

# **Sabbath and Legalism**

*by Shelly Miller*

“When we drove into our driveway after church, our neighbor stood from her crouched position pulling weeds in her flower garden, walked over to us and apologized for working on the Sabbath. Though Sabbath is a big deal in our community—big chain gas stations and even the local Walmart were closed on Sunday until recently—I was flabbergasted that anyone would feel the need to apologize for such a thing ...”

Natalie was responding to my weekly email letter to the Sabbath Society, an online community of more than 200 people who long to make rest a routine instead of an elective. She confirmed my suspicions as I speak and engage with many around the world about Sabbath.

Guilt rooted in three common myths keeps people from believing the fourth commandment is still relevant.

## **Rest Is an Ideal Not Achievable in Contemporary Culture**

Have you ever apologized for engaging in an activity that brings you pleasure? Something not associated with calculable productivity like taking a nap? Guilt about pleasure reveals an unrealistic ideal we’ve bought into regarding value. Ideals about rest often keep Sabbath elusive for many.

An apology about gardening on the Sabbath in this example isn’t conviction of sin but the sly tug toward legalism. God created the Sabbath for man because he longs for our undivided attention, not because he wants to create more hoops to jump through. The evolution of culture and society doesn’t change that.

If digging in the soil on a warm spring day makes your heart beat wildly with abandon then the activity is restorative, not an idol of identity. Some people experience the nearness of God’s presence more acutely through play, creating art, and activity, while others experience it in napping or quiet reflection. There are no ideals for rest in God’s economy, that’s why Sabbath is still as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago.

## **If I Can’t Do It Perfectly, Then What’s the Point?**

Observing Sabbath doesn’t come with a rulebook for sainthood. Perhaps God said, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” because he understands our proclivities toward forgetfulness.

When the majority of our days occupy work, we can mistakenly equate what we do with our identity and worth. Sabbath is a day of perspective; taking our hands off work to remember why we are doing it in the first place. God is the Creator and we are His created. When rest becomes a way to control time, we lose the power of His presence in it.

He isn’t as interested in how perfectly we Sabbath as he is about cultivating relationship with the One who is Perfect.

## **I Am Lazy and Irresponsible if I Take a Whole Day to Rest**

This lie is possibly the most popular thread in our thinking that keeps Sabbath an elective and not a mainstay of living. When we leave the sink full of dirty dishes, the laundry baskets overflowing and toys strewn like fall leaves covering the carpet, God doesn't shake his finger and call those decisions a shortcoming. He smiles about our willingness to trust him with 24 hours.

God says to test him regarding the tithe because he knows we'll find him trustworthy. Perhaps he's saying the same thing about Sabbath. Test Him with a day to rest, abide in his presence and watch the way he multiplies the hours during the other six days of the week.

You'll soon find guilt elusive and Sabbath a weekly freedom like seeing weeds as God's artistry instead of a nuisance.

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### **Prayer:**

Lord Jesus,

Sometimes we get caught in all the rules and regulations that are in our world. Help us to remember that you created Sabbath us so we could enjoy our families, good books, naps, playtime, and your creation and not feel guilty. May we be reminded that we are cultivating a relationship with you, the One who is Perfect. We give thanks that you are trustworthy and invite us to rest in your presence.

In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

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### **Questions:**

1. Do you ever feel guilty for resting? Where does that guilt come from—actual conviction or your own standards?
2. Are there any activities that others might consider work, but that are restful for you?
3. Do you find yourself identifying yourself based on your work? How about others?
4. Has legalism ever taken the joy out of Sabbath for you or someone you know? How about in other areas of your life and spiritual walk?