

Rest, Recreation, Sabbath: Caring for One's Soul on the Journey

Is the care of our souls being neglected? Often an erroneous assumption is made that goes something like this: **“The condition of the soil of my soul will always be good.** When I first received Christ as Savior, the seed of the Word of God fell on the good soil of my heart and produced much fruit. Because the soil of my soul/heart was good then, it will always be good and produce much fruit.” However, we know from Scripture and gardening, that the condition of soil is not static. Soil must be attended to, nurtured, given opportunity to rest, and supplemented with nutrients when it becomes depleted (Ex. 23:11) The quality and condition of the soil is most important. Jesus said the same thing, when he taught the parable of the soil in Matthew 13:1-23. The rocky soil, the thorny soil, and the trodden down soil does not produce fruit when the seed falls on these kinds of soil. When seed falls on the “good” soil, it produces an abundant crop. The point Jesus was making is that the quality and condition of the soil of the soul¹ is directly related to fruitfulness and productivity!

At the National Pastors Retreat in California in 2008, Ruth Haley Barton from the Transforming Center said, “The most important thing we can do is to be extremely tenacious in the care of our own soul. The best thing we can bring to the work of God is a transformed self, stripped of compulsive behaviors, and then replaced with basic rhythms, rhythms of work and rest, engagement and retreat, solitude and community, Sabbath keeping, and celebration and self-examination.” (Barton 2008:19) Sadly, 40% of the leaders of one mission agency said that their greatest weakness was the nurture and care of their own soul and relationship with Christ.

Another cause for the neglect of the care of one's soul is that there is a subtle erroneous belief that the great commission task of discipling the nations is equivalent to the great commandment of loving God. Consequently we can become so pre-occupied with the work and assume that service is the highest expression of love for Christ. We are committed to the Great Commission, and yet the Lord of the harvest wants our love above all else.

Rest and the importance of caring for one's soul.

Rest is central to the Christian life and the cornerstone of the care of one's soul. Rest is an experience that can be enjoyed by faith, because it is our heritage. When God rested on the seventh day from his creative works, creation was completed and rest began, because the seventh day has never been completed. This Sabbath rest “was to be entered

¹ By “soul” is meant “the real you”, the you that was conceived in the heart of God, the you that is more than any job or position, it is the you that longs for relationship and intimacy with its Creator.

into by those who respond to His overtures with faith and obedience.” (Bruce 1964: 74) The original consecration of this seventh day of rest was for the people of God to leave behind the struggle to live by their own efforts and live out of the gracious provision of God, and celebrate life as a gift of Yahweh, with no efforts of their own needed. The six days of labor would remain under the power of the Fall, “but on the seventh day there was to be relief, renewal and restoration as an eschatological ‘jubilee’, a provision, but promising hope, of complete reconciliation.” (Anderson 1997:6465).

The writer of the book of Hebrews exhorts the reader, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also rest from their own work, just as God did from his. Let us therefore, make every effort to enter into that rest...” (Heb 4:9-11) There is a danger for the people of God to fail to enter that rest because of self-effort, lack of trust and faith, and disobedience. The challenge of discipling the nations is an enormous task, so we are tempted to fulfill the Great Commission and strive unceasingly in our efforts to do so. Whereas, the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to **“make every effort”** to resist that temptation, and desist the ceaseless striving and enter into that place of rest, renewal, and restoration which God intended for all of creation. However, we need to be encouraged to learn how to better care for our souls. We have forgotten that our Lord, who was sent by the Father with the huge task of redeeming the world, showed us the way to live a life characterized by a rhythm of work and rest and ministry and communion with the Father. In becoming so driven by the task, and taking little time to pull back and tend to condition of the soil of our soul, we may be in danger of losing our souls! When the soil of our soul is untended, it becomes trodden down and a hot bed for weeds, thorns and insects. Souls become unproductive when there is little time and attention given to the care and condition of one’s soul. The consequences of the neglect of that care are many: depletion, plateauing, burnout, depression, weariness, loss of soul or understanding of God’s purpose and call, irritability, hoarding of energy, compassion fatigue. That’s why Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and *I will give you rest ... for your souls* (Italics mine).” (Matt 11:28-29) Rest is essential to health of the soul, and restoration of a weary soul.

Just as the rhythm of “ebb” and “flow” is necessary for much of sea life for rest and the repletion of energy expended during the “flow”, there can be no high tide (flow) without the preceding low tide (ebb). Likewise, there is no spiritually powerful work without rest. The ministry journey is long and arduous. It is a marathon and not a race. “Pacing” and “care” of one’s soul throughout the journey is critical to learning and enjoying all God’s purposes, not to mention finishing the journey well. Setting the pace takes into account the monitoring of the expenditure of energy as well as the need for repletion, in order to make the purpose, goals and longevity of the journey possible. So “make every effort” to experience the rest and renewal of the “ebb” of life is of critical importance, if we are to experience the intended power of the “flow” from the hand of God’s provision.

Why is it so important to attend to the care of the soul, when the task is so great? Why take time for the care of one’s soul, when there is so much to do?

First, God Himself cared for His soul by ceasing from His work of creation on the seventh day. God's creation itself demonstrates His intention and desire that we practice a rhythm and life style of rest. As His image bearers, we are called to rest, as He rested. Rest is obvious in the day/night cycle, the seasons (dry and monsoon, winter and summer), the tides of the sea (high and low tides). I had the privilege of living near the ocean for a period of time. One day, I went to the ocean during low tide, when the waves were minimal. I saw scores of seals lying on the beach and rocks. As I started to move toward them to get a photograph, someone warned me not to get too close, so as to not disturb the seals' rest! Even seals need to rest!

Second, when we rest and the soul is cared for, it gives us the opportunity to reflect upon and assess our work, just as God Himself assessed his work of creation, and to ask ourselves if what we are doing is really "good". God did not finish the work of creation, but entrusted the on-going process to us humans. As we pull back to rest, we are given insight to assess if our work is aligned with God's purposes and desires for His creation. "When we rest, we look back and see how God has providentially led us along the way, how he has protected us and provided for us... If we don't enter into the rest that's both symbolized and experienced, our lives will become cluttered, and that will keep us confused. We often labor under the illusion that everything depends on us or on those around us. But it doesn't. Everything depends on God. And this is the great lesson that rest has to teach us." (Peterson 2007:1894).

Third, Jesus said He is the "way" (John 14:6). The prophet Jeremiah said, "Stand at the cross roads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good **way** is, and walk in it and you will find **rest** for your souls" (Jer 6:16). Dallas Willard says, "My central claim is that we can become like Christ by doing one thing— by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live." (Willard, 1988:ix) Jesus modeled for us the "way" to care for his soul by a life style characterized by both serving and resting. We get a glimpse of Jesus' rhythm for living from Mark 6. The disciples had been chosen and sent out with authority to preach and minister to the needs of the people. When they returned to Jesus, they reported all the wonderful things that had happened. Because there was so much commotion going on around them, Jesus' responded by saying, "Come away with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some **rest** (Mark 6:31)". After much ministry, Jesus invites us to be with Him and get some rest. This was Jesus' own pattern for caring for His soul.

Fourth, rest and solitude were the spiritual practices where Jesus reflected with the Father in prayer over what had happened in ministry. Communion and solitude with the Father brings rest to our soul, which gives us the strength to face the needs of the multitude. "Compassion is the fruit of solitude and the basis of all ministry. The transformation that takes place in solitude manifests itself in compassion." (Nouwen, 1981:33) Compassion is not our natural response to the needs of people, unless we have been alone with the Father, have His heart, and have come to a place of rest in our souls. Jesus could have compassion on the people, because He had been with the Father and would have more time with the Father very soon (Mark 6:34, 46).

Following are some foundational spiritual disciplines to assist in the practical care for one's soul in order to cultivate the rhythm of work and rest.

1. Get a good night of sleep. Many times I hear missionaries say, "I only need 5-6 hours of sleep." Archibald Hart in his book *Adrenalin and Stress* says that adults were created basically to get 8-10 hours of sleep (Hart 1986:154). When we are in the habit of sleeping much less than that, adrenalin may be interfering with our basic need for sleep, and in the long run this can be damaging to our health, because our bodies were not designed to live on adrenalin day after day. Adrenalin is God's tool to help us cope with emergencies, and not to be used to help us work more and rest less as a life-style. Try getting at least 8-9 hours of sleep each day for a week. Journal your experience at the end of the week.

2. Daily communion and solitude with the Father. Communion with the Father puts our souls at rest, because He reminds us again that He is with us, and it is His strength, not our own, that we are relying on to face the demands of the day. A day without a time of solitude and silence is to subject ourselves to the noise of both the world around us as well as our own hearts, often missing the opportunity to hear God's still small voice speaking quiet into the storms of the day. Try spending 20 minutes in silence with the Lord each day for a week, listening to what He has to say to you. Journal your thoughts at the end of each day.

3. Weekly Sabbaths. For us in missions, we are often called upon to minister on Sundays, the traditional day of Sabbath for most Christians. The challenge we face is how to observe the purpose of the Sabbath, which is to cease from work. "The important thing is that a particular day is set aside as the Sabbath, and that it is observed faithfully every seven days so that God can imbue us with his rhythm of six days of work and one day of ceasing work." (Dawn 1989:xi) Practice observing the Sabbath for 6 consecutive weeks, journaling your experience having ceased work one day each week for 24 hours, sundown to sundown.

4. Periodic Personal Retreats. A personal retreat is simply a concentrated and consecrated time to be alone with God for a day or two. It is that resting place where we remove ourselves from the demands of our life and give the Lord an opportunity to speak and minister to us in an unhurried setting. It can be anywhere, as long as solitude is possible and distractions are minimal. Jane Rubietta's book *Resting Place* is an excellent guide for that retreat time, with quotes and passages of Scripture to meditate on along with reflection questions and hymns to guide one during the time. Try taking a 24 hour retreat or even a week-long retreat. Journal your experience.

5. Exercise. Exercise a minimum of 150 minutes spread over 6 consecutive days. This can be working out in a gym, walking, etc. It must be intentionally planned exercise. Journal your experience.

6. Sabbaticals. “Sabbatical years are the biblically based provision for restoration. When the farmer’s field is depleted, it is given a sabbatical—after six years of planting and harvesting, it is left alone for a year so that the nutrients can build up in it. When people in ministry are depleted, they are also given a sabbatical—time apart for the recovery of spiritual and creative energies.” (Peterson, 1989:145) For some unknown reason, missionaries seldom take sabbaticals. After 35 years in missions ministry, I had never heard of missionaries taking a sabbatical, until a missionary friend shared with me his sabbatical experience. Something stirred in my heart when I heard his story and saw his changed life, because I was depleted spiritually, and my walk with God had plateaued. After taking this sabbatical, I felt such incredible love from God. I fell in love with the Lord all over again. It isn’t that God loved me more, rather my *awareness* of His love was deepened, love that was not predicated on performance and production. I now know what it is like for my soul to be at rest from having had such an extended time with my loving Father. That rest has become a plumb line, a standard, by which I assess the condition of my soul. When I get off center, I quickly take corrective action.

To take a sabbatical, with the blessing of one’s supervisor, take a minimum of two months of time stopping all ministry, and if possible, for as long as 6 months. This is a time for the restoration of one’s soul, doing whatever is life-giving and not obligatory. Journal each day, and restrain the use of the computer to once a week. Report back monthly to a select group of 4-6 godly people.

So what does it mean and how important is the rest and care for our soul? We are not called to the monastic life, or may not have the physical constitution to survive the rigors of the desert like the Desert Fathers, but we are still responsible for the care of our own souls. “Precisely because our secular milieu offers us so few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own. We have, indeed, to fashion our own ‘desert’ where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord. Without such a desert we will lose our soul, while preaching the gospel to others. But with such a spiritual abode, we will become increasingly conformed to him in whose Name we minister.” (Nouwen, 1981:30) As missionaries and leaders, the intentional care of our souls is the single most important thing we can do. As under-shepherds, we best lead the sheep to places of green pastures and quiet waters, when we ourselves have been there. When we haven’t practiced rhythms of rest, and don’t know the way to places of rest, then the sheep are impacted, because they too don’t where those places of rest are that bring restoration and transformation of the soul. The Good Shepherd is concerned for our souls, because a restored soul is directly related to the sheep’s welfare. The restoration of a depleted soul is much more arduous than the regular attentiveness to the soul’s need for a rhythm of work and rest.

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Biography

Jim Van Meter has been a missionary for more than 45 years, having served in Indonesia and the Philippines. For the last 25 years he has been involved in missionary training with a passion to focus on those areas, which enhance missionary effectiveness and reduce undesirable attrition. For the past 10 years he has been focusing on the importance of the care of the missionary soul, which he believes is the core of effectiveness. Currently, as an associate with Paraclete Mission Group he is partnering with the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance. He was part of the MC ReMAP II team that produced *Worth Keeping*, a 22-nation study on mission agency best practices that impact missionary retention. He holds a Th. M. from Dallas Seminary and a D. Min. in Global Ministries from Fuller Seminary. He and his wife Leta have 2 grown children and 5 grand children.

