

THE JESUS VIRTUES: SABBATH REST

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In his book entitled, Do I Stay Christian, Brian McLaren writes, “Jesus was the kind of extraordinary person who inspired people so profoundly that they told stories about him. He inspired people to experience something meaningful which felt like liberation, like love, like healing and reconciliation, like good news of great joy for all creation.”

For the six weeks of Lent, we are focusing in on Jesus - noticing how he lived, how he treated people, the stories he told, the message of his teachings, the character traits and values he embodied.

We begin with a look at one of the consistent habits of Jesus’ life. This habit is also a spiritual practice, because it drew him closer to God, it helped him become the person he was created to be, it equipped him to face the challenges of his life with strength and courage. Here are three brief passages all from the gospel of Luke, from chapters 4, 5 and 6 -

When daybreak arrived, Jesus went to a deserted place. The crowds were looking for him. When they found him, they tried to keep him from leaving them.

But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places for prayer.

During that time, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night long. At daybreak, he called together his disciples. He chose twelve of them whom he called apostles...

Jesus consistently took time for himself. He consistently left the crowds, sometimes rowing a boat out onto the lake, sometimes climbing a mountain, sometimes

walking into the desert. He made time in his life for quiet, for solitude, for listening, for meditation, for prayer. Jesus rested.

These are not the only examples of Jesus engaging in this spiritual practice. Read through any of the gospels and you will see this pattern in his life. He's with people, teaching, preaching, healing, leading and then he needs to be by himself, to center himself again, to recharge his spiritual battery. Then he returns, and he is fully present with the people who need him. He gives his all, he gives his best, and then he's back out in nature again, by himself again. Praying and resting again.

What we don't see in the gospels is what Jesus said "no" to. Which people didn't get to hear him speak? Which people didn't benefit from his healing touch? There would always be one more sermon to preach, one more life to transform. If he had waited until there was nothing left on his agenda, until his to-do list had every single item checked off, he never would have rested. And surely his ministry would have been less effective. Because Jesus had a human body and human limitations, like we do.

This Anne Lamott quote says it well: "Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes - including you."

And the Christian writer Jim Smith puts it this way, "The number one enemy of Christian spiritual formation today is exhaustion."

The need for rest is not a new development. After all, God found it necessary to include this instruction as one of the ten commandments: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work." And the word, sabbath, here means "stop." Stop your activities. Rest.

Throughout most of human history, men and women have been aided in their need for rest by the fact that there was light by which to work only for a portion of each day. As civilization “progressed,” humans found ways of producing light to see in the darkness, but those sources of light were usually expensive and often scarce. Faced with the reality of no light by which to work, humans slept during the darkness.

Obviously that scenario has changed. What was once a reliable source of rhythm for the cycle of work and rest is now gone. In fact, true darkness is now hard to come by, and - of course - our society is now built upon many people working overnight and at different shifts. Yet the way the human body functions has not changed much in the years since God commanded people to observe a day of rest. The amount of time set aside for sleep has shrunk, but the need for it has not.

Rest is important for us physically and spiritually. Practicing the discipline of rest is an act of trust: a statement of confidence in God.

Why do we resist resting? One person posits this theory: “We get seduced and sucked into constant activity, and a lot of it is good, worthy, important activity, but it obliterates space for rest. We cannot hear the Spirit or flourish as people if we don’t rest.”

It’s echoes of the Protestant work ethic, sometimes, telling us that work is good and rest is bad. If we’re resting, we’re lazy, right? Was Jesus lazy? Or it’s echoes of the capitalist ethic that has seeped into every part of our lives, telling us that productivity is the greatest good and that even our hobbies should be monetized and our passions should become side hustles.

The earth itself teaches us to rest. Trees go into rest in the wintertime and come back alive and vital and pulsating with life in the spring.

Rest is part of what God intends for creation. We can hear God more easily when we feel that we're at rest.

What is restful for you? See if this scenario seems at all familiar. You're so tired at the end of the day that you can't imagine doing anything except vegging in front of the TV, on the couch or the recliner, with easy access to a beverage, your phone and the remote control. I've done it, many times; we all do it. Let's call it relaxing, and it's part of life. But it's not the same as rest. Compare how you feel after vegging with how you feel in this alternative scenario. You take a detour one day while driving on Lake Road, you pull into a park, and you sit on a bench overlooking the lake. You feel the fresh air, you smell the water, you hear the birds. You simply sit. You're not doing anything. You're being. Those small rest breaks are renewing.

Or you take five minutes in the middle of the day to put on a favorite song. You listen, you might close your eyes, you might hit repeat and listen again. You feel more alive.

Some people find this kind of restfulness in walking, especially a quiet, intentional walk. Some people find it in meditation. This short video describes rest as a spiritual practice: <https://www.pepperdine.edu/practicing-faith/resting/>

I am going to have you practice a one-minute meditation rest right now. I'll guide you through it using the words of Psalm 46, verse 10. I invite you to sit comfortably. Gently close your eyes. "Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be."

If you'd like to probe a little deeper into the concept of Sabbath, a good book is Sabbath, by Wayne Muller. He describes the importance of sabbath rest this way: "A successful life has become a violent enterprise. We make war on our own bodies, pushing them beyond their limits; war on our children, because we cannot find enough time to be with them; war on our spirits because we are too preoccupied to listen to the quiet voices that seek to nourish and refresh us."

Even Jesus rested.

If you are not resting enough, it's worth asking yourself, "why". Do you feel you don't deserve it? I invite you to hear the voice of Jesus saying, "You deserve to rest. You are my follower - and I rested. And besides, God commanded it!"

Do you justify it by saying, "I'm resting now, so that I will be more productive later?" I invite you to consider that rest is worthy in itself, not so that it leads to more hustle later.

Some people resist rest, because we know that many people do not have the privilege of resting. People who are struggling for survival, people working two and three jobs...they don't have the luxury to even think about resting. One of the most interesting books I've seen on this topic recently is this one: Rest Is Resistance, by Tricia Hersey. She calls herself "the nap minister" and she writes from her perspective as a black woman. She says that rest is countercultural, especially for her as a descendant of slaves. Claiming the power to rest is a way of saying to the world, "No, you cannot use our bodies for your profit. No, you cannot tell us when we can sleep and when we cannot. Rest is deeply liberating. The more rested we are, the better able we are to dream and imagine a better world."

