

NOVEMBER 2022

Practice of the Month

## SABBATH

"Sabbath is not dependent upon our readiness to stop. We do not stop when we are finished. We do not stop when we complete our phone calls, finish our project, get through this stack of messages, or get out this report that is due tomorrow. We stop because it is time to stop."

Wayne Muller

# WHAT IS A SABBATH?

Sabbath is an ancient practice of abstinence from work which is meant to help us experience rest. While the origin of the Sabbath comes from Genesis 2, it first became a practice in ancient Israel in response to the giving of the law in Exodus 20. Jewish Sabbath began in the evening when the family set aside all the to-dos of the work week. As the lamps were lit, everyone settled into the evening calm of Shabbat— a Hebrew word meaning ‘to stop’. Candles, prayers, blessings, food— it all represented delight and refreshment in the presence of God and each other. When bedtime came, the family rested in God’s covenant protection and continued to rest until sunset the following day.

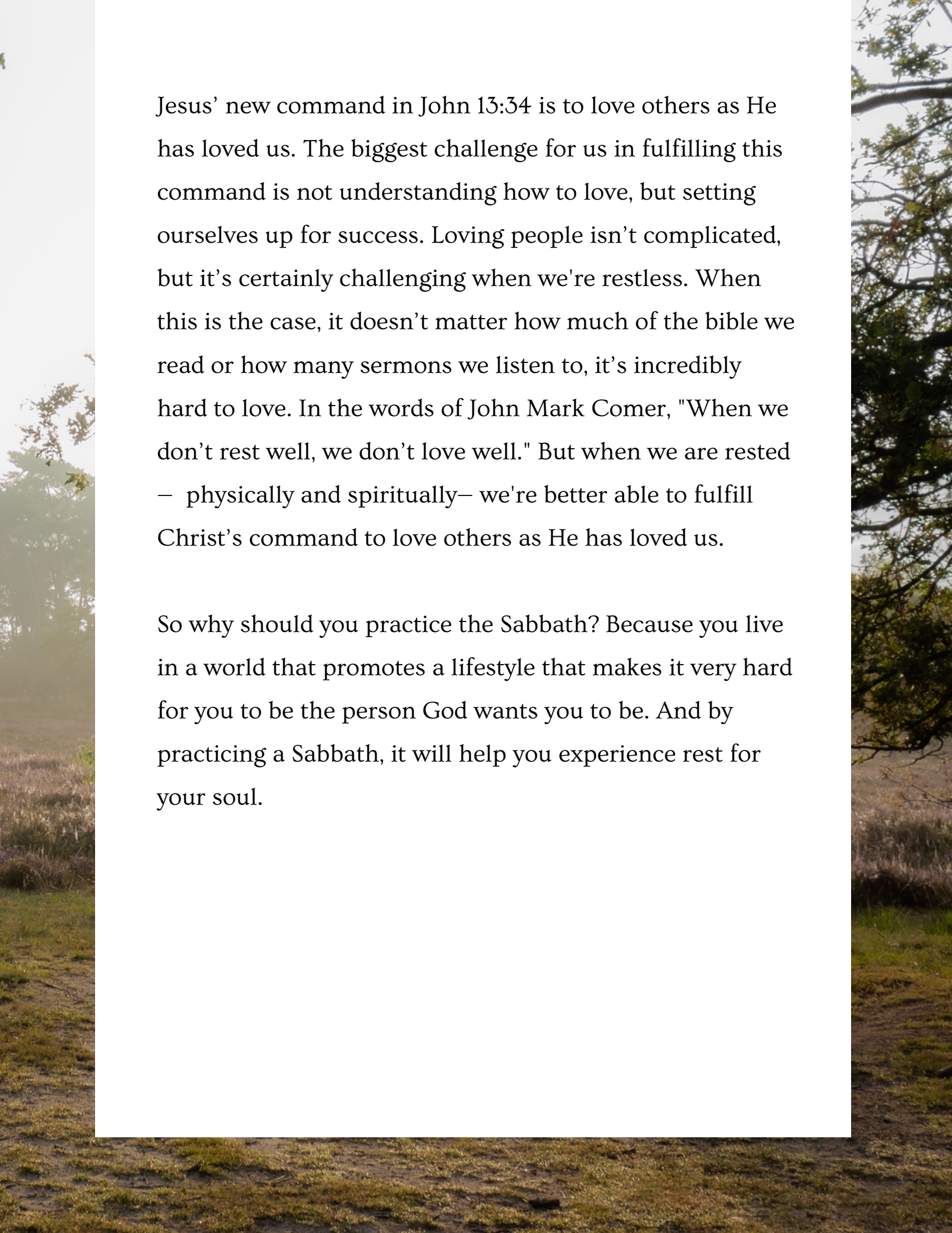
While this practice began as a Jewish custom, it became a pillar practice in the life of the early church because they too felt the need to rest from their work and understood that the only place to find that rest, was in the presence of God himself.

As Christians, we are citizens of another kingdom— a kingdom not ruled by the clock, a to-do list, or the tyranny of the urgent. God’s sabbath reality calls us to trust that the creator can manage all that concerns us in this world as we settle into his rest.

# WHY PRACTICE IT?

While the Sabbath certainly isn't as well practiced today as it has been in previous generations of the church, the need for us to practice it may actually surpass that of any other generation. Our world lives in a chronic state of restlessness. People are constantly trying to fill a God-shaped void in their life with money, sex, power, influence, status, or possessions. Any life devoted to such endeavors is typically characterized by hurry, busyness, overload, stress, materialism and careerism, all of which lead to restlessness. According to A.J. Swoboda—an American pastor, professor and writer— “we have become perhaps the most emotionally exhausted, psychologically overworked, spiritually malnourished people in history.”

As those living in this cultural environment, if we aren't intentional about seeking rest, then we'll inevitably get caught up in the restlessness of the world. And while this may seem unrelated to our life of apprenticeship to Jesus, it's actually intimately connected to it, because restlessness inhibits our ability to live a life like Jesus.



Jesus' new command in John 13:34 is to love others as He has loved us. The biggest challenge for us in fulfilling this command is not understanding how to love, but setting ourselves up for success. Loving people isn't complicated, but it's certainly challenging when we're restless. When this is the case, it doesn't matter how much of the bible we read or how many sermons we listen to, it's incredibly hard to love. In the words of John Mark Comer, "When we don't rest well, we don't love well." But when we are rested – physically and spiritually– we're better able to fulfill Christ's command to love others as He has loved us.

So why should you practice the Sabbath? Because you live in a world that promotes a lifestyle that makes it very hard for you to be the person God wants you to be. And by practicing a Sabbath, it will help you experience rest for your soul.

# WHAT DOES JESUS SAY ABOUT IT?

In Mark 2:27, the Pharisees criticize Jesus for doing what was unlawful for him to do on the sabbath, and in response, Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” According to Jesus, the Sabbath is not practiced out of obligation or to earn religious merit, nor is it practiced by following a set of rules. Instead, the Sabbath is something that was created FOR humanity; it is a means to an end. The ‘end’ is experiencing rest for our souls that is only available in Jesus, and the ‘means’ is stopping our regular patterns of life and intentionally drawing near to God by engaging in life-giving, soul-resting practices.



# A REFLECTION ON THE SABBATH

Even though scripture clearly presents the Sabbath as an important part of life with God, the Sabbath is one of the least practiced disciplines in our day and age. One possible reason for this is because previous generations of Jesus followers fell into a similar thought pattern as the Pharisees and treated the sabbath as the 'ends' instead of the 'means'— which as we know, leads to legalism. In response, many have over-corrected and believe that practicing Sabbath is not only not required, but that it shouldn't even be practiced at all. This is a form of antinomianism— the belief that because of God's grace, it doesn't really matter how we live. Those who've moved into this camp correctly believe that ultimate rest— rest from having to earn our place with God— isn't found by taking a day-off, but found in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. But unfortunately, they wrongly conclude that since they've placed their faith in Jesus, there is nothing for them to do to experience and live into that rest.

So where the legalist says that you must practice Sabbath in order to qualify for Jesus' rest, the antinomianist says that there is nothing you can do to better experience that rest, so carry on living the way you normally do.

A biblical view of the Sabbath that is faithful to the way Jesus talked about it and practiced it does not fall to either one of these two extremes. It understands that by the grace of God, Jesus has provided a way for us to rest from earning our standing before God. But it also recognizes that God invites us to live a certain way and practice certain things, because those practices help us better live into and experience the reality of our new life in Christ. Practicing a sabbath is a way of taking a spiritual truth, and experiencing it in our mind, heart and body. As Walter Brueggemann once said, "people who keep Sabbath live all seven days differently," because through their intention stopping, they experience rest for their souls that will carry them through the other six days of the week.



# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What difficulties or compulsions make it hard for you to stop? What is preventing you from practicing a sabbath?
- How does taking a sabbath enhance your enjoyment and worship of God?
- Do you view rest, sabbath, margin, or sleep hours as something essential to your apprenticeship to Jesus? Or is it something extra?
- What would make a sabbath day nourishing and replenishing to you?
- What happens to you when you go without regular rhythms that allow you to rest in God?
- Which of the following lists is more reflective of your current state?  
Could this be a reflection of how well you're experiencing the rest that Jesus has on offer?

## Restfulness

content in the everyday  
margin  
slowness  
quiet  
deep relationships  
time alone  
delight  
enjoyment  
clarity  
gratitude  
trust  
working from love  
work as contribution

## Restlessness


discontent  
busyness  
hurry  
noise  
isolation  
crowds  
distraction  
envy  
confusion  
greed  
anxiety  
working for love  
work as accumulation and  
accomplishment



# SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Plan out your sabbath. Sabbath's don't just happen; you need to plan for it.

- Choose a day and length of time that you want to practice a sabbath. While we encourage a 24-hour sabbath, there are no rules here, only suggestions. If this is new to you, maybe try something shorter. Here are some suggestions:
  - Traditional Sabbath- From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday
  - Lord's Day Sabbath- From sunset on Saturday (or sunrise on Sunday) to sunset on Sunday
  - Midweek Sabbath- Choose any day of the week to practice your sabbath
- Consider the things that would nourish you. Some common practices include worshiping, music, sharing a meal with people, taking a nap, making love with your spouse, praying, walking, reading, afternoon tea, time with family and friends, time alone, practicing gratitude, not setting a morning alarm, etc. Plan these practices spaciouly into the day.

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- Consider the things that won't nourish you spiritually. Write these things down and refrain from doing them during your sabbath. Some common examples are answering emails, checking social media, consuming media, going shopping, watching TV, etc.
  - Plan your week accordingly. Sabbath's don't just happen; you need to plan for it. Write a list of things you typically do on your sabbath day and find time to complete those at another point throughout in the week.
  - Begin your sabbath with a time of prayer. While there is no escaping the presence of God, acknowledge your awareness and pleasure of God's presence as you begin your sabbath.
  - Conclude your sabbath with prayer. Thank God for his presence and rest that he has given to you. Reflect on how you feel having completed your sabbath, and which practices were helpful and which weren't. Allow your reflections to shape your next sabbath.