

Rhythms Week 4

Cultivating the Virtue of Contentment by Engaging the Practice of Sabbath Keeping

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal**** is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. *This week, we will seek to grow in the virtue of Contentment by engaging the practice of Sabbath Keeping.*

Contentment is a feeling we all long for and struggle to experience. It is an that elusive sense of satisfaction with our circumstances. But the virtue of contentment is more than just a feeling. It is *an inner orientation* of peace that we “put on” and practice actively, not by seeking fulfillment of our every desire (self-indulgence) or by resigning ourselves toward the real evils and problems of the world (apathy), but by choosing to relate to our present circumstances in light of the infinite goodness of God, who is with us and will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Contentment involves a posture of receptivity - toward God, who is sufficient for our every need, and toward our circumstances today, which are the context in which God meets us, leads us, sustains us, and involves us in his work of restoring the world to wholeness.[1]

Sabbath Keeping is a practice that cultivates contentment by helping us intentionally shift our way of being in the world from a mode of achieving and acquiring to that of receiving and resting. *“Sabbath keeping is more than just taking a day of rest; it is a way of ordering one’s life around a pattern of working six days and then resting on the seventh.”*[2] As we navigate life in our chronically busy, underslept, overworked, over-cafeinated, over-scheduled, screen-addicted culture, practicing sabbath is both countercultural and deeply humanizing.[3] Wendell Berry cautioned, *“It is easy... to imagine that the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines.”*[4] Practicing sabbath is a way of honoring the reality of our limited and dependent nature as God’s creatures.

In the Old Testament, God instructs the people of Israel to follow a disciplined weekly pattern of devoting six days to work and one day to replenishing rest and worship (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The rationale for this sabbath command was based on God’s work of both creation and redemption; Israel was to reflect God’s character to the world by imitating the pattern God modeled in creation (Exodus 20:8-11) and to rest in God’s provision by stopping to remember God’s redemption of Israel from slavery as the foundation of the life and liberty of God’s people (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). In the New Testament, Jesus further reveals God’s intention for sabbath to be a gift that promotes life and helps humanity flourish, not a burdensome rule to be followed slavishly (Matthew 12:1-14).

Marva Dawn sees sabbath as God’s gift to our stressed-out world, a manner of life through which God’s kingdom *“reclaims us, revitalizes us, and renews us, so that it can reign through us before others, on behalf of others, sometimes in spite of others, and always with others.”*[5]

God reclaims us by releasing us from our need to be in control or to accomplish something, revitalizes us by giving us an entire day to be open and waiting for God, and renews us through rest, joy, and feasting - for our own health and for our greater fruitfulness in loving and serving others.

Dawn further teases out the sabbath way of life as a fourfold practice that involves our *resting, ceasing, feasting, and embracing*. The resting Dawn envisions is holistic - spiritual (reconnecting to God through worship), physical (restoring the body through sleep, exercise, and good food), intellectual (renewing the mind by contemplating things other than our work), emotional (restoring our hearts with a day full of delight), and social (reconnecting with God's family in communion). Sabbath ceasing, Dawn explains, is about saying "No" to both our busyness and all the many voices that captivate our attention in order to say "Yes" to being open and receptive to God. Sabbath feasting is about immersing ourselves in celebration and joy that orient us toward God's eternal kingdom of abundance and goodness, and sabbath embracing involves our embracing God, others, our calling as disciples of Jesus, and the cost of discipleship that goes the way of the cross.[6]

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on from Week 3? That is okay! Continue practicing the rhythm of Week 3 until you feel ready to move forward.

If you are ready for Week 4, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time, not all at once.

1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group

- Why do you think sabbath is a practice that cultivates contentment?
- What are some examples of practicing sabbath resting, ceasing, feasting, and embracing?
- What are some non-sabbath ways we often seek to "unwind" or "crash" when we feel exhausted, and how do these differ from the practice of sabbath?
- What makes the practice of sabbath difficult?

2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE: *Recognize the power of a trio of core lies we often believe: "I am what I do. I am what I have. I am what others say about me."*[7]

One of the greatest obstacles to both our practice of sabbath and our experience of contentment is our belief that our identity and security are fundamentally ours to create, achieve, and preserve, rather than ours to receive as gifts from God. Henri Nouwen teases out three common variations of this core lie of identity - "I am what I do; I am what I have; I am what others say about me." When we live out of any of these core lies of identity, we live restlessly and anxiously in pursuit of the achievements, acquisitions, or applause we believe will satisfy our longings and fulfill what feels lacking in our lives.

Read one of the anti-Psalms[8] below as a way to reflect on this.

Anti-Psalm 127:1-2

The Lord will not keep his promise to make his home among us
and bless us with his life-giving presence.

Anyone who trusts the Lord with their future trusts in vain.

We must do this on our own - all of it -by the light of our own eyes,

by the strength of our own hands, by the designs and deadlines we have established.

It's either success or failure; faithfulness is irrelevant.

The Lord won't protect us; no one will.

Anyone who trusts the Lord for security trusts in vain.

We must protect ourselves. I must protect myself.

I will keep watch. I won't miss a thing.

I will anticipate every threat and eliminate every liability.

It's either survival or death; faithfulness is irrelevant.

I will rise early and go to bed late, burning the candle at both ends,

because input leads to output, which will lead to my feasting on the fruit of my labor.

How could I sleep at a time like this? I am Atlas, holding up my world.

If I rested, it would all come crashing down.

Notice the core lies at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing one or more of the trio: "I am what I do," "I am what I have," or "I am what others say about me?" If none of these resonates with you, what do you think might be a core lie that is operative in your life? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH. Your identity and security are gifts from God. You are God's beloved. You are God's forever. You are also a creature with limits, not a machine. Yet you are an heir with Christ and all Christ's people to the unshakable, everlasting kingdom of God's abundance, goodness, wholeness, health, peace, justice, joy, life, and love. Your future is secure because of God's faithfulness to keep his promise and God's gracious inclusion of you in his family, not because of your abilities and efforts. The fullness of life and your security for the future are gifts from God for you to receive by faith and await in hope, not tenuous possibilities that you may or may not attain if you are successful (1 Peter 1:3-9; Romans 8:14-17). God is faithful. God is enough. In him is the fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). And Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Psalms 127:1-2

Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the Lord guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.

It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION. Look at how Jesus exemplifies contentment & Sabbath in John 5:1-20:

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk’?” Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.

5. Questions for Prayerful Examination

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of contentment and the practice of Sabbath have to do with your becoming that person?
- Consider Marva Dawn’s four aspects of a sabbath practice: resting, ceasing, feasting, and embracing. What is one way you can practice each of these this week?
- How do you think practicing sabbath (resting, ceasing, feasting, embracing) might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?

- What do you find inspiring about Jesus' life of Sabbath and contentment, and what's one way that you can imitate Jesus's practice of Sabbath in your own life this week?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?
- Group exercise 1 : Sabbath Stories. Share with one another sabbath traditions and habits that have been meaningful to you. If you don't have any, that's okay! Listen and learn from others, and let their experiences stoke your imagination.
- Group exercise 2: Sabbath Together. Discuss with your household or group of friends how you might be able to practice sabbath together on a regular basis. How can it look in this pandemic time? What would it look like this fall to set aside regular time together to delight in God's good gifts and embrace your calling as a community to love one another and to welcome others into your common life?

6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.

Arrow Prayers. We'll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose "Jesus Storybook Bible" many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn't have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some "arrow prayers" for this week's practice:

- Jesus, I rest in your arms.
- Jesus, you are enough. You are more than enough.
- Jesus, I surrender to you my demand to be in control.
- Into your hands, O Lord, I commend _____ (my spirit, this deadline, all my burdens, my child, this thing that is stressing me out, etc.).

Mini Verses for Easy Memory

- "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).
- "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor build it in vain" (Psalm 127:1).
- "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).
- "I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep; for only you, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8).

Habit Stacking. Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear in *Atomic Habits*. Some ideas:

- As you walk or drive to work, turn off your audio devices in order to feast on God's presence. Spend your commute in prayer or mindful contemplation of God's presence and care for you.
- Treat meal time as a mini-sabbath. Stop everything else that you are doing in order to practice mindful eating. If you are with others, be fully present to them and feast on relational connection. If you are alone, spend the time savoring your food and enjoying the abundance of God's provision and presence with you.

- Approach your workday today as preparation for sabbath rest, similar to the way you would prepare for vacation. Setting apart one day in seven takes active preparation throughout the week.
- Turn every bedtime into sabbath practice. Tish Warren writes, “In the nitty-gritty of my daily life, repentance for idolatry may look as pedestrian as shutting off my email an hour earlier or resisting that alluring clickbait to go to bed.” This evening, try turning off all your devices by 8 or 9pm, and turn bedtime into an intentional act of resting yourself in God’s care.
- Let the children in your life teach you how to playfully rest as an aspect of practicing sabbath. Kids are experts in resting and trusting in another’s care. If playing with kids is part of your weekly rhythm, turn that time into an intentional practice of sabbath by recognizing that playtime as important and formative for you.

Practices of Contentment and Sabbath Keeping for Community & Mission

- Make a plan for setting aside a day of rest and play (including what you will take care of on the other 6 days and what you plan to do on your sabbath day). Share your plan with your household or City Group.
- Think about how to rest before and after Sunday Service. What can you put aside so you can enjoy the rest that comes with worship?
- Practice sabbath “ceasing and feasting” this week by taking a one-day break from social media and screens and choosing instead to take a walk with friend or neighbor.
- Try this sabbath challenge - put away your computer and phone for one whole day this week. Use your newfound time and headspace to try a new recipe, call a friend, exercise, do a puzzle, read a book, take a nap, play a game, make a craft, or whatever else would be restful and replenishing for you.

Sources Cited

[1] Steve L. Porter, “Contentment,” in Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, eds., *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 126-43.

[2] Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 134.

[3] Tish Harrison Warren, “Spiritual Direction: Get More Sleep,” *The Well* (blog), October 29, 2013.

[4] *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2001), 55.

[5] Marva J. Dawn, *The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those who Serve God, the Church, and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 13.

[6] *The Sense of the Call*, 38-68.

[7] Henri Nouwen identifies these three “lies of identity” as lying beneath all our struggles to rest in God. See Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 29.

[8] We got the “anti-Psalm” idea from Dr. David Powlison, “Anti-Psalm 23,” which we use as a model for exploring the Psalms devotionally as windows into both our own hearts and the mercy of God.

**Rhythms of Renewal* is adapted with permission from resources by our friends at City Church Philadelphia.