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RHYTHMS OF WORK AND REST FOR MINISTRY LEADERS

Kurt N. Fredrickson

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” —Mark 1:35

As ministry leaders, we do a good job of caring for others but often we do not extend the same care to ourselves. The work is challenging, and the seemingly endless demands of preaching, counseling, and visioning keep us busy. Perfectionism, productivity, and exhaustion can often become symbols of our dedication and the measure of our self-worth. And though we comfort ourselves with the belief that all this is necessary for the kingdom, we struggle with fatigue, anxiety, and discouragement. We grapple with the growing incongruity between how we present ourselves to others and what we may be experiencing on the inside.

A friend of mine charged with the care of pastors in the Evangelical Covenant Church shared a formula for unhealthy ministry: *depletion + isolation + conflict = significant trouble*. We know that conflicts and challenges in ministry are inevitable! But when conflict encounters a leader’s untended depletion and isolation, trouble is also inevitable. If we are not careful, busyness can kill us—emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and physically.

Perhaps it’s time to stop and to reevaluate the rhythms of our work and rest. It goes without saying that we need to work hard in order to be faithful and fruitful in our work. Still, a Sabbath lifestyle is fundamental: living and working out of a place of quietness before the Lord. In a culture that values speed and productivity, Jesus shows us another way. In the midst of busyness, he took Sabbath, stepped away, went to a solitary place, and prayed. When we choose this kind of Sabbath lifestyle, we are confessing that we want our identity to align with the radical and subversive example of Christ.

First, a Sabbath lifestyle confesses that we are not necessary. It can be hard to admit that though we are loved and cherished, we are not necessary. The truth is, we are dispensable and the work will go on without us. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” We need a more sobered attitude about our work and ourselves. Too much of what we do is wrapped up in proving to ourselves, to others, and to God how valuable and necessary we are. Sabbath living declares my worth is not in what I do.

Second, Sabbath living is a declaration and confession that we are not in control. Listen to our language. We talk about *my* work, *my* duties, *my* responsibilities. We



think it is all about us. Yet it was the Lord's work before it was ever ours. Scripture reminds us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart . . ." We accept and embrace our weakness, submitting to and trusting in the work of God who does powerfully beyond what we can do or imagine. Sabbath living declares that God is God and I am not.

Third, a Sabbath lifestyle reminds us that we are not indestructible. God rested on the seventh day. It is a mandate to us: we must stop. Strangely enough, keeping Sabbath is the one commandment we feel free to break. We justify it by the size of the task before us; there is so much to do, and so we sacrifice Sabbath. We eat poorly, drink too much coffee, don't get enough sleep, don't exercise, all under the fallacy that we are indestructible. We need to live differently—otherwise we will die. It is a time to be still, to break from the routine and the hectic pace, and to set aside time, as Eugene Peterson says, to "pray and play." Sabbath living declares that we are human, finite, and fragile. We were built to attend to our own bodies and hearts. We need a new approach to Sabbath, and here are some practical ways to bring this about:

Personally:

- Exercise three or more times a week
- Make getting 6–8 hours of sleep a night a priority
- Be mindful of what you eat
- Engage in scheduled times of personal Scripture reading and prayer

- Take periods of vacation and physical/mental/emotional rest
- Intentionally take one day as Sabbath

Intentionally caring for our families and staff members:

- Hold each other accountable for these behaviors
- Model new behaviors before others
- Watch how we speak. Do we talk about how much time we spend working, or do we also talk about the time we spend engaging in Sabbath activities and encourage others to do the same?

Working smarter:

- We need to give up some of our responsibilities and empower others
- We need to develop new skills in time and people management
- We need to learn to say, "No" and "Stop!"

This is the right way to live—it benefits us and it benefits our ministry. This Sabbath lifestyle comes with a promise:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." —Matthew 11:28–30



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