

## “Work & Rest”

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Colossians 3:23

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters...

Leviticus 25:1-13

The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.

Work and Rest. Together these two form one part of a balanced life. We need both. The balance shifts between them in different seasons of our lives. God knows both are vital. God’s word speaks to the need to work and to the need to rest. This is our topic for this Labor Day weekend.

In the U.S., three out of four people work in excess of 40 hours per week. While many nations have laws limiting the length of the work week, the U.S. does not. We’re also the only industrialized nation without mandatory parental leave for new parents. Or legally mandated annual leave, no federal law requiring sick leave.

All of this in spite of the fact that productivity per U.S. worker has increased 400% since 1950. This means it should only take 11 hours a week to afford the same standard of living as a worker in 1950.

17 million people work in “contingent” or “alternative work arrangements” – temp work, freelancing or using on-demand apps to make ends meet. When more women were entering the workforce half a century ago, it was generally believed this would lead to higher standards of living for families. Now women work because they have to. 70% of children grow up in households where all adults work. This creates a huge hit to family and free time.

Yet people are still struggling. Women and men regularly come to churches and community agencies looking for help. We are mistaken when we assume they’re all unemployed or making poor choices. Many, many people work multiple jobs but they still find themselves behind on their energy bill. Or sleeping in the Walmart parking lot.

Something is very wrong. We work too many hours. Our nation is the most overworked in the world. Yet families struggle to make ends meet. Children eat free breakfasts and lunches at school – even in the summer – because otherwise they wouldn’t eat. Too many jobs don’t keep families out of poverty.

This is not the norm around the world but here, many companies have become disinterested in workers. The decline of unions allows them to offer fewer benefits and people generally take what is given rather than risk having no job. Few can afford to fight for reasonable benefits. So we watch mutely as government and enterprise strip us of dignity.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a day that pays tribute to the contributions and achievements of workers. In the late 1800s, many people worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, often in physically demanding, low-paying jobs. Conditions were generally harsh and unsafe. Children as young as 5 worked – on the same farms, mills, factories and mines.

Labor unions began to organize strikes and rallies to protest poor working conditions and to compel employers to renegotiate hours and pay. Labor Day became a federal holiday 124 years ago. Although many people dedicated themselves to ensuring that people in our nation could support their families in health and safety, in recent years, those in power have been gutting the rights of workers while those who could prevent it have often looked the other way.

In our scripture lesson, we read that the bible calls us to work – at whatever you do – from the heart for God and not for people. Maybe you're able to do this. Maybe you genuinely love what you do and are doing it for the right reasons. If so, keep at it. But for many people, work is a drudgery, leading to more stress and a lower quality of life.

Stress is considered the #1 cause of health problems – physical and mental. We need time to unwind, to spend time with loved ones, to enjoy hobbies and connect with friends. Without these things, it's hard – maybe impossible – to lead a balanced life.

On the second page of our bible, it says that God took a day off, surveyed all of their work and announced that it was very good. This line is in our bibles so that we can understand how important downtime is. If God does it, then it must be important.

Sabbath and jubilee are both proscribed in the bible. And while it sometimes seems like just one more “law” when Jesus is getting in trouble for breaking sabbath, these laws are mandated for two very good reasons. You probably know what they are but I'll mention them just in case.

The ancient Israelites were called to practice sabbath and jubilee because it was good for them. People who work hard need regular breaks. It doesn't matter what we do, we come back to it more rested and ready to work again after taking time away. (Did you take all your vacation time last year?) People today – regardless of what sector we work in – need sabbath time just as much as those early Israelites. Sabbath is good for our muscles and our minds. It's vital for our imaginations and creativity. Have you ever been surprised when you can't think, when ideas are not coming to you, that by stepping away – whether by taking a long walk or playing Horse in the driveway – suddenly everything becomes clear? That's sabbath.

These days many people cannot take a full 24 hour break. Many more believe they can't. Still we can take three hours here and 90 minutes there. I truly believe that we do better with a full day, but when that's not an option some time away is better than none. Sabbath is essential for individuals and families; it's also good for communities and nations.

Our Leviticus text also speaks of the year of Jubilee when the land is left fallow and all debts are canceled. “The fiftieth year will be a Jubilee year ... it will be holy to you.” While there's no evidence that the nation of Israel ever actually observed Jubilee, it is as good and healthy an idea today as it was back then. I won't go into the many ways that it's impractical and would never work. Still, we would be wise to consider how we can work the spirit of Jubilee into our lives and the life of our communities.

Martie teaches in the UW system. When we met at the farmers market last month, he told me that he'd taken a six month sabbatical. We didn't talk in any depth but I could just sense how good it had been for him. He looked well; he sounded like he had balance. He was ready to get back to work.

Sabbath is good for you. It's good for your parents and your children. It's good for your staff, your boss, for temp workers, transient farm workers and the ones who have worked at the same job all their adult life. It's also good for you retirees who are keeping longer hours at your unpaid jobs than you ever did when you worked for money.

We are made for work and rest. Both. In the right, healthy balance. This is God's intention for us. What refreshes your being? When was the last time you made time for it? Maybe this is the week to allow yourself some time to play. Trust that the work will still be there when you get back. Let go of the stress for a time and trust that God will use this to replenish your well of vitality, love and joy.

And while you're at it, maybe you will discover small ways to allow others the opportunity to do the same and still pay the bills.

This is the only life we get. Don't let it slip away. Talk about it. Address the elephant in the room: we work too hard. Don't let your silent complicity support unhealthy practices.

I haven't mentioned the second good reason for having sabbath laws. We need these words to remind us of a better way because we forget. We slip into doing what we believe is expected of us even as our productivity declines. Even as we long for a break to get on the water or into the woods. Even as our families are begging for our attention.

It's easy to lose track of the truth that God wants us to lead rich and full lives. God cares so much about us and wants us to be able to spend time with friends, help strangers, laugh and play.

Take this moment now, while Rob plays, and maybe later too, and think about your best life and what you might do to live closer to it.