

Made for Man: One Professional's Journey from Pharisaism to Freedom through Observing the Sabbath

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ABSTRACT: Is Sabbath still a relevant concept in the post-modern professional world? The author reflects on how his relationship with Sabbath observance evolved from Pharisaic avoidance to celebratory freedom over his professional career. Historical research, application, exploration, and family intervention all played a role in the journey. Not proselytizing for his views, the author simply holds himself out as one recipient of God's blessing through keeping the Sabbath.

Key words: Sabbath, rest, work, Christian professional

INTRODUCTION

The Sabbath can seem like an outdated proposition in our post-modern working world. Businesses can now operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (Gupta & Seshasai, 2004). The Internet and globalization allow many businesses to be open to customers continuously (Timmers, 1998). Businesses and the people who work in them no longer seem to operate on a weekly rhythm. Yet Sabbath remains in the Word of God, like an anachronistic treasure, waiting to be uncovered by each generation. Is Sabbath still a valuable concept for the post-millennial workforce? My own experience with Sabbath has confirmed its worth. Through divine preparation and the intervention of my family, I was able to rediscover Sabbath observance and experience its impact on my life.

MY CONFLICTED HISTORY OF SABBATH OBSERVANCE

When I started my professional career, I had the same attitude towards Sabbath that I observed in many of my Christian colleagues. I was conflicted. I was like the Pharisees of Luke 6:7, struggling to keep rules that were more burden than blessing to me. Sabbath, for me at that time, meant Sunday, and after church on Sunday morning, I wanted to get started on the next week's work. I hated the idea of showing up at the office on Monday already behind and loved the idea of getting ahead of my colleagues. At the same time, I felt guilty

for working on the Sabbath. I was familiar with Exodus 20:8 ("Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy") from childhood and I did not want to violate the Lord's commandment. Sabbath work became a guilty pleasure. I did it when I felt insecure and avoided it when I was more confident.

My superiors understood my condition. Working at a Dallas law firm many of them shared my experience. The office was usually quiet on Sundays but lawyers would come in Monday morning with brief cases full of marked up documents. The firm approved. Like most employers of professionals, they had figured out a long time ago that we were an internally driven workforce. They shrewdly supported our initiative by rewarding us for working long hours (Luke 16:8). The prize was often more work, especially of the kind we most wanted. They were not malevolent people. They were just perpetuating a system designed to maximize the firm's profitability, like any good businessman would.

That same dynamic endured when I went in house as a corporate attorney for a major financial services firm in Boston. As an in-house lawyer, I had more control of my schedule, but the internal demons that chased me at the law firm still pursued. My problem was not that my faith and work were divided, as described by Brown & Weise (2013). It was that they were out of priority. Work was driving my life rather than life imbuing my work.

My wife, Lisa, was increasingly troubled by this. At one point, she went so far as to invite our pastor over to counsel me on the issue. I stonewalled him, as I had her

over the years. The conflict I faced was not going to be resolved by repeating the same arguments in my ear that I was already replaying internally.

DIVINE PREPARATION

In a revealing twist on the story, twelve years ago I left my law practice to become senior pastor of our church in Norton, Massachusetts. That pastor who had counseled me left to work in a para-church ministry, and the congregation called me to accept his role. The Lord echoed that call in me. I knew it was my next mission. It was strange to leave my law practice after all those years, but I was excited to be working full time in the pastorate and to see what the Lord had for me, my family, and our church.

Pastoral work brought a new element to my Sabbath dilemma. Am I not supposed to work on Sunday now? After all, Christ said in Matthew 12:5 that “the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless.” This point is subject to broader application because pastors are not the only ones who have a role in church on Sundays. Many members of the Christian Business Faculty Association serve as teachers or administrators or in other positions of service within their church. We all have the opportunity to “work” on the Sabbath as priests.

The vocational change eased my internal conflict but another problem soon emerged. My body and family began to show the strain of my 7-day workweek. Surdyk and Diddams (2006) did a fine job in the first issue of the *Christian Business Academy Review*, cataloguing some of the ill effects of overwork, and I was experiencing them. Adding to my fatigue, although I did not know it at the time (I would not be diagnosed until ten years later), I was suffering from intestinal cancer.

THE MOMENT OF INTERVENTION

It was then that my wife decided to intervene. She went back to the Old Testament in terms of timing and forward to modern Judaism for procedure. (It was an odd combination for her because I am the one with Jewish roots, not her.) One Friday, she spent all day cleaning our house, cooking a Sabbath dinner and preparing to take the following day off. She pressed my daughters into service to help. She taught my son the Hebrew blessings for bread, wine, and hand washing. She looked up the exact time for sundown online and set her schedule to meet it.

Then, when the sun went down on Friday, she called us all in to dinner. She lit candles and prayed, blessing the day of rest that the Lord had ordained for us. We sipped grape juice (we were a Baptist ministry family after all), washed our hands, and broke bread. My son dutifully prayed the Hebrew prayers for each element. There were Christian themes tied in throughout the ritual, the candles expressing Christ’s light to the world (John 8:12), the bread and juice representing his body and blood (Matthew 26:26-28), the washing signifying our sanctification in him (I Corinthians 6:11). The details of the ritual are not as important as the motivation. Abraham Heschel (1954) affirms that, even for Jews, “piety is an answer to God, expressed in the language of *mitzvot* rather than in the language of *ceremonies and symbols*” (p. 114, italics in original).

Then we ate, big. Marva Dawn (1989) states that Sabbath is about feasting, not deprivation. She would have been proud. There was more food than we could have eaten in three meals, and that was the idea. The leftovers were available all the next day with no need to cook. We lingered at the table for hours, catching up on what everyone was doing and feeling. In the words of Dawn (1989), we were “cherishing time rather than space” (p. 122). As the candles burned down, my heart rate came down with them. God had designed me to work, but he also designed me to need rest (Surdyk, 2002). Out of respect for their investment and an incipient appreciation for the benefits of Sabbath, I agreed with my family’s request that from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown I would not do any of my regular “work.”

ADJUSTING TO THE SABBATH

While my commitment to my family was uncomplicated, determining exactly what to do and not do on my Sabbath was a bigger problem. Heather McKay (2001) points out that there are no prescribed activities in the Pentateuch for the Sabbath except for the priests and other “cultic officials” (p. 41). The Mishnah generally portrays meeting, studying, and reading the law as appropriate behaviors for Sabbath (McKay, 2001, p. 208), although Peder Borgen (1996) argues that observation of the Sabbath was already controversial among Jews in Christ’s time. In 321, Emperor Constantine enacted a law that everyone (except farmers) was to rest on Sundays (Bradshaw & Johnson, 2011, p. 25). Centuries later, Queen Elizabeth I’s Act of Uniformity proclaimed worship as mandatory on

Sundays, although it was legal to work after church services during harvest (Solberg, 1977, p. 31). The Puritans clashed with James I over his promotion of sporting events on Sundays (LaTourette, 2000, p. 817).

None of these prescriptions were particularly helpful. Eventually I determined to regulate my Sabbath activity by distinguishing between the moral law of Exodus 20 and the covenant and ceremonial law found elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Kaiser, 2003, p. 145). I also experimented with different strategies. Not scheduling meetings or pouring over budgets on Saturday was an easy boundary to establish, but while the root of the Hebrew *Shabbat* means “to cease,” I found that a Sabbath exclusively defined by what you do not do is an impoverished Sabbath.

Abraham Heschel was a major contributor to my approach. His daughter, Susannah, in her introduction to his book, *The Sabbath*, described how he reserved certain books for Sabbath reading, went on walks with his wife, took naps, and entertained guests (Heschel, 1979). I began to schedule things on my Sabbath, things like reading large blocks of Scripture or a spiritually formative book that I reserved for those days. I scheduled early morning coffee dates with my wife or lunch with one of my adult children. Sometimes I even scheduled naps.

Occasionally emergencies intervened, and I adjusted. When a distressed husband showed up at my house on a Saturday afternoon, thinking his wife was having an affair, I accepted that as God’s appointment for the day and shared his grief. If a call came to meet someone in the hospital, I never refused. Even my Jewish ancestors would have agreed it was permitted to tend to the sick on the Sabbath (Neusner, 1998, p. 216). Jesus, of course, showed us in Matthew 12:12 that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

The appropriate day on which to observe the Sabbath is an issue for some. New Testament texts like Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:5 indicate that first century Christians’ trust in Christ as their source of salvation rendered the timing and ceremonial aspects of observing the Sabbath unimportant. Kenneth LaTourette (1953) holds that by the second century Christians worshipped on Sunday rather than Saturday (p. 198). The whole argument, for me, is rendered somewhat suspect by the fact that the Romans did not really observe a 7-day week until the 3rd century (Miller, 2008). Early Christians referred to Sunday as “the Lord’s Day” in recognition of the date of his resurrection, and worship on that day symbolized their faith in him. At the same time, however, LaTourette (1953) acknowledges that many gentile

Christians in the early church observed the Sabbath, meaning they refrained from work on Saturday. The Council of Laodicea attempted to resolve the issue by declaring that Christians should worship on Sunday and that resting was inappropriate for Saturday (Miller, 2008). Willy Rordorf (1968) suggests the Council’s goal was to distinguish Christianity from Judaism. It was not until the late 16th or early 17th century that Christians began to refer to Sunday as the Sabbath (Miller, 2008).

My own practice has been informed more by pragmatism and New Testament theology than by history. I employ the same schedule now, as a professor, as I did when I was a pastor. I rarely preach on Sundays, but I still hold to a sundown Friday to sundown Saturday Sabbath. On Sundays I begin the day with worship and then get to work preparing for Monday. My Christian neighbors may not understand this but, should they ask, I can remind them of Romans 14:5, “One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.”

SABBATH IMPACT

Have I paid a price in terms of my career? I cannot say for sure, but I certainly do not feel I have suffered. I have practiced law on four continents, taught for three different universities, published, preached, and led organizations. The counterfactual is always unknowable, but I believe part of the faithfulness of observing the Sabbath is not knowing, sacrificing any potential productivity gains as an act of obedience. I might be more productive overall if I worked on the Sabbath, but I believe I would also be less obedient and that disobedience would jeopardize not just my working effectiveness but also my relationship with God. If I believe that I can do all things through Christ (Philippians 4:13) but can do nothing of eternal good without him (Ecclesiastes 1), then whatever conditions he requires must be acceptable to me.

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.

It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:1-2)

The costs are unascertainable, but the benefits of keeping the Sabbath have been obvious. It keeps me in right relationship to myself by reaffirming my intrinsic value. Heschel (1979) states, “What *we are* depends on what *the Sabbath is* to us” (p.xv, italics in original). The Sabbath reminds me that my value is not tied to my productivity. This was a paradigm level shift for me. I had always judged myself by what I produced, and my superiors affirmed that judgment. God, however, values us on the basis of being his creation (Genesis 1:31). I had unwittingly adopted the worldview of the Pharaoh of the Exodus who valued the Israelites only for the work they produced:

But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.” And Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!” (Exodus 5:4-5)

Lisa Surdyk (2002) puts it very well: “Sabbath is meant to humanize us in a world where so many forces are dehumanizing” (p. 82).

I am physically healthier than I have been in my adult life. I can run farther, lift more weight, and work harder than ever. My cancer has been removed. I have no idea that working seven days a week caused me to have cancer, but I know that keeping the Sabbath aided my recovery. In addition to the simple, physically restorative effects of not working one day a week, Sabbath taught me to value rest as a spiritual good, rather than reject it as a failure of productivity. I saw rest as an integral part of the process (or “work”) of recovery and devoted myself to it in order to regain my strength after multiple rounds of surgery and chemotherapy.

Observing the Sabbath also keeps me in right relationship with others. I keep my Sabbath schedule loose to be open for whatever the Lord brings. I am available to take walks with my wife or go swimming with my children. Over the years, it has also kept me from abusing those who worked for me. The Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:10 extends to all those for whom we are responsible — sons, daughters, servants, animals, and even the “foreigner residing in your towns.” Sabbath can be particularly important for the disenfranchised, and it is incumbent on all of us to provide it (Havens, 2013). Eager as I am to run an efficient operation, I have never been willing to compel coworkers to labor while I rested.

Most importantly, I have found Sabbath observance keeps me in right relationship with God. When I cease

from my labors, I acknowledge his sovereignty by my obedience (Exodus 31:13). I acknowledge his provision and my dependence (Exodus 16:29). I acknowledge his wisdom by submitting to his plan. I also share in his joy. My keeping of the Sabbath is an emulation of his rest on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:2). Just as he reflected on his work with satisfaction, enjoying its “goodness,” I reflect on my activity of the week. Sometimes it is good, sometimes not. Either way, this act of rest and reflection actually provides added meaning for the work itself. A painter may enjoy painting or a chef cooking, but the act of painting or cooking becomes more meaningful when the worker knows that they, and others, will engage their work and appreciate it.

There have been struggles when I tried, and sometimes still try, to pick up work on the Sabbath. Mercifully, my children are there to remind me what I am giving up to gain the slight advantage of another hour’s work. Just as in the rest of our Christian walk, we do not observe Sabbath alone. From Exodus 20 it was designed to be a communal exercise. I rely on my family and friends to encourage and correct me in Sabbath observance, just as I rely on them to encourage and correct me in prayer and holiness. Richard Foster (1998) argues that spiritual disciplines, which is what Sabbath has become for me, “are best exercised in the midst of our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors” (p.1).

I cannot say what my life would be like today if my wife had not helped me incorporate Sabbath into it. Would I be farther “ahead” in my career? Would I still be alive? Would I still be married? Frankly, I don’t want to know. Sabbath has taught me how to rest and I am resting in God’s providential hand in my life. “The LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23). Ultimately, I have learned that work is good and rest is good, and that each enhances the goodness of the other (Cafferky, 2013), but neither is the supreme good. They are both good in that they point us to God, who alone is the ultimate good (Mark 10:18).

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