

May 25, 2008

Isaiah 56:4-7 / Isaiah 58:13-14 / Luke 6:1-11

Luke (#20) - The True Purpose of the Sabbath – Spending Time With God

Every so often I have a chance to get together with couples whose weddings I officiated at years previously—years after the initial glow of marital infatuation has faded, and children have come on the scene, and squabbles over childrearing techniques have taken place, and financial pressures and obligations have mounted and things just aren't as rosy or romantic as they used to be!

One such occasion took place a few of years back. I was traveling to their part of the country, and when they heard I was in the area they invited me to join them at a local restaurant. We did some initial catching up, and then a ways into the conversation, I popped the pastoral question — *“So, how things going between the two of you?”*

HE immediately responded: *“Good, things are going really good.”* Then I looked at her, and I could tell by the look on her face that she saw things a tad bit differently! And I was right, because after a little hesitation, she said: *“Okay, I guess.”* And after a somewhat uncomfortable pause in the conversation, I came to find out the reason they disagreed.

You see, HE felt their relationship was doing really well, because they weren't fighting that much / there were no major problems / there was only the occasional little spat over minor things / and they were keeping ahead of things financially. SHE, on the other hand, totally disagreed that just because there were “no major problems,” the relationship was “going really good.”

So I probed a bit further and asked them, “When was the last time you guys went out on a date together — alone?” HE said, as close as could figure, it had been at least 6 months. “Six months!?” SHE replied, “It's been at least a year!”

So I probed even further:

Flowers? I asked. No. / Surprises? No. / Special little gifts? No. / Candlelight dinners? No. / Getting a babysitter so just the two of them could escape to a quiet place and talk about their plans and dreams and aspirations? No. / Anything at all to make her feel more loved and appreciated? No, he confessed, none of the above. They had settled into the nightly routine of so many married couples — him coming home from work tired, to a wife who was also a bit tired from being with the kids all day without a break / eating dinner / cleaning up from dinner / playing with the kids / relaxing on a chair in front of the TV / then heading to bed only to do it all over again the next day.

Nothing bad, mind you, just nothing special! And in all that she felt neglected and obviously unappreciated—like he didn't care for her enough to make her feel special. (Something he'd been very good at when they were courting, but apparently stopped being good at shortly after they were married and the kids came along!)

As we talked it became clear:

She felt more like a maid and a nanny, than a wife. Like an employee brought in to keep the family machinery running smoothly, and perform the necessary domestic functions. But she DIDN'T feel cared for emotionally, and she definitely DIDN'T feel loved passionately or romantically—at least not since the kids had come along.

And he's not alone! I think most males wrestle with that to one degree or another. When we're dating we're sure to make their perspective mate feel loved and desired and appreciated. But once we're married for a few years—or a few decades—and the hormones have subsided, the thought of doing such things becomes less and less frequent!

Anyway, after talking for quite a while, I finally suggested that he read James Dobson's book – "What Wives Wish Husbands Knew About Women." And I also made him promise to set aside one night each week to take her out on a date, and never plan anything on that night without her permission, since that would be her night with him.

"If you do it only when you can fit it in, or try for just once a month," I said, *"it probably won't become a regular habit."* (In fact, that's what they had been doing—intending to fit it in once in a while). *"You need to set aside one specific night every week where just the two of you spend time together—talking, catching up, relaxing together, or just going for a walk—anything you both like to do, or other things will nudge it out of your schedule."*

"It's a necessity," I said, *"for a healthy relationship. People who don't spend quality time together communicating on a regular basis become distanced from each other!"* Spending time together, alone, talking and sharing is not a luxury, it's a necessity for any couple that wants to have a healthy and lasting relationship!

Now by this time you're probably scratching your heads and wondering, *"What the heck does all this have to do with the Sabbath? I thought the text was about the Sabbath!"*

And my response to you is this: Dating has everything to do with the Sabbath—everything! In fact, in my opinion, what I've just shared with you is the best way to view the Sabbath!

Because rightly understood the Sabbath was the one day God sanctified, or set aside each week for us to be able to spend undistracted, quality time together—us focusing on Him and Him speaking to us and communing with us.

That's the **FIRST** thing we can be assured of in relation to the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day set aside by God each week for the express purpose of nurturing and sustaining the love relationship that exists between God and His BRIDE. It's the one day each week that He set apart to strengthen and sustain the relational bond between the Groom and His Bride — who continues to be His BRIDE forever!

Did you ever notice that in Scripture? Did you ever notice that we're never referred to as His "wife" – in the routine, settled, domestic sense of the word? Not ever! Rather, in Scripture we're habitually locked into the "wedding day imagery," and we never move beyond it regardless of how many years we've been "married" or "spiritually joined to Jesus." With God we never move beyond the zealous passion and affectionate love of the wedding day.

In that sense John Eldridge is right when he calls our relationship with God, "The Sacred Romance." It is! And the key to understanding it is that unlike our earthly courtships and marriages, our marriage to Him never moves beyond the romance stage! The zealous, passionate, affectionate stage.

God continues to be passionate about His Bride and His relationship with His Bride, regardless of how long we've been together, how old we get, how many wrinkles we have, how many grey hairs we get, or if we even have any hairs or teeth left at all! God loves His dear aged saints as zealously and passionately as He ever did when you were young and strong and virile!

And to make sure that the warmth of affection between us never diminishes or flickers out, God wisely set aside a one day every week to "DATE HIS BRIDE"! One whole day each and every week for no other purpose than to free us up from our daily routine of work, so that we could spend time together with Him!

Not simply leaving us to try and fit it into our schedules when we could. / Not simply trying to get together once a month! / Not on some sporadic basis where we would "get together felt like it" or "were in the mood"! / NO! God desired that we should spend undistracted time together each and every week on a day set aside for that very purpose!

That's the same reason I encourage every couple I marry to set aside one evening a week as their date night, refusing to plan anything else on that day, except for extreme emergencies!

Because although they'll talk each day, and see each other each day, they also need a special, focused, specified time, for uninterrupted sharing and communication each and every week. It's a Scriptural principle for healthy relationships!

In Isaiah 58:13 we read *"If you honor the Sabbath by not going your own way or doing as you please, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land..."*

And LISTEN: You can't find joy in someone, or be uplifted by their presence, unless you spend time with them, communicating with them on an intimate, personal level! I'll say it again: People who don't spend quality time together communicating intimately on a regular basis become emotionally distanced from each other and drift apart.

That's why God set aside one day a week to ensure that wouldn't happen! *"To all who keep my Sabbath without desecrating it,"* says Isaiah 56:7, *"and hold fast to my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer."*

Why prayer on the Sabbath? Because prayer is the means God has given to us by which we spend time in focused, intimate, personal, communication with Him! It's a time to pour out the CONTENT of our soul to the LOVER of our soul!

Joseph Pipa is right when he says: *"God designed the Sabbath as a means of enjoying Him through special, restful, pleasurable communion with him. It is a day to find exquisite pleasure in God. A day to meditate upon the beauty of God in His attributes; to contemplate the depth of His love toward us; to thank Him for his grace and favor; to praise Him for His covenant faithfulness; to reverently adore Him for His saving condescension; and worship Him for all His consummate perfections."*

That's the purpose of the Sabbath: It's a day set aside for us to be able to fall in love with God all over again — each and every week. A day to ensure that the flame of our affections for Him never flickers out because we've let other things cause that special, focused, intentional together-time to dwindle down to nothing.

Imagine, MEN, how insulted you would feel if you went to great trouble preparing a beautiful dinner for your fiancé, or your wife—whom you invite to come and enjoy it with you—talking and sharing and catching up on things and partaking of the meal you spent hours carefully preparing for her—no one but her, because you love her.

Imagine, then, if after all that effort she were to call you on the phone and say: *“Sorry honey, I just can’t make it. I might be able to stop in for a few minutes on the way to the gym, but that’s all I can spare. I know we haven’t seen each other all week, but I really do have more important things to do than spend time with you. I love you, sweetie, but I just can’t fit you into my schedule. After all, I need my sleep, and I do have to catch up on some stuff at the office, and there’s that new movie coming out this afternoon right after my tennis game at the club. So don’t be mad, sweetie, I really do love you, and I know you spent a lot of time preparing this meal, it’s just that I don’t have time for you! You understand, don’t you?”* What would you say to that?!

Or you **WOMEN**, imagine how you’d feel if your husband invited you out for a romantic candle-light dinner, at the most expensive restaurant in town, for your anniversary. And after you get all dressed up, and you get to the restaurant, and he pulls out the chair for you at the table, and kisses you on the head. And after the waiter lights the candles and takes your order and pours your glass of wine—you look across the table at your husband who’s so handsome in his nice suit, and as you get ready to give him the card you bought, and tell him how much you love him, you lean forward and notice he’s got his wireless laptop computer opened up on the chair beside him! And in the dim light he’s been secretly glancing out the corner of his eye at graphs and charts of the day’s earnings, and the latest updates of the Phillies game!

And not only that, you see he’s secretly texting his secretary on his cell phone under the table, lining up details for the next day’s work project, while he merely pretends to be paying attention to you! What would you do ladies? (Did I hear someone say ‘kill him’?!)

Ever tried to have an intimate, meaningful and in depth conversation with someone who’s busily scribbling down figures, and trying to solve some work related problem?

Ever tried to pour out the deepest concerns of your heart to someone who’s listening with one ear, but is texting someone else on their cell phone at the same time?

Ever tried to go on a date with someone who brings their work along with them on the date?
How do you think it would it make you feel?

You see, it’s so easy to SEE IT when you put in those terms, and say, “I would NEVER put up with it!” Right?!

Yet, you know what? God has to put up with it every week! Every week He offers you intimate, uninterrupted time with Himself. Every week He prepares a banquet table filled with the most luscious foods, prepared just for you. He invites you, His BRIDE, to come date Him the GROOM once every week.

Yet so often we snub His offer to spend that special time together, because we have other things we'd rather do than spend time with the Lover of our soul who invites us on a date. That, I believe, is what God means when he says in Isaiah 58, that, *"if we will honor the Sabbath by not going our own way, or doing as we please, or speaking idle words, then we will find our joy in the Lord, and He will cause us to ride on the heights of the land."*

The Sabbath was given as a day to nurture and sustain our love relationship with God — "The Sacred Romance between our Lord and us His Bride." And when we avail ourselves of that date time with Him, and set all distracting things aside God says He will *"cause us to ride on the heights of the land."*

He will make us soar. Our souls will be nourished by the spiritual intercourse. We will gain unspeakable blessings by accepting His invitation to come and dine with Him, and spend focused, intimate, uninterrupted time with Him.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. Breaking the Sabbath or desecrating the Sabbath. And He's not just talking about working on the Sabbath (as Jesus is accused of in Luke 6). He also calls other things *"desecrating the Sabbath,"* like: Going our own way, or doing what we please, or speaking idle words on the Sabbath—all of which constitute *"breaking the Sabbath."*

Using the dating imagery, desecrating the Sabbath would be like a WIFE telling her husband, or a HUSBAND telling his wife:

"I don't really care about improving our relationship. I don't really care that it's become somewhat superficial. I don't care about your wants, or desires or feelings. I don't want to spend time with you. Taking with you bores me. You bore me. I like doing my own thing, and you make me feel like a caged bird with all this having to listen, and learn, and care and share, when there's so much more exciting things to do out there! Sorry dear, I'd rather do my own thing, and hang out with the guys, than spend my precious time in intimate, affectionate, deep, undivided quality sharing time with you."

And you say, “No one would ever say that to his wife! At least not in those words!” But I beg to differ. I witnessed a scene very similar to that when I was 16 years old — one of those scenes you stumble across and it gets burned into your brain because it’s so emotionally charged and disheartening.

I walked up the street on a Sunday afternoon, shortly after church, only to see a wife running out the front door of her house pleading with her husband not to head off to yet another football game with 3 of his drinking buddies. She was a very sweet and pretty lady, who had married a man who had become an alcoholic, and with tears in her eyes she begged him not to go off with them again (like he did every weekend).

And to my utter shock, I watched as he turned around, grinned at her, yelled some words I can’t repeat, gave her the finger, and then slapped his buddies on the back (as if he’d shown her who was boss), said, “Come on, let’s get out of here,” jumped in the car with his friends and sped off to the game with his beer in his hand (even yelling some additional things as they sped off).

I was in shock. I’d never seen anything like it. Maybe I’d grown up too sheltered. SHE wanted him, his attention and affections, HE wanted to go out and have a good time with his buddies at the ball game. / SHE wanted a relationship with her husband, HE told her to grow up. They divorced six years later.

WHY? Because you can’t go your own way, and do as you please, and speak idle words about nothing important and ever expect the relationship to last. A good relationship takes an investment of time and effort; making compromises and seeking to understand and meet the needs of the other person — otherwise you will drift apart and lose all relational connection with one another. And the same is true for our relationship with God. That’s why God tells us not to do those things on the Sabbath.

Then **LAST**, Isaiah emphasizes in chapter 56 verse 7, that the Sabbath is a day when God “*will give us joy in His house of prayer.*” And in the very next verse, again speaking in relation to the Sabbath, He says, “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.*” The Sabbath, in other words, is a day to come to the house of God and spend time in prayer — with the attending promise that if you will, God will give you joy through that intimate time spent talking and communing with Him.

Maybe that’s where the prohibition against speaking “idle words” comes in. The Sabbath is a day to go deep — in prayer. It’s a day to move beyond the trivial or the routine.

Ever tried to engage anyone in a meaningful conversation and have it incessantly return to the weather, or some TV sitcom, or the latest Hollywood gossip, or some bargain they picked up at the flea market. You want to get to know the real them, and they send up all these conversational smokescreens of verbal trivia!

LISTEN: Idle, silly, surfacy, insignificant, trivial conversation hinders relational intimacy and affectionate closeness. Because deep, healthy relationships require substantial, well-chosen, well-thought-out responses and true, honest, self-disclosure! It requires focus, and intentionality, and in-depth interaction, and attentive listening.

Everyone knows that—including God. That's why He forbids idle or trivial conversation WITH HIM on the Sabbath! He wants to interact with the real you, not just the surfacy you / He wants to go deep, not be deflected by religious niceties and spiritual trivialities / He wants to talk about what's going on in your spirit and not just idle words about nothing!

When you're struggling He wants you to share it with Him. That's the mistake most people make: They stop going to church when they're struggling in their faith! Why?! That's when they should go and seek the joy God promises to give in His house of prayer on the Sabbath.

Think of it: What would happen to the relationship between a husband and wife if they refused to talk to each other every time they went through hard times or struggles? What would happen if they simply stopped communicating for weeks and months or years at a time, whenever they struggled or felt distant from each other?

I'll tell you what would happen! The relationship would eventually dissolve! Because the reality is that it's during our struggles and hard times that we need to talk the most! We need to force ourselves to do what we don't feel like doing because we know it's good for the relationship!
Right?

I mean a couple should talk all the time, but they especially need to do so when they're struggling! They need to address the problems at hand with deep, meaningful, soul-searching conversation — not cut off all conversation.

The same is true with God: When you are struggling with your faith it's not the time to stop going to church, it's the time you need to go to church the most! You need it all the time (whether you think so or not), but you need it even more when you're struggling with your faith, and wrestling with doubts, and clinging to the last vestiges of hope.

You don't cease communicating with your spouse when your struggling, you make sure to set aside additional time for it! Focused time for it! Time when you can give it your undivided attention.

That' common sense when it comes to your relationship with your spouse—which means it should also be common sense with our Lord Jesus. And part of that conversation is deep, honest, personal conversation devoid of "idle words," "trivial words," "useless conversation that is simply thrown up as a smokescreen to divert the conversation away from really needs to be talked about.