Genesis 2:2, John 15:5, Psalm 16 February 24, 2019

*Pleasant Places, Part 6*

*Living with Healthy, Biblical Boundaries*

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We have come to our sixth of this sermon series entitled, Pleasant Places, based off of Psalm 16, “*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.”* God has shown us where we need to have boundaries in our lives so we can have less stress, more peace, and more joy. Last week, I proposed to you that we need to draw a boundary between Christ-serving and self-serving. This week, we are going to go a little deeper for a boundary that will not only help us serve Christ, but also is very beneficial to ourselves. But first, let’s pray: *Thank you God for giving us your word and your spirit so we do not have to live this life on our own. Thank you for giving us a community, the Church, to gather together and share life with. Thank you for showing us the path of life so we may have joy and peace. As we turn to your word today give us eyes to see and ears to listen. May your word come forth and speak into all of our lives. Amen.*

The first thing I had to do when I entered seminary was to read a book entitled, *The New Science of Learning: How to Learn in Harmony with Your Brain.* Essentially, it is this short little book explaining study tips and how to absorb and retain information so that one can reach their “full potential of learning.” The authors discuss things like exercise, using all your senses to learn, patterns, memory, and, my favorite, sleep. A book that encourages you to take naps, that is my kind of book. But isn’t it interesting that someone has to tell us that sleep, naps, and breaks are good for us. Rest is essential for function; our bodies need rest. What happens when our bodies do not get the rest that we need? Life does not go well for us. So why is it that we struggle with drawing a boundary between work and rest?

Burn-out is a buzz word that is thrown around today in many circles. In both my undergrad and graduate studies the topic of managing stress and burnout has been and continues to be a major theme in my courses. Stress, anxiety, and depression are on the rise in our society as a whole and especially among our young people. While there are many contributing factors, I believe that part of the problem is that we just cannot slow down and rest. We have too many things on our list, too many responsibilities we have to take care of, and too many things we would like to get accomplished. We only get twenty-four hours in a day and we need to make the most of those twenty-four hours.

I confess that I have not managed and upheld this boundary of work and rest well. I tend to overbook myself sometimes, saying yes to too many things at once and then scrambling to get it all done. I overestimate how much time I have to work on certain projects and underestimate on the amount of time I actually need to complete them. There are some days in which maybe I rest too much and others when I rest not enough. I am sure I am not the only one with this problem of not managing a good boundary between work and rest.

But this boundary is one we all should pay attention to because God has made it pretty clear to us in his Word. It is right there in the beginning. Genesis 2:2, *“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so, on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”* God rested. God…rested. Did he need to rest? Was he exhausted from the work that he had just accomplished? I don’t think so. God did not need the rest, but he took it anyway. God took a step back and marveled at his creation, he enjoyed his creation.

Skipping ahead to Exodus when the Israelites were led out of Egypt. In between the commandments addressing our relationship with God and our relationship with others is commandment number 4: *“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20: 8-11)”* God commanded his people to rest, to take a Sabbath. But what is a Sabbath and why is it important?

As we learn from Exodus the Sabbath was a day of rest instituted after the Israelites left Egypt. It is unclear whether or not Sabbath rest occurred before then, but most likely the Egyptians, as slave masters, would not allow it if it did. Sabbath in its simplest and most basic form is a time of bodily rest and refreshment. God knew that it was not good for people to work “24/7” and so he created a time for them to rest. However, Sabbath is also deeper than that. Sabbath is also the space where we have fellowship with God in our rest. True rest and Sabbath is not only physical rest, but also spiritual and emotional rest and refreshment. In a time where it seems like stress is running the world, some rest and refreshment sounds nice.

While this rest and refreshment sounds nice, we might not see it as always practical or feasible to fit a time of rest, of doing nothing, into our already busy schedules. I can’t just not do anything. I just cannot stop for twenty-four hours. I work forty hours during the week so on the weekend I need to take care of the house, do those things on my list that has fallen to the back burner, and then I need to prepare myself for the week ahead. I just cannot possibly find time to experience rest and renewal. In response to this, may I point you back to last week’s boundary of Christ-serving and self-serving? Who are you trying to please by working yourself into a nervous breakdown: God, man, or yourself?

My second response is this: Sabbath rest is not about doing or not doing. Sabbath rest is a matter of being. Sabbath rest is not just sitting around doing nothing. It was never meant to be legalistic in which you cannot do anything. The Pharisees saw it as such, leading to some conflict over whether it was lawful for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath. The gospels give us various accounts of Jesus’ miracles on the Sabbath. The first coming from Matthew 12:9-13, “*Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ He said to them, ‘If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.’ Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ So, he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.”* From the Gospel of Luke, we get this account, “*On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, ‘There are six days for work. So, come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.’ The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to get water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her.”*

I love Jesus’ language here. He tells her, “*Woman, you are set free from infirmity,”* and “*Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set FREE on the Sabbath day from what bound her.”* Sabbath is meant to give us freedom and remind us of the freedom we have in Christ! We are not meant to be slaves to this world! We are not meant to be slaves to success! We are not meant to be slaves to anything! But we are meant and called to be free! A Sabbath is a day to live different and remember what the Lord has done for us. We remember the Lord as creator as we enjoy creation. We remember the Lord as provider as we enjoy the blessings he has given us. We remember the Lord as our strength and our source of life.

Hershey Park has an attraction called the East Coast Waterworks. It is that area in the waterpark that has the water slides and the gigantic bucket that fills up with water and then dumps it all out on those standing below. That bucket has one job right: to fill up with water and splash people below. Imagine what would happen if the bucket was not getting filled. If it’s not getting filled with water, then it cannot dump water on those below. If it is not connected to the source of water, then it cannot do its job properly. Your vehicle has one job, to transport you between point ‘A’ and point ‘B’ so long as it has fuel in the tank. What happens you’re your vehicle is running on empty. Eventually, if you don’t fill it back up, it will break down. Rendering it useless until it is full again. In the same way, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we have one job: to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ. If we are not connected to the source, we cannot do our job properly. Jesus told his followers in John 15, “*Abide in me, and I will abide in you. A branch cannot bear fruit if it is disconnected from the Vine, and neither will you if you are not connected to me. I am the Vine, and you are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear great fruit. Without me, you will accomplish nothing.”*

How can we stay connected to the Vine, if we are always racing around in our busyness? How can we expect to bear fruit, if we are not connected to the Vine? We need to invest in purposeful and meaningful rest, as Jesus did. It doesn’t matter how noble our busyness might be, it will eventually wear us out. Jesus knew this and so he took time to teach his disciples about the importance of rest and to set an example for them. In Mark 6, Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs to “*go out in the countryside, preaching the changed life as Jesus had taught them, casting out unclean spirits and anointing the sick with oil to heal them.”* (Mark 6:12-13, Voice Translation). When they came back and were all excited to tell him their stories, Jesus’ response was, “*Let us go out into the wilderness for a while and rest ourselves (Mark 6:31).”* Author Ruth Barton in her book, “*Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership,”* notes that Jesus was “more concerned with helping them to establish rhythms that would sustain them in ministry than he was in their ministry reports.” Jesus wanted to make sure that his disciples understood their limits. If they were going to be sustainable and bear fruit for the kingdom, then they needed to learn to rest. And so do we?

Barton also writes this, “…we want to give our best for our calling. We want to run the race we have been given to run to the best of our ability. We want to last for the long haul. There is nothing more crucial to the staying power of the leader than establishing rhythms that keep us replenished – body, mind, and soul. There is nothing more crucial than rhythms that help us make ourselves available to God for the work that only he can do in us – day in and day out. Week in and week out. Year in and year out. All organisms follow life-sustaining rhythms. If we believe that we are somehow above or beyond or immune to our need for such rhythms, we will find ourselves in danger. Sabbath keeping is the linchpin of a life lived in sync with the rhythms that God himself built into our world, and yet it is the discipline that seems hardest for us to live. Sabbath keeping honors the body’s need for rest, the spirit’s need for replenishment and the soul’s need to delight itself in God for God’s own sake.”

We cannot follow Christ and do our one job if we are not connected to him and if we do not establish these rhythms of rest. If we try to live without this boundary we will become worn out, giving the devil a foot hold to wreak havoc and chaos in our lives. But by finding rest, we can be more attuned to God. When we are more attuned to God we can experience the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Who wants more of these qualities in your life? God has given them to us, but we can be too frantic at times to notice or practice them. We need to slow down and rest.

How do you rest? What brings you replenishment and refreshment? What would purposeful and meaningful rest look like? I want you to think about an activity or hobby you really enjoy doing. Why do you enjoy this activity? Does this activity cause you to slow down? Does this activity provide meaningful connections with family and friends? Does this activity give you peace? If you answered yes to these questions, then maybe this is how God wired you to find rest and renewal. I know for some people, hiking or walking is how they wind down and find rest. The activity allows them to focus their thoughts and more specifically focus their thoughts on God. This could be any other outdoor experience because there is something about being in God’s creation that helps us to understand how awesome and wonderful God is. Others may find renewal and refreshment in knitting or crocheting. Others it might be baking or cooking. God wired us differently to find relaxation in different ways. But I challenge you, no matter where you find this peace and refreshment to do it in a way that is intentionally focusing on God, who is the giver of peace. Focus on God and what he may be trying to teach you. I also challenge you to mark out space to intentionally be with God. Sit down in his word and don’t rush through it, but pray through it. Spend time in prayer. Make time to just be with God, whether that is when you are drinking your morning cup of coffee, your drive to work, or during that two o’clock slump. Find a time that works for you and rest with God.

Then also, rest in him. When life is difficult and chaos and stress are getting the best of you, do not keep trying to plow ahead. Stop, breathe, pray. Rest in God and his strength. Relinquish your own strength and submit to God’s strength. A big part of this boundary between work and rest is the ability to relinquish control. Release your work to God. We cannot be all things to all people. Only God is that. When we refuse to release it to God, we only make idols of ourselves. But by practicing rhythms of rest and work (because work is also a good thing created by God), we shine the light not on ourselves, but on the one who created us. We can live differently because of the one who has shown us the way, who is The Way. Jesus has shown us the path of life. We need to slow down, rest, and pay attention to how he has shown us to live. To conclude, I would like to read together Psalm 16, using the voice translation.

*Psalm 16*

*Protect me, God, for the only safety I know is found in the moments I seek you. I told you, Eternal One, ‘You are my Lord, for the only good I know in this world is found in You alone.’ The beauty of faith-filled people encompasses me. They are true, and my heart is thrilled beyond measure. All the while the despair of many, who abandoned Your goodness for the empty promises of false gods, increases day by day. I refuse to pour out blood offerings to utter their names from my lips. You, Eternal One, are my sustenance and my life-giving cup. In that cup, You hold my future and my eternal riches. My home is surrounded in beauty; You have gifted me with abundance and a rich legacy. I will bless the Eternal; whose wise teaching orchestrates my days and centers my mind at night. He is ever present with me; at all times, He goes before me. I will not live in fear or abandon my calling because He stands at my right hand. This is a good life – my heart is glad, my soul is full of joy, and my body is at rest. Who could want for more? You will not abandon me to experience death and the grave or leave me to rot alone. Instead, You direct me on the path that leads to a beautiful life. As I walk with You, the pleasures are never-ending, and I know true joy and contentment. Amen.*