

*Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (NRSV)*

<sup>12</sup>Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.

*Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NRSV)*

<sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup>As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

<sup>53</sup>When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. <sup>54</sup>When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, <sup>55</sup>and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup>And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

*We begin today a new series: American Idols.*

*We know God banned the worshiping of idols, but what do we really mean.?*

*How might we be idolaters, even when it comes to our work?*

*Idols . . . American idols*

When we first began working on this series, I assumed that I knew what we were talking about. I was wrong. I had thought to myself . . . ok, an idol is whatever we worship, and it might be work or money or work or career success or even family. But I soon realized after some study and reflection that I wasn't getting very far. My series on American idols was going to end up a series on priorities, i.e., what comes first in my life. That would be a wonderful and helpful series, but I had the uneasy feeling that there was more to this business of idols and idolatry than I had thought.

So I turned where I often do when I need a new and deeper direction, I turned to Eugene Peterson. Here is a bit of what he had to say about idols in his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a conversation in spiritual theology*:

- Idolatry is “reducing God to a concept or object that we can use for our benefit.”
- “Idolatry is using God, not worshipping God.”
- “An idol is god with all the God taken out. God depersonalized, God derelationalized, a god that we can use and enlist and fantasize without ever once having to (maybe ‘getting to’ is the better phrase) receive or give love,

and then to go on to live, however falteringly, at our most human. The essence of idolatry is depersonalization. The idol is a form of divinity that requires no personal relationship. The idol is a form of divinity that I can manipulate or control. The idol reverses the God/creature relationship: now I am the god and the idol is the creature.”

I may not have thought of idolatry in that way, but that is definitely the biblical view. Idolatry is not about the priorities in my life, but how I think about God and how I relate to God.

### Sabbath

Of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to practice Sabbath is the most richly detailed (Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Out of his love and genuine concern for his people, God commands that they rest on one day out of seven. This rest is to be extended to all – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (see Galatians 3:28 for a thought-provoking parallel) – even the livestock! Further, this rest is explicitly tied to God’s redemption of his people from bondage in Egypt. Sabbath is to be a holy time, set apart for God, in whom we find true rest.

Jews marked observed Sabbath on Saturday but marked days from sunset to sunset. Thus, the Jewish Sabbath began about 6pm on Friday.

Because Jesus was resurrected on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, Christians came to adopt Sunday as the principal day for worship.

Consider the Ten Commandments and idols:

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the LORD your God am jealous God . . .” (Exodus 20:4-5a)

Such idols were usually crafted figurines of various sizes and materials who represented gods of varying functions. Some brought fertility, some rain, others harvests, and so on. Ancient people devised rituals to call upon these gods to deliver what the people needed and desired.

Since we humans have a wide assortment of needs and wants there were numerous such gods and their material representations, the idols.

The truth is that this isn’t too far removed from some advice I was once given on how to sell a house fast: (1) buy a figurine of a certain Roman Catholic saint, (2) bury it in the front flower bed, face up with the feet pointing to the street (or was it the other way around?), and (3) stand back and watch the offers roll in.

You’re probably thinking to yourself, how silly. Surely I don’t reduce God to some sort of good luck charm or real estate agent. Or do I? These are

the sorts of questions we’ll be exploring in this series, as we seek to know better the God of creation and resurrection and the numerous ways in which we unknowingly reduce God to a god that suits our purposes.

### *Idolatry and work*

Here’s Peterson on the idol of work:

- “Along the way [of our Christian journey] the primacy of God and his work in our lives gives way ever so slightly to the primacy of our work in God’s kingdom. . . . It usually takes a long time for the significance of the shift to show up. But when it does it turns out that we have not so much been worshipping God as enlisting him as a trusted and valuable assistant . . . Why not ask God to help us in our work? He invited us to, didn’t he, when he said, ‘Ask and you shall receive . . .’? Well, yes, he did. The problem is that, taken out of the context of the wonder of creation and resurrection, any prayer soon becomes an act of idolatry, reducing God to what I can use for my purposes, however noble and useful.”

Ouch! Reducing God to my valuable helper as I pursue my noble and good work. You can imagine that someone with a lot of business training and experience, as I have, could easily fall into such idolatry. Do I really use God? Sadly, I'm sure that I often try to, quite removed from, as Peterson puts it, the wonder of creation and resurrection.

### Sabbath in Jesus' Day

The Jews were God's chosen people. Of all the nations on the planet, God had made a covenant with them! For hundreds of years, ever since the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews had struggled to stay true to YHWH, to resist the pressures of cultural assimilation by their oppressors. There were several potent symbols of Jewish distinctiveness – and they were non-negotiable. Sabbath-keeping was one of these symbols. By definition, Jews were those who kept the Sabbath.

In Luke 13, Jesus heals a crippled woman whose body had been in bondage to Satan for 18 years. To the dismay of the local synagogue leader, Jesus heals her on the Sabbath. Jesus' confrontation with this leader is not really about the legal niceties of Sabbath law, but about Jesus' frustration that so many Jews are unable to see that the great Sabbath day, the day of Israel's release from bondage, was breaking in upon them all. Thus, after the confrontation, Jesus teaches not about the law, but about the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:18-21). As Rabbi Arthur Waskow recently wrote, "With Shabbat, we get what Jewish tradition calls a foretaste . . . of the Messianic Age, a higher Eden."<sup>1</sup>

1. This is from an article, "Radical Shabbat," in *Sojourners* magazine. The article is available online at [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net) in their magazine archive.

Work has a way of squeezing such wonder out of our lives. We are organized, analyzed, scheduled, and pressed to where everyone and everything can become a tool to get the job done. Functionality, usefulness, and effectiveness become our watchwords. And then when someone comes along talking about our need to recapture the wonder of creation and resurrection, we roll our eyes. Who's got the time or energy for that touchy-feely stuff.

So how can we regain that sense of wonder that elevates God and his creation, that in every moment of every day suffuses our relationships and activities . . . and work . . . with the worshipful appreciation of the Lord our God?

There are surely many places we might begin, but I want to suggest that regaining genuine Sabbath in the pace of our lives is foundational to gaining wonder. It isn't the only way, but without Sabbath, you'll never get there.

### *Compassion . . . shepherd . . . rest*

Too often, we live frantic lives. We fill our days with so many activities and obligations that it can sometimes feel like we are barely hanging on. It is clear from the Gospels that even Jesus and his disciples were often pushed hard by the crowds that came seeking healing and teaching. In today's passage from Mark, Jesus knows that his disciples<sup>1</sup> desperately need some rest and renewal. Understandably, Jesus tells them to get away, to find a deserted place and get

some rest. Again, perhaps paralleling our own best intentions, the crowds foil the disciples' plans. Jesus and his helpers simply cannot escape. Nonetheless, Jesus has compassion for the surging crowds and, like a good shepherd, sets aside his own needs and gives the throng what they had come seeking.

We misread the story if we think that all Jesus had in mind for himself and his disciples was a little time away from the office. For many of us, we manage to make vacations

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<sup>1</sup> You'll notice in the scripture passage that Jesus uses the word "apostles." This is the only occurrence of "apostle" in Mark's Gospel. Usually, of course, Jesus' closest followers are referred to as "disciples" in the Gospels. "Disciple" is akin to student or apprentice. "Apostle" means "messenger" or "one who is sent forth." Here (6:30), Mark probably uses "apostle" because in 6:7 Jesus "sends" the disciples out in two-man teams to spread the Good News.

and other so-called “downtime” every bit as frantic as the rest of our lives. But if the “rest” of which Jesus speaks isn’t simply downtime, what is it?

### *Practicing Sabbath*

Recently, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA urged its clergy and congregations to rediscover the gift of Sabbath. Calling on both scriptural teachings and centuries-old Christian traditions, the Presbyterians articulated well the larger sense of Sabbath among God’s people. They noted that the “gift of Sabbath” serves many purposes:<sup>2</sup>

- “*Sabbath is for our joy and our rest.*” John Calvin<sup>3</sup> wrote, “Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing.” As God rested on the seventh day to rejoice in the goodness of his creation, Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is!
- “*Sabbath is for deepened communion with the Living God.*” Sabbath is a time that we set aside for God to shape us within, to restore that sense of wonder.
- “*Sabbath draws us into the sacred rhythm God has woven into all of life and all creation.*” In addition to a Sabbath day, God commanded that his people honor a Sabbath year. Every seventh year the fields were not to be sown and the vines were not to be pruned. The land itself was to have a Sabbath to God. After seven Sabbath years there was to be a year of Jubilee, when land was to be returned to its original family, for it was God’s land, not the Israelites’ (Leviticus 25). In the Jubilee year, slaves were to be freed, just as God had redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. The Sabbath is about the need for and goodness of rest, redemption, and renewal.
- “*Sabbath is profoundly prophetic.*” Again Calvin: “Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God.”
- “*Sabbath is for our life in community.*” Sabbath is not a private gift from God. The Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as the entire community of God’s people.

For too long, I associated “Sabbath” with no work and stores closed on Sunday! But I’ve gained a deeper appreciation for the true meaning of Sabbath. It is about much more than simply my leisure. It is about God, and about community, and about reconnecting with God and one another as we pull ourselves away from the craziness of our daily lives.

Sabbath is about working from our rest and not vice versa. For it is in rest that we can begin to experience a sense of wonder, of new creation and resurrection. It is in rest that we can hear God’s voice anew and come to see our co-workers as persons, unique and each made in the image of God. It is in rest that we can begin to see the subtle idolatry in our own life with God.

This journey through the American Idols will present new challenges to us each week. It is Sabbath rest that will sustain us as we strive to see how even we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians are idolaters.

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<sup>2</sup>The quotations and much of this section are taken from “An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift,” written by the Sabbath Keeping Work Group of the PCUSA General Assembly in 2000.

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin was one of the great Protestant reformers and a near-contemporary of Martin Luther. Calvin was the founder of what is known as the “Reformed” branch of Protestantism. The Presbyterian Church USA is the largest Calvinist/Reformed denomination in America, as the United Methodist Church is the largest Wesleyan denomination.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In this study, I've shared some of my own struggles with this topic of idols and idolatry. I'm convinced that it is important and more challenging than we think. In what ways have you always thought of idols? Have you ever considered yourself an idolater, i.e., a worshiper of idols? I suggest that it has to be more than simply the ordering of my priorities and focus. Do you agree? If so, why? You might go back and re-read what Peterson has to say and put it in the context of the "house-selling saint." In what ways do you reduce God to a trusted and valuable assistant?
  
2. Who doesn't ask God for help and guidance? We all do. Peterson suggests that it is the context in which we come to God that matters so much. He argues that we need to come to God in a context of sheer wonder . . . wonder at God's creation and God's rescue of his creation. I think I see what he means. Living in right relationship with God certainly implies that I appreciate and live within the beauty and truth and wonder of God and his creation. Thus, if I'm truly living with God in the right relationship, then I come to him for help as the creature, not the pseudo-creator. You might try to put this in your words. Do you think it is the context of our prayers that matter so much? Perhaps another way to say it is that we need to live within God's will and purposes if we are going to avoid reducing God to a mere helper of our purposes.
  
3. We don't really make much of Sabbath keeping anymore. In the Bible, Sabbath is a gift from God and an honor due God. Should we try to rediscover this gift? If so, how? Why? Should we restore the practice of keeping every seventh day as the Lord's Day . . . keeping it holy? Do you think that we are talking about the activities of a single day or the ways in which we order our lives? The Presbyterian working group I referred to in the study, suggests some simple Sabbath acts in which we might engage: seeking rest from daily occupation, sharing with others in worship, taking time with God's word, engaging in acts of compassion, and enjoying activities that refresh and renew the spirit. Are there others you might add to this list? Which of these would most help you to rediscover the gift of Sabbath?

### *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

In this week's readings, we'll get a sampling of biblical passages on Sabbath.

<b>Monday, Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15</b> The Sabbath commandment	<b>Tuesday, Leviticus 25</b> The Sabbath year and Jubilee
<b>Wednesday, Amos 8:1-6</b> The Lord warns those who wish the Sabbath to be over so they can get back to work (v.5)!	<b>Thursday, Mark 2:23-28</b> Jesus calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath (for he is the Son of Man)
<b>Friday, Luke 13:10-21</b> Jesus heals on the Sabbath and tells parables about the Kingdom of God.	<b>Saturday, Luke 14:1-6</b> Again, Jesus heals on the Sabbath and confronts the Pharisees.

# Encounter

*a time for fellowship, worship, and learning*

Are you ready for a life with God that makes a real difference? Would you like to develop a passion for Scripture? Would you like to make new friends in a casual, Christian setting? The time has come . . . **Encounter** is happening to St. Andrew, every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall.

Featuring the music of Jodi Wright, the teaching of Scott Engle, and the pastoral leadership of Rev. Steve Robertson, **Encounter** will be a Wednesday evening time for connecting with God, his word, and one another. Each week, we'll worship together with fresh and engaging music. We'll encounter God's word in an innovative time of teaching and preaching, beginning with the Gospel of Mark. We'll make new friends and share our joys and concerns. Each week . . . Every week.

We are offering a children's program, as well as childcare for the littlest ones.

We are making meals available at 5:45 in Youth Commons, much like last fall's popular "Soup for the Soul." Dinner is \$5 per person or \$15 per family. Reservations can be made at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org).

Whatever you think this is . . . well, it is probably a bit different. You'll have to come see for yourself!

## *Uniquely You*

*Your personality, your talents, and your spiritual gifts*

**A six-week series beginning this Sunday, September 13, in Scott's 11:00 class**

God has created each of us to be unique humans made in his image. He has given all people widely varying personalities and talents. In addition, God's Spirit has given believers certain gifts for the good of the body of Christ. In this six-week series, we'll examine the Spirit's work in our lives and the gifts given to each of us. We'll take both a personality test and a spiritual gifts inventory, as we seek to understand the differences between them and the unique way in which God hopes we will put these gifts to work for God's kingdom.

Cost of the assessment materials: \$10

Scott is a certified instructor in both of the assessments we'll be using

## Sermon Notes

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