

“Punctuation”

Exodus 34:21 ¹

I’ve been a fan of English grammar ever since Alice Badgett made us diagram sentences in the 8th grade until we thought we would die. I actually became so fond of our Harcourt, Brace & World grammar book that I bought one for myself. I still love to play with the meaning of words, and I’m a stickler for correct grammar and punctuation in everything with which I am connected.

For example, I’m sure you’ve realized how important punctuation is to conveying the intended meaning of a sentence. Here’s a famous example from the New Testament. Look at the difference punctuation makes in these two versions of Ephesians 4:28: “*Let him who steals, steal no more. Let him work with his hands . . .*” OR “Let him who steals, steal. No more let him work with his hands”!

Or how about these:

Woman, without her man, is nothing.
Woman: without her, man is nothing.

It’s time to eat, children!
It’s time to eat children!

Without proper punctuation, words run together and create meanings and situations that we never intended to bring about. And on this Memorial Day weekend, I want to think with you about the proper “punctuation” of life, without which days, weeks, and years run together and create meanings and situations that we never intended to bring about.

Let me begin with a question. As you sit here in worship this morning, how would you respond to the question, “Is your soul *rested?*” Is your *soul* rested? Consider that for a moment and answer it for yourself.

As I’m sure you know, we’re approaching the end of the school year, with all that entails for students, teachers, and parents. A teacher named Dorothy Bass had an end-of-year epiphany that gets at what I hope to leave with you this morning:

It was Saturday night, and a few teachers were sitting around a dinner table. Tomorrow, we complained, would not be a happy day. Great piles of papers needed grading, and we had promised our students that we would return them on Monday. And so we whined, and as we whined our complaints gradually shaded into boasts. Someone listening in might have thought that we were competing to see who had to grade the most, who worked hardest, and who was most put upon by the demands of his or her job.

That’s when it hit me. *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.* This was a commandment, one of the ten laws in the basic moral code of Christianity, Judaism, and Western civilization, and here we were, hatching plans to violate it. I could not imagine this group sitting around saying, “I’m planning to take God’s name in vain”; “I’m planning to commit adultery”; “I think I’ll go out and steal something.” Yes, we might occasionally break one of the other commandments . . . but if we did, we would hardly boast about it.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 29, 2016. Memorial Day weekend. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

Our approach to the Sabbath commandment was different. We had become so captivated by our work, so impressed by its demands on us and by our own indispensability, that the idea of keeping the Sabbath had simply vanished from our consciousness. Most of us were in the habit of churchgoing, though our whines included some complaint even about this. But I knew in my bones that we were a long way from keeping the Sabbath holy. I began to wonder what that meant and why it mattered. . . .²

Barbara Brown Taylor described Dorothy's situation well when she wrote, "I do not mean to make an idol of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see the least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand."³

Maybe God will understand . . . but maybe not. After all, was it not our Creator who said to us, "*Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest*"? (Exodus 34:21).

I'm basically a city fellow, having spent most of my life in places like Atlanta, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Louisville, but I did spend five years long ago as a country parson. And I know that farmers and their income are largely governed by the weather.

There are certain times of the year when getting the fields plowed is a crucial enterprise, greatly dependent on the weather. And there are certain times of the year when getting the crops in during a particular window of time determines whether there will be food on the table this year or not. That's why Exodus 34:21 is so startling: *but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest*. The message here is that God requires us to rest . . . even when resting is going to cost us money.

Truett Cathy was—and is—famous for closing his *Chick-fil-A* stores on Sunday, no matter what his competitors do. And while we Christians need to be careful about "dishonoring" the Sabbath observances of our Jewish friends while we require them to honor our Sundays, the idea that I call "The Sabbath Principle" is one that bears some serious thought.

You probably know that the word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew *Shabbat*, meaning "to cease" or "desist." The primary meaning is that of cessation from all work. In observant Jewish homes, *Shabbat* begins each Friday night at sundown as a woman lights the Sabbath candles. It is a festive time; people dress up, the best tableware and food are presented, guests are welcomed.

In some families, everyone turns toward the door, singing to greet *Shabbat*, which Jewish hymns personify as a loving bride who brings inner delight and as a beautiful queen who gives order and peace. I have had the privilege of observing the Sabbath meal with both Rabbi Bernstein and Rabbi Starr in their homes, and those were very special experiences indeed.

It seems to me that what we Christians need to recover is not the Sabbath *per se*, but *the Sabbath Principle*; and we probably need such rest far more than we realize. God's purpose in the Sabbath Principle is that you and I spend one day each week diverting the bulk of our energies away from creative activities and directing our energies toward recognizing, exploring,

² Dorothy C. Bass, "Receiving the Day the Lord has Made," *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2000. Excerpted from *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. © 2000 by Jossey-Bass Inc.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Divine Subtraction," *The Christian Century*, November 3, 1999.

renewing, and ultimately sanctifying our inner selves. God told us to “*keep the Sabbath day holy*,” and to make something holy is to regard it as separate and different from other things.

Living the Sabbath Principle doesn’t mean taking a day to mow the yard, clean out the garage, and paint the house. Those things have to be done, but for most of us, that’s not Sabbath time. Sabbath time is time in which we lay aside the tools of our crafts and the responsibilities of our chores and enter into deeper relationship with God. Sabbath time is time in which we renew the balance in our lives between the strength that comes from the earth and the strength that comes from heaven.

I’m afraid that many of us have more in common with Dorothy Bass and her teacher friends than we may want to admit. You and I live in a 24/7/365 world in which we try to live faster and faster all the time. Our communication is instant, the Internet is everywhere, and as globalization accelerates, “the sun never sets” . . . on anything.

Some years ago, Jill and I visited the flagship store of L.L. Bean in Freeport, Maine, where they brag about not having locks on their doors because the store has never closed—not even once—since the current building was built in 1951!⁴ But research shows that such addiction to work and profit is not really a good thing.

Economists estimate that the average American works a full month more every year today than we did in 1976 . . . but workers in other nations who don’t put in as many hours as we do live longer, weigh less, and have lower divorce rates. And perhaps as many as a quarter of American workers don’t have any paid vacation at all.⁵

Contrast this with God’s design. According to Leviticus, besides having a full day of rest every single week, there were nineteen additional religious holidays every year. That’s 71 days of holiday and rest every year.⁶

Can you even imagine what it would be like to have one full twenty-four-hour period in each week in which you gave yourself permission to do no work of any kind? That means no employment-related activity, no housekeeping or yard work, no projects, no bill paying, maybe even no cooking or washing dishes?

Can you imagine what your life might be like if you worked as much as you needed to for five days each week, spent one day doing chores, and had one whole day for rest? Can you imagine looking forward to a day of deep rest each week, eating, playing, taking delight in God, in creation, and in people you love?

In his fascinating book, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*,⁷ Dr. Richard Swenson described something he calls “margin” that has a lot in common with “the Sabbath Principle.” The opposite of “margin” is being “marginless,” and Dr. Swenson wrote that “Marginless is being 30 minutes late to the doctor’s office because you were 20 minutes late getting out of the hairdresser because you were 10 minutes late dropping the children off at school because the car ran out of gas two blocks from a gas station and you forgot your purse. That’s Marginless. Marginless is *hurry*. MARGIN is calm.

⁴ www.llbean.com/customerService/aboutLLBean/company_history.html

⁵ Justin Ewers, “All Work and No Play Makes a Company . . . Unproductive,” *U.S. News & World Report*, August 13/20, 2007, 42.

⁶ Leviticus 23:5-43. Sadly, it doesn’t appear from the records we have that Israel took much advantage of those days. We humans seem to prefer money to rest. One wit observed that “we spend our health to gain wealth, and then we spend our wealth to regain our health.”

⁷ NavPress, 2004.

Marginless is our culture. MARGIN is counter-culture. Marginless is the disease of our decade and MARGIN is the cure.”

Our lives have Margin—if they do—as a direct result of choices—our choices. Nobody else is going to put space in your schedule. You’re going to have to schedule Margin yourself. So put space in your schedule.

Don’t worry about “remembering the milk.” Remember the Margin. Margin is breathing room. Margin is spiritual reserve in your life that you’re not using up. Margin is that uncluttered Sabbath time where we find renewal and strength. And far more often than not, God speaks to us most clearly “in the Margin.”

The truth of the matter is that there is plenty of time in every single day to do those things that God intends for you to do. Let me say that again: **there is plenty of time in every single day to do those things that God intends for you to do** . . . with plenty of margin to boot. And if you don’t have enough time or enough margin, guess what? You’re trying to do things God doesn’t intend for you to do.

Jesus said that he intends for our life with Him to be “abundant,” “joyful,” and “renewing” (John 10:10). If my life or yours doesn’t feel like that, then we’ve got stuff in our lives that Jesus doesn’t intend to be there. Did you hear that? **If your life has no Margin, then you’ve got stuff in your life that Jesus doesn’t intend to be there.** Now what you’ve got may all be good stuff, but if your life has no Margin, you’re cramped up and stressed, not joyful. Your life is not “abundant,” and that’s not what God intends for you.

Try to imagine that Jesus is here this morning. He is here, of course, but imagine that I am standing beside Him as we come to our time of commitment: “*Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens,*” He says, “*and I will give you rest. Let me teach you . . . and you will find rest for your souls*” (Matthew 11:28-29).

And so I end as I began, with the question, “How’s your punctuation? Is your soul rested?” Is there something in your life that has withered? Is there something in your life that has become misshapen through lack of Sabbath rest? Are there priorities in your life that need to be reordered? Are there commitments that you need to make or to renew?⁸

Rick Warren, in his characteristically memorable way of describing things, wrote that “The best use of life is **love**. The best expression of love is **time**. And the best time to love is **now**.”

HANDOUT: “A Punctuation (Sabbath) Self-Test”

⁸Isaiah wrote that In repentance and rest is your salvation in quietness and trust is your strength Isaiah 30:15 And so I end as I began with the question How’s your punctuation Is your soul rested Is there something in your life that has withered Is there something in your life that has become misshapen through lack of Sabbath rest Are there priorities in your life that need to be reordered Are there commitments that you need to make or to renew

A Punctuation (Sabbath) Self-Test

		Never True for Me	Always True for Me
1.	“Joy is the most certain sign of the presence of God” (Teilhard de Chardin).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
2.	“The truly happy person is the one who wants, more than anything else, what he [or she] already has” (Roy Oswald).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
3.	“When we finally stand before God, we will have to give account for all of the God-given pleasures of life of which we did not take full advantage” (Sam Levinson).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
4.	“Six days a week we work to manipulate the world for the better. On the seventh day we enjoy everything just as it is” (Roy Oswald).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
5.	<i>For the joyful heart, it is festival always</i> (Proverbs 15:15).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
6.	“The best thing you can do is to get very good at being you” (Dennis the Menace).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
7.	“The glory of God is people fully alive” (Irenaeus of Lyon, A.D. 130-200).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
8.	“The sin of overwork kills the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful” (Thomas Merton).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
9.	“Burnout is caused by a major miscalculation about how much I can affect the world” (Brooks Faulkner).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	
10.	<i>Six days are set aside for work, but on the Sabbath day you must rest, even during the seasons of plowing and harvest</i> (Exodus 34:21).	0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7	

