

Chapter 5

Rest, the Pleasure of His People

I Please God by Making His Rest My Pleasure

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

(Isaiah 58:13-14)

One of the largest obstacles to true Sabbath-keeping is leisure.... Leisure is what Sabbath becomes when we no longer know how to sanctify time. Leisure is Sabbath bereft of the sacred. It is a vacation—literally, a vacating, an evacuation.³²

(Mark Buchanan)

Sabbath-rest is a time to set aside lesser pleasures and be filled with eternal joy in a temporal setting.

(Jim Anderson)

In every age people manage to worship the works of their hands at the expense of God's pleasure. The original recipients of Isaiah's message blatantly worshiped images formed by their own hands: "The craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and he who smoothes with the hammer spurs on

him who strikes the anvil. He says of the welding, 'It is good.' He nails down the idol so it will not topple" (Isaiah 41:7).

Shades of idolatry advance as twenty-first century man becomes more and more amused with his technological discoveries. Computers, cell phones, digital cameras, and satellites are great tools and toys, but terrible treasures. While I enjoy the use of all such devices, I am amused at what happens when a storm takes out the satellite signal to my television. I am also amazed when an entire company is immobilized whenever its computer system goes down. I chuckle every time I hear the most familiar question asked by cell phone users, "Can you hear me now?" Too often I am that cell phone user. Such disruptions remind us that our devices are worthy of our use, but never our worship.

I have also been tempted to worship the work I do with people as opposed to my work with things. There is a tendency to worship seemingly higher ranking jobs that require higher education and social skills compared to worshipping manual labor. If we do not worship how we rank in the work force, we may settle for worshipping the material goods and services our jobs make affordable to us.

Gordon Dahl made a profound statement in his book, *Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure Oriented Society*:

"We worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship."³³

The temptation to worship our work gives birth to another temptation—the temptation to work at our play. Good employment pays bills and makes luxuries and leisure activities possible. Once golf clubs, country club memberships, fishing rods and boats are purchased, they beg to be used. As they are used there is a desire on the part of their owners to be proficient at

their use in order to justify their purchase. Gradually leisure becomes serious business. Before we know it play has become work.

We work at our play when we take leisure activities more seriously than our jobs or families. Preoccupation with sports teams and hobbies while on the job can be dangerous. It also produces mediocre work. As the saying goes, “Never buy a car that was made on Monday or Friday.” The implications being that on Mondays workers are still decompressing from their weekend leisure activities, and on Fridays they are thinking about what they are going to do when the buzzer rings and the weekend begins.

LEISURE ACTIVITIES

A search on the web for the word “leisure” brought up 303,000,000 hits, compared to 7,700,000 a few years ago. To say that we live in a leisure-minded world is an understatement. One of the more interesting websites out there is *Men of Leisure Limited*.

Men of Leisure Limited is dedicated to the spread of leisure in all forms. It is our duty to educate all peoples about the transforming power of the leisure philosophy, to guide them in their quest for leisure, and in due time to declare each of them an official man of leisure! We shall provide quality products, sound advice, links to the leisure world, and leisure reviews to all men no matter what their stature in life.³⁴

LEISURE ACTIVITIES CANNOT REPLACE GOD

Leisure activities have their place. It is no secret that I like to hunt and fish. Such activities helped keep our family close, especially during the years Lois and I were raising teenage boys. Compared to girls, boys tend to be less communicative, keeping their parents guessing as to what they are thinking. On the way home from hunting or fishing trips both of our sons

chattered about numerous subjects. Every family needs to have at least one leisure activity. They are a means of parenting and keeping family members together.

They have also been a significant means of friendship and interaction with men. When it comes to teaching men, nothing compares with getting in a boat together. After all, that's what Jesus did (Matthew 8:23). Once they are in the boat you have a captive audience; they can either listen or swim to shore.

Leisure activities serve as good introductions to rest. They help us wind down and relax after intense periods of work. Leisure activities also serve as effective bridges after extended periods of rest. They help us transition back into our work zones.

I would be a full-fl edged hypocrite if I frowned on people having fun and experiencing pleasure as God intended. The Apostle Paul warned against deceptive teachers who forbid the enjoyment of God's creation:

Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

(I Timothy 4:2-4)

THE LIMITS OF LEISURE

Leisure activities have their place. They also have their limits. First of all, leisure activities cannot replace God any more than work can replace God as a focal point of worship. Solomon went to extremes stimulating his

senses with every delight known to man. He pursued pleasure hoping it would unlock the meaning to life. He discovered pleasures could not complete him. They couldn't even quench his thirst for pleasure.

I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. ² "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" ³ I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

(Ecclesiastes 2:1-3)

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. ¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 2:10-11)

By seeking happiness through pleasure, Solomon pressed against pleasure's limits. The pursuit of pleasures failed him. Pleasure loses its luster when pleasure becomes the purpose of life. The pursuit of pleasure cannot replace the pursuit of God as a purpose for life. Solomon went on to say, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Since God set eternity in the heart of man, only the pursuit of the Eternal One can satisfy man's enormous craving for purpose. As the theologian Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and the heart of man is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

Another downside to working at our play is financial. Leisure activities are not affordable to all. Yet many who cannot afford them are consumed by

them. Those who work extra hours so they can obtain leisure toys are often exhausted before they can enjoy them. In order to work at our play, we have to first work for our play.

The pursuit of pleasures often drives a desire for more money. Leisure activities compel people to seek more demanding jobs to feed their hobby horses. Better-paying jobs typically require more education, extended workdays, and longer commutes. Ironically the efforts that make leisure activities affordable consume remaining energy and time for enjoying them. The demand for more money to support leisure activities usually leads to less leisure enjoyment. When it is all said and done, one has a big house with a garage full of toys that rust out before they wear out. Randy Alcorn makes this very point in his book *Money, Possessions and Eternity*. “What I am pointing out is simply a law of life—the tyranny of things. And the central issue is not the things themselves, but the depletion of the resources of time, energy, enthusiasm, and money that could have been invested in the kingdom of God.”³⁵

The pursuit of affluence for any reason may produce the same vacuums as poverty. David Mckenna has coined the word *affluenza* in describing the ill effects of wealth:

Affluenza is a strange malady that affects the children of well-to-do parents. Though having everything money can buy, the children show all the symptoms of abject poverty—depression, anxiety, loss of meaning, and despair for the future. Affluenza accounts for an escape into alcohol, drugs, shoplifting, and suicide among children of the wealthy. It is most often found where parents are absent from the home and try to buy their children’s love.³⁶

Others manage to find time for leisure activities at the expense of worship. For them the day to pray has been exchanged for a day to play. Thus they

play at their worship. Hope in the pleasures money can buy subtly replaces hope in God. Paul warned those who are rich in this world not to make such a shift in their focus and passion: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (I Timothy 6:17).

Since God richly provides everything for our enjoyment, leisure has its place. Ironically that proper place is not found by pursuing leisure. Like money, leisure activities make good servants, but terrible masters. Decades ago A.W. Tozer identified the perpetual conflict within mankind that takes place when God is replaced as the king of human hearts.

Our woes began when God was forced out of His central shrine and things were allowed to enter. Within the human heart things have taken over. Men have now by nature no peace within their hearts, for God is crowned there no longer, but there in the moral dusk stubborn and aggressive usurpers fight among themselves for first place on the throne.³⁷

Leisure activities find their rightful place as people invite God to take his rightful place as their hope. When hope in leisure replaces hope in God, hopelessness prevails.

While leisure activities have limited value for those who can afford them, God offers lasting satisfaction to all who come to him. God’s full and free offer is recited in both the Old and New Testaments for all who are tired and weary of pursuits that fail to satisfy.

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

(Isaiah 55:1-3)

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

(Revelation 22:17)

What an offer to all regardless of social status or income! No one has to moonlight or take a second job to obtain this offer.

I have lived enough years craving more time, money, and freedom to enjoy leisure activities. I have also had moments when I could have been rightly accused of working at my play. I still take pheasant hunting pretty seriously. No matter how aching tired I may be after chasing roosters through the tall grass, I never want to quit. As one hunter’s son quizzed his dad, “What does Jim have against those birds? What did they ever do to him?”

Today I could fill my life with more leisure and less work. I have never had more access to the things I once lived to do. I could be a leisure lord, traveling the world, taking cruises, hunting other species of birds, enjoying more than one Canadian fishing trip a year, and buying leisure toys. However, if I became a lord of leisure, leisure would become a lord of me.

Truthfully an increase in leisure activities does not appeal to me. It’s not that I experience guilt when engaged in them nor sigh with self-pity as one

who sacrifices leisure to serve God and others. I honestly have the life I want. I have found a pleasure beyond leisure. I believe it is God's pleasure.

Recently I met a man whose experience in this mode of pleasure far exceeds mine. After fifty-one years of enjoyable marriage he has been a widower for the past six years. At the age of seventy-eight, Max is a retired minister living on Social Security. If anyone is worthy of a life of full-time leisure, it is Max. He has earned his keep, serving churches for over a half century. However, stooping to a life of leisure has no appeal to him. His hobby is helping people. He serves as interim pastor where needed, encourages pastors to hang in there, and gently counsels unwed couples living together to break it off or get married.

I sense no driven workaholic tendencies in the man. Max portrays pure pleasure in God and a passion to see God loom large in the lives of others. Max has the contentment many crave but few find. He is living the pleasure of God.

PLEASURES CANNOT REPLACE RIGHT

Second, leisure activities cannot replace what is right. Isaiah chapter fifty-eight addresses worshipers who think God should bless them for fasting and keeping a Sabbath ritual while they freely exploit the needy and poor. They act as *a nation that does what is right* while enjoying pleasure at the expense of others:

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 3 ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have

not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists . You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high."

(Isaiah 58:1-4)

As an act of denial they suppress their exploitation by doing as they please (verse 3). In every age among people of all ages wrongs are buried under pleasures. When guilt pangs pierce we tend to anesthetize them with sensations of pleasure. While hearing a cry for help we turn up the volume on the music we enjoy. When witnessing suffering on the evening news we channel surf to our favorite pleasure programs. Pleasure blinds us to wrong and avoids what is right.

In contrast God says forsake your pleasure and do what is right. Get right with your fellow man. Pleasure is not an antidote for wrong. Pleasure, even when innocent, distracts from doing what is right. In doing what is right we uncover and correct wrong.

PLEASURES CANNOT REPLACE REPENTANCE

Third, pleasures cannot replace repentance. Sin dulls the pleasure sensors. It jams the circuits that communicate pleasure to the brain and every other part of a being. What once brought pleasure now brings boredom. One must now go to extremes to stimulate the body's pleasure sensors. Some turn to drug use. Having given up on pleasure, some choose to arouse fear sensors through daredevil stunts. After normal pleasure sensors have been singed, I know of only one way to restore them. Repentance restores pleasure.

Isaiah's message calls for repentance for all the sinful ills of ancient Israel. The opening chapter of Isaiah is an invitation to reason with the Lord

regarding sins committed. Throughout the book *repent* is cited along with its near equivalent *return*.

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; ²⁰ but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

(Isaiah 1:18-20)

Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will “pass over” it and will rescue it. ⁶ Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites.

(Isaiah 31:5-6)

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

(Isaiah 55:6-7)

“The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins” declares the LORD.

(Isaiah 59:20)

While visiting friends in Atlanta, Lois and I heard a sermon from the most unpretentious senior pastor I have ever met—Pastor Buddy Hoffman of Grace Fellowship Church in Snellville, Georgia. The church Buddy serves is by no measure small. Yet when I met him before the service he impressed me as being one step up from a street person. His head was completely shaven. His clothes were extremely plain and his shoes looked like

something designed for gardening. Without facade this man communicated grace and truth. Buddy spoke slowly, even for a person in the south. I was so impressed by his un-impressiveness that I got the message: this is a pastor and church that lives up to the name, Grace Fellowship Church. This was also the experience of our friends who came to the church in need of grace and truth.

Buddy spoke of repentance as a progression. Repentance moves from awareness to awakening and on to alteration. In order to truly repent one must have an awareness of personal sin before God. As a person becomes aware of personal sin, he or she begins to own up to the fact that he or she is indeed a sinner who has committed sins against God and man. This leads to awakening.

Awakening occurs when someone is disturbed by the devastating consequence of sin. Sin has made him an enemy of God. God is therefore just in sending him to hell. As he is awakened to the reality that God is good and just in contrast to his sinfulness, the sinner calls out to God in readiness to accept God's solution to the dilemma. A desire to do something about sin has been awakened. It is at this point that a person becomes receptive to God's free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Having received Christ, a person has the power to alter his or her desires and behavior. It may be a total turnabout where a person leaves his or her former lifestyle. It may be a process of change that includes peaks and valleys before the person rids himself of the sinful habits that once ruled.

Buddy's sermon was not out of a textbook. He spoke as one who had experienced and observed again and again the transforming power of God activated by repentance in all of its stages: awareness, awakening, and alteration. People are hungry for grace and truth, and Buddy gives it to them.

Repentance in Old Testament Hebrew means to bring back or return. In New Testament Greek the word repentance is the descriptive compound word *metanoia*. Meta communicates change as in the word metamorphosis. Noia pertains to the mind. Repentance is a change of mind so as to change behavior.

God invited the Israelites to change more than their outward demeanor and posture. He wanted more than the apparent humility of an external ritual. God called them to repentance, an inward change of mind and heart.

Unfortunately change does not come easy for human beings, especially where sin is involved. We will deny, rationalize, and project our sin on others before claiming ownership of our sins. Most often we need to be confronted. Gentle confrontations are not always effective. In *your face* confrontations are often mandatory. We do not posture ourselves for change until we take ownership of our sin. Isaiah was sent to get in the face of the Israelites for their pretentious behavior toward the Sabbath. They pretended to keep the Sabbath while exploiting the poor.

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

(Isaiah 58:5-8)

God promises to change his demeanor toward sinners once repentance works its change in the minds and hearts of transgressors. He is quick to reply and repay with kindness towards the repentant:

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: "Here am I." If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, ¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. ¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

(Isaiah 58:9-12)

The Lord rewards repentance by satisfying desires in unlikely places, giving strength where there was once weakness, and prospering his people according to his good pleasure. Through repentance God provides what the pursuit of pleasure could not. Repentance produces joy that is no match for leisure activities.

Genuine repentance is followed by joy. I find this connection between repentance and joy extremely interesting. This connection is obvious in Isaiah chapter fifty-five. The call to repentance in verses six and seven is followed by a promise of intense joy.

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

(Isaiah 55:6-7)

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed.

(Isaiah. 55:12-13)

JOY IS THE EMOTION OF HEAVEN

It is also noteworthy that repentance produces a shared experience of joy in heaven and earth at the same time. When repentance happens, both heaven and earth rejoice. Luke chapter fifteen has been labeled the lost-and-found department of the Bible. The chapter contains three parables about three lost valuables: a sheep, a coin, and a son. There is rejoicing in heaven and on earth when each is found.

“And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

(Luke 17:5-7)

REPENTANCE IS A PREREQUISITE TO JOY

Joy is the emotion of heaven. Joy is the true pleasure of God. Repentance transforms pleasure into joy. One cannot experience the joy of God without repentance, without turning around and facing God. There is no joy in

running from God. Joy is reserved for those who run to him like the prodigal son returned to his father:

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” So they began to celebrate.
(Luke 15:17-24)

True Christians repent. John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries with the word repent. I have listened to many testimonies of believers in Russia and to the best of my memory they all began with the words, “I repented when....” In contrast *repent* has all but dropped out of the vocabulary of churches in the west.

In order to maintain the joy-filled Christian life, repentance must take residence as the official Christian response to sin. David tried to hide his sin of adultery with Bathsheba by covering it up with the murder of her husband, Uriah (II Samuel 11). Even though God had worked mighty victories and written volumes through him, David had no joy as long as he hid his sin. In Psalm thirty-two David expressed the grief he experienced during those unrepentant days:

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
4For day and night
your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
Selah

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"—
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin.
Selah

6 Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you
while you may be found;
surely when the mighty waters rise,
they will not reach him.
7 You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.
Selah
(Psalm 32:3-7)

David's joy returned after he reinstated repentance as the programmed response toward sin in his heart. Once he confessed his sin and received forgiveness the songs of deliverance returned. David wrote Psalm fifty-one

during the same era. Once again David expresses the dregs of unrepentance and craves for joy, the emotion of heaven:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

(Psalm 51:1, 2)

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

(Psalm 51:12)

REPENTANCE IS A PREREQUISITE TO REST

Whenever I sin and fail to repent my joy evaporates. Sin drains joy. The removal of joy functions as a deterrent to sin. Once experiencing the heavenly emotion, one does not want to return to a meager life of pleasure. I simply don't want to go there again. No matter what momentary delight accompanies sin, it is no match for the joy God has in store for his people. The loss of joy drained out at the point of sin is too big a price to pay for the sensation of sin.

It may seem strange to devote so much space to repentance in a book about rest. However, repentance is a prerequisite to rest. Rest requires repentance as an admittance fee.

We may attempt to enter the rest of God while our innards churn with sin, but Sabbath-rest will remain a locked door. Sabbath-rest is a pleasure of God we cannot enter apart from repentance of sin and a change of heart.

Repentance seldom comes easy. We stonewall true repentance of the heart with all our defenses. David Hansen vividly depicts the resistance of the

human heart toward investigation and change. David's depiction of the heart echoes God's word through Jeremiah: "The human heart is the most fiercely guarded piece of ground in the universe. The fortress is built up through years and years of self-justification and rationalization. The soul in sin feels alive, but it is dead".³⁸

"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve"

(Jeremiah 17:9-10).

If any of us have any hope of experiencing the fruit of repentance that leads to Sabbath-rest, we must persistently ask God to crack open our hearts and investigate them until we have no other response than repentance. After all, repentance is the official Christian response to sin.

Before attempting to open the door to personal Sabbath-rest, we must each ask ourselves before God the following questions: *Have I ever truly repented of my sin before God? Have I become aware, awakened, and altered so as to turn fully away from my sin? Have I asked Christ to forgive me and my sin and invited him into my life? Do I desire his life-altering power, so I can turn about from my sin and face him the rest of the way? Am I a believer who has allowed sin to take root and grow in me, so that I need to confess my sin, turn from it, and resist it in the faith and power of Christ?*

Please take a moment, a day, a week, or whatever it takes to settle these issues before entering the door of Sabbath-rest.

REST BEYOND LEISURE

Fourth, pleasure or leisure activities cannot replace true Sabbath-rest. When activity replaces rest, fatigue diminishes joy, even if the activity is leisure. As self-indulgence takes precedence over Sabbath-rest, joy departs. This is not a new problem. Israel apparently experienced a depletion of joy while pretending to maintain a Sabbath practice and wondered why until God sent the Prophet Isaiah with the answer:

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, ¹⁴ then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

(Isaiah 58:13-14)

While the specific application of Isaiah fifty-eight rebukes anyone who thinks spiritual discipline can wash away human abuse, the deeper issue provides a more general application confronting the basic selfish nature of man. *Doing as you please* is confronted twice (verses three and thirteen) as the root cause of exploitation: You do as you please and exploit all your workers.

Sabbath-rest is a time to set aside what is less than the best for what is best. While you may not be exploiting anyone, you might allow your independence coupled with the leisure industry to exploit you. *Going your own way* is less than the best. *Doing as you please* is less than the best. *Speaking idle words* is less than the best. *Finding your joy in the LORD* is the best!

Once I refrain from practices that are less than the best, I am in a far better position to find my joy in the Lord. Once I taste the joy of the Lord, I will

want to carry that taste of joy into the rest of my week. But it takes setting aside what I want to do to taste what God wants for me. He always knows what is best for me.

On occasion I am asked, “What’s all this fuss about Sabbath-rest? Why not just take a day off once a week and do some lawn work or engage in some leisure activities? Why not just take a day off to do as you please?” While a day or weekend off for doing leisure as we please provides a divergence and relief from the pressures of work, it fails to produce the deep-cycle rest needed in a stressful, leisure-driven world.

In his article “Learning to Rest,” J. Alex Kirk conveys his discovery that his leisure activity proved to be less than the best:

Then one Sunday as I turned off the TV after the late afternoon game, I evaluated how I actually felt. In truth, after 15 hours of watching football over the previous two days, I was sluggish and my eyes were glazed over. All I really wanted to do after “resting” for the past two days was take a nice, long nap. I was trying to find rest in something that wasn’t bad, but it didn’t restore me. This realization was a bit startling at the time. I’m ashamed to say it took me several more years to shake my habit, but the realization that Sunday woke me to the bigger issue in my life: where does rest come from? For leaders, most of whom are enthusiastic and energetic, the discipline of resting is a foreign one. But to work this into your leadership journey is essential for a healthy and glad ending down the road.³⁹

Leisure activities are overrated when it comes to providing deep rest. The relief they provide is short-lived. A steady diet of leisure leaves us empty inside. Leisure is simply not potent enough to bring rest into the dark restless recesses of the soul. While leisure may serve as a divergence from

stress, it can also distract us from settings that help us identify the real stress producers. They will be identified in the next segment of the book.

SABBATH-REST, WHEN DIVINE AND HUMAN PLEASURES MEET

It may appear that God's pleasure and my pleasure are opposites, never to be aligned with one another. That was my perspective in my teen years. I perceived that pleasing God would numb my pleasure sensors. Whatever God wanted for me was all work and no play. Later, I discovered that when I desire divine pleasure, God is pleased and so am I. Seeking God's pleasure is a win-win proposition.

After I encouraged a pastor to attend a Sabbath Retreat he replied, "God says a whole lot to me while I am cutting wood with a chainsaw." I thought to myself, *just think how much God would say if he turned the chainsaw off?*

A fellow workaholic like me can relate to his reply. He feels guilty as soon as he stops working. A running chainsaw that produces a pile of firewood pacifies guilt and disengages the mind enough for God to get a word in edgewise. I have a chainsaw. Using it is a good reprieve from sitting at a desk or computer all day. Though cutting wood produces sweat, it feels more like leisure than work.

Mundane work at which our minds are free from the strain of study or decision making is an opportunity for God to have a word with us. After all, God will take what we give him, and he is perfectly capable of speaking above the chatter of a chainsaw.

However, there is the issue of disrespect. If someone wanted to talk with me, I wouldn't keep the chainsaw running. It is disrespectful to keep on

working when someone wants to talk to you. How much more when God speaks!

God can speak to us at any time, even with a chainsaw raging through a tree trunk; but God wants to speak to us while we are alert yet resting from work and leisure.

God wants us to enjoy him. When we find our pleasure in God, God is most pleased and glorified. In my estimation no one in recent decades has melded the pleasure of God and pleasure of man more passionately than Pastor John Piper. With reference to this pleasure Piper has coined the phrase *Christian Hedonism*:

Here is the rock-solid foundation of Christian Hedonism: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. This is the best news in the world. God's passion to be glorified and my passion to be satisfied are not at odds....

The aim of Christian Hedonism is to show why this is so. It aims to show that we glorify God by enjoying Him forever.⁴⁰

Contrary to my early belief system, divine pleasure and human pleasure are not mutually exclusive. When I first experienced the pleasure of God as my joy, Psalm 34:8 and related verses became my reality: "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him." "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days" (Psalm 90:14).

Sabbath-rest has become my focus time for setting aside both work and leisure, so that God's joy-filled rest may enter me without competition. I strongly believe that is how it is meant to be. The only way we will find the higher plateaus of joy is by weaning ourselves off the lower stuff, including

leisure activities. Sabbath-rest is a time to set aside lesser pleasures to be filled with eternal joy in a temporal setting.

I enjoy the great outdoors. I like to hunt, fish, swim, work on the lawn, and cut wood for the fireplace, but not during my Sabbath-rests.

For the first time in my life I live on a lake. Skiing boats, fishing boats, and jet skis motor around the lake in the summer and snowmobiles in the winter. I have learned to not indulge in those enjoyable activities during my Sabbath-rest. By not indulging I allow a greater joy to seep into my life, the joy of the Lord. I cease doing as I please and make room for God to share with me what pleases him. I pray, “God, grant me the joy you experience. May your joy settle in my soul, joy that cannot be taken away by injury or age.”

I have found the best use of a lake during a Sabbath-rest is to not use it. Sabbath-rest is the enjoyment of being. God doesn’t ask that we do anything during a Sabbath-rest so we might know that he enjoys us as human beings apart from what we can do. I don’t ask the lake to provide a ride, a swim, or a fish. I don’t ask it to do anything for me. I let it be because it has worth and gives joy for just being, apart from what it can produce. It is best to let it be. Having bonded my pleasure with God’s pleasure, both work and leisure are carried out with greater joy.

Sabbath-rest is the sanctuary of lovers. Throughout the Bible, God uses a number of caricatures to portray our relationship to him: a potter and his clay, a shepherd and his sheep, a lord and his servants, a teacher to his students, a father to his children, a friend to his friends. But God saved the best until last—a bridegroom and his bride. Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church, made up of his people, the Bride (Ephesians 5:22-33, Revelation 19:7-9). True lovers need neither the accomplishment of work nor the entertainment of leisure to be in love. They just need each other.

Steve McVey brings this concept home emphatically in his book, *Grace Walk*: “How foolish I was when I thought that God’s main interest was in what I did for Him. I lived as if He wanted a maid to serve Him, when what He really wants is a bride who loves Him so much that she is consumed with knowing Him intimately!”⁴¹

Sabbath-rest is not only the pleasure of God; it is the pleasure of his people. It is the joy, the emotion of heaven that loss of health or home cannot remove. Unlike so many leisure activities, you don’t need to get a second job to pay for it. You need a sanctuary of time that neither work nor play can destroy.

Here is an old hymn with a new melody. Make it your prayer, your theme song.

JESUS I AM RESTING

Jesus I Am Resting Resting
David Hampton / Jean Sophia Pigott

Chorus 1

Jesus I am resting resting
In the joy of what Thou art
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart

Verse 1

Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee
And Thy beauty fills my soul
For by Thy transforming power
Thou hast made me whole

Verse 2

Oh how great Thy loving kindness
Vaster broader than the sea
Oh how marvelous Thy goodness
Lavished all on me
Yes I rest in Thee Beloved
Know what wealth of grace is Thine
Know Thy certainty of promise
And have made it mine

Verse 3

Simply trusting Thee Lord Jesus
I behold Thee as Thou art
And Thy love so pure so changeless
Satisfies my heart
Satisfies its deepest longings
Meets supplies its ev'ry need
Compasseth me round with blessings
Thine is love indeed

Verse 4

Ever lift Thy face upon me
As I work and wait for Thee
Resting 'neath Thy smile Lord Jesus
Earth's dark shadows flee
Brightness of my Father's glory
Sunshine of my Father's face
Keep me ever trusting resting
Fill me with Thy grace ⁴²

Prayer

Dear Lord God, grant me that joy that can only be found in you. May your joy settle in my soul—joy that cannot be taken away by injury or age. I long to feast in the pleasure that you enjoy, for you are my pleasure. You are my leisure activity. In Jesus' name and for his sake I pray, Amen.

Questions to Ponder

1. Does the quote from Gordon Dahl represent my life in any way(s)? “We worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.”
2. Do I expect more from my leisure activities than God intends for me to receive from them?
3. Have I truly repented of my sin?
4. Am I experiencing joy, the emotion of heaven? Am I expressing it through work, through leisure activities, through Sabbath-rest?

Part 2

Pleasing God, at Rest from Work

HOW CAN I REST FROM WORK?

By now you have gotten the picture that pleasing God exceeds working for God in some capacity. Pleasing God includes rest, even if you like your work. God wants you to enjoy him above and beyond the work you enjoy. God wants you to relax and enjoy him apart from work on the job, work at home, even work you regard as hobbies.

The next five chapters are designed to guide you into a weekly Sabbath experience. Chapter six describes my own reluctance to begin such a practice and the treasures I discovered once I finally yielded to the Holy Spirit's prompting. Chapter seven depicts the Sabbath as a day to release your concerns and release yourself from the rigors of labor. Chapter eight urges you to review your life before God as a means of cleaning house

through repentance. Chapter nine encourages you to remember your God, given that the Sabbath was intended to be a day to recall God and his works of creation and salvation. The Appendix provides a practical Sabbath-rest exercise designed to guide you through release, review, and remember. Chapter ten emphasizes the futuristic aspect of the Sabbath as a weekly occasion to focus on eternity and the believer's final home in heaven. The Appendix, Part IV, will assist you in becoming more heavenly minded during your earthly existence.

As you keep reading you will experience the relief God has prepared for you as you learn how to please him through rest.

Real Churches Turn Around

Chapter 6

Sabbath-Rest, A Time to Discover

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.

(Psalm 62:5)

Helicopters require almost constant attention, and it would appear that God has designed human beings to run best with a weekly spiritual recalibration. His Sabbath principle is one that can't be repeatedly ignored without doing damage to your soul. God seems to have made us to function best when one day each week is designated for resouling, or restoring, or attending to our spiritual needs.

(David R. Mains)

The minister who fails to practice what he preaches places himself in a precarious position. Unfortunately, it is a position few preachers avoid. Just ask their families.