

Take a Time-out  
Deuteronomy 5:12-15  
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What was the preferred method of punishment for you as a child? When you acted up, when you got out of line, what form of justice did you face? For some it was a good ol' fashioned whooping. I was sent to the principal's office in first grade for acting up, and the principal gave me a spanking. Remember when that was fashionable? I braced myself as the principal prepared to smack me – she had a reputation as a real home-run hitter. On her first swing she only struck a glancing blow. I said without thinking, “Hey, that didn't hurt at all!” The second, third, and fourth swats hurt a lot more!

Maybe you suffered your share of groundings as a kid. A particularly effective one used against me was no dessert. Amy still uses that from time to time. A more recent popular method of discipline has become the timeout. Why is the timeout as discipline so effective? Here's the philosophy behind it. To make our children stop their unruly behavior, we take them away from the things they are doing and put them in an isolated place that forces them to slow down, be quiet, stop their activity, and reflect on how they are behaving. The goal is, of course, transformation, a change in behavior.

Now, what if I made this invitation to you? In order to help you put a halt to some of the unruliness in your life, I would like to invite you to take a break from your daily routine, to find a quiet spot in your house or neighborhood, to turn off all your electronic devices and means of communication, and simply slow down, be still, and reflect on the life God has given you to live. How does a short time away from the demands of life sound? Maybe WE need a timeout.

The Bible has a word for taking a timeout: it's called the Sabbath. A Sabbath is simply a block of time which is set aside for two primary purposes: rest and worship. The idea of Sabbath originated in the beginning of the Bible at creation, when, after six days of work, God rested to enjoy what God had made. Jews place a strong emphasis on their Sabbath, which lasts from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, so we think of it as an exclusively Jewish practice. That excuses Christians from focusing on the significance of Sabbath.

A few years ago my Sunday School class was studying the Ten Commandments. I started each class by seeing how many of the commandments we could name. For the first class, we didn't do so well. People were guessing things like “thou shalt use your turn signal” and “don't remove tags from mattresses.” I think those were in the top 20 but didn't make the top 10. We got better, but for the first four or five weeks, there was one commandment we would always forget. It was the commandment about honoring the Sabbath.

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy,” the Bible tells us. You realize that this commandment is placed alongside the commandment not to murder, not to steal, not to commit adultery? It's that important. In God's eyes, forgetting to rest is akin to murder. Remember the Sabbath. I bet it was worded that way because God knew we were going to forget. And God was right. We don't take timeouts anymore.

A whole day of doing nothing but rest and worship? In our world today, that sounds like crazy talk! While the Christian Sabbath day of Sunday used to be protected as sacred by Blue Laws and family traditions, our culture has encroached upon that time so egregiously that it's unrealistic to think we'll ever regain Sunday as a holy day on a societal level. We can place the blame wherever we want, but the fact is unless you work at Chick-Fila or Hobby Lobby, Sunday

sabbaths are gone, and so is any culturally protected time to take a break from the demands of our life.

And if we're willing to admit it, we like it that way. In a culture that measures a person's worth by their productivity, we pride ourselves on being busy. We prove our value by how much we do, so that our exhaustion becomes a trophy and the ability to get everything done a mark of our character. The demands on us seem too great and the time we have to meet them in seems too short. How often do we say, "I wish there was more time in the day"? Of course, if there was, we would just fill it with more to do.

Which makes taking a Sabbath seem strange and impractical. There's so much to be done! Who can afford to take a day off from being productive? Who has time to just stop and reflect? We see Sabbath-taking, not as holiness, but as laziness. We see resting as a sign of weakness, not a divine prerogative. We can't afford to take a day off; that would just make the other six that much more chaotic.

So we forget the Sabbath. It doesn't fit into our understanding of our on-the-go spirituality. We love the other six days, because that's where we can pursue spiritual progress and accomplishment. We are do-something Christians. But here's the truth, as I see it. We're not too busy, too important, or too needed to take a rest. We're too scared. Too scared to relinquish that bit of control we think we have. Too scared that the world can't go on without us, or even worse, that it can. Too scared that if we "waste" that time, we'll never get it back.

I remember feeling that vividly at the start of my first sabbatical six years ago. I went from being the busy pastor of a vibrant church on Sunday to having nothing to do on Monday. It was a shock to my system. No emails, no appointments on my calendar, no social media to check. I felt...useless. I remember making trips to Target and Kroger just to walk the aisles so I could hopefully run into a church member. "You remember me, right? You still need me, don't you?" FOMO, the fear of missing out, is real. I took me a good two weeks to settle into my time of sabbath.

Our society feeds into our forgetting to slow down. Author Wayne Muller calls it the theology of progress. This belief says that everything is getting incrementally better, which means today is not as good a day as tomorrow. And if we can just get to tomorrow, things will be better. Until we get to tomorrow and realize things aren't quite as good as they will be the next day. We have to keep making progress, and we can't do that if we stop. So we don't stop, because the good life, the finish line, the end of our work, is just one day away.

Or one purchase away. Our culture sells us happiness, but in reality it is designed to produce suffering. We see commercials that imply that if we buy this product, we'll be happy. But the people in the commercials aren't happy because they own the product. We see them taking a drive in their new car or smelling their clean sheets or enjoying a cup of coffee. We're told that if we buy these products, we'll be happy, too. But their happiness doesn't come from owning the product. It comes from the fact they have stopped to enjoy that new car or that cup of coffee. They're happy because they've stopped. And you can't buy stopped. You simply have to stop.

Stopping is built into the rhythm of life. Everything must rest in order to produce. Everything must lie fallow in order to be fruitful. Our land, our bodies, were created with this natural cycle of rest and activity. Did you ever wonder why God raised Jesus on the third day? If God had the power to bring Jesus back from the dead, why not do it on the first day, or the second day? Muller said it's because everything must rest. Maybe Jesus needed to rest before his

resurrection. Maybe God needed to rest after watching his son crucified. Everything must rest. You can only do so much before you need to rest.

And yet, we feel like if we can just do a little more – not a little less – then we can make life better. There's a Chinese proverb that says, "Who is it that can make the muddy water clear? But if allowed to remain still, it will gradually become clear by itself." How many of us thrust our hands into the muddy waters of our lives, thinking that if we can just move them a little faster, the water will clear up and we will see. But there's only one way to find that kind of clarity.

Or think of it this way. When we inhale, we don't take in enough air to last us a week, or a day, or an hour. We take in enough breath to last us until our next breath. At some point, we must exhale. When God made this world, the first six days were this creative inhale, and the seventh day – the Sabbath – was God's exhale. You can't live your life only inhaling; you'll suffocate. You have to exhale.

Starting a week from tomorrow, I'll be exhaling for three months after six years of inhaling. My second sabbatical – the word comes from "Sabbath" – will be a time of resting, of stopping, of exhaling, of stepping away from the church to do a much different kind of work as a student. I'm so thankful that this church provides me this opportunity for an extended Sabbath, and I plan on honoring it and keeping it holy. After six more years of ministry, weighed down by a global pandemic and unending staff changes, the waters have gotten pretty muddy, so I'm ready to be still and let things become clear again. Believe me, I don't want to stop; I love what I do! But it's time. So if you see me in Target, please say Hi but don't talk to me about the church.

The fact of the matter is that the Sabbath is not going to elbow its way into our lives. We have to make room for it. Maybe taking a whole day isn't realistic. I know one family that takes a Sabbath from sports and activities for one season a year, and uses that time to be together as a family. Maybe there are Sabbath moments to be found in each day, time to turn off the TV or computer, time for rest, reflection, and worship. Whatever works for you, find time to exhale. It's not just a nice break; it's a commandment from God.

I will be praying for you these next three months. My prayer for you is that you find time in your lives to be still, to do nothing, to let the waters clear. I know we all have demands placed upon us by kids, jobs, and family. This gift of life is from God, and life is not supposed to make us tired. It's supposed to make us joyful. And we'll miss that joy if we pass it by at 70 mph. You can't buy stopped. You simply have to stop. Maybe it's time to take a time-out.