



30 ON-RAMPS TO 24/6

*24 + 6 Ways to Think, Talk, Write,
and Preach about the Sabbath*

MATTHEW SLEETH, MD



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INTRODUCTION

When I wrote 24/6, I believed that reclaiming Sabbath practices was foundational to our faith. Since the book was published, our ministry, Blessed Earth, has led retreats for more than a thousand clergy and preached Sabbath sermons to tens of thousands. Through these retreats, forums, workshops, and sermons, I've come to a new realization: the Sabbath journey is richer than I ever imagined. Each time I think I've explored every bend in the road, God reveals an even more beautiful vista.

Below are thirty ways for thinking, talking, writing, and preaching about Sabbath living. As you read this list, I pray that the Holy Spirit will nudge you to explore one or more of these topics, not simply as an intellectual exercise but as a tool for enriching your faith.

1. The Ten Commandments

The Commandments are grouped into two sections: one through three are about our relationship with God and five through ten are about our relationships with people. Commandment four, the Sabbath commandment, serves as a bridge. The Sabbath connects God and people, heaven and earth. The Sabbath also helps us keep all of the other commandments through worship (commandments one through three), family meals (commandment five), seeking shalom (commandments six and nine), renewing our marriage (commandment seven), and resting from commerce. (commandment ten)

2. Healing

The miracles that Jesus performs on the Sabbath all center on healing. Christ does not walk on water or turn water into wine on the Lord's Day; rather, he heals the withered hand, helps the blind see, and allows the lame to walk. These miracles point to the intent behind Sabbath: to heal us—body, mind, and spirit. Man is not made to save the Sabbath; the Sabbath is made to save man.

3. Holiness

The first time “holy” appears in the Bible is in Genesis, when God describes the Sabbath day. All of creation is good, humans are very good, but the Sabbath is holy. Note that the King James Version translates the Hebrew kadosh as “sanctified”. God rests. God is Holy. Therefore, rest is holy. At the very core of sanctification is humanity’s covenant to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

4. Lost Practices

2 Chronicles 30 is a blueprint for what to do when a holiday (or holy day) has been lost. The Hebrew people have forgotten the Passover for many years, and now they wish to restore its observance. But how? The Bible gives us a plan for recapturing a lost practice: 1.) recognize the need, 2.) repent to God, 3.) recruit like-minded people, 4.) spread the word, and 5.) celebrate the holiday, even if imperfectly. In 2 Chronicles, the Hebrew people do Passover “wrong”: the priests are unprepared, the date is wrong, and the length of the celebration is too long, yet God blesses their celebration—just as God will bless your Sabbath journey.

5. Health

When we never know when our next day Stop Day is coming, our body responds by sending out stress hormones. These hormones are commonly known as the fight or flight response. If you ever have a severe allergic reaction, a shot of adrenaline can save your life. A few hours later, however, you would feel utterly exhausted. When we are under stress long term, our bodies produce another stress hormone called cortisol. Cortisol production contributes to a host of medical conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, depression, and anxiety. The bottom line: constant stress doesn't just make us tired and grumpy, it makes us ill. We were made in the image of God, who rested on the seventh day and instructed us to do likewise.

6. Gratitude

If you look for a miracle every day, you will see one—a colorful sunset, a new bloom in your garden, a child at rest in her father's arms. Make a note of these miracles in a gratitude journal, or snap a picture with your phone. Then, on your Sabbath, review the miracles. This simple practice will change your atti-

tude throughout the week, allowing you to see God's hand everywhere. We don't need more wonders in this world, just a greater sense of wonderment.

7. Parenting

In today's 24/7 world, Sabbath-keeping is counter-cultural; it doesn't just happen. If you wish to make Sabbath keeping a family priority, you will need to prepare for it. In return, the Sabbath will do some of the heavy lifting of parenting for you. It will help your children learn the hard but important lessons of restraint. It will encourage them to set priorities and establish boundaries. But first, you have to model the Sabbath yourself. One of the best gifts you will ever give your children is a healthy rhythm of work and rest.

8. Marriage

Ask a divorced couple why they separated, and most will say that they simply drifted apart. When we get overscheduled, we lose track of the relationships that really matter, including our relationship with the person we covenanted to forsake all others for until death do us part. Sabbath is a time set aside to

renew marriages and commit the opposite of adultery. Put the children down for a nap. Encourage a family quiet time. Sabbath opens up the quality and quantity time to reconnect with our spouse and remember the joys of marriage.

9. Social justice

The Sabbath commandment is explicitly inclusive. It says we must extend the Sabbath to the least in our society, including the stranger in our midst, the minimum wage worker, the illegal alien, and the animals in our care. Each of us should examine how our actions as a spouse, employer, colleague, parent, or church leader might be preventing others from accepting the Sabbath invitation.

10. Creation Care

Sabbath ethics provide the foundation for many of the ordinances about caring for the land. For example, the injunction to allow the fields to lie fallow every seventh year allows the land a chance to renew while providing food from perennial crops for the poor and for God's creatures. Not harvesting to the edge of the fields preserves wildlife corridors. Most impor-

tantly, Sabbath reinforces the lesson of restraint. By coming to rest one day in seven, we are able to fill the emptiness inside by being with God rather than by consuming more and more things.

11. History

Sabbath is a gift that God gave to civilization through the Hebrew people. No society has come up with resting one day in seven unless they came in contact with the Jews. Christians have traditionally celebrated the Sabbath on the Lord's Day, a term that first appears in the Bible in Revelation 1:10 and is implied or mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:2, John 20: 19-26, and 1 Corinthians 11:20. It is talked about by Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Pliny, Tertullian, and Dionysus of Corinth. Our world today would be a very different place if we had never had the Sabbath—a day for prayer and reflection, a day for families, a day for holy rest.

12. Politics

During the French Revolution, people wanted to get rid of God and King. Getting rid of the King was easy: they chopped off his head. Getting rid of God

was harder, so they instituted a ten-day week with no Sabbath. During the Russian Revolution, Lenin decreed a five-day week with no Sabbath. For many years, Blue Laws in America ensured that workers had one day a week to be with their families and worship God; today, however, it is possible to consume, 24/7. Although no one is coercing us to give up our day of holy rest, we enslave ourselves through the temptations of pride, workaholism, and busyness.

13. Business

Two of the best witnesses for Sabbath keeping come not from the Church but from the business community. David Green, the CEO of Hobby Lobby, risked one hundred million dollars per year in revenues when he decided to close his stores on Sundays. Chick-fil-A, despite being closed on Sundays, is one of the most profitable fast food chains in the country. Isaiah 58:13-14 shares a Sabbath promise that both the business community and consumers would be wise to heed:

“If you watch your step on the Sabbath
and don’t use my holy day for personal advantage,

If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,
God's holy day as a celebration,
If you honor it by refusing 'business as usual,'
making money, running here and there—
Then you'll be free to enjoy God!

Oh, I'll make you ride high and soar above it all.
I'll make you feast on the inheritance of your ancestor
Jacob.”

Yes! God says so! (*The Message*)

14. Generosity

Sabbath and tithing share much in common. When people with financial problems are advised to tithe, it seems counterintuitive. How can giving money away solve our financial woes, especially when it already seems nearly impossible to make ends meet? The same principle holds true for time. When people are overscheduled and overcommitted, the first thing they should do is commit to keeping a Sabbath. Why? Because when we give the first fruits to God, it turns our entire perspective upside down. Everything belongs to God—our time and our money. Sabbath and tithing allow us to operate out of the principle of abundance rather than scarcity. By trusting that

God will provide a double portion, we learn the true meaning of “enough”.

15. Music

Sabbath is a day for joyful singing and music. While we have many hymns that emphasize time with God—such as Take Time to be Holy, Sweet Hour of Prayer, I Need Thee Every Hour, and Amazing Grace—many hymnals do not list “Sabbath” in their topical index. This may seem like an oversight until we understand that the entire hymnal is about the Sabbath. What other day of the week do we regularly get together to sing? What other day of the week do we enjoy live music? If we lose Sunday as the Lord’s Day, we may lose not only our most beloved hymns but also the church where those hymns were once sung.

16. War

During the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, in his executive order dated November 15, 1862, stated that no Union soldier should work, fight, or march on Sunday unless under direct attack. His rationale was that if we lost the Sabbath, it did not matter who won

the war; we would all become slaves. In more recent history, The U.S. was attacked at Pearl Harbor on the Sabbath and Israel was attacked on Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. Some of our most courageous soldiers were Sabbath keepers. Desmond Doss, a hero of World War II, was the first American conscientious objector to win the Congressional Medal of Honor; although he never fought on the Sabbath, his fellow soldiers and his country honored him for extreme acts of courage. For as Abraham Lincoln so presciently said, “As we keep or break the Sabbath day, we nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope by which man rises.”

17. John Wesley

Sabbath has been integral to the teachings of many church leaders, including Calvin, Luther, and Wesley. John and Charles Wesley’s mother, Susannah Wesley, wrote a letter dated July 24, 1732, detailing the importance of Sabbath in the faith of all her children. From the very dawn of their conscientiousness, she attempted to establish Sabbath as a foundational rhythm of their lives. In “Almost a Christian”, the second of Wesley’s fifty-two standard sermons, he

equates profaning the Sabbath with drunkenness and wife beating. Perhaps Wesley's most famous thoughts on the Lord's Day are expressed in *A Word to a Sabbath-Breaker*.

18. Evangelism and Church Growth

Ask people how they are doing and one of the most common responses is, "Busy!" People are drowning in a new kind of debt—time debt. We are overcommitted and overscheduled, stressed-out by seemingly endless demands. Fortunately, the Church has an answer to this problem: the Sabbath. One day in seven, lay down your burdens and come to rest. Yet Christians, in large part, are failing to model this life-giving rhythm. The real estate in time that our church has existed on for two millennia is the Sabbath. Only in the last generation have we forgotten to renew the lease. Yet we must first model Sabbath living ourselves if we wish to effectively offer this Good News to the world.

19. Art and Literature

Traditionally, the prime time for reading was Sunday afternoons. Is it no wonder, then, that in our 24/7 world, literacy is being lost? Who has time to read out loud to a spouse, or to their family? Who has time to read for spiritual enrichment or simple pleasure? Last year, I read the Bible out loud to my wife Nancy. This year, Nancy is reading the canon of C.S. Lewis to me. Sabbath gives us the time and space we need to appreciate not only literature but art, beauty, and the many “excellent things” created throughout history, all for the glory of God.

20. Sports

It used to be that the Church lost our college students to sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Now, we are losing our tweens to travel soccer leagues. Sports have become the Church’s number one competition. We do not so much live in a post-Christian world as a polytheistic world. Instead of Baal, we worship ball. Today, more Americans watch Super Bowl Sunday than attend Easter services.

21. Satan

We have an enemy who is willing to do anything and use any lie to separate us from God. One of his greatest tools is busyness. The Devil is the only person in the Bible who presents himself to God as perpetually busy—someone who is always going up and down and to and fro. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis tells us that Satan wants to keep noise in our lives so we are unable to hear the quiet voice of God. Remember that the Devil's tool is trickery. He gives us ninety percent truth and ten percent lie. Being industrious is good. Thinking that we—not God—are the authors of our lives is foolishness. Getting rid of the Sabbath is the Devil's cheap ticket to enslaving souls.

22. Time

Time is the great leveler. We all have twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, and three hundred and sixty-five days per year. How we use that time, however, is up to us. God chose to give humanity free will. We can use our time to inflate our personal story or to increase God's glory. God, The Ancient of Days, is intensely concerned with time. He

instructs us to number our days and reminds us that our Savior comes quickly. The Puritans considered Sabbath breaking a form of sloth, a sign of spiritual laziness to not prioritize time with God.

23. Character

Someone who keeps the Sabbath and lives to be seventy will spend ten years of their life—a full decade!—involved in holy activity. Take away a decade of anything foundational in someone’s life—a decade of education, a decade of living in a stable family, a decade working in a certain field—and the whole character of one’s life can change. Remove a lifetime of Sabbaths from a nation, and you will be missing a continent of character-building experience. Little wonder, then, that research among our students shows a steady decline in empathy and an increase in me-centered behaviors. Sabbath is a weekly check on hubris, a time to remember Christ’s sacrifice and to rekindle our commitment to serving others.

24. Community

My wife and I run a nonprofit together. We both have workaholic tendencies. We both love our work. This is a dangerous combination. Yet no matter what deadlines are looming, my wife and I do not work on the Sabbath. When one of us begins to “talk shop,” we gently remind each other to give it a rest. Sabbath is best practiced in community. So find a Sabbath partner. Help each other to create a Sabbath plan: what you’ll need to do to get ready, how you’ll celebrate, and what you’ll avoid on your day of rest. Then check in and encourage each other. Even better, experience Sabbath for a season together as a small group, a church, a college, or a seminary. Your lives will never be the same.

25. Economics

In a Jubilee Year, all debts were cancelled and all properties were returned to their original owners. The purpose was to prevent generational poverty. Because of our fallen nature, we have a tendency to greed and hoarding. Cain’s first sin wasn’t bashing Able in the head: it was being greedy and giving God less than his first fruits. Sabbatical economics help

us fight our inherent propensity to greed. Are these economic principles nonsense, or can we incorporate some aspects of them into our modern society?

26. Heaven

No one knows exactly what heaven looks like, and yet everyone believes that it will look more like a Sunday morning than a Monday morning. Theologians have long felt that the half hour of silence that occurs in Revelation is the ushering in of the eternal Sabbath. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is among us. What can we do to make Sunday look a little more like heaven on earth?

27. Freedom

Scholars have argued for centuries about how to define rest. Here's a simple definition: decide what work is for you and don't do it on your Sabbath. For people engaged in sedentary work during the week, puttering around in the garden on the Sabbath might be restful. For people who do manual labor, holy rest might mean taking a nap. Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, once said that there are only two rules for Sabbath: pray and play. Now in his eighth

decade of life, Peterson also believes that Sabbath-keeping is the best thing he ever did for his marriage, his children, and his ministry. My family and I have been keeping the Sabbath for the past dozen years, and all I can say is, “Amen!” Now grown, our kids kept the Sabbath throughout high school, college, medical school, and residency. The Sabbath gave them something almost none of their peers had, even while attending a Christian college: a day off. No homework, no chores, no shopping—just time with family, friends, and God.

28. Retirement

What does it mean to rest when we are retired? Perhaps we should look at the example of older people in the Bible, including Anna and Simeon, who devoted their lives to the church. Can retired persons give those in the congregations who have no chance to rest—such as single parents, parents of disabled persons, or those caring for people with dementia—a day off? Can the church help to make those connections? What can retired pastors do to encourage working pastors to keep the Sabbath? The

first psalm is a good place to seek advice on how to be fruitful for an entire life.

29. Clergy

Pastors often have their busiest day of the week on Sundays. Most clergy, therefore, need to pick another day to Sabbath—usually Friday or Monday—so they can refill their spiritual well. Without the Sabbath, burnout is almost inevitable. Pastoring quickly can spiral down to the blind leading the blind. Congregations need a pastor who is spending time with God on a regular basis, steeped in the Word, entering the week renewed and refreshed. Clergy should consider writing a letter to their congregation each year, explaining why they keep the Sabbath. Then they should model that behavior, and extend the Sabbath invitation to their congregation.

30. Jesus

Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. Not only did Jesus do a majority of his healing miracles on the Sabbath, he conducted a great deal of his teaching on that day. In Luke 14, Christ discusses the excuses we have for not sitting down to feast with him. Hebrews 3 and 4

also give us a greater understanding of Christ as the Sabbath. Lay down your heavy burdens and Jesus will give you rest. His yoke—the Sabbath—is easy, and his burden is light!

I pray this list will help you go beyond thinking about 24/6 to living 24/6. We serve a God who created the weekend! Rejoice and be glad! Sabbath is holy. Note that the King James Version translates the Hebrew kadosh as “sanctified”. God rests. God is Holy. Therefore, rest is holy. At the very core of sanctification is humanity’s covenant to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.



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