

Sabbath and Modern Day Slavery

by Kirk Winslow

But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Deuteronomy 5:14-15

How many times have we gazed into our electronic calendars, crammed full of colored squares, and thought: "I feel like a slave to this thing!" We hasten from the conference call in the wee hours, to the team meeting over lunch, to the email that must be returned "immediately!" while rushing to make the soccer game that ends at nightfall. Do we control our calendars, or do they control us?

In the ancient world, when slavery was a tragically common reality of daily life, time belonged only to the ruling class. Kings and lords determined the schedule, and slaves—regarded more as property than people—had to obey. In such a context, one of the great symbols of true freedom, then, was rest.

Thus, the connection between the Sabbath and the Exodus becomes clearer. By delivering his people from Pharaoh, YHWH had become Israel's Lord. One of the ways YHWH expressed his kingship was to restore the dignity of his people, reflected in granting them rest. In short, to rest on the Sabbath was a weekly reminder that Israel was free and YHWH was king.

Just as YHWH's kingship was to affect every dimension of Israel's life, so respite from labor was to be the possession of every person within Israel's borders. From the elders to the children, the sojourners to the slaves, everyone was a dignified human in God's kingdom. It was the obligation of the ruling class to ensure the Sabbath for all. This, in turn, places our personal sabbath observance in a new light.

No longer can I regard the neglect of my own rest as a victimless crime. By foregoing rest, I not only undermine my own health and humanity, I communicate to others that rest, and the freedom it implies, is optional. In so doing, I fail to safeguard the dignity of those with less power than me (and we must never forget that actual slavery remains a reality in our world—an evil the people of God are called to confront!).

We must never forget that rest is not a reward; it is not a bonus earned when the work is done. Rather sabbath is an obligation to respect humanness (ours and others') as God created it. Strangely, protecting rest is some of the most important work the people of God can do!

Prayer:

Our gracious God,

We acknowledge your kingship over all creation, and we submit ourselves to your authority. It is your insistence that we not only work for your ends, but rest according to your will. So help us to value our stopping as much as our going, our ceasing as much as our doing. Help us to value ourselves and likewise to ensure the value of others by granting rest to weary souls. Amen.

Questions:

1. In what ways are you feeling captive to your calendar?
2. Does reframing rest as a human dignity issue motivate you to protect it more vigorously?
3. Are there people who look up to you who need your encouragement to rest?
4. What step can you take to offer the freedom of rest to yourself and to others?