

**Red Light, Green Light –
Renewing and Refreshing for the Long Haul**

“Therefore go into all the world” - #7

October 18, 2015

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes ² so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

*⁵“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; **apart from me you can do nothing.** ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and **my words remain in you**, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸**This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit**, showing yourselves to be my disciples. John 15:1-8 (NIV)*

We are now half way through our series, “*Therefore go into all the world*” based on the book “*Missional Essentials*” by Brad Brisco & Lance Ford. The main theme of the entire series is about being more missional in our own community. I believe that today’s lesson is the most important lesson of the entire series. I am convinced that if we don’t get this one right, we will fail in the long term of fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives here on earth, both as individuals and collectively as a church. This morning’s lesson is about hitting the pause button.

Is there anybody here this morning who has ever played the game “Red Light, Green Light?” The game is a combination of running and stopping, moving and freezing. To win, you must listen keenly to whoever is calling out the commands for stopping and going, going and stopping. “Red light! Green light!” We have spent the good part of this series talking about going! As Jesus’ disciples God calls us to go! Go out into the world and share the Good News of Jesus Christ in word, and in deed. No matter what job we might have out there, no matter what our family situation (married, single, . . .). That is our primary calling as Christians. If we’re not going, and we’re not sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and in deed, then we’re not following Jesus, it’s as simple as that. We go when God gives us the green light!

But there are times in each of our lives when God gives us the red light! Stop!! Just stop!!! Stop what you’re doing and just relax, refresh, replenish, come alone and be with me. How often are we supposed to stop and for how long? At least once a week and for a whole day. That is the concept of the Sabbath. How strange is that concept to us today?

As Brisco & Ford point out in their book *Missional Essentials*,

“For most Christians, especially those of us in the west, the concept of Sabbath is not only misunderstood, it is largely dismissed. It is most certainly rarely practiced and enjoyed. But correctly understood, the Sabbath simultaneously becomes a joy and a gift from God to us. It becomes a ‘get to’ enjoy rather than a ‘have to’ endure.”

Sean Gladding, a contemporary missional leader today, says,

“To take a day of rest is to resist the internal forces that drive us to assert ourselves through our activity. It is to refuse to conform to the restlessness of the culture we find ourselves in, to cease our tireless striving to reshape the world in our own image.” Sean Gladding, *The Story of God, The Story of Us, Getting Lost and Found in the Bible*,

By all indications, being a faithful Jew, Jesus would have practiced *The Sabbath*. Though he often healed and did miracles on the Sabbath to show the Pharisees and the other religious leaders that *The Sabbath* was made for the betterment of man, even saying, “*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27), he most often practiced it each and every week. One of the primary purposes of the Sabbath is a day of rest and replenishment for us, but the Sabbath is so much more than that.

Believed by many to have been one of the best books ever written about God’s purpose(s) for the Sabbath, for both Jews and Christians, was written by a Jewish Rabbi by the name of Abraham Heschel (1907-72) in the mid 1900’s. Rabbi Heschel wrote,

“To the biblical mind . . . labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day from abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one’s lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. **The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life.** Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. Last in creation, first in intention, the Sabbath is the end of creation of heaven and earth. The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.”

Is that how you view your Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, as “the climax of living?”

I was amazed by how much God spoke to me in my devotional reading this past week as I was preparing for this morning’s message.

On Tuesday John Piper in his daily devotion, *Solid Joy*, was commenting on Acts 17:24-25,

²⁴ “*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.* ²⁵ *And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.*

Acts 17:24-25 (NIV)

Piper’s devotion was entitled “Beware of Serving God:”

“We do not glorify God by providing for his needs, but by praying that he would provide ours – and trusting him to answer. Here we are at the heart of the good news. God’s insistence that we ask him to give us help so he gets glory forces us to the startling fact that we must beware of serving God and take special care to let him serve us, lest we rob him of his glory.

“This sounds very strange. Most of us think of serving God as a totally positive thing; have we ever considered that serving God may be an insult to him? Evidently, there is a way to serve God that would belittle him as needy of our service. Even Jesus said, *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve”* (Mark 10:45). He aims to be the servant. He aims to get the glory as Giver.”

The previous day, Piper’s devotion was entitled “We Can Do Nothing,” referring to our Scripture this morning from John 15: *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”* John 15:5

It doesn’t say that “apart from him we can do some good things,” it says “apart from him we can do nothing!” What is the purpose of God’s people “bearing fruit?” For God’s glory! Abiding in Him comes before the bearing much fruit.

Then I received an e-mail devotion from Ruth Haley Barton entitled, “You Say You Don’t Have Time for Retreat? Think again!” In the Christian world, retreat is just a fancy word for going off and getting alone with God. Ruth Haley Barton quotes from a woman by the name of Emily Griffin:

When there is no time to do it, that’s when you most need to unclutter the calendar and go apart to pray. When the gridlock in your schedule relentlessly forbids it is the time you most need retreat. That is when your heart beats against the prison walls of your enslavement and says, “Yes, Lord, I want to spend time with you.” –Emily Griffin

Barton adds her thoughts:

“One of the most important rhythms of a Christian’s life is the constant back and forth motion between times when we are engaged in the battle—giving our best energy to taking the next hill—and times of retreat when we are not “on” and we do not have to be any particular way for anyone, times when we can be in God’s presence for our own souls’ sake.”

Do you know who are some of the worst people at finding that rhythm, the time of being actively involved and the time to step back and just be alone with God? It is my experience that those who identify themselves as Christian leaders and those who are most actively involved in ministry who are the ones who struggle the most. The ones who you would think would be the role models for demonstrating the correct balance are some of the ones who are the worst at it. In fact Ruth Haley Barton’s e-reflection is mostly directed at Christian leaders:

“A sobering truth about life in Christian leadership is that we can be very busy and look very important, yet be out of touch with that place in the center of our being where we know who we are in God and what he has called us to do—that place where we are responsive to the voice of God above all others. When this happens, we are at the mercy of all manner of external and internal forces, tossed and turned by others’ expectations and our own inner compulsions. This inner emptiness then becomes the source of frenetic activity that is un-tethered from any kind of groundedness in God. This is a scary place for a leader to be. (That is a scary place to be for anyone).

“Christian leaders in particular can have a hard time distinguishing between the work we do *for* God and time to be *with* God, resting in him and enjoying his presence. Over time, Scripture can be reduced to a textbook or a tool for ministry rather than an intimate personal communication from God to us. Prayer can become an exhausting round of different kinds of mental activity or a public display of our spiritual prowess. Life in Christ can be reduced to a life of Christian busyness.”

Not only did Jesus practice most likely practice the Sabbath growing up, as a good and faithful Jew, he most likely followed their daily prayer times – at least morning, mid-day, evening and night. That was good preparation for him so that when he became involved in his intense three year period of ministry which we read about in the gospels, he is often found going away and being alone with God, probably just about every day before he began his daily ministry.

Henri Nouwen, one of the most respected Christian spiritual writers of the 20th century, who was one who was able to often find that balance between the busyness of Christian ministry and the need to slow down and stop, just be alone with God, wrote:

“The world says, ‘if you are not making good use of your time, you are useless. Jesus says, ‘come, spend some useless time with me.’ If we can detach ourselves from the idea of the usefulness of prayer and the results of prayer, we become free to ‘waste’ a precious hour with God in prayer. Gradually, we may find, our ‘useless’ time will transform us, and everything around us will be different. **Prayer is being unbusy with God instead of being busy with other things.** To not be useful is to remind myself that if anything important or fruitful happens through prayer, it is God who achieves the result. So when I go into the day I go with the conviction that God is the one who brings forth fruit in my work, and I do not have to act as though I am in control of things. I have to work hard; I have to offer my best. But I can let go of the illusion of control and be detached from the result. At the end of the day I can prayerfully say that if something good has happened, God be praised.”

The early church, taking its cue from the Jewish practice of set times of prayer, developed the *Daily Office*. Office comes from the Latin word *opus*, which means “work.” In monasteries the entire day is structured around the *Daily Office*. Their prayer time is considered to be their primary “work.” Seven or eight times a day in most monasteries, the monks stop whatever it is they are doing, and they attend to their most important work of praying to God, usually through Scripture reading, especially the Psalms (believed to be the original prayer book for God’s people), and prayer. On top of that they spend significant chunks of time each day just being alone with and abiding in God.

Now I am one who really enjoys spending time in monasteries. I really do like the structure of the *Daily Office*. It is there where I find the best opportunity to refresh and replenish, but I don’t think monasteries is where God calls most of us Christ followers to live. I think he calls us to seek the balance between active ministry in our daily lives and daily time spent abiding with Him.

I know most of you are probably saying, “I just don’t have the time to do it.” If that’s your situation, and it’s often mine, I would say, you don’t have the time not to do it. King Solomon is referred to in the Bible as one of the wisest men who ever lived, credited with the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. He wrote in Proverbs 4:3, *Above all things, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.* Unfortunately while King Solomon was able to write about it, he was not able to live it out in his life and his life story is one of the saddest stories in all of the Bible.

Brad Brisco and Lance Ford close this chapter of their book *Missional Essentials* with these words:

“Attending to our inner heart, attitudes, and a listening ear is essential as we move out in missional ways and means. Good works will quickly become dead works if we are not drawing both our wisdom and strength from the power of the Holy Spirit on a frequent basis.”

Being missional in our own community is not about doing more, adding more things to our already busy and hectic schedules, it is about re-prioritizing, removing some of the things from our lives that have absolutely no Kingdom of God enduring values. And we all have those things.

If your Missional Discipleship Group has started I imagine by now most of you are probably saying how am I going to fit that one hour each week into my schedule? Don’t you find it interesting that most of us can find multiple hours each week with sports, whether it’s watching them on television, getting our kids to them, watching our kids, participating ourselves, and we have a hard time carving out just a little time for God each day, to read Scripture, and to pray, and to meet for one hour with a couple others each week? What’s the message we’re giving to our children? We reap what we sow. I only mention sports because it seems to be by far the biggest distraction in our local culture, but we all have our distractions.

As we move forward as a church I think it is important to recognize where God is leading us with both the storefront ministry, finding ways to be more missional and engaged in our local community, and the discipleship groups – finding time to abide in Him and His Word. There’s a balance there which is hard to achieve. There is a time to stop and a time to go, a time to go and a time to stop, in each of our lives, and in the life of the church. And if you are feeling that God is calling you to “stop,” beware! My personal experience and witnessing it in the life of others is that if God is wanting you to stop, for whatever reason, whether it be that your life is just too hectic and you don’t have your priorities in order, or you’re living a life that is not in tune with his will for how He wants us to live, and we don’t heed to that slowing down and stopping, God will bring it to a halt, and when he does it’s usually not too pretty. It’s only after we pick ourselves up and look around and see the consequences, that we say “God, why didn’t I just listen?” “Why didn’t I just stop?”