

Mark 1:35–37 (NIV)

³⁵Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

Mark 6:30–34 (NIV)

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. ³¹Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

³²So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Luke 5:16 (NIV)

¹⁶But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Matthew 14:9–13 (NIV)

⁹The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted ¹⁰and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹²John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

¹³When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

We all need rest. But what is the sort of rest God intends for us?

Respite is a time of rest or relief. It may seem odd to us that Jesus needs times of respite, occasions when he would withdraw from the pressing crowds and head off alone. When he learns of the killing of John the Baptist, he withdraws and heads off alone. So human.

But Jesus’ times away were not simply meant for solitude. Rather, these were times to be with his Father and to pray. Jesus, you see, was divine but he was also fully human with the same need for rest or, more pointedly, Sabbath that you and I have, even if we ignore God on this. Sabbath, rest, and prayer are not just for us, they were for Jesus as well.

Compassion . . . shepherd . . . rest

We often 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 Jesus and his disciples were often pushed hard by the crowds that came seeking healing and teaching. In today’s passage from Mark

6, Jesus knows that his disciples¹ 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 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

Two decades ago, 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:²

- "*Sabbath is for our joy and our rest.*" John Calvin³ 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.
- "*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."

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ John Calvin was one of the great Protestant reformers and a generation later than 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.

- “*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.

I always associated “Sabbath” with no work and stores closed on Sunday. But as I learned more, I 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. We so need to rediscover the gift of Sabbath and respite.

There is more here than rest. Prayer is an integral part of practicing Sabbath in our daily lives. But why?

Why pray?

Why pray? The reason is simple. We pray because our heart seeks its true home . . . and its true home is the heart of God.⁴ God longs for our presence. After Adam and Eve made their fateful decision to turn away from God, God came to the garden, calling for Adam, seeking him. In much the same way, God invites each of us to come to him, to come home, to return to the way of life for which we were made. Our hearts hear God’s call, but we’ve turned so far away from God that the call is somehow muffled. It is a little like hearing a phone ring, but being unsure where the ring is coming from, much less who is on the other end of the line. We might search all over the house and yet never look in the right place.

I often refer to an article I read long ago, “The Futile Pursuit of Happiness.”⁵ The widely-shared article tells of researchers whose studies have concluded that we think we know what will make us happy – but we don’t. I’m sure that people were drawn to the article because it speaks to the human condition. We have restless, yearning hearts that seek peace and joy. We spend much of our life looking one place after another for something that will make us happy or joyful or content. But, in truth, our restless hearts will only find their rest in God.

Coming home

Writing thousands of years ago, the psalmists expressed our hearts’ seeking after God, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . My soul clings to you . . . happy are those who take refuge in him. . . in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy”. The heart of the psalmists’ prayer, indeed all prayer, is a loving relationship . . . between God and me . . . between God and you . . . between God and all those who seek their “heart’s true home.”

Richard Foster uses familiar, yet powerful, imagery to describe this home. “We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity . . . he

⁴This beautiful phrase, “the heart’s true home,” is from Richard Foster’s book, *Prayer*. This book is a touching and challenging presentation of prayer and will be my book recommendation for February. It is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

⁵The article is by Jon Gertner and was in the *NY Times* on September 7, 2003.

invites us into the bedroom of his rest . . . where we are known and are known to the fullest. . . . The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.”⁶

But do our prayers actually make a difference?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this ever-present question as to whether prayer can actually change the course of events. We pray for a friend’s recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost. Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God’s response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn’t respond to this. You wouldn’t either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we “let go and let God” waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all *and* God does it all.

If I go back to school so I can get a better job, it will change the course of the future. Not even the most rigid determinist doubts that. But when it comes to God, all of a sudden I believe that what I do (pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future.

But the prayers of the Bible reveal something else. They show us the truth that our prayers not only do us good, they do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, *and* my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God’s purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and storms strike. Creation remains wild, untamed, and even hostile. However, Fretheim writes:

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a “Who knows?” (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a “Perhaps” (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but

⁶from the introduction to Foster’s book, *Prayer*, p. 1-2.

whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.

Yes, God responds to us and answers our prayers. Yes, our prayers matter and can make a real difference, even when we have trouble discerning where and how. Jesus calls us to a life of prayer and genuine Sabbath rest. That is Good News!

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Judges*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: *Digging Deeper*: "It's All Greek to Me : Christians, the Septuagint, and the Apocrypha"

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.