

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on

Work and Faith

Hard Work

D. J. Reed

SERMON NOTES

***The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work***

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.*

*Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

A Note from the Author

I'm embarrassed to admit this, but my lawn has gone several weeks without a good mowing. It hasn't been edged or weed-whacked, and the hedges haven't been pruned. The grass looks long and listless, and a carpet of leaves has been growing.

Now, I'd like to say that the lack of attention is completely because of a busy schedule. But if I were truly honest with myself, I would have to admit that my grass is neglected because the work is hard. I know that a day of working in the yard is a day ending with a back ache, sore hamstrings, and blisters. I know I will be thirsty, hot, sticky, and powdered with dirt blown from my leaf blower. I know that even if I devote hours to this endeavor, in a matter of days, the grass will grow back and the leaves will litter the turf once again. Yard work is hard, and so I procrastinate and delay the inevitable work.

Humans were made to work. We were created to till and care for the earth, to be stewards of the world God has created. Our anatomy and our ingenuity are both indicators of the fact that we are not meant to be a slothful, static people. No, we were made to be dynamic, to be resourceful, and to be co-creators with God.

But humanity has also been called to work. We are to be "fruitful and multiply." We are called to spread out "over the face of the earth." Abraham was called to leave his homeland and travel. Moses was called to free Israel. Jacob worked for his two wives. The prophets were called to speak. Joshua was called to lead, and Jesus called us to go into the world to make disciples. We were made to work, and we have been called to work.

But when work seems meaningless and frustrating, when work taxes and even damages our bodies, when work is hard; then life can become unbearable. We may be called and created to work, but it just doesn't seem as if we're equipped to withstand work. In the end, the daily grind and resistance from our jobs, tasks, and responsibilities wear us down, and, eventually, we all succumb to its pressure. Hard work is hard on humans.

The following sermons have been written with hard work in mind. It's written for those of us who yawn at the end of a difficult day, for those who groan with exhaustion, and those who weep in the car as they head home from another day at the office. It's written for those who see little progress, those who are addicted to progress, and for those who struggle to find hope in the midst of pressure. The first two sermons explore the theme of hard work in Genesis and the third sermon focuses on an account in the Gospel of Luke.

Sermon 1: The Curse of Hard Work (Gen. 3:8-21)

Sermon 2: Rest from Hard Work (Gen. 1:31-2:3)

Sermon 3: The Better Part of Hard Work (Luke 10:38-42)

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Sermon 2: “Rest from Hard Work”

Genesis 1:31-2:3 (NIV)

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Theological Point: God set an example for us by resting on the seventh day. The Sabbath is a gift to God’s creation and our remembrance is a gift to God. Recognizing and celebrating the Sabbath as a day of delight and “joyful repose,” is an act of trust in the power of God rather than our own.

Introduction: The Difficult Sabbath

- I. Introduction to the Sabbath**
- II. What the Sabbath is not**
- III. What the Sabbath is**
- IV. What does the Sabbath look like**

Conclusion: The Essence of The Sabbath

Introduction: The difficult Sabbath. *Why is the Sabbath so difficult to observe, remember or enjoy? Why is it so hard for us to rest from our hard work? What does a “Good Sabbath” look like? These are the central questions that drive the following sermon. An opening illustration which highlights our misconceptions of rest could help listeners wrestle with these questions.*

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a missions conference in the East African country of Uganda. And during our lunch break, I sat down with a couple of the Ugandan pastors and enjoyed a lively conversation with them. We talked about cultural differences, festivals, and family dynamics. And then I asked, “Where does the average Ugandan go on vacation?” One of the guys, whose name was Ronnie, said, “Ha! That’s a question for a rich man.” Typical Ugandans, you see, don’t go on a vacation. They don’t have time for it, and they can’t afford it. Leisure, recreation, vacations, even rest—those, according to Ronnie, are things the wealthy enjoy.

I. Introduction to The Sabbath. *Because the idea of observing a Sabbath is misunderstood, some basic education regarding this day of rest would be helpful. I draw some attention to the controversy surrounding the observance of the Sabbath and also point out what the Sabbath has become.*

In the text for today, we read about God taking a well-deserved vacation from creation. This would later become the foundation for the fourth commandment which said that everyone should “... remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” Remember this day of rest, the law said, and set it apart from all other days. It is to be, as Dan Allender puts it, “The Queen of all days” when we are supposed to put everything aside, take a deep breath (breathe in and breathe out), and rest.

If you’re a Christian, the Sabbath is Sunday, the day you go to church, and if you’re Jewish or a Jehovah’s Witness, Saturday is the true Sabbath day. The way we observe the Sabbath has been the subject of ongoing debates for some time now. Christians, Jewish people and Jehovah’s Witnesses can all agree that you’re technically not supposed to do work on these days, but what does that really mean?

Some lean toward the legalistic side, forbidding themselves to participate in any strenuous play, work or travel. Some see it as more of a “change of pace” day, a day off or a day to enjoy yourself. Still, there are others who see it as a relic of the past, an expectation that’s out of touch with the busy schedules and demands of the 21st century. And so the Sabbath has become a “catch up” day, a football day, a family day, a golf day. This is what we think about when we think of the Sabbath. But what is it really?

II. What the Sabbath is not. *At this point, I have chosen to broaden the discussion of the Sabbath by pointing out what it is not. I chose to do this by “musing out loud,” giving voice to my thoughts and a forum for my questions (“Maybe the Sabbath is like...”).*

Well, what we know for sure is that it is supposed to be a day when people imitate the posture of God: a posture of rest. But for so many of us, this feels like a luxury we just can’t afford. There is so much to do, and so many demands that need to be met. In fact, if I were to ask how some of you observe the Sabbath, some (if not most) of us might respond to this question like my friend Ronnie. “Sabbath? Rest? Ha! That’s a question for a rich man. God can maybe afford to rest, but I can’t.” God has cattle on a thousand hills. God has mansions with many rooms, and God has streets of gold. There is nothing more powerful than God, no threat to God’s existence, and no competitor to put God out of business. Of course, God can

set aside one whole day for a restful Sabbath ... God can afford to take a day off. But not us. Not us hard-working people who have to put food on the table, meet the demands of customers, and work hard to impress our supervisors. We can't afford to rest. Rest is something that can be enjoyed by the wealthy, by brainiacs, CEOs, outsourcers, delegators and Amway salespeople who have somehow managed to whittle their work week down from 45 hours to 4 hours. Maybe someday we'll reach that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow called "Sabbath," but right now there's work to be done.

Maybe the Sabbath is only for the wealthy. Maybe it's for the people who can afford it and for those who have the luxury of having a job that allows them to take a day off. But Scripture doesn't teach this. The Fourth Commandment makes no qualifications—it seems that Sabbath observance is for everyone. And apparently our culture is beginning to think this Sabbath thing is a pretty cool thing.

Pick up any magazine in the check-out line, open any self-help bestseller, and you'll find an article or chapter urging readers to treat themselves to a "Sabbath." Take a long bubble bath, or treat yourself to an afternoon of shopping at the mall, an evening working on a hobby. "You work hard all week," our culture points out, "and you deserve a little time, a little something for yourself." Sabbath, our culture says, is a reward you can give yourself for working so hard.

Maybe that's what a Sabbath is: a reward at the end of a hard week of work; a day to indulge yourself and enjoy the finer things of life. Maybe that's what the Sabbath is. Isn't that what God did? He rested after a hard six days of creative work.

But feeling good isn't the only advantage of taking a Sabbath, according to our culture. Google is a corporation that encourages its employees to take one afternoon to work on a project that has nothing to do with their job description. And the result has been a flowering of creativity which has birthed some of the most popular Google tools (like Gmail). Colin Powell has said that when he is confounded by some particular dilemma, he will go to the garage and work on his car. And he says that after tinkering around for a while, the solution to his problem will become clear. This is what Lauren Winner calls "capitalism's justification for taking a Sabbath." We can't justify taking a Sabbath for the sake of rest, so we justify it on the basis that it unleashes a burst of creativity and productivity.

Maybe that's the reason we should remember the Sabbath, because we need a break so that we can be more efficient and more productive. Or maybe the Sabbath is for the "unambitious," the losers, the loafers, those who have no goals or drive.

One of the most revered records in professional baseball is held by a player named Cal Ripken Jr., who played 2,632 straight games without a break. He is appropriately called "The Iron Man," and he broke the record of Lou Gehrig, who held the record previously after playing 2,130 games without a break. He was called "The Iron Horse." Notice that there are no records for those who were the most consistent Sabbath-takers. There is no "Sabbath Man" or "Sabbath Horse." Instead, we laud the people who refuse to quit even for a day, people who gobble up overtime hours and are the first on the factory floor. We applaud perfect attendance and cheer for those who put their heads down and go the distance. Think about it. At a funeral, you never hear a eulogy in which the deceased is celebrated for taking a weekly Sabbath. But you do hear things like, "He never missed a day of work" or "He worked until his heart gave out." We like to rest, and we crave rest, but work makes us feel valuable, like we have something to contribute to society.

Andy Stanley, the pastor of North Point Community Church, said that when he's at work, it's easy for him to see how valuable he is. He is easily able to see how effective his work is and how successful he is. But he says that when he goes home, he's just "Dad." He's just a husband, and there's no way to measure how successful you are at being a parent or a spouse. This for some of us is a strong motivation for working hard. Work gives us meaning, purpose, a mission, and value.

Maybe that's it: The Sabbath is for those who don't have a purpose or a mission. It's for the lazy, listless ones.

III. What the Sabbath is. *In an effort to describe what the Sabbath is, I have selected a companion text to illustrate the fact that the Sabbath is a gift and to reveal that we often times have difficulty accepting this gift of rest. This illustrates that "Sabbath-ignoring" is a problem irrespective of time and location.*

It's hard to know what the Sabbath is. And so the observance of the Sabbath has become an optional commandment. And what tends to happen to optional things? They tend to be overshadowed, and in the case of the Sabbath, it gets filled up. The Sabbath may be a fun day, a relaxing day, and even a productive day—but it's not a day that is "holy"; it's not a day that's "set apart." It's not a very special day. We don't see it as a gift from God.

In the Old Testament, 2 Samuel chronicles the latter years of King David's reign. David was a war-time king who spent much of his reign outrunning enemies or pursuing them. Well, in Chapter 7, David finally gets his reward. Verse 1b says, "... the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him." In the Hebrew, that word rest is the same word that was used to describe what God did after six days of creation. The word is *menuha*, and it means, "joyous repose," absolute tranquility or delight. God, in essence, is giving David a Sabbath, the same thing God enjoyed after six days of creation. This is what David has been fighting for, working toward—peace, absolute tranquility. But David can't sit still in this state of "menuha." No sooner is this stated then we hear David musing about the condition of the Tabernacle and that God doesn't have a house. "Why doesn't God have a house?" he wonders. "I will build him a house, a great temple." But God replies to David's dreams in verse 5 by saying he doesn't need a house; God wants to give David rest.

“I will ... give you rest from all your enemies.” It’s almost like God is saying, “For the love of Mike! Take the gift I’m giving you and enjoy your rest! Stop working for me, stop working for yourself, your family, or for the future! Stop working and enjoy your rest!” And we see that King David is just like us, “rest-less” and unable to comprehend the Sabbath that was given to him as a gift from God.

Now, we should at least give David some credit here because he is directing his work toward God. And that’s a good point. I don’t know about you, but most of my Sabbaths are really about me and not about God. A soothing bath may be a treat for body and soul, and a game of golf goes a long way toward redirecting our minds. But these activities, while they are not evil, sinful or harmful, if we’re honest, we’ll acknowledge that they are really about us ... they’re not about God. We fail to see that while the Sabbath is a gift from God, it’s also a gift to God.

The fourth of the Ten Commandments reads, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.” And notice the text says, “The seventh day is a Sabbath TO THE LORD.” This isn’t a time of navel gazing and doing the things that make us happy. This is a time to love and cherish God. God took time to gaze and bond with his creation, and we in turn are called to take the time each week, on a blessed day called the Sabbath, to return that gaze and bond with God.

An additional metaphor and illustration is offered here to help the congregation understand the Sabbath is not only a gift from God, but a gift to God.

Dan Allender says that the Sabbath should be like those moments parents share with their babies when they have just come from their mother’s womb. Those of you who are parents know how it is. You sit there with this little person who had once been inside of you or your wife and is now “set apart” from you, and you bond with that baby. And that bonding isn’t always action-filled. Sure, there’s some kissing, nursing, hugging, soft words—but most of the time no words are needed at all to cement the bond between parents and children. Most of the time, the parent just stands there and looks at the baby—and time stands still. This is what God did on the seventh day. God sat back and gazed at creation and bonded deeply with what he had made. The hard work was over, now it was time to bond. This is a Sabbath. God looks at us, and we look at God.

I have a picture of me with my elder son that was taken a mere 24 hours after he was born. He’s swaddled tightly like a burrito with a knit cap on his pink, slightly jaundiced head. He had been laid on my thighs, balanced just so, with his head resting on my knees. But my eyes aren’t gazing at him. Instead they are fixed on a book (not a very good one, if I remember correctly) that I’m holding with my left hand, and my right hand is holding my chin. And I wonder if that picture of ignoring beauty is a reflection of how we observe the Sabbath. We have this blessed opportunity to give God a gift, to bond with our Creator, and our focus is elsewhere.

The byproduct and dare I say, benefit, of observing the Sabbath is greater trust in God. I tread carefully here. I don’t want readers to value the Sabbath because of what it does for us.

The Puritans used to say, “Good Sabbaths make Good Christians.” And my youth pastor used to tell me something that could easily be a companion to the Puritans’ phrase: “If the Devil can’t make you bad, he’ll make you busy.” I think they were both right. Think about it: Being busy all the time convinces us that if we don’t work, then our work will not be completed. Busyness convinces us that if we don’t make it happen, then it won’t happen. That is an arrogant, self-centered attitude—right where the Devil wants us to be. But a Sabbath forces us to stop and trust. A Sabbath forces us to put aside our own ambition and trust that our work is sufficient and that what needs to be completed will be finished in due time. In essence, Sabbaths force us to trust in God, the maker of the world, who owns the world. And when we can admit that this world is God’s, we begin to let go and take our work less seriously. We begin trusting less in our own efforts and instead trust in God’s. And when we reach that point, we will finally be able to rest. We will encounter that *menuha*: that “joyous repose” and delight that God felt after six days of work.

IV. What the Sabbath looks like. *I usually avoid offering practical suggestions, mostly because I prefer sermons that are more evocative and less prescriptive. One could choose to be more explicit or suggestive for those struggling to understand the Sabbath.*

So let’s just say that this fourth commandment really meant what it said. Let’s just say that the Sabbath is a gift from God to all of us, not just the wealthy or lazy. It’s not a reward for our diligent work, and it’s not for the purpose of keeping us fresh, efficient and creative, either. It’s a gift from God for the purpose of intentional, God-focused rest. So what does that look like? If we’ve got it all wrong, if most of us admit that it’s hard to celebrate a Sabbath, what changes should we make?

First of all, let me say that I know some of us are unable to take an entire Sabbath day of rest. There are soccer games, projects and weekend shifts that don’t consider the Sabbath to be very important. I understand that. So let’s make it a goal to start off small. Let’s strive for Sabbath moments. Moments when we stop, rest and enjoy. And then let’s slowly, intentionally and steadily begin adding more and more of these to our Sabbath days.

Maybe you’ll want to start off with a “crock pot feast” with friends. Maybe it’s slow dancing with someone you love. Maybe it’s a walk with no destination in mind. Maybe it’s tickling the ivories on your piano with no sheet music. Sit in front of a

fireplace for a while, with no book, no music and no television to accompany you. Doodle on a piece of paper, with no plan. Play a game of catch. Take a nap, and let your body wake you instead of the alarm. Pray. Write in a journal. Write a note of encouragement. Play with your kids. Play with your spouse. Play with no concern for who wins or who loses. Do something that has a slower pace and has no other purpose but to delight and enjoy.

Conclusion: The essence of The Sabbath. *I conclude with a more evocative description of a Good Sabbath. Broaden the scope to allow the listeners some space to reflect and ponder about the way they observe the Sabbath.*

But you see what I'm doing? I'm giving you things to do, when the Sabbath is all about rest! Maybe I should tell you what a Sabbath is like. Maybe I should help you understand its essence. Sabbath is like Sunday dinner at my in-laws' house in Pennsylvania. After a morning worship service, they sit around a table and eat a hearty meal. And after it's finished, the plates are cleared, the adults push back and pat their bellies, they fold their arms across their chests, and they watch the children play on the floor. Sometimes they nap, sometimes they say words, but mostly they just watch. That's a good Sabbath moment. They stop, the farm chores can wait until evening, and the projects can wait till tomorrow. Right now, it's time to rest and enjoy their little children just like God enjoyed his "creation."

Maybe that's what a Sabbath is. Simply stopping, abiding in the presence of God, blessing those you love, relaxing and enjoying. It's simply that. But it's a lot harder than it looks.

Sermon 3 "The Better Part of Work"

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Theological Point: The account of Mary and Martha complements Christ's teachings of service and loving our neighbor while also reminding us to offer full attention when offering hospitality.

Introduction: Insulting the Dinner Host

- I. **Mary and Martha: a tension in the life of a believer**
- II. **Mary and Martha: a lesson in hospitality**
- III. **Mary's gift of attention**

Conclusion: Allowing our duties to direct us towards God

Introduction: Insulting the Dinner Host. *Jesus' lack of deference to his host is striking. Drawing attention to this can provide fresh insight on a well-known text.*

One of the many challenges of raising a preschooler is the task of training our son to embrace table manners. We gently, and sometimes not so gently, encourage Danny to keep his napkin on his lap, to stop blowing bubbles in his milk, and to eat his broccoli with a fork. And I'm happy to report that we've made some progress. The boy actually asks to be excused, he takes his semi-clean plates into the kitchen and sets them on the counter, and he's pretty good at eating with his mouth closed. But one discipline which has been difficult to establish is the discipline of being courteous to the dinner host. When we go to someone else's house for dinner, we just can't seem to keep him from saying, "That's yucky," or "I don't like tomatoes." Efforts are being made, but taming our son's dinner-table tongue continues to be a challenge. And apparently, saying polite things to the dinner host was a discipline that even Jesus struggled to learn.

During one particular meal, he criticized the host because of the guest list. He told him not to invite friends or family members to his dinner parties, but to invite the poor, the crippled, and the lame. Another time, he criticized the host for not giving him a kiss of greeting, water for his feet or oil for his head. He might as well have said the lamb is overcooked or the greeting he received at the door wasn't cheerful enough. Would you want your four-year-old complaining like that? And in the passage for today, Jesus gives us yet another example of his penchant for offending those who graciously invite him to their table.