

## Training Session 13 - BLESS Rhythms: Sabbath Rest

### Objective

Develop a rhythm of working six days and resting on one day (the Sabbath).

### Key Scriptures

Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 11:29

The BLESS rhythms are helping us learn to live counter-culturally, conforming to God's rhythms for our lives as opposed to the rhythms of the world. These rhythms of life express our love for God in tangible actions. If we say that we love God, then we'll express our love for Him by *doing* what He asks us to do. Period. Jesus said, "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love" (John 15:10). The BLESS rhythms give us five ways to express our love for God daily by saying yes in tangible ways to His commands. This week, we're going to explore His repetitive command to rest. The S in BLESS rhythms stands for a weekly rhythm of rest known as a Sabbath rest. In this training session, we're going to consider this Biblical notion of a Sabbath rest from three perspectives:

1. **The Problem of Unrest (Cultural)**
2. **The Solution to Unrest (Biblical)**
3. **The Road to Sabbath Rest (Practical)**

### THE PROBLEM OF UNREST (CULTURAL)

When it comes to working the longest hours and racking up the most stress-related illnesses among developed countries, recent studies show that we in America win, even over the infamously hard-working nation of Japan.<sup>1</sup> Quite an accomplishment, isn't it. Yet, the price we pay is high, and we all know it. Most of us are sleep-deprived. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sleep deprivation is now considered to be a public health epidemic.<sup>2</sup> Technology allows us to work *anywhere*, so we work *everywhere*. We're always on and never off and the impact on our overall health is significant. Dr. Matthew Sleeth, a former emergency room physician and author, describes the physiological impact of being always on: "*When we're constantly going, we pour out chemicals to try to meet those stresses. We have short-term hormones like adrenaline, and longer-term hormones like the steroids that we pour out. Those chemicals constantly being 'on' are bad for us, and they lead to anxiety and depression...diabetes, and being obese. It's interesting that if I took somebody in the emergency department and gave them a big slug of adrenaline, you'll find that an hour later they're just wiped out, and that'll really persist throughout the day. I think that's what we're doing to ourselves.*"<sup>3</sup>

This is how many of us feel, constantly. We're tired all the time, as if we're recovering from an adrenaline high, because we never shut down. We're always on and our bodies never have a chance to reboot. We intuitively know, however, that it isn't just physical rest we're lacking. We're lacking soul rest. All of us have taken vacations or a weekend and physically

rested but yet still feel wiped out on Monday. Why? Because we can't downshift. Work is always with us. Work is on our mind and work is in our pocket and so we work all the time, even when we're supposed to be resting on vacation or chilling at home on a weekend.

Big Papi, the Boston Red Sox legend, describes why many of us lack a deep rest in our soul when talking about his legacy in baseball. He said, "*That's what really makes me mad when I think about the way I will be **remembered**. They're only going to **remember** my power. They're not going to **remember** the hours and hours and hours of work in the film room. They're not going to **remember** the BP. They're not going to **remember** me for my intelligence. Despite all I've done in this game, I'm just the big DH from the Dominican.*"<sup>4</sup> Five times he uses the word remember. We, like Big Papi, have ways that we want to be remembered, so we frantically (over)work to be remembered. And it's exhausting.

Yet, there is another equal and opposite problem that leads to unrest for some, which is the problem of underworking. On the one hand, underworking can stem from sheer laziness, which we will see nullifies the point and the blessing prescribed in the Sabbath rhythm of rest. On the other hand, some of us are unemployed or underemployed and constantly stressing over it. The underemployed often feel utterly disconnected from work. Work feels meaningless. In a malaise of purposelessness, endless hours are slothfully frittered away on video games, social media, pornography, and other pleasure-seeking hobbies in an attempt to spice up the dullness of life. Simmering under the surface is a deep unrest, a constant search for meaning, happiness, and the good life. Augustine famously said, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee."

### **THE SOLUTION TO UNREST (BIBLICAL)**

Whether underworking or overworking is leading to unrest in your heart, God offers a solution: a Sabbath rest. In the 10 Commandments, God gave us 9 negative commandments: *don't* put other gods before me, *don't* make idols, *don't* take the Lord's name in vain, and on He went telling us what *not* to do (Exodus 20:1-17). Yet, in lane four, He startlingly interrupted the flow of prohibitions by commanding us to do one thing: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

In the first positive commandment of the bunch, God offers the solution to the unrest of the world. If this day really is the solution to the physical, spiritual, and psychological unrest we all experiencing, then it has to mean more than taking a nap (although I sure do love a Sunday nap!) He could have said, "I command you to take a nap." Instead, He said, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." What in the world does this mean? Let's slow down and examine the words because each of the words He chose matter if we're going to experience a deep soul rest one day in seven that helps infuse rest into the other six days of our week.

**Remember.** He begins with remember, meaning, "Hey, don't forget this. Establish a rhythm one day in seven and on that day remember." Remember what?

### **The Sabbath Day**

Remember the Sabbath. OK, but what is the Sabbath? Sabbath means cease. Think of it as a stop day. God commanded His people to cease doing everything that looked and felt like the work they normally did the other 6 days of the week. "On it you shall not do any work" (Exodus

20:10).<sup>5</sup> The pattern here is 6 days of work and 1 day of ceasing from everything that is work-related.<sup>6</sup>

### **By Keeping it Holy**

The way we remember the Sabbath day is “by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:10). Holy means set apart. By establishing the rhythm of six days of work and one day of ceasing from work, you are setting apart one day as a special day in your week. In a very real sense, it’s a sacred day because it is set apart from all the rest. Hear this. Don’t miss it. Remembering is, therefore, *behavioral*, not simply *intellectual*. We remember with our actions. We remember by doing things (and ceasing from doing work-related things), and in doing so we set this day apart.

Set apart for what? Exodus 20:10 goes on to say, “the seventh day is a sabbath *to the Lord your God*.” Our thoughts and time and conversation on this one set apart day are directed in a Godward direction in a more focused way than the other six. But what in the world does that mean? Well, God modeled how to set a day apart in order for us to understand the meaning.

### **God Rested**

“For in six days the Lord made the heavens and earth...He rested on the seventh day” (Exodus 20:8). God rested. Does this mean that God took a nap? Did forming Mount Everest take such a toll on God that He needed a quick power nap? No, we know that He never sleeps or slumbers and He never grows tired or weary.

What did God do when He rested? We don’t know exactly, but we do know God rested by ceasing from the creative work He did on the other six days. We’re given a hint at what God did in His Sabbath rest by the pattern he established of restful, momentary reflection in the other days of the week.<sup>7</sup> In these days, we see a distinctive pattern of work, followed by a restful cadence of completion, “And God saw that it was good.” In a very real sense, God models for us what it means to remember in His brief reflection on the goodness of His work. Remembering, therefore, means stopping long enough to reflect on the work we did in the past with a spirit of thanksgiving, even when, or especially when, the work was (and is) hard.

The Sabbath, therefore, takes God’s moment of reflection at the end of His work days and creates space for lots of moments of reflection and remembering. It is one 24-hour day *full* of remembering *by* celebrating the good work God allowed you to accomplish in the other six days. This is why, historically, the Sabbath day has always been a festival day of feasting, not fasting.<sup>8</sup> Even when the people of God were fasting for extended periods of time, they set apart one day in seven as a feast day, to feast on the goodness of God displayed in His good gifts of food and wine and friends and to remember His past faithfulness.

### **The Lord Blessed the Sabbath Day**

If we have the faith and courage to stop working one day in seven, then God issues a promise, “I’ll bless you with a special blessing that I have reserved only for those who have the faith to take a Sabbath rest.” Exodus 20:11 says, “Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath Day.” Picture God depositing one billion dollars into a safety deposit box. The key to the safety deposit box is faith. There is no other way to access the blessing God has stored up for you. No other key will fit the lock other than the faith demonstrated through ceasing work.

Friends, it takes faith to stop working. It takes faith to confidently assert God knows what is best for us and will provide for us in six days of work (not seven!). Many of my friends in San Diego worked in the service industry, which thrives on Saturday and Sunday. Often times they worked two and three jobs and were living paycheck to paycheck. Taking one day off was an enormous act of faith. I always loved watching them courageously decide to trust in a God who somehow, someway would come through, especially when it didn't make sense.

Imagine going to work on Monday brimming over with the fruit of the Spirit gleaned through a Sabbath rest. Everyone around you will be better if you have more love, joy, peace, patience, and all of the supernatural character traits associated with the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). If we want this blessing badly enough, then we'll stop working one day in seven. Or we can keep on keeping on, just like everyone else around us, wondering why we're all filled with stress, exhaustion, fear, and deep unrest.

The stakes are high, and they always have been. Moses, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the prophets all shouted, "Hey, this is a really big deal. Stop working. Rest. Trust God to work for you. Live differently than the world. And if you don't dire consequences are coming." Why is this such a big deal? Because God wants to give us a gift and we can't receive it until we activate our faith by deactivating our normal work.

### **THE ROAD TO REST (PRACTICAL)**

Most of us think all this about a Sabbath rest sounds utterly impractical. It seems like a nice suggestion for those who are retired, but I've got to get \$%#@ done. I hope you didn't cuss right there. Forgive me for talking you into it, but this way of thinking is so commonplace among us all that none of us have any problem filling in the blank. Bill Gates captured this line of thinking well when he said, "Just in terms of allocation of resources, Christianity is not very efficient. There is a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."<sup>9</sup>

Yes, Bill, many of us feel the same way and our lives reflect it. Without question, the incessant need we feel to keep working shouts loud and clear, "I think far too highly of myself." Let's imagine, however, that we want to humble ourselves and take hold of the beauty and blessing offered to us by establishing a Sabbath rhythm to our life. It seems obvious what we shouldn't do (work), but it isn't quite as obvious what we *should* do on the Sabbath. What should my Sabbath day look like? God gives us 4 ways to activate a deep physical and spiritual rest on the Sabbath:<sup>10</sup>

#### ***Worship Jesus at Church***

Worshipping at church is an obvious one. Hebrews 10:24 says, "Don't give up regularly gathering together with the ekklesia" (gathered fellowship) to worship God. If you are physically able, get out of bed and head down to a local church so you can gather with the people of God to worship.

As you worship, remember the word remember. The Sabbath is a special day set aside to remember the finished work of Jesus Christ that establishes our identity and leads to our adoption as sons and daughters of God. Remember Jesus on this day in song, in Scripture

reading, in the preached word, and in every other way possible in church. If your church doesn't help you remember Jesus, find another local church that will!

Why? Because Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the fulfillment of the Sabbath and the only one who can truly bring our hearts to rest, which is why He says, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:29). The Sabbath, ultimately, is about putting on Christ and learning to experience more of His restful presence.

### ***Worship Jesus All Day***

In order to worship Jesus all day, here are suggestions (not commandments) that have helped our family rest on the Sabbath:

- **Technology:** We turn off technology on the Sabbath or, if our phones are on, we ignore any texts or emails that aren't family emergencies in order to create more space and time to connect with God and people. Our technology is turned on for six days and turned off for one. I don't respond to work-related texts or emails for one 24-hour period (either sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday or the whole day Sunday). I know, I know, most of us feel so important that we need to be near our phone and email at all times, but we really aren't that important!
- **2 Hour Shut-Down:** After we come home from lunch after church, we shut it down for 2 hours. Currently, we have kids that range in age from 2-12 and they know everyone is going to be quiet and in their beds napping or reading or coloring. They may not always like it, but Bradford and I sure do! We collectively catch our breath and the whole house exhales. It's as if a fresh wind blows through the house preparing us for another week of work.
- **Pray and play:** I remember reading the words of a pastor and author named Eugene Peterson describing the 2 things he does on the Sabbath: pray and play. That succinct summary stuck with me. As a result, I pray more on the Sabbath because it helps me worship God and I play more on the Sabbath because it helps me enjoy God. Try it!
- **Remember:** Remember the word remember. Remember. Take time to reflect on the good work that God enabled you to do in the past six days. The Bible says, “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). The Sabbath is a day to remember the good, creative work God enabled you to do in the previous six days. Linger in a conversation with friends and family members over a Sabbath meal and celebrate the good work God enabled you to do the past week as a father or mother, as a husband or wife, as a friend, as an employee, as a volunteer.

### ***Deeds of Mercy***

Full disclosure, practicing deeds of mercy on the Sabbath is something I've found hard to put into practice. I hope to find and live into more expressions of mercy on the Sabbath, but I just haven't been very successful in establishing a regular, systematic way to be involved in ministries of mercy on the Sabbath. Yet, the Bible is pretty clear in its teaching that the Sabbath is a day where “the poor live as princes for one day a week.”<sup>11</sup> On this day, economic disparity is jettisoned and we come before God as one united people. To this end, God instituted a system of Sabbatical years as an extension of the weekly Sabbath and made special provisions to bless the poor, culminating in a release of debts and a return of sold property in the year of Jubilee.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Jesus consistently healed the broken and hurting on the Sabbath (intentionally), much

to the chagrin of the rabbis,<sup>13</sup> to demonstrate God's desire for "mercy and not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:8).<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees placed such a high value on physical rest that they missed the weightier matters of the law, such as showing mercy to the poor on a day that should have been a special day of rest for them as well.

### ***Deeds of Necessity***

What is a deed of necessity? Dr. John Frame, my seminary professor, defined it well in saying deeds of necessity are those things that "keep human life on an even keel."<sup>15</sup> This is a category that is only vaguely defined in Scripture and its application requires spiritual maturity and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. We see, in Scripture, that eating and rescuing cows from ditches are considered deeds of necessity, but other than these examples we're not given much guidance (Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 14:5). Bradford and I often joke about our "donkey falling into the ditch," by which we mean the work we normally do during the week is in such a state of crisis that it necessitates us going to work to "get our donkey out of the ditch." Now, if our donkey routinely falls in the ditch Sunday after Sunday, then this isn't as much of a deed of necessity as it is a deed of sin.

Over the years, here are some lessons we've learned in seeking to enjoy the blessing of the Sabbath (remember, these are suggestions, not commandments):

- **Costco (and shopping in general):** We don't shop on the Sabbath. This takes planning. At one point I found myself going to Costco on Sundays and thinking, "Why I am doing this? Costco is the one store on planet earth I actually enjoy, but it isn't a matter of necessity. We have six other days to go to Costco." So now we plan ahead and go to Costco on Saturday, which allows us to pray and play more on the Sabbath.
- **Prepping for Monday:** As a student or professional, I often had a big test or meeting early Monday morning. What I've found most helpful is to stop working for one 24-hour period, typically from sundown Saturday to Sundown Sunday. If I faithfully worked before and after this time, then I really didn't need to work on the Sabbath.
- **Yard work:** For me, yard work is most definitely not worshipful. I'm not praying or playing when I'm working in the yard, so I don't do it on the Sabbath. My wife, on the other hand, worships like no other in the garden. She loves gardening and this is a great Sabbath activity for her. So, you see, it takes knowing yourself, it takes spiritual discernment, and it takes a heart full of grace to make it all work.

Finally, remember. Remember. Remember. It's all about Jesus and taking his yoke that is light and easy and full of grace. So pray and play and enjoy Him and don't stress about the rules.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Read Exodus 20:8-11. What does the word "remember" mean when God says, "remember the Sabbath Day?"
2. What does it mean to keep the Sabbath day holy?
3. Describe your Sabbath. What changes are you going to make as a result of this training session?
4. What is a deed of necessity? Do you find that your "donkey regularly falls into the ditch on the Sabbath," meaning that you turn regular work into "deeds of necessity?" Discuss.

5. Why do you think God is so emphatic and seemingly harsh with His people for failing to remember the Sabbath?
6. Have you been able to find regular ways to show mercy on the Sabbath?

## Endnotes

1. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cartoonoftheday/2018/03/01/the-us-is-the-most-overworked-country-in-the-developed-world-heres-how-well-change-that/#7ad8503a1880>
2. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/18/health/great-sleep-recession/index.html>
3. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/01/11/health/sleeth-take-day-off/index.html>
4. [https://www.syracuse.com/axeman/index.ssf/2015/03/boston\\_red\\_sox\\_slugger\\_david\\_ortiz\\_offers\\_passionate\\_defense\\_of\\_ped\\_allegations.html](https://www.syracuse.com/axeman/index.ssf/2015/03/boston_red_sox_slugger_david_ortiz_offers_passionate_defense_of_ped_allegations.html)
5. See also Exodus 31:13-17, Exodus 34:21, Amos 8:4-6, Jeremiah 17:21.
6. The assumption here is that we are working for six days, not necessarily collecting a paycheck, but taking the gifts and talents we've been given and deploying them in Kingdom work as moms and dad, bakers, candlestick makers, and beyond. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 and Proverbs 3:10 (as well as other places) warn against idleness and all of the tragic consequences associated with a lazy, idle life.
7. On the second day as God created the heavens, we see a glaring omission in the Hebrew text (and therefore most English translations) of the phrase, "And God saw that it was good." The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, felt the omission was so glaring that the scribes included it in Gen. 1:8, "And God saw that it was good." Phillip Cary, and other theologians, suggest one way to deal with the omission is to note that God's declaration of something as good came as a note of completion. Because heaven is not complete until it is united with earth in the final work (see the book of Revelations), God withheld His cadence of completion.
8. Leviticus 23; see also Thomas Schreiner's quotation regarding fasting and feasting: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/schreiner-qa-is-the-sabbath-still-required-for-christians/>
9. Bill Gates, quoted by Walter Isaacson. "*In Search of the Real Bill Gates*." TIME, January 13, 1997.
10. I've altered the wording, but these four ways are summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith. <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf>, 109-110.
11. Quote by D. Wallace. [http://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp/link/http:%5E%5Ethirdmill.org%5Earticles%5Ejoh\\_frame%5ETH.Frame.Ethics.4.html/at/Pastoral%20and%20Social%20Ethics,%20Part%20Four](http://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp/link/http:%5E%5Ethirdmill.org%5Earticles%5Ejoh_frame%5ETH.Frame.Ethics.4.html/at/Pastoral%20and%20Social%20Ethics,%20Part%20Four)
12. Exodus 23:10; Leviticus 25:1ff; Deuteronomy 15:1-6; Isaiah 58:13ff.
13. Matthew 12:10-13; Luke 14:1ff; John 5:1ff.
14. Matthew 12:9-13; Mark 3:1-5; Luke 6:6-10; John 5:1-17.
15. Dr. John Frame, Systematic Theology Class, RTS Orlando 2002.