we are told, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Thus, when we work, we ought to work hard for the glory of God with thankfulness. We shouldn’t be lazy nor should we begrudge work. We ought to work to pursue excellence as those who work in the name of the LORD. As Christians, our work ought to be of the highest quality. We should never use our faith as an excuse for poor work. So, a helpful question to ask here is “How does my work reflect God’s excellence? What does my work say to others about the glory of God?” This is one of the implications of the Sabbath command.

Second, God commands us to rest.

While God designed us to work, He did not design us to be workaholics. While we live in a world that celebrates productivity, God reminds us of our limits. He reminds us that He is the LORD of the universe, who upholds all things by His power. When we rest, the world does not fall apart, because the world does not depend upon us.

We were not created to work endlessly. We need rest. We need sleep. We need nourishments. We need times of recreation. We need times of restoration. And these are not bad things. God, in His wisdom, has ordained cycles of work and rest for our good. He cares about us. The Sabbath command illustrates this clearly.

So, I ask, do you rest from work? I’m not asking you if you have time to rest from work. That is not what the principle of the Sabbath command means for us. It is not some sort of optional, if you have time, and can work it into your schedule, then you should rest. No. The command is to rest. To cease from your labor and sanctify the day unto the Lord. Are you able rest? Are you able to put your phone in another room and just unplug to rest? Are you able to close the laptop with all of its email notifications and rest? Are you able to ignore the text message for a while and just rest? Or are you fearful that if you do not work or stay available to work at all times then you are going to suffer consequences? The Sabbath frees us to let God deal with those issues. The Sabbath frees us to rest from our ceaseless labor because we trust that He can and will take care of us.

Resting in the LORD reveals that you trust that God will take care of you. What does your rest reveal about your trust in God?

Can you go home today, leave the dishes in the sink, read your Bible, turn on some music, meditate upon God's mercy toward you in Jesus, maybe even take a nap? What is keeping you from resting? If it is the fear that you will not be okay if you do not work during every waking, free moment, then you are not placing your trust in God in the manner that He desires for you. You have six other days to fill your schedule with work. Will you not find rest in His provision?

Third, God calls us to reflect His character in our work and rest.

In both instances in which the Sabbath command is given in the Old Testament, the people are told to “keep” or “observe” the Sabbath to reflect the actions of God. At one point, it was the reflect God's rhythm of work and rest as revealed in creation. Thus, when we work and rest, as God did in creation, we are demonstrating something about character of God. At another point, when we provide rest to others as God has provided rest to us, we are reflecting something of God's mercy in redemption to those under our care and authority. In both cases, through our own rhythms of work and creation with rest, and the way that we relate to others, we reflect His character.

Do you have the responsibility of managing other people? How are you reflecting the character of God toward those who work under you at your job? Are you a harsh manager? Do you want mercy from God but refuse to show it to others? Would those under your supervision describe you as someone who has not only experienced the mercy of God but longs for others to experience it?

What about your relationship to your spouse? Do your expectations have room for rest? Do you make your spouse feel like they never measure up? Like they never work hard enough? Like their work is not as valuable as your work? Does your spouse know that you love them more than you love your work?

What about your relationship to your children? Do your children have time to rest or are you constantly pushing them in one direction or another? Maybe its school or athletics or housework. Do you encourage them to rest in the LORD? Do you encourage them to trust that He will take care of them? Do they know that they are more important to you than your career?

God calls us to reflect His character in the ways that we work and rest.

Finally, God has provided everlasting rest for His people.

The Sabbath ultimately points us to the redemption that we possess in Jesus Christ. When Jesus calls the people to rest from their labors in Matthew 11:28-30, it is important that we see that He does not call the people to the observance of a particular day during the week, but to Himself. All who are weary and heavy laden need to come to Jesus for rest. The author of Hebrews makes a similar point in Hebrews 4:3 regarding how we enter God's rest by believing in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God has provided us with something greater than one day a week to rest from our labor.

Thus, even when rightly set aside a day each week for rest and worship, we must realize that it ultimately serving the purpose of granting us a foretaste of our heavenly rest. A rhythm of weekly work and rest ought to remind us that a greater, fuller rest is coming.

We enjoy this rest in part by faith now, but the fullness of the rest is coming. One day all the toil of our labors will cease. One day all the thorns of the curse over our work will be removed. The pain will be gone. The tears will be wiped away. Because then, the eternal Sabbath will be fully here, fully ours as our inheritance, not because the works of our hands have saved us, but because the works of another's hands, the nail-pierced hands of Jesus will be extended to us and welcome us, saying, "Well done, my good and faithful servant, enter into your rest."

Invitation

We cannot enter God's rest through our own works. We need the works of another on our behalf. As long as we attempt to find salvation and purpose and fulfillment in our own work, we will be disappointed, full of despair, and left depressed. Only Jesus can deal with the guilt of our sin and provide for us the righteousness that we desperately need to be accepted by God. He simply calls us to believe, to place our trust in Him alone.

The religion of "workism" is not the way. The "gospel of work" will not save your soul. It will not give you the meaning that you are longing for. You need the gospel of grace.

One of the saddest examples of how the "gospel of work" will not save comes from the life and tragic death of beloved comedian, Robin Williams. One of the most outwardly funny and full-of-life personalities of our time, longed deeply for a sense of identity, and sought it in his work, but could not find it. According to one account, Williams tried to find solace and significance in working more. **But work and busyness did not heal the deepest wounds in his soul.** His biographer, Dave Itzkoff writes:

But what proved more powerful than the pleas from his colleagues and from family members to slow things down—even more powerful than Robin's desire to sustain his life with Susan and to be a good earner for his managers and agents—was his own desire to keep working through the pain, the one cure-all that had helped him cope with past troubles.

"I don't think he thought he could blow up what he built for himself," Cheri Minns, his makeup artist, said. "It's like he didn't worry about anything when he worked all the time. He operated on working. That was the true love of his life. Above his children, above everything. If he wasn't working, he was a shell of himself. And when he worked, it was like a light bulb was turned on."

A life dedicated to nothing but our work will always leave us empty. You cannot help your wounds through your busyness. But Jesus can heal you. He can save you. He can restore you. And He invites you to come to Him, just as you are, right now, and find rest from your works in Him. He will provide you with everything that we need. Will you come to Him today? Will call upon Him?