



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

Tara & Ray Bennett

July 16, 2017

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

Isaiah 58:13–14

Matthew 11:28–12:14

Intro

We have to start by saying that when we saw the lineup for this sermon series, we thought: hmm, one of these things is not like the other. We are so thankful for Benji Davis, Sally Breedlove, Mary Vandel Young, and Barney Ford. We will warn you that we do not have the theological training, deep seasoning, years of wisdom, or beautiful words that these others have. But when we were asked if we would share our story about Rest as part of this series, we knew we couldn't say no.

This topic has turned our life on its head more than any other in the last 5 years. When we learned some of the things we are going to share with you this morning, we started to discover God in new ways that increased our overall joy in life and brought us into a sweeter, closer walk with Him. That is not to say that we have this topic figured out – we are still very much in process. But we do want to share some of spiritual truths we have learned that have been life-changing.

So this morning we want to offer you an invitation: to enter deeper into God's rest and by doing so, to discover a richer, deeper, more full-color experience of God.

We are indebted for much of what we will share with you this morning to a book called *The Rest of God: Restoring your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* by Mark Buchanan, which a friend recommended to us in the midst of a particularly challenging season about 5 years ago. The title is a double entendre, referring to the fact that when we enter the Rest of God, we also discover the Rest of God that we have been missing.

Part 1: Life Before

There are three parts to what we want to share with you today. First, we want to tell you a little about our journey. Second, we want to share with you 3 lessons that turned our lives upside down about rest and Sabbath. Third, we want to offer some examples from our own lives about how we have applied these lessons that may jumpstart your own thinking as you think about how to incorporate more rest into your own lives.



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

Now, in order to understand our journey, you have to understand a little about where we came from. All our lives, we have both been type-A, people pleasing, achievers. We would do whatever it took to make the grade, climb the ladder, make others happy with us, get the job done.

We were also steeped in a religious tradition that emphasizes the good-old fashioned Protestant work ethic. Who doesn't love that verse from Proverbs 6:

Consider the ant you sluggard, go to its ways and be wise!
It has no commander, no overseer or ruler,
Yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

When it came to rest, or keeping the Sabbath, we thought about it this way: God rested once all of his work was done, so rest is great, Sabbath is great – as long as you've been like the ant and finished all of your work. As a result, we used to be night owls. If you come to the end of the day, but there is more work to do – you just stay up later. If you get to the end of the week and you didn't finish everything you planned to do – well, rest just has to wait until next weekend after the work is done (or maybe the next weekend, or the weekend after that).

Of course, a confession like that in our society is no confession at all – it's part of the soup we swim in. In fact, most of us pretend that character traits like these are weaknesses. But when we “confess” things like this, what we really mean to do is highlight our strengths – our work ethic, a commitment to excellence, and if we're really honest – the signs that we are a good Christian. This value system is so pervasive, we often don't even notice it. As Benji said earlier this month, research shows that while the mark of high status 100 years ago was how much leisure time you had, now the mark of status in our culture is how hard you work. One of the most popular buzz phrases in Christian culture is the value of being “purpose driven.” Consider the ant you sluggard –those messages from scripture are held up as our mantra to bolster and undergird our cultural values.

Well, that approach worked for awhile, and in some sense you could say we were quite successful at it. But then we hit our 30's. I joined a large law firm, an environment where the billable hour expectations are often set at a number that requires significantly more than a full-time investment in order to meet your targets. We added 1, then 2, then 3, then 4 children. All the while, we continued to apply the same approach we always had – if the workload increases, you just step up your game to meet it. You work harder, sleep less, juggle better, deploy more of the 7 habits of the Highly Effective Person.

But things weren't right. We didn't know it at the time, but this restless existence had started a long, slow process of erosion in our lives. In reality, we were getting worn down and



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

irritable, making it harder to connect with God, harder to connect with each other, harder to connect with our kids, and harder to connect with others. The moments of rest or vacation we did have, we checked out – it was a time to recover, catch our breath, gear up for the next round. But we came back from these periods of rest worn out, tired, wondering if we ever should have left.

There is one little story that seems trivial, but is particularly telling about the place we were in during the fall of 2011. In our last house, our neighbor had a large number of oak trees. Starting in early November and continuing through January, it felt like these trees made a constant assault on our yard—threatening to bury us in leaves if we did not stay on top of them. The first year we moved in at Thanksgiving and did not know this was coming and stayed under a carpet of leaves for months before we could dig out. So during the busiest season of the year, we would plan ahead and schedule the weekend days we were going to spend raking in order to stay on top of the leaves.

One Sunday when we had planned to spend the entire day raking, some friends of ours asked if we would like to go out to lunch after church. We both looked at each other with a little panic in our eyes. Our schedule through Thanksgiving and Christmas was tightly packed with military precision. If we missed the opportunity to rake that afternoon, between holiday travel plans, Christmas shopping, Christmas parties, briefing deadlines, hearings, kids' activities, and other commitments, there was literally no chance for six weeks or more to get back to the leaves until after Christmas. This one invitation seemed like it threatened to bury us in leaves through the Christmas season – our life felt like it might spiral out of control.

So – with a little bit of unjustified irritation on our part – we said no. It must have sounded like someone saying they needed to wash their hair on a Saturday night. But it didn't feel like that at the time. It felt like they had made a request for our last bit of margin, our last breath of air before we went under.

As we reflect back on those feelings and our response, how often we felt at the end of our rope, we're a little embarrassed and reminded of the unhealthy spot we were in at that point in life. But, at the time, we thought we were just being faithful to everything God had given us to do.

Around 2012, God initiated a process of change in us that radically transformed our thinking. We wish we could say that we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps or decided to make a change. But it didn't happen like that – this story started with God.



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

During the fall of 2011, I was starting to have second thoughts about the law (or at least practice at a big firm). I was stressed out and exhausted and regularly feeling like I was being forced to make impossible choices – either drop the ball at work or drop the ball at home. I had heard the line about how work obligations are balls made of rubber and personal obligations are balls made of glass. But too many times, I had chosen to drop the glass balls and some of them were starting to crack. I could see the damage this was doing and started to wonder about making a career change.

In early 2012, my professional life shifted out from under me. The two senior partners within my group decided to part ways – with one leaving and one staying. Everyone was given a choice to go or stay – and there was fierce competition for those of us on the team. As several others started negotiating for more money, I started to wonder if this was an opportunity to get some more time. I thought I could use that time to work harder on finding another career, doing some writing to become a law professor, or something else to leave the practice of law in a large law firm. So instead of asking for more money, I asked for more time.

I left my previous firm and joined the one I am with now because they agreed to let me go $\frac{3}{4}$'s time. Nothing changed about my commitment to doing excellent work or my desire to serve my clients well, but I wanted to do everything I had been doing for less time and less pay if I could have some more margin in my schedule.

That single professional change has made a dramatic difference in my life – making it possible to have fewer times when I have to make choices between work and family. Ironically, the additional flexibility and margin made me much more effective at my job and made me enjoy it much more. My clients were happier. My family was happier. I was happier. It turns out, I actually did like my job, I was just doing too much of it.

But even with that significant change in life, that by itself was not all that God had for us. In fact, if that was the only change, given our old patterns, we still would have filled up all of life to overflowing. $\frac{3}{4}$'s time at a large law firm is a lot like a typical full-time job – and with 4 kids, service in the church and the community, it would not have taken long before we would have been just as stressed out, worn out and irritable as we had always been.

Part 2: Lesson Learned, Rest of God

It was at that time that God also started teaching us some of these lessons about rest. Again, by his grace and his initiation, we started to hear about this topic over and over again. It was like God knew that if we heard it only once, we would miss it. Maybe you're like us – and



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

the first two sermons about rest are just kind of sitting in the back of your mind, but it won't be until week 5 when you really start to think about making a change in your life.

So through this book, *The Rest of God*, in addition to many other things over the next year or two, we learned 3 critical lessons about rest that we want to share with you.

1. Our bodies, souls and spirits, need Sabbath.
2. Sabbath requires trust.
3. Sabbath observation is about stopping work and choosing joy.

First, our bodies, souls, and spirits need Sabbath. This is something built into our design. Before we can talk about why we need it, though, we first need to clarify what we mean by Sabbath. When we say Sabbath we mean two things which we have borrowed from Buchanan's book. First, we mean a day, the seventh day in particular. In Christian heritage and tradition, it often means Sunday, but it doesn't have to be .. Second, we mean an attitude. Here's how Buchanan describes it:

It is a perspective, an orientation. I mean a Sabbath heart, not just a Sabbath day. A Sabbath heart is restful even in the midst of unrest and upheaval. It is attentive to the presence of God and others even in the welter of much coming and going, rising and falling. It is still and knows God even when mountains fall into the sea. You will never enter into a Sabbath day without a Sabbath heart.

Now, when we thought about Sabbath in the past, we never really thought of it as something that was central to the Christian experience. Yes, it shows up in the 10 commandments, but we thought of it more like all those quaint food laws or other Old Testament stuff that went away with Jesus. It was not part of our design. That thinking resulted from two misconceptions. First, we had always thought about Sabbath rest as something that comes when the work is all done because God didn't rest until he completed his work of creation. There are two versions of the 10 Commandments, The one in Exodus is more familiar, which is why we read the Deuteronomy one this morning, but the Exodus version says "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God." And a little later on, "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day."

So there is a clear connection between Sabbath in the Old Testament and the cycle of work and rest in creation. But we tend to get this backwards. We tend to think God got all of his



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

work done, then he rested. So we should get all of our work done, then we can rest. But God does not need rest. Buchanan puts it this way:

God never sleeps nor slumbers. He runs no risk of breakdown, burnout, exhaustion, injury. God doesn't need Sabbath or sabbatical. He doesn't pine for vacation. He doesn't require a good night's sleep to clear his head or steady his hand. He doesn't run ragged and run amok, pushing himself beyond his limits, patching himself together between bursts of striving and binges of workaholism. God is not waiting for the weekend. God is complete without rest.

But that is not true of us. For us, rest is absolutely indispensable. In fact, all things God made need rest. As humans, we're the only one who seem to think we can escape that reality. Our need for rest cannot be eliminated by chemicals or technology or better discipline or cleverness. It always catches up with us eventually.

So, God, in knowing our need for rest, took the lead. The Sabbath was his last day of creation. But humans were created on the sixth day. So for us, Sabbath is the first day.

That truth was revolutionary for us. Rest is not something we earn after all the work is done and after our tanks have run empty. It is not something that can be pushed off until we get around to it. Instead, all of our work is supposed to begin with rest. Rest is what fills our tank at the beginning of the week so that everything we do grows out of that rest, rejuvenation, connection with God. It is the beginning and not the end. It is critically essential – not an option.

Now the lie we had adopted was that we could not rest until all the work was done. But the truth is that the work is never done. As Buchanan puts it,

"Rest is not a reward for finishing. It's not a bonus for work well done. It's sheer gift. It is a stop-work order in the midst of work that's never complete, never polished. Sabbath is not the break we're allotted at the tail end of completing all of our tasks and chores, the fulfillment of all our obligations. It's the rest we take smack-dab in the middle of them, without apology, without guilt, and for no better reason than God told us we could."

That one truth led to a very different approach. It meant that we started resting when we came to the end of ourselves, rather than straining to keep pushing. We slept when the day was over. We started observing Sabbath rhythms on Sundays, even when it might lower anxiety to go into the office for a few hours on a Sunday to get a jump on the week. Instead of feeling like I have to get a few things done so I can get through the next week, we started to think, it is critical that I rest so that I can get through all that God has laid before me for



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

the next six days. My productivity grows out of my rest. That principle turned everything upside down.

The second misconception that was undermining our sense of conviction that our bodies, souls, and spirits need Sabbath is that we always thought Jesus had gotten rid of the Sabbath, or at least not taken it very seriously. After all, wasn't that the hang up that the Pharisees had? Didn't Jesus criticize them repeatedly about all their Sabbath restrictions? Didn't he do away with all of those burdensome regulations from the Old Testament about the Sabbath?

Interestingly, it turns out there are no rules about observation of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. God clearly took the Sabbath seriously because there is one story where a guy ends up being sentenced to death for gathering wood on the Sabbath. But apart from that one story, the Bible is silent on specific rules. God prescribes all kinds of rules about sexual conduct, priestly garments, dietary restrictions, forbidden clothing, etc. But on Sabbath, there is almost nothing – just repetition of general guidelines: rest, cease from work, celebrate, remember, observe, deny yourself, delight yourself.

See, while the Exodus passage emphasizes Sabbath as a reflection of the cycle of rest and work in creation, Deuteronomy emphasizes Sabbath as an example of freedom.

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

So to refuse Sabbath is in effect to refuse the freedom God has given us from slavery. As Buchanan puts it, to “embrace the taskmasters who are ready to thrash us for the smallest sign of slowing down.”

So when we turn to Jesus, is it any wonder that he is so hard on the Pharisees who have taken the Sabbath – intended to be this gift of freedom from oppression, a chance to experience God’s rest – and made it into the day of the week most burdened with rules, the most oppressive and dour day of the week.

In the New Testament passage we read today from Matthew, we heard some of the most famous words Jesus said on rest, but because of the chapter breaks, we often miss that this is part of a story about Sabbath. Jesus says this in the last few verses of Matthew Chapter 11:



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Interestingly, he was speaking this on the Sabbath. Immediately afterward, Matthew Chapter 12 begins this way "At that time, Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them." So Jesus speaks these incredible words of rest on the Sabbath, then walks with his disciples as they eat their way through a grainfield.

Then, Jesus goes on from that place to heal someone – to restore the person's body to wholeness.

The Pharisees flip out about this unlawful harvesting and unlawful healing – there are six other days for that sort of thing. In fact, they start plotting murder on the Sabbath, which apparently wasn't prohibited by any of their laws.

Jesus is very hard on the Pharisees for their legalistic treatment of the Sabbath – for the rules they have piled onto this day that is intended to be a gift of freedom. But that is not to say that Jesus thought we could just do away with the Sabbath as a relic of Old Testament law. In fact, just as Jesus tends to do with many of the other 10 Commandments, he showed the people they were completely missing the point. Remember when Jesus said, "You've heard it said, do not murder. But I tell you anyone who is angry with his brother is subject to judgment." You've heard it said, Do not commit adultery," But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery."

Jesus is not doing away with rest or the Sabbath in this story. The whole story begins with Jesus saying *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* Jesus claims to be the "Lord of the Sabbath" – not because Sabbath is not important, but because He is the fulfillment of it. He is throwing off all the burdens that the Pharisees had added – 39 categories of rules and regulations of their own making – and restoring its purpose – to bring liberty, freedom, rest for those who are weary and burdened. Jesus' rest includes sustenance and food for those who are hungry, healing for those who are broken, rest for all of our souls.

For too long, we did not understand how critical these things were to our survival. How desperately we needed cycles of regular rest where we could draw away with Jesus and find restoration for our souls.

There are two more lessons we learned and they will be shorter.



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

Second, we learned that Sabbath requires trust. Rest is intimately connected with trust. In order to stop when everything is not done, you have to trust that if you follow the command to stop, things will not spin out of control. It requires you to believe that you are not really the one in control but that God is. The principle here is very similar to trust that is required to respond to a call from God to start tithing or giving even more generously. You have to make the decision to give or to rest when you don't know for sure there will be enough resources in terms of time and money for everything you need. But we started to realize that this fear that there would not be enough time later was really just a reflection that we did not trust God to meet all of our needs. When we started to follow the command to rest – to sleep at the end of the day or to rest on a Sunday even when there were piles of work to do – we started to see God have an opportunity to meet our needs in miraculous ways. We would find ourselves on a Monday with a rush of extra energy and productivity, getting done much more in less time. In other cases, where it seemed certain trains would collide, an obligation would dissolve. We started to live lighter on our toes, looking more to see how God would provide. Life became more fun and thrilling as we trusted God with our time.

Learning to trust God with our time has expanded our ability to trust God in other areas. [Expand on this]

Third, we learned that Sabbath observation has two parts: stopping work and choosing joy. Real Sabbath rest is about more than just stopping work. It is not vacating or a vacation. It is not escape. It is not putting down work just to spend some time on your favorite painkiller or diversion.

True Sabbath rest requires two things – first, you have to stop work. In other words, you have to cease that which is necessary. But second you have to choose joy. In other words, you embrace that which gives life.

The passage we read from Isaiah talks about both parts:

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... then you will find your joy in the Lord.

So there are two parts to true Sabbath rest. First, you stop going your own way. You stop doing as you please. Buchanan puts it this way: “*Stop doing what you ought to do.*”

But next, we learned that really deep rest only comes when we also choose joy. When we embrace life. This means that on Sabbath days we generally turn off our screens for the day – because they tend to draw us away from each other and other people. Instead, we try to



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

spend time together, be available for long conversations, spend time with other people we previously would have turned down to rake our leaves, read a book, take a nap, or play a game. We try to look for hidden blessings or chances to be attentive to God and notice Him that we might miss during the rest of the week. That does not mean we never watch a movie or look up something on the internet. It just means we specifically look for things that connect us to God and help us to embrace life.

We try to avoid creating a new legalistic set of rules about what we can and cannot do on the Sabbath, or the exact time parameters for its observance. There are days when I will mow the lawn as part of our Sabbath rest. I spend most of the week in an office not seeing the sunshine and not moving my body. As long as I do not insist that the task be completed, if I am open to interruption, there are days that being outside and mowing the lawn or raking leaves is wonderfully restful. When it connects me to God and to joy.

We have learned that this decision to embrace rest or Sabbath isn't something that happens only on a Sunday either. One day just recently was truly awful. From the moment we woke up, it seemed like things went wrong. My list of problems at the office was much longer at the end of the day than it had started. Tara and the kids had had a very difficult day. People in our family were irritable. It was the type of day you wanted to put everyone to bed, turn on the television and check out. That night we chose something different, though. We ended up piling into the car, driving to the local park just as the sun was going down, and letting the kids play in the twilight. We brought popsicles with us. We sat and enjoyed each other. We laughed. We experienced God. We stopped doing what we ought to do and we embraced life. The hard day was not forgotten. It just no longer had power over the present. That's Sabbath.

Part 3: Application

As we said earlier, starting to apply some of these principles of cycles of rest and work have turned our life upside down. We have discovered new lessons in this area for 5 years now and we are still in process. We want to share some practical examples of ways this has been made part of our life.

As we do so, though, we are cognizant of the reminder of the Pharisees and the rules they laid on the church that sucked the life out of rest and robbed the joy of the gift God had freely given to His people. So we offer these only to jumpstart your own thinking – not as a rubric to follow or a new set of “ought tos” to burden your life. Our hope is that you might be inspired to press into God’s rest in even one small way and discover a hidden blessing that would enrich your life and draw you closer to Him.



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

So we have found that Sabbath rest is really a way of dividing up time into cycles of rest and work – where you embrace rest and renewal of life so that your work grows out of a storehouse instead of a mustering of resources that aren’t really there. There are ways to do this daily, weekly, yearly, or in seven year cycles of sabbatical.

First, on a daily basis, for years we were night owls. We would work until everything was done—even if that meant working into the early morning hours. Part of Sabbath rest for us has been stopping at the end of the day. Recognizing that our bodies have limits and are made for sleep. So when our bodies begin to cry out for rest, we relent rather than having one more cup of coffee or pushing to finish one more task. We have stopped trying to escape our limits. We do not do this perfectly—and we still have some late nights. But our rhythms have been reset to incorporate principles of work and rest into our daily rhythms.

On a weekly basis, we have started taking a weekly Sabbath on Sundays. We first began this practice as a Lenten commitment one year. Just like a Jewish Sabbath, we followed the cycle of sundown to sundown, starting with a Sabbath dinner on Saturday evenings. We lit Sabbath candles, made a simple dinner, and intentionally celebrated the beginning of 24 hours of rest. Then we shut off the screens and committed not to work on Sundays. We didn’t run errands. We didn’t do any “ought tos.” Frankly, this seemed virtually impossible at the time. We considered it to be a form of fasting – a sacrifice we could get through for just one Lenten season. Instead, we discovered it was so life-giving we never went back. We now look forward to Sunday Sabbath as an essential part of our week, and necessary in order to complete all that God has for us the rest of the week.

We also discovered that there was a need for a yearly, longer season of Sabbath retreat and reflection. So, about 5 years ago, we started going to this old rustic farmhouse, North of Boone in Todd, near the end of each summer, just before our kids go back to school. This is different from our family vacations, where we seek out adventures, new experiences for our kids, or go somewhere for the purposes of exploring. During this week, the screens go off, we stay in a place that has no cell service, and in a location where the kids can run out the door and explore without the tight leashes necessary when living in a city. During this time, we hike familiar trails, sit on a familiar porch, look out at familiar landscapes. We spend time reading books, playing games, catching up on conversations, and spending extended times with God. When we come back, instead of feeling exhausted from our vacation, we feel renewed and eager to return to work and begin a new school year.

Finally, we both started a commitment to take a 7-year sabbatical. We do not have the option in our current work and life arrangements to go away for several months. But we



RAC Rest Series: Summer 2017

have each taken a year when we have withdrawn from all commitments and used the extra time to spend more time thinking, reflecting, and praying. My first “sabbatical year” was that year when I switched firms and reduced my schedule to $\frac{3}{4}$ ’s time. I plan to take my next sabbatical year in 2020 and have warned nonprofit boards I sit on and other commitments that I will resign for that year. Tara just finished her first one this past year, where she stepped out of the majority of her commitments outside our home. This has built into our schedules a regular rhythm where we take time to pull back and evaluate, and to listen – to draw more deeply into God to prepare for the next season.

These are just examples. If you ask the Lord, we know he will show you where his invitation to rest is in your life. Just as Jesus said to His disciples on that Sabbath Sunday where he fed them when they were hungry and healed them when they needed healing, Jesus is saying to you, Come away with me. I see that you are weary and burdened. I will give you rest. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Please pray with us. Oh Lord, giver of life. Would you help us to find rest in you. Help us to stop all of our work and embrace life. And by doing so, find life that is really life in You. Amen.