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# God's Remedy for Stress



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Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor  
Sunday Sermon Oct 14, 2012  
Scripture Passage Exodus 20: 8-11, Deut. 5: 12 –15  
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



Most of us live with some stress in our lives, but many of us are living with little or no margin. Almost every magazine you pick up today will have some kind of article on dealing with stress. Stress is a robber and a killer. Stress is a rapist. It steals freedom and joy from our lives.

In the Ten Commandments we do not find a bunch of outdated and irrelevant rules. We actually find some of the best wisdom and challenging truth for our daily lives.

But once again, this fourth commandment to set a day aside as holy to God seems so out of place in our society. Today many people work shift work. Stores are open 7 days a week. Some 24 hours a day. We have turned holy-days into holidays and weekends and holidays are often busier than any other day of the week. What was to be understood as time for personal re-creation has become recreation. Some people work harder at recreation than they do at work.

When people get too busy, the usual answer or remedy is that they need balance. This commandment is about something far far beyond balance. It is about a different way to live as God's people. It is about ordering our lives in a

radical new way that will call for boldness in the face of our culture. It is about deep inner order in the face of chaos.

Yet we have to confess that when religion got hold of this commandment it made it worse than ever! Jesus faced this problem from the religious establishment of his day.

## Mark 2

**23 One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.**

**24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"**

**25 He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need?"**

**26 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."**

**27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**

**28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."**

Jesus was saying that the central idea of the Sabbath was to help people. Instead it put them in bondage.

William Barclay helps us understand some of the ways in which these Sabbath regulations were interpreted and applied in daily Jewish life, what you could/could not do.

For example, it was permissible to help a woman in childbirth on the Sabbath, wasn't that thoughtful!

If a wall fell on someone, you could remove enough bricks to see if they were dead or alive. If they were dead you left them. If they were alive you could help them only enough that they did not get worse, but you could not help them get better. That would be work.

You could bandage a cut finger with a plain bandage but you could not put ointment on it. That would make it get better and that was work.

Some years ago we visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem where people write prayers and insert them in the cracks of the wall. But you did not write the prayers on Shabbat. That was regarded as work.

In history things did not get much better. The Puritans sought to control society with strict Sabbath laws. They punished people for not going to church and punished them more if they went anywhere else.

Then in more recent days we have seen how the Taliban in Afghanistan have sought to control their culture and especially women through severe religious laws.

Nothing binds people like religion. We take the best of God's truth and we turn it to the worst ends. When people find out that I am a pastor and they often tell me that they are not religious, I usually tell them that I'm not religious either! Christianity is about a relationship.

So how are we to understand this commandment of God in the society/culture in which we live?

There are three main passages that link this commandment about the Sabbath to a different aspect of God's work and activity. We are usually only familiar with the first. Each connects Sabbath to the work that God does.

## **GOD CALLS US TO FIND OUR IDENTITY IN WORSHIP**

### **RATHER THAN IN WORK.**

God is creator. He worked and then He rested.

#### **Genesis 2**

**2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.**

**3 And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.**

God worked in creation and then he rested. Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word Shabbat = to rest. But it is not the rest of snoozing on the chesterfield or getting involved in another busy activity. The rest of the Sabbath is not the rest of doing nothing. Rather it is the rest that come from cultivating a particular kind of consciousness. To is to remember who God is and what God has created. Sabbath is to take the time and to enjoy the work that God has done. In order to do that, we have to stop what we have been doing, what tasks have filled our time. We stop our work so that we can enjoy God's finished work and be refreshed.

What do we usually ask someone when we meet them for the first time. We ask, what do you do? This is because we do not really know how to ask

tell me who you are. Adam was created to walk with God and to enjoy God's company. He steps onto a finished world, but when he sinned, he was turned out of the garden and a new rival god came to meet him and meet his needs. This god was called work.

The result is that for many people in our culture, their significance, their sense of value comes from their work. When we go to work we think can conquer and control. After all, we are in charge. In our jobs we have a **TITLE** and a **TASK**. We are tempted to think that this is what defines who I am and what I do. This has seductively crept into our Christian thinking so that we usually define the will of God in our lives as a certain job. The will of God is actually our character. It is not finding a job at some divine employment centre.

Dr. Jim Houston thoughtfully writes about seeking significance in our work.

If work is that parasitic activity from which I draw my significance then as a workaholic I am no different from some poor alcoholic who lives on the bottle instead of in authentic personal relationship.

This word about Sabbath rest disrobes us of these false clothes. There is no title on the Sabbath. There is no task to be done on the Sabbath. In Jewish life the work is set aside. The essential truth of Sabbath rest reminds me that my significance/ my identity is to be found before God in worship rather than in society in my work. It is a different place to stand.

If we will grasp this it will be revolutionary. This means that we can bring our significance to our work rather than trying to find our significance in our work. Some years ago I discovered something that changed my life. The greatest seduction in our society is that we can succeed at what we do while we fail at who we are.

We come to worship and when we come to worship we leave our tasks and titles at the door and we enter into the finished work of creation. Our worship is where we enjoy God's work and we lay the stress of our always-unfinished work and tasks aside for a while. In our work there is always something more to do. Worship before God invites us to experience and enjoy something that is finished.

Second passage, God gives us a covenant and the Sabbath is part of the covenant sign of the

people of God.

## **GOD CALLS US TO BE A WITNESS OF HIS PRESENCE IN THE WORLD.**

**Exodus 31:12-13.**

**12 Then the LORD said to Moses,**

**13 "Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.'**

Today we live in a culture of contracts that can be broken or cancelled. The heart of God's commitment to Israel is radically different. It is called a covenant. This is His agreement with his people. Covenant is a word and a concept that flows through the entire Scriptures.

It is a spiritual agreement that God creates with His people. We do not negotiate the terms. We simply accept them.

The reality of the covenant is made visible or tangible in a number of ways. One of those ways was in keeping the Sabbath. One of the things that would set Israel apart was that they would stop what they were doing, put down their tools and tasks and come together in worship. Their corporate gathering was a sign of the presence of God among them

and also in the world. When they gathered God came and dwelt among his people. His glory came upon the people in worship. The essential idea is that Israel was commanded to gather together and that gathering was a sign of God's covenant relationship.

We move this picture across many years and to a different culture, but the same essential truth is there. One of the signs of presence of God among his people is in the church that gathers to worship. It also stands a sign of the presence of God in the world. Have you ever thought that when we gather in this building at the heart of Vancouver, we are a sign of the presence of God in the city?

There is a lot of stuff each week in our society that tears us down, that pulls us apart. Gathering together in worship is a time to re-create, to put ourselves back together again under the hand of the Living God. We are encouraged in God's Word not to give up meeting together.

In the rhythm of each week, we need to come together as the people of God to worship, to pray, to study, to encourage one another, to remind each other of the truth that God is still at work. Worship is a time to come

together and enjoy God. Some of it should be serious. Some of it should be fun. Church should be serious but not somber.

The impact of these gatherings is not just realized on one Sunday, rather it is the cumulative effect of meeting week by week, song by song.

In my mind, the heroes each week in our church are the young families who come with babies and small children. Frankly it would be easier to stay home. Some weeks they must ask themselves, is it worth it? But you are molding and shaping your family for now and for the years to come.

So there are days in the week to work hard and there is a time to lay work aside and come to worship, to give thanks to God, to sing, to praise, to pray to be His people and to celebrate His presence. God is not only in us as individually, he is with us corporately.

When we do that, we are being a sign of the presence of God in the world. We are saying when we gather together, God comes and dwells in the midst of his people. This is a covenant activity that we are involved in. In Exodus when the people gather, the glory of God comes and settles down among them.

Sunday by Sunday, the church gathered for worship is a sign of

God's presence among us and in the world. This is something we should not miss.

**GOD CALLS US TO LIFESTYLE THAT IS MARKED BY FREEDOM RATHER THAN BY SLAVERY.**

Deut 5:12-15 teaches us that God is our redeemer who sets us free.

**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 manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do.**

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.

God is not only our Creator, he is also our Redeemer. You were slaves but the Lord has set you free from the tyranny you were under. The Sabbath was a symbol of freedom. Israel was no longer under the rule of the

Egyptians. She was free from the holocaust of Egypt and the treadmill of endless work. It is a painful irony that in another holocaust in history, the slogan over the gates of Auschwitz read Work Makes You Free.

We are given the gift of the Sabbath as an active reminder that we are free and no longer under the oppressive tyrant called work.

We work hard 5 days a week. We do our 40 hours or whatever and then a little voice whispers to us, you could make more money if you worked evenings. Imagine if you worked 6 days a week and then what about 7 days.

You could get another sale. After all its seductive voice whispers, isn't it all for your family?

So we find ourselves caught up in the neurotic work ethic. Its poisonous fumes filling our lungs. The result is that we have surrendered our freedom for the greed of our culture. One more evening, one more sale, one more client. Many of us live in emotional and physical overdrive.

We say, but we can't stop. The truth is that some of us don't want to stop. But a sharp pain in our chest, a numbing of our arm will make us stop.

The seduction is that we actually think that everything depends on the amount of work we do. Sometimes pastors think that the growth of the church depends on how hard they work. They think, the harder and longer they work, the more the church will grow. No it doesn't. The growth of the church depends on the Spirit of God.

The Lord of the Sabbath says, you are free to stop, to take a day and time away from the treadmill. In fact you must stop.

Students, you need to take a Sabbath break each week, take time in your week to rest, time for worship.

Mothers who often do the lion's share of meal preparation need a Sabbath break. Here's a risky idea. There could be at least one meal a week that you do not to do, that is your Sabbath. Take that time to read, to walk, to enjoy a break. At the very least, you should not have to do the dishes.

Richard Foster (Quaker, much more used to living with spiritual discipline than most of us) suggests a radical approach (far beyond balance)

Rank your activities:

1. Absolutely essential
2. Important but not always essential

3. Helpful but not necessary

4. Trivial

He says, eliminate #3 and #4 completely and cut #1 and #2 down at least 20%. We declare that it is impossible. But what if a doctor told you that you had 6 months to live, what would you change your lifestyle?

The real question is, do we trust God and are we really free to follow him?

Our daily lives would benefit so much if we would only look back into the heart of God and listen to his advice even in the small details of life. The Jewish Sabbath began on Friday evening. Extra food was prepared, worshipping God takes preparation. What if we began to get ready for worship on Saturday night, get ourselves ready.

The word given about the Sabbath was not to bind people at all. In fact it was to set them free, free from the endless tyranny of work, the drudgery of toil. There was a day to be free to enjoy God.

Each of us needs to understand our own emotional limits, different for each of us, but we all have a psychic overload that we must not cross.

We come in a few minutes to communion and if you are stressed out or have been too busy this past week, this is a time to rest. Just as God finished his work, rested and invited us to walk in his finished garden, so Jesus cried out from the cross it is finished and we are to live out of the rest of our salvation in him.

Just as God gave the people a sign for the covenant in this Sabbath, so Jesus calls us to a new covenant and he also gives us a sign. He calls us to share bread and wine as the symbols of this new agreement. There is nothing for us to do here at this table. Jesus said it is finished, just come and enjoy what God has done for us.

This morning if you have come here and you are feeling stressed out, perhaps burned out, find rest in your soul in these moments of worship at communion.

Words of an old hymn say to us.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Forgive our foolish ways

Reclothe us in our rightful mind

In purer lives thy service find in deeper reverence praise.

Drop thy still dews of quietness

Till all our strivings cease

Take from our souls the strain  
and stress and

Let our ordered lives confess

The beauty of your peace.