

Sermon Series: Overwhelmed

Time by Jeff McClain

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Boone UMC

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I want to start off this morning by explaining what's up with my foot. If you saw the final play of the Michigan/Michigan State football game last night and the broken TV in my trash, you wouldn't have to ask. Just kidding, it's a stress fracture from a running injury two months ago. But it's still not better, so the doctor decided to immobilize it with this boot for three weeks. It's not a big deal, it doesn't hurt, and I don't deserve any of your pity. I'll gladly accept your prayers for healing though. Thank you!

Today we continue our series entitled "Overwhelmed" as we talk about being overwhelmed by time. I suspect that most of us are intimately familiar with this feeling. We've all got work commitments, appointments, extracurricular and volunteer activities, kids' responsibilities, relationships to invest in, and myriad other things that clamor for our time. At the end of the day when Carrie asks me, "How was your day?" my most common response is "Good, but I didn't get everything done that I'd hoped to."

I suppose we can take some comfort in the fact that we all share this feeling, and none of us has any more time in any given day than any of the rest of us. There was a movie out a few years ago called "In Time" with Justin Timberlake about a futuristic society in which the only way people survived was by literally buying time. We're not there yet, and hopefully we never will be. Right now, we all get 24 hours in a day. And time just keeps on moving. As the old soap opera intro used to say, "Like sands through the hour glass, so are the days of our lives."

Do you ever wish you could turn the hourglass on its side and stop it from pouring out? I know I do. Sometimes it's when I'm experiencing an especially tender moment with my family. My kids are two and four, and right now I can scoop them up in my arms and cuddle with them. It won't always be that way, and sometimes I just want time to stand still so I can enjoy those moments a little longer. Another time I often wish would slow down is at the end of a long day, after the kids are asleep and I've finally got a few minutes to unwind. And I'm tired but I don't want to go to bed because I know as soon as I do the alarm clock will go off and I'll be back at it again. Sand through the hourglass. Always moving. The days of our lives.

In one of the Harry Potter movies there's an hour glass with a really interesting feature.¹ It senses the mood and the ambiance of the room and the people around it, and it slows down the sand when the conversation is interesting. When things are good, time moves slower and allows them to linger a little longer. Wouldn't that be great?! Usually it seems like the opposite happens, right?

¹ HarryPotterHourglass.jpg

Time flies when we're having fun. Wouldn't it be nice to find a way to slow down the sands of time when things are going well? To stay just a little longer before having to move on to whatever comes next; before life bombards us with whatever else needs our attention.

But we all know time just keeps moving. For better or worse, the sand keeps flowing. But even in the midst of that reality, there are ways we can optimize our time. Scripture tells us that God is the creator of time. God existed even before there was time. God is outside of time. God was, and is, and is to come. Through God's word, the Author of time gives us instructions for how to make the most of our time. God teaches us how to structure our time and steward our lives in such a way that we don't end up feeling overwhelmed but, rather, blessed. Hear this word from the giving of the Ten Commandments. The one we're reading is the longest of all the commandments, which tells us God must really mean it! **Deuteronomy 5:12:**

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

“Six days you shall do all your work. But on the seventh day you shall not do any work.”

Everyone needs rest. But we don't do a very good job resting. We live in a culture where we feel compelled to constantly produce. I knew a guy in college who worked all the time. He never really slept. Instead, he took twenty-minute naps every four hours, around the clock. He was insanely smart. And a little strange. And he produced more in 24 hours than I did in a week.

But human beings can't really live like that. We can't always be producing. It's not healthy. It's not sustainable. We're just not made that way. We need rest. Even creation needs rest. Farmers know land needs to lay fallow. If you continue to plant crops year after year on the same plot of land, no matter how much fertilizer, water, and sun, the soil will eventually be completely drained of nutrients and the crops will not yield a good harvest. The land needs time to recover. We're made the same way. We can only be so productive without rest.

We all know this intuitively, but why are we so bad at resting? We often think that the more we work the better. The more we work, the more we can get done. The more we work, the more

productive we'll be. We read articles and hear stories about how important it is to rest and create space for reflection and recovery and we think, "Wow, doesn't that sound nice! Wouldn't it be great to have that luxury! I just don't have time for that."

A report released last year by Gallup found that the average fulltime work week in the US is 47 hours.² If an average work day is 8 hours, then I guess we're holding to at least half of the biblical standard – on six days you shall work. Sounds like we've got that part down. Although I'd guess most of us reach the 47 hour mark in 5 days or less. But regardless of how many days or how many hours we're working, I still suspect many of us struggle with the second half of that commandment – on the seventh day you shall not do any work.

It's really hard in our society to do no work. What does that even mean, anyway? Although it's not work I get paid for, there are always things to do at home. For some reason everyone in our house seems to require food every single day. There are endless piles of laundry. The leaves that I cleared yesterday magically reappeared this morning. All of that stuff sure feels like work. And it can be overwhelming.

And even if we set aside time to "do no work," smart phones make that almost impossible. Sometimes just being available can be a form of work, and our phones make us accessible 24/7. It's hard to turn off the phone. Most of us never do it. I have family members who answer the phone regardless of where they are or what they're doing. I'll call and they'll say, "Oh I can't talk now I'm in a board meeting!" Then why'd you answer? Another family member of mine expects an instant response to every text message, as if we're sitting in the same room having a conversation. If I don't answer I start getting texts that say, "Hello???Are you there???" (Just to be clear, I'm not talking about my wife in either of those examples!) We're always expected to be available. It can be exhausting. And it can feel like work, too.

Why are we so reluctant to shut things down for a while and rest? What are we afraid of? What is it that's just so important that might not get done while we're taking time to rest?

Scripture makes clear from the very beginning the importance of rest.³ Immediately following the first creation account in Genesis 2:2, we read this:

"And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation."

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2014/09/02/the-average-work-week-is-now-47-hours/>
Genesis 2:2-3 NRSV

Even the Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, rested after all the work he had done. God rested. Shouldn't that make us feel ok about resting regularly, too?

Scientific studies consistently show the benefits of more rest. The doctor who founded Stanford's Sleep Research Center "contends that **sleep, more than any other factor (including diet or exercise and heredity) predicts longevity and health.**"⁴ Listen to that again: Sleep is the most important predictor of long life and health. Rest is not just a good idea. It's scientifically shown to make our lives better. It's also God's commandment and prescription for healthy living.

This past summer during the NBA Finals, I read that LeBron James took 3-hour naps every day to help his body recover and be ready for the next game. Winston Churchill, even during the height of WWII, also took daily naps. This is what he said about them:⁵

"You must sleep sometime between lunch and dinner and no halfway measures. Take off your clothes and get into bed. That's what I always do. Don't think you'll be doing less work because you sleep during the day. That's a foolish notion held by people who have no imagination. You will accomplish more. You get two days in one – well at least one and a half, I'm sure."

A number of us have taken spiritual retreats to Mepkin Abbey, a monastery in South Carolina. During our orientation there, Father Gueric told us, "Most people are surprised by how much you sleep here. If your body is telling you to rest, listen to it. It will make you more available to hear from God."

I'm telling you this so you might not feel so guilty the next time you decide to take a nap. It's ok to rest! Also, if you happen to come by the church some time and find me in my office with my eyes closed, please know that I'm practicing a spiritual discipline! Just trying to follow Jesus more closely, y'all.

In all seriousness though, it's a problem if we're not taking time to rest. And it's not just a potential health problem. Incessant busyness is a spiritual problem. Constant busyness is a sin. We don't often think of it like that but that's exactly what it is. Never-ending busyness is sinful. It's a form of idolatry. It's saying that something else is more important than time with God.

I'm reminded of the time Jesus came to Mary and Martha's house.⁶ Martha is running around like crazy, distracted by all the preparations that needed to be made. And she gets mad at Mary

⁴ Ken Shigematsu, *God in my everything: How an ancient rhythm helps busy people enjoy God*, p. 127

for just sitting there listening to Jesus. But Jesus says, “Martha, Martha. Mary has chosen what is better.”

The Ten Commandments, from which we read earlier, are about being in proper relationship with God and each other. They’re meant to teach us how to live life abundantly. We can’t live life abundantly if the demands on our time overwhelm us to the point where there’s no time for God. God doesn’t want us to be overwhelmed. God wants us to discover life in Christ. And that takes time.

Remember for a minute the context in which God gives the Ten Commandments. The Israelites had become enslaved in Egypt, working constantly in the midst of incredibly oppressive conditions. Day after day, with no hope for relief, and no rest in sight. But God delivered them. And at the end of the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy 5:15⁷ God says remember that you were slaves, but I brought you out from there. Before, you had no rest. Now, I saved you so that you can rest in me. Therefore, I command you, remember the Sabbath day!

I wonder in what ways do you find your time enslaved today? By your work? Your phone? To Facebook or other social media? Are you simply involved in too many activities? How much do you think that self-induced slavery contributes to feeling overwhelmed and not having enough time?

God commands us to live another way. God wants us to discover freedom by resting in Christ. Freedom from all the things that used to hold us captive. Freedom from fear and failure. Freedom from all the things that constantly vie for our attention. Freedom from all the ways we think we’re not producing enough. Freedom from being overwhelmed.

Six days you shall work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath. You shall not do any work.

So what does that look like in real life? What would it look like to schedule intentional rest from the things that overwhelm our time? I’ve preached on this part before but it’s so good it bears repeating.

Sabbath from Peter Scazzerro⁸ - one 24 hr period/week [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality]

1. Stop – find a way to get out of the rat race for a bit, unplug/do not disturb, schedule this in calendar
2. Rest – do no work, figure out what work is for you and don’t do it.⁹

⁶ Luke 10:38-42

Deut 5:15 NRSV

⁸ Sabbath (from Peter Scazzerro) – stop, rest, delight, contemplate

⁹ From Matthew Sleeth on sabbathliving.org

3. Delight – do something that brings you delight – movie, music, read, eat, exercise, play
4. Contemplate – reflect on where you’ve seen God
 - pray
 - read scripture slowly (abide in God’s word, presence)
 - “Be Still and Know” as the choir sang so beautifully earlier

This kind of practice requires intentionality. Pete Scazzero said he usually tries to wrap up his work for the week by mid-afternoon Friday. That way he has some time to go home and get ready to rest. Clean the house, buy groceries, prepare meals, do whatever needs to be done so that when it comes time to rest, he can truly and fully rest. It takes intentionality to make Sabbath a priority.

It’s also a process. Every good discipleship practice is a process. It takes time, a whole lifetime, to figure out how to follow Jesus more closely. The same is true with practicing Sabbath. Don’t be discouraged if you can’t seem to figure this out right away. It’s taken your whole life to develop the habits you have now, so they’re not likely to change overnight. Be patient. Anything worth doing takes time to develop. Be gracious with yourself as you learn to live into this more fully. Remember, the Israelites took forty years wandering in the desert being formed as God’s people before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. Sabbath living is a formational process. It’ll take time to make time for it.

Stop. Rest. Delight. And contemplate God. One Sabbath teacher I listened to this week said if you keep a Sabbath for life, you just added 11 years with the Lord.¹⁰ That’s time well spent. That’s good stewardship of the time God gives us. That’s choosing the better way, as Jesus told Martha.

After all, life is too short to spend it being overwhelmed. Scripture says our lives are but a mist.¹¹ We’re here for a little while and then we vanish. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Sand through the hourglass.

There’s a little-known singer/songwriter I admire named Amy Fletcher. She’s got a great song called “Sand” that really captures the idea of giving our lives to God. We’ll listen to it in a moment. She sings about how we hold the pieces of our lives like grains of sand in our hands. And we try to hold on to them tightly and keep everything under control, making sure everything goes according to our plans. But the more we try to squeeze and hold on, the more the sand falls away. We can’t always control our lives. We can’t always control our plans.

¹⁰ Also from Matthew Sleeth, sabbathliving.org video on Prescription for Rest

¹¹ James 4:14

But we can surrender them, and open our hands to the God who made the sand. We can open our hands to the God who made us out of the dust of the ground. Opening our hands is an act of faith. Just like it was for Jesus. His open hands led him first to the cross, and then out of the open tomb. Opening our hands is an act of faith.

Sabbath is an act of faith. Giving our time back to God is ultimately about trust. It's trusting that we can pray with Jesus, "Not my will but thine be done." It's trusting that the God who made time, the God who sustains time, the God who is beyond all time will make the most of the rest of our time. It's trusting that whatever else we need to accomplish this week, God will empower us to do it. Sabbath is an act of faith. It's also an act of worship.

I want to close by encouraging us to respond in worship to God's call to give of ourselves – our time, our talents, our treasure, our hearts, as David preached last week. This past week we've been praying over these covenant cards and discerning the ways in which we might partner with God and give our hearts to God's work in this church and this community. As David said, these cards are not any kind of binding legal contract or obligation. They're a confidential pledge between you and God.

As we listen to this song now about laying down our sand, I invite you to come and lay down your cards. If you need a card you can find one in your bulletin. Bring it forward as the song plays or drop it in the offering plate in a moment. If you come forward, feel free to stop at the altar and pick up some sand. Hold it, squeeze it, and then open your hand and release it. Experience a tangible reminder of what it feels like to let go of our hearts and entrust them openly to the God of all eternity. Come, let us worship.