

The Rest of God: What Does Sabbath Mean Today?

Sermon preached by Andy Kumpel
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There is something great about being a pastor at Autumn Ridge Church that I want to share with you. It's not a part of the benefits package. It's not described in the personnel manual. But when you are a part of a church staff you are surrounded everyday by people who are in tune with God. Many of them do not think like I do. They see the world through a different set of experiences, so they hear God and see his direction through a different lens. Sometime this fall one of the pastors gave me a book to read. I said, "You know I don't have time to read this, so just tell me about it." She made me a copy of the most salient chapter. The book is called **Leading on Empty by Wayne Cordiero**. This kind of exchange can only happen if you give others permission to speak into your life. I wasn't excited about my leadership deficit being named so clearly. It turns out there are even books written about it. But my coworker and friend knew that my tendency is to not stop going, after all there is always more to do.

A few weeks later another pastor said to me, “It sounds like the Kumpel family needs to take a break.” I shirked the comment off as a misguided observation; only to recognize later how accurate it was. The truth is that I struggle to see the times when I need to stop working harder or stop altogether.

At the end of one year and the beginning of the next we often take some time to reflect on the time that has gone by. We assess our experience of life. We remember what God has done in the past year. We make plans and hopes for the year to come. If our spiritual lives are in tune then we will be able to see God’s fingerprints all over 2011. As we begin another year I thought a helpful way to start would actually be to stop. Since I struggle with knowing how and when to stop, I figure some of you might share in my struggle. This is what Sabbath actually means – to stop. When God stopped his work after the six days of creation we read it as God resting – that is what most modern translations say, but it actually means that **God ceased from his work**. It is only later that the idea of Sabbath is attached to God’s ceasing of work on the seventh day of creation. The idea of Sabbath influenced the culture of God’s people so thoroughly that our entire world still recognizes a seven day week today.

When we study the Sabbath we can be led down the road of confusion because there are so many nuances to the practice and teaching of Sabbath rest over the centuries of Hebrew and Christian worship. The main view of historical Biblical Christianity has been to replace the Jewish Sabbath with the concept of The Lord's Day in Christian worship. There are many passages of scripture which lead to this conclusion. One example is **Colossians 2: 16-17** ¹⁶ **Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a *Sabbath* day.** ¹⁷ **These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.**” The subject of Sabbath leads us to many questions like: why did God rest? How should we rest today? Is the Sabbath more about rest or holiness, or worship? Is it permissible to gather for worship on any day of the week?

My goal for us today is to discover that God doesn't change. Even when it comes to Sabbath rest. The Sabbath law that God gave to Moses on Mount Sanai is the same Sabbath law that Jesus observed in the first century. Our practice of Sabbath rest should be informed equally by ancient Jewish practice, the observation of Sabbath of Jesus, and the influence of the modern church. The temptation that we face is to throw out the idea of Sabbath rest because we think of keeping the Sabbath as a

legalistic practice. I hope that we will discover great freedom in the rest of God that Jesus practiced with his followers.

Today we want to begin by examining some **perceptions and misconceptions about Sabbath** that some Christians may hold. The first misconception is that **the Sabbath is only on Sunday**. This idea comes straight from the Sabbath law from the Ten Commandments in **Exodus 20:8** “⁸ **Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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.**” Christians moved the Jewish Sabbath from Saturday to the Lord’s Day on Sunday and we’ve made that our traditional day of worship. This leads to problems as many churches now hold worship services on Saturdays. During seminary I was introduced to **Pastor Joel Hunter** who pastors a church in Florida called **Northland, a Church Distributed**. They hold five identical services every week: Saturdays at 5 pm, Sundays at 9 am, 11 am, 5 pm, and Mondays at 7 pm. They’ve found that they have to offer so many options because many of their people work every weekend. Is this church keeping the Sabbath? These are the kind of questions we must wrestle with in today’s world.

The second perception that we have is that **Sabbath is a list of things I shouldn't do**. Many of us are old enough to remember a childhood Sabbath that was filled with worship, but where play was restricted. Pastor John told me that where he grew up in London the Sabbath restrictions were taken so seriously that the swings at the local playground were locked up on Sundays to keep the children from playing. While it's true that Sabbath carries with it the idea of not working, we have also attached many other restrictions. Jesus' contemporary Jewish leaders would spend hours debating what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. They listed many regulations about what was meant by work. For example they would study verses like **Exodus 16:29:"Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out."** Then the Jewish rabbis would define the terms of "going out". Some restrictions would give exact distances of how far you could carry an object on the Sabbath or whether you could take something from a private residence to a public place.

The third misconception that we commonly find about Sabbath is that **rest isn't spiritual**. In our spiritual lives we often are moved to activity. We want to meet God in our action of worship. We think of reading the Bible. Perhaps we journal. But the idea of doing nothing doesn't appeal so much. I'm not sure I

could ever write “rest” on my **checklist** and then check it off after doing it. But this is actually what God prescribes for us in Sabbath rest.

The fourth perception that we may have is that **Jesus abolished the Sabbath**. There is a Christian teaching about the spiritual freedom that we have in Christ. So our tendency is to balk at rigorous requirements like keeping the Sabbath. Jesus said, “¹⁷ **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.**” **Matthew 5:17**. It is easy to become confused by Jesus’ fulfillment of the law and prophets, which includes the Sabbath. If Jesus fulfilled God’s commands that may mean that when we exercise freedom in Christ, we no longer have to keep the Old Testament commands. After all, isn’t that what the early church decided during the controversy over whether Gentiles must be circumcised? If we have the freedom to decide whether or not we should be circumcised, then shouldn’t we also have the freedom to keep the Sabbath or not?

We could spend all day going around and around with all kinds of questions that are raised by the topic of Sabbath rest. But we are helped by the perspective of God’s word. Jesus himself said ²⁸ “**Come to me, all you who are weary and**

burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ **Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.** ³⁰ **For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11: 28-30.** To grasp the essence of Jesus’ teaching we must first understand the framework of the Sabbath, so we need to begin thinking like a Hebrew. The Hebrew people were the first to be given the Sabbath regulations by God. Sabbath shaped their culture over generations and if we follow the Sabbath through the story of God’s chosen people we see that there are common motifs that begin to emerge.

The first motif is the Sabbath is about **covenant**. In **Exodus 31: 16** we read “¹⁶ **The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant.**” For a Hebrew person the Sabbath was about remembering that God kept up his end of the covenant when he rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. But a covenant is not meant to be one-sided, so Sabbath was also a weekly practice that was a sign that you were a part of a covenant community. Sabbath was a sign of keeping God’s law.

The second Hebrew motif is the Sabbath is about **refreshment and restoration. Isaiah 58:13-14 says** ¹³ **“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a *delight* and the LORD’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,** ¹⁴ **then you will find your *joy* in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”** We see the highest goal of Sabbath rest was to find delight and joy in the Lord. This brought refreshment to God’s people. The Hebrew idea of being restored to God is somewhat harder to find in the concept of Sabbath as we think of it as the seventh day of the week. But other Jewish festivals were referred to as Sabbaths even though they may not have fallen on the seventh day of the week. Some examples include **the Festival of Trumpets, the Feast of Booths, and the Day of Atonement** when the chief priest would enter the holy of holies to make a sacrificial atonement for the sins of the people. The Day of Atonement in particular was what made Hebrew people associate the Sabbath with restoration. An extension of this concept is the Sabbath of the land whereby the land was allowed to lie fallow every seven years – this is commanded by God in **Leviticus 25:3-4** ³ **For six**

years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. ⁴ But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.” Additionally, the year of Jubilee was calculated by counting off seven sets of Sabbath years for a total of 49 years, the fiftieth year was observed as a year of Jubilee. Land was returned to its original clan and anyone who had become poor and was made a slave was set free in the year of Jubilee.

The third Hebrew motif is the Sabbath is about **God’s promise and provision**. In remembering the Sabbath day the sixth day was just as important as the seventh, because when Moses was leading the Israelites through the wilderness the sixth day was when God would provide a double portion. **“²⁹ Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out.” ³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day.” Exodus 16: 29-30.** The Sabbath was a time to enjoy what God had provided for you, both in the daily bread of the manna, but also in the spiritual blessing that he gives. The Sabbath was a time to celebrate God’s promise of a land for his people and a future of blessing. Let me suggest one way that we can emulate the

Hebrews today by meditating on God's promise and provision. You should have received a **Bible reading plan** in your Ridgelines this week. If you follow this guide you can read through the Bible in a year. This isn't about keeping strict Sabbath rules. I'll tell you that I always lose the paper guide, so I use an app on my smart phone to read through the Bible. But this can be a resource for you to have a regular spiritual practice of Bible reading that can become a Sabbath activity of remembering God's promise and provision in much the same way that God's ancient people did. They shared the reading of God's word in public proclamation and so would declare his promises. We too have a share in God's promise and one way to discover that is by reading through the Bible in a year.

The fourth Hebrew motif is the Sabbath is about **sanctity and remembrance**. Sanctity is a fancy religious word that means holy. It speaks to when God gave the Sabbath to Israel through the Ten Commandments "**Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it *holy*.**" **Exodus 20:8**. Holiness was a big deal to the ancient Hebrews because it is a big deal to God. For the Hebrews Sabbath was not only about rest, it was also about setting themselves apart for God. We've already seen how the Hebrew people remembered God's rescuing them from bondage in Egypt. The Sabbath was also about remembering the fact that

God rested on the seventh day of creation. This gives us a significant understanding of what it means to be made in God's image. If we are in fact image bearers of God, then we will join God in his Sabbath rest.

The fifth Hebrew motif is the Sabbath is about **worship**. We find an example of ancient worship in **Numbers 28:9-10** “⁹ ‘On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old without defect, together with its drink offering and a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil. ¹⁰ This is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.’” Worship on the Sabbath was about the connection that God makes with us. For the Hebrews this was done through the sacrifice that we read about here. Today we must ask ourselves what Sabbath worship means. We no longer have the need to bring two lambs to the altar because Jesus became the final spotless lamb that was sacrificed. He made right the broken way of worship that was known in the past.

I want to tell you about a new opportunity for worship that is beginning at Autumn Ridge. It is called **The Well** and it starts next week on Sunday nights from 5:30-7:00 pm in The Center. The Well is a worship opportunity for young adults. It is being

designed and led by young adults. We want it to become a place where we can discover God's truth together as a community of young adults. We are going to start out meeting once a month and we will see where God wants it to go. So if you are a young adult, you are invited to come to The Well next Sunday night. I know that we all like to think of ourselves as young, so I'll say that if you are a more experienced young adult then I invite you to pray for the young adults of our community. There are many young people who have left the church behind or who have never had an authentic encounter with Christ. We want to reach them with an invitation to come to Jesus – his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

These Hebrew motifs are what the people who lived around Jesus would have thought of when they thought about Sabbath rest. When we read Jesus words in Matthew 11 we must recognize that the words are soaked in history and meaning and tradition. They drip with ancient nuance. They conjure mental images of Hebrew history. So let's turn our attention to Jesus. When we understand how Jesus treated Sabbath, it will help us as his disciples to know how to follow him. **How did Jesus observe Sabbath?**

First, we have to admit that **Jesus kept the Sabbath holy**. It is true that he healed the sick on the Sabbath and the Pharisees wanted to indict him for that. They would have said that Jesus broke the Sabbath law, but we know that Jesus was without sin “¹⁵ **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.**” **Hebrews 4:15**. So rather than saying that Jesus broke the Sabbath, we can proclaim that the Sabbath that the Pharisees practiced was broken and Jesus came to fix the Sabbath. You see, the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day had added the burden of their oral law and the minutiae of 613 commandments. This is why Jesus says, “**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...**” **Matthew 11:28**. With 613 oral commandments floating around, it’s not hard to imagine why so many people were weary and burdened.

The second way that Jesus observed the Sabbath was that **Jesus didn’t argue about the definition of work**. A close look at one of Jesus’ encounters on the Sabbath will help us here. **Luke 6: 1-11** “¹ **One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels.** ² **Some of**

the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

³ Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” ⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

⁶ On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. ⁷ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. ⁸ But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” So he got up and stood there.

⁹ Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?”

¹⁰ He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was

completely restored. ¹¹ But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

Jesus didn't engage with the Pharisees in the argument about what was or was not lawful on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were focused on the letter of the law, but Jesus turns their attention to the heart of the very mission of God. David wasn't supposed to eat the consecrated bread, but he was on a mission from the king. Jesus is also on a mission from the king of kings and lord of lords. Rather than get caught up in rule keeping Jesus instead turns our focus on the very heart of God. He causes us to ask ourselves “What does God desire?”

The final way that Jesus observes the Sabbath also comes from this passage in Luke. We see that **Jesus showed compassion and mercy**. He heals a man with a shriveled hand. Jesus even said to the man “**Get up and stand in front of everyone.**” **Luke 6:8**. It seems his hope was to move the Pharisees toward compassion and mercy for this man. But their hearts were hardened and they were not able to look upon the man with the eyes of compassion that Jesus has. The result of this encounter on the Sabbath is that Jesus' opponents are left speechless. They have no response to the magnanimous actions of Jesus. His selfless act has left them in the dust with nothing to

do but grumble. The truth is that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. God has created us in his image and we are meant to rest in him.

Let us pray together.