

Work Hard, Play Hard, Rest Easy

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Let's play a game this morning. You fill in the blank, okay? A stitch in time

_____ (saves nine). A fool and his money are _____ (soon parted). Work hard, _____ (play hard).

Working Hard has been an American motto from the beginning. The Protestant work ethic got its start in Europe, but it took root in colonial America. The early settlers had to work hard just to survive. John Wesley was one of the ringleaders. Remember his motto? "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." And how do you do that? Well obviously, you work all you can. I'm not opposed to working hard, as long as we remember to take breaks. But somewhere along the line, we all got confused. Our culture has convinced itself that the opposite of Work Hard is Play Hard.

Dr. Richard A. Swenson, graduate of the UW medical school and author of *The Overload Syndrome*, has studied this pillar of American culture. He writes, "We spend 10 percent more than we have - and it no longer matters if one is talking about time, energy or money. We work hard, play hard and crash hard."

Play is supposed to be a break from work. But when do we get a break from going at full throttle, all the time? I think it's important for us to recognize that the opposite of Work Hard is not Play Hard. It's not even Nap Hard, as one website suggests. If work and play and even napping are all hard, we need a break that's easy. Wouldn't you like to have one day, just one day, where you get an honest-to-goodness break? Just one easy day?

That's because the opposite of Work Hard is Rest Easy. And if we turn that into the language of God, the opposite of Work Hard is Sabbath. If work and play are hard, Sabbath is supposed to be easy. But centuries of human life and interpretation have gotten in the way, and for some reason, we struggle with the concept of Sabbath.

But this is not the first generation to make Sabbath more complicated than it has to be. Look at the Pharisees in our Scripture reading this morning. Their motto? Work Hard, then Don't Work at All. When they looked back to the old laws from Moses, they tried to make Sabbath easy by making it a black-and-white situation. Every possible human activity was broken up into two categories: 'work' and 'not-work.' And boy, you better not get caught working on the Sabbath.

But then Jesus shows up, and he cures a woman. Apparently, healing fell into the 'work' category. The Pharisees are up in arms. First of all, no one gets away with breaking Sabbath if they're around. Second, this Jesus guy was supposed to be a great teacher. He's a role model, so they have to be sure to stop his public rule breaking with a public scolding.

Did you catch what Jesus tells the Pharisees next? He calls them hypocrites, because their oversimplified categories just don't fit with the complexities of life. He demonstrates to them that even they don't keep their own rules. Jesus says, "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" In essence he tells

them, “You can’t see it, but you’re breaking your own rules. Somehow, you innately know that compassion overrules human law. You know enough to offer that compassion to your livestock. Why on earth will you deny that compassion to this woman who has been suffering for so long?”

This one gospel story gives us two angles on Sabbath. First, it reminds us of the rules and guides that Moses set forth. Second, it gives us Jesus’ thoughts on how we should interpret those rules. But here we sit, caught between the two, far removed in the 21st century, trying to figure Sabbath out for ourselves. What in the world are we supposed to do?

Well, it’s pretty clear in the Scriptures that we should be observing Sabbath. It’s on the Top-10 list after all. Remember how it appears in the Ten Commandments? *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.* That sounds pretty familiar. But how about these other Scriptures:

You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people.
(Exodus 31:14)

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy sabbath of solemn rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. (Exodus 35:2)

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 58:13)

This Sabbath stuff is pretty serious. And it’s pretty clear. Alright, let’s get down to brass tacks. If we’re going to honor this commandment, what does that really mean? How do we observe the sabbath? What can we do? What can’t we do? Well, to answer that, we have to get at the primary purpose for Sabbath.

What did I say a moment ago? What’s the opposite of Work Hard? That’s right, Rest Easy. Which is really redundant when you think about it. Rest is supposed to be easy. We know

how to take a break physically and mentally. We sleep in or veg out. We set down the New York Times Crossword puzzle in favor of a simple TV show.

We know how to give our bodies and brains a break. But what about your soul? How do you give yourself a rest spiritually? We all need that rest, because our souls are working hard all week. We come to church on Sunday, we learn about how to live and be a good Christian... But then we have to go back to our regular lives. Being a Christian isn't easy. We're working hard all the time, facing temptation and trying to make the right choices. So on Sabbath, we're supposed to make it easy for our souls. In other words, we have to surround ourselves with an environment that is far-removed from our usual setting of temptation. We can't get the whole world to stop sinning and making bad choices one day a week. But like the saying goes, "You can't stop birds from flying overhead, but you don't have to let them nest in your hair."

So Sabbath is about voluntarily stepping away from the things of the world. And when we get down to particulars, that means different things for us today than it meant for Moses or for Jesus, because we have different choices. When Moses was first sharing the Sabbath laws with the Israelites, one law said that you weren't supposed to do any cooking on Sabbath. You had to work hard the day before to make enough food for two days. But can you imagine for a moment how much effort it took then to make meals? Even a simple loaf of bread, made of flour and oil, required grinding the wheat and pressing the olives. And the only ones doing the cooking were women. Cooking was their full-time job, and Sabbath was their only chance to get a break. But today, five minutes of prep time and a microwave can yield a well-balanced meal.

Of course, we have other choices too. What about TV? Can I watch TV on the Sabbath? Or how about soccer. Can I play in a soccer tournament? Can I go to the mall? Can I make a big family dinner? Can I wash the car? Jesus tells us not to worry so much about the particulars. The

Pharisees were consumed by the details – and that’s what got them into so much trouble. Jesus had to remind them that even they knew, deep down inside, that compassion overruled the law. We too know, deep down inside, what helps us spend a day with God at the forefront of our minds and what distracts us.

But we have to get started. It’s one of the great paradoxes of our faith, that it’s only by celebrating the Sabbath that we’ll really learn how to celebrate the Sabbath. What a great opportunity we have to make this the weekend we get started. Tomorrow’s Labor Day, which as the last day of summer, is usually also National Play-As-Hard-As-You-Can Day. But between all the working hard of this week and the playing hard of tomorrow, let’s set aside the rest of today to Rest Easy. Go home and celebrate Sabbath. Amen and Amen.