

Sabbath and Mission: Why the First Big Thing is Still the Next Big Thing

John Chandler
Verge LA 2009

I begin today by lighting this candle. In a traditional Jewish household, Sabbath began with the lighting of a candle. This candle represented that a sacred day had begun. And it is Sabbath that I want to talk with you about today -- the relationship between Sabbath and mission.

JR's urge for all of this in our preparation was to bring what we think is the next Big Idea in mission. I would say that God's first big idea for humanity is still the next big idea. And that first big idea was Sabbath. I won't attempt to offer a timeline of the sixth day of creation, but Genesis 1 tells us that animals were created and then humans were created after them. And that evening began Sabbath. The first full day, and God's first big idea, for humanity was the Sabbath.

This is emphasized to us again as God begins a covenant relationship with the people of Israel. The command that they take the seventh day as a day of rest is the first notion of a weekend in all of recorded history. Throughout God's relationship with the people of Israel, we find reminders and commandments to take a day of Sabbath -- a day of rest to be set aside for God.

Out of the Ten Commandments, it is Sabbath that we take the most lightly today. But as we talk about Mission this weekend, Sabbath should be primary for the church's presence in the world today.

Before we address Sabbath further, let me take a few brief moments to define mission. This will be critical for the development of how Sabbath fits with Mission. The mission of God's people, the mission of the church, is the ongoing announcement and demonstration of the Kingdom of God. David Bosch, one of the most important thinkers about mission in recent decades, states that mission is "alerting people to the universal reign of God."

To put this more tangibly, the mission of the church looks like the ministry of Jesus. The things that Jesus did are the things the church should still do. We share the Gospel with others to announce the Kingdom of God. We care about the poor or speak on behalf of those in the margins to demonstrate the Kingdom of God.

Part of the appeal of talking about Sabbath this weekend is the inherent tension that exists in our minds between Sabbath and Mission, as if they are complementary opposites. We might consider that mission is what we go out and do, and Sabbath is a time to withdraw, re-fuel and prepare ourselves to go out in mission again. And I want to acknowledge this tension, and recognize that it is true. The church does need to gather for many reasons, certainly encouragement and equipping for mission are among those. But this alone is not a complete understanding of what Sabbath is to be.

But what should a complete understanding of Sabbath look like?

There is a long held Jewish tradition that if Sabbath were ever to be practiced perfectly, then the Messiah would come. Knowing that, you can understand why the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day were so concerned about his improprieties on the Sabbath. Jesus' actions did not fit within their many boundaries of what was appropriate Sabbath behavior.

The 20th century rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his rich little book on Sabbath goes to great lengths to describe Sabbath as a preview of eternity. He also turns that around to say that eternity is perpetual Sabbath. Stanley Grenz goes so far as to say that "the seventh day of creation has yet to happen. We are to conclude from the creation narrative, therefore, that we are living in the sixth day, awaiting the dawn of the day of perfect shalom, the completion of God's creative activity." As we practice Sabbath, we offer a coming attraction of God's Kingdom if it were fully present.

Genesis 2:1 describes how the heaven and earth were completed on the sixth day. But, then Genesis 2:2 states that God finished his work on the seventh day, and then rested. Jewish rabbis make a great deal of this distinction, suggesting that God had one more creation for the seventh day -- *menuha*. This word that we commonly translate as rest suggests more. It is delight, enjoyment, fulfillment. The seventh day was not an act only of ceasing to labor, but a day to take in and enjoy what had been made.

Sabbath is a topic I take personally as my family has spent the last few years trying to practice Sabbath. Even after that time, I still consider myself a much better ponderer than practitioner of Sabbath. We don't have Sabbath figured out...far from it, but we learn week by week the richness that it offers lives.

But I am passionate about Sabbath for a far greater reason -- **it is the most overlooked act of mission available to the church today.** If mission is the ongoing announcement and demonstration of the Kingdom of God, what better way to do that than to live one day a week as if the Kingdom of God were fully realized? Sabbath is an invitation not to withdraw, but to delight, to enjoy, to live abundantly. What if our churches, large or small, were able to offer, and invite others, to this kind of visible preview of what God's kingdom looks like?

Sabbath might be the most prophetic role of the church in the world today. In recent decades, we have seen the church in North America join in movements happening in culture at large. In a world of instant communication around the world, issues of justice and poverty are more available to us than ever before, and the church has been part of a greater movement. We are also beginning to see the church acknowledge the movement toward caring for our environment that with a renewed theology of stewarding creation.

These are both valuable and the church should be part of movements toward justice and creation care, even if we are often joining in work that those outside the church have already begun. But I am convinced that Sabbath offers a way of living that our North America culture needs to see. It is an opportunity for the church to be salt and light. It is an occasion for the church to reflect how humanity looks when we live as God intended.

I don't need to quote statistics about how overworked we are, about burnout and depression. Most of us have firsthand accounts of all of this. A few decades ago, a physician named Larry Dossey coined the term "time-sickness" to describe our growing speed culture...our need to race against our perception of the dwindling resource of time. Slow movements are starting to spring up -- slow food, slow sex, and in Europe, there are even slow cities. But these movements are still marginal, or good intentions, for many.

Our frenetic culture is primed for an invitation to Sabbath. We all hunger to see what a community that truly delights and enjoys the goodness of life might look like. But it is not only a hunger waiting to be filled today, but a demonstration and anticipation of what God has in store for us in a fully realized kingdom.

With the few minutes that remain, I want to explore what Sabbath might look like. I am not so interested in defining specific guidelines as I am suggesting areas where we need to begin to ask hard questions. I have pastored in a megachurch, a small church plant, and now a start-up church that meets in our home as we shape a core community. I know that in everyone one of these contexts, even the questions to be asked about Sabbath would be very different. My hope is that, in the midst of the 19 other talks you will hear, I can leave you with your own sense of longing to figure out what Sabbath might look like where you are.

Just as Sabbath began with a celebration of God's very good creation, so it should still. This candle represents more than the beginning of Sabbath. It's light is symbolic of the very act of creation that God began by speaking light into existence. The goodness of God and creation must continue to be central to the celebration of Sabbath.

Yes, humanity is broken, and we don't have to take many steps beyond these walls or into our own souls to see that. Things are not as God intended them to be. On Sabbath we are reminded not only of what God intended, but of God's redemptive movement into this brokenness to bring about in the age to come.

This means that Sabbath is centered around the enjoyment of creation. It is a day of enjoying rain, sunshine, or feasting on the fruits of both. It is a day of enjoying relationship with others that bear the fractured but still beautiful image of God.

And this leads me to my second exploration -- Sabbath is to be communal. God's creation was not 'very good' until humanity had entered the picture, and we cannot enjoy the fullness of what was created and what is yet to come by ourselves. God stressed the importance of a communal celebration in Deuteronomy 5, noting that the Sabbath was to be for all, even the servants. Norman Wirzba expands on this, pointing out that "the rest of one person should not be at the expense of another's exhaustion or toil."

This leaves us with important questions to ask about our church practices. How can Sabbath be a communal celebration of delight when so many are involved in making our churches services happen? Should our Sunday services be considered something other than Sabbath? If so, what does a communal celebration of Sabbath look like? There are questions here that we need to work through in our communities.

One final exploration, though perhaps most significant. Sabbath is to be a reminder of who is God. The mission of the church is not something that we are responsible for, but that

we join God in. Sabbath is a day where mission is not the doing of God's work, but the being of God's people. There are emails and voice mails and tweets that will still be there tomorrow. Our ability to take a day of delight and rest is a reflection of how much we are able to trust and rely on God the other six days of the week.

I want to close by leaving you with an image of what Sabbath might be. And I hope I have left us with enough time that we can just sit and take it in.



This painting was painted by Diego Velázquez and hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. It is called Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus. In the background, we see a feast as Jesus sits with the travelers he met on the road to Emmaus telling them of the Kingdom. The maid pretends to go about her work, curious and straining to hear their conversation.

I pray that this might be the church...announcing and demonstrating the kingdom of God in the delight of the Sabbath while a curious world watches.