

RESTART SABBATH

Isaiah 58:13-14

Matthew 11:28-30

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1 February 2015

Do you sometimes feel that the world is conspiring to make you miserable? Every article you read tells you that you shouldn't be doing the things you enjoy. Too much surfing the internet: it's bad for you. Too much time on the couch: very unhealthy. And then there are the articles that tell you what you should be doing: like eating more kale and quinoa, drinking eight glasses of water a day, time on the treadmill, lifting weights...non-stop fun, right?

Last fall, an article was published in a reputable journal. I'm not talking about a grocery store tabloid or even a magazine you'd read at the doctor's office. I'm talking about the Journal of Physiology. This article says: "Drinking a glass of red wine is the same as getting an hour of exercise." There is a natural compound found in fruits and nuts - which is good news for those who are not drinkers - and in red wine - which can enhance exercise training and performance, and even substitute for some of the benefits of exercise. Now here's the downside. It only works with red wine, and it only works with one glass. Do not leave here, buy a case of wine, and cancel your gym membership!

What if we were to discover that all of the rules of the universe were not meant to punish us, but actually intended to enhance our quality of life?

People often look upon religion as a lifestyle seemingly designed to make people unhappy. One rule after another. There are those stereotypes of Christians as

judgmental, looking down their noses at anyone who appears to be having fun. In TV and in the movies, Christians are portrayed as super straight, as people who are AGAINST things, OPPOSED to things. Maybe it comes from the negative language in the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt NOT. It would be interesting to write all ten commandments in positive language, so that, for example, instead of “Thou shalt not covet what other people have” we would be told “You shall gain a great appreciation for all of the blessings in your life and cultivate a spirit of gratitude.” I would love it if the media would find a way to portray an occasional person of faith who is doing good in the world and having fun doing it. I wish the outside world could see our kids working super hard on their mission trips but having a blast and calling it the best week of their summer. I wish people who think of church as the “land of no fun” would show up here and see how much good natured teasing goes on among our members, and how deeply caring we can be with one another.

Because the truth is that the life the Bible describes and calls us to is a life that is healthy, whole, fulfilling and yes, joyful.

And the truth is that many people who live their lives according to the values of the outside world are deeply unhappy. I see it in the faces of people who come to see me for counseling. They describe lives that are stressed to the point of crisis. I have had parents and teenagers alike talk about their family schedules which are so full they are almost unlivable. It is almost physically impossible sometimes for people to get to all of the places they need to be.

Our teenagers are describing anxiety that comes from trying to perform and succeed on many levels at the same time. Adults worry about their jobs in an age of understandable job insecurity. They're afraid to take time off.

Relationships are strained, health suffers. As I talk to them, my goal is to help them to see what aspects of their lives are stressful because of the choices they have made. We can't change everything about our lives, but sometimes we forget how much of our anxiety we ourselves have caused. And we often forget that it is always within our power to choose how we will cope. Time and time again, I turn to the serenity prayer which says, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

When we listen to the outside world, we are told that we are not enough. We are not good-looking enough, happy enough, rich enough, successful enough. Therefore, we must buy beauty products, we must spend money on entertainment designed to make us happy, we must climb the career ladder whether we want to or not, we must have bigger houses and fancier cars. There are so many voices telling us these things that the messages soak in, even when we're not aware of them. Pay attention tonight to the Super Bowl commercials. In addition to admiring the creativity of some of them, and enjoying some of them, be aware of the messages they're giving.

Do any of them sound remotely like Jesus? Do any of them say, "The real path to happiness and serenity lies in a life of service, a life of generosity, a life of forgiveness and unconditional love"? That kind of message wouldn't sell much beer or many cars, so no - you won't hear that. And I'm not trying to be a killjoy here. Nor am I trying to suggest we all turn into monastics and completely remove ourselves from the consumer

society. But here's the truth. Chasing after more things causes our lives to become anxious. There needs to be a balance in our lives if we are to experience any sort of peace. We need to each be able to say to ourselves, "Enough is enough." Enough activities on the schedule, enough money in the bank, enough possessions in the home. And then we make room in our lives for other things, we make room for people and relationships. We make time for service to others. We make space for the things that deeply matter.

The fourth commandment is actually one that is written in the positive. It says, "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy."

Now some Christians managed to turn this concept of sabbath into a negative, especially at one time in our history. Reflecting our American Puritan heritage, there was a time when keeping this commandment meant that Sundays were days for quiet restraint and prohibition. Don't play cards, don't shop, don't go to movies. Those days are gone, and so is any recognition of the Sabbath whatsoever. Sundays the Costco parking lot is packed, and it's prime time for youth sports from soccer to basketball to hockey.

The idea of the sabbath is one worth looking at again, and one worth reclaiming. The idea of sabbath is one we desperately need - now more than ever, I will argue, and it is a gift to us from a loving God who wants our lives to be healthy and whole and joyful.

The traditional understanding is that we should rest one day because God rested one day after the six days of creation. That day has come to be, in our Christian tradition, Sunday. But I would like us to think beyond this traditional understanding for

today and instead think of Sabbath in a broader context. "Sabbath" is a way of understanding time and the choices we make about our time.

The concept of Sabbath reminds us that life is meant to be lived with a rhythm of stopping and starting, rest and activity. If we were meant to be on 24 hours a day, why did God create a world where there is night time? If we were meant to go, non-stop, 365 days a year, why are there different seasons to the year? The natural world lives according to cycles and rhythms, and it's the way our lives are meant to be lived as well. Jesus' life gives us a wonderful example of this. His life has a constant rhythm...he is with people, pouring himself out, giving of himself in relationships, in teaching, in healing, and then he goes away by himself, to be with God, to restore himself. He's out on a boat or up a mountain or deep into the wilderness desert, then he comes back again. What is the rhythm of your life? Do you make opportunities to fill your spirit?

The commandment to keep the sabbath is not a commandment about what we shouldn't do. It's a commandment to stop some things so that we make time in our lives for other things. The idea of the Sabbath opens up alternatives for us, alternatives that could be life-giving. It works like this. You are given the gift of time: a whole day, or a free afternoon or evening. Because there is nothing on your schedule, you can decide what it is you want to do with that time. You take control of your time and you make choices. You ask yourself these questions, "Is the way I'm spending my time helping me to achieve a more balanced life? Do I spend my time in a way that helps me live that abundant life God wants for me? Am I making the most of my time?"

The word "sabbath" in Hebrew means "stop" or "rest". God commands us to stop and rest. How wonderful is that! In a world where so many people are stressed,

anxious, tired, burned out, God commands us to stop and rest. That might even be better news than the red wine thing! So why don't we do it more often? Why don't we set aside more time for rest? Are we worried that we'll miss something if we put down our phones and our facebook and our instagram for a few hours a week? Do we want to believe that we're indispensable, that life cannot go on without us? Are we afraid of quiet, of silence? Why don't we find more time for rest? What most people find is that when they rediscover their natural rhythms, when they get away more, when they rest deeply, is that they're actually more productive in their regular daily lives.

We are more than consumers. We are people created in the image of God, and we are good enough already. Better grades will not make us better people. Winning a sports tournament will not make our teenagers winners. They are already winners. They won the moment they realized that they are loved unconditionally by God.

Jesus says, "Your life is too hard. Let me carry your burdens for a while." Just stop your relentless pursuits and rest in God's spirit. Experience the Sabbath. Step off the grid for a few hours or a few days. Make time and space in your life for the things that matter the most. The Sabbath is not a burden. It is a release from burden. God has created us for more than lives of constant anxiety.