

Why Can't We Stop!

Pete Scazzero

In my travels and speaking, I regularly conduct an informal survey asking the question: “how many of you are taking a 24-hour weekly Sabbath?” Would you be surprised to know that 90% indicate they do not?

Why is that? Why is it so hard for us to stop? The truth be known, we are flagrant Sabbath-breakers. It is a hidden scandal among us.

We are overscheduled, tense, addicted to hurry, frantic, preoccupied, and starved for time. Cramming as much as possible into our Blackberries and to-do lists, we battle to make the best use of every spare minute we have.

We end our days exhausted from ministry and the endless needs of our churches. And then our “free time” on our day off becomes filled with more demands in an already overburdened life.

We listen to sermons and read books about slowing down and creating margin in our lives. We read about the need to rest and recharge. But we can't stop.

It is like being addicted—only it is not to drugs or alcohol but to the ministry. Our bodies physiologically cannot seem to get off adrenaline in order to stop.

We feel indispensable. So much will fall apart if we stop. So we just keep going.

Who has time to enjoy Jesus, enjoy our spouses, enjoy our children, enjoy life! There is simply too much work for God to be done.

Do we really want our people to follow us as we follow Christ?

It is a hidden tragedy with far-reaching consequences.

Rediscovering Sabbath

One of the keys to our freedom is a rediscovery of Sabbath-keeping, a radical, countercultural, essential spiritual formation practice for us as pastors.

The Sabbath was always a hallmark of the Jews for over 3500 years. This one act, perhaps more than any other, protected them from the pressure of the powerful cultures that sought to assimilate them.

The word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word that means “to cease, to stop working.” It refers to doing nothing related to work for a twenty-four hour period each week. Our work is the ministry itself.

God worked. We are to work. God rested. We are to rest. We are made in God's image. When we work without stopping, we violate His image in us.

Most of us can't stop until we are finished whatever it is we think we need to do. We need to answer our e-mails, return all phone messages, and finish our sermon. There's always one more goal to be reached before stopping. We accomplish one goal and then immediately are confronted with new opportunities and challenges.

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses proclaimed further that the very act of ceasing from work in the midst of all the surrounding nations was a sign of their liberation by God (see Deuteronomy 5:13ff). By refusing to succumb to the enormous pressure of our busy Western culture, we too are to serve as a sign of a free people, as free pastors!

The Sabbath calls us to build the doing of nothing into our schedules each week. Nothing measurable is accomplished. By the world's standards it is inefficient, unproductive, and useless. As one theologian stated, "To fail to see the value of simply being with God and 'doing nothing' is to miss the heart of Christianity."

God is on the Throne

We stop on Sabbaths because God is on the throne, assuring us the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities. God is at work taking care of the universe. He manages quite well without us having to run things.

On Sabbath I embrace my limits. God is God. I am not.

Even though Sabbath has been one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life, we cannot do without it.

One great danger of faithfully observing Sabbath is legalism. The apostle Paul seemed to think one day would do as well as another (see Romans 14) and reminds us that reality is found in Christ (Col. 2:17). Nonetheless, like prayer and Bible study, this is not an optional extra if we are going to lead well and follow Christ.

So Scripture commands us to relax, to enjoy the fact that we are not running God's world. When we die, the world will continue on nicely without us.

The core spiritual issue in stopping revolves around trust. Will God take care of our concerns if we obey him by stopping to keep the Sabbath?

The answer, of course, is "yes".

Getting Started

Sabbath keeping has changed my life. The more you step inside Sabbath and do it, the more it will transform your life and ministry.

Try it.

The key is to set a regular rhythm every seven days for a twenty-hour block of time. I know many Christians who begin their Sabbath precisely at 6:00 PM or 7:00 PM on Saturday until the same time the following day. Others, like myself, choose a day of the week. What is important is to select a time period and protect it! You may want to start with half a day. Experiment.

Consider setting aside time to wrestle with the biblical principles of Sabbath-keeping – stop, rest, delight and contemplate (go to www.emotionallyhealthy.org to download a few messages I recently gave).

Once you do, I guarantee you will find the words of Jesus are true. We were not made for Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for us. It is a pure gift from our Father in heaven (Mark 2:27).

Pete Scazzero is senior pastor of New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York City and author of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nelson, 2006). His website is www.emotionallyhealthy.org. Watch for second and final part of "Why We Can't Stop" next month here at pastors.com.

