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sleeping



sabbath, rest, and the work of God

A comprehensive study in the United Kingdom recently revealed that kids learn to rest in the same way they learn to walk, run, and talk.¹ Rest takes practice.

We need a ritual and routine to learn to fall asleep. Infants learn by habit, over time, how to cease fighting sleepiness. A regular bedtime, dim lights, bath time, book time, rocking, allow their brains to carve out a pattern, a biochemical path to rest. Without a ritual and routine, they become hyperactive and often exhibit behavioral problems. Adults aren't much different. I'm certainly not.

If rest is learned through habit and repetition, so is restlessness. These habits of rest or restlessness form us over time.

There is a profound connection between the sleep we get in our beds each night and the sacramental rest we know each Sunday in our gathered worship. Both gathered worship and our sleep habits profess our loves, our trusts, and our limits. Both involve discipline

and ritual. Both require that we cease relying on our own effort and activity and lean on God for his sufficiency. Both expose our vulnerability. Both restore.

The liturgy of my night—lock the doors, brush my teeth, get a glass of water, turn out the lights, pull back the covers, crawl into bed, curl up, close my eyes—is a repetitive, mundane, and good thing, through which I’ve learned to slow down, to let go of the day behind me, and go to sleep. Similarly, corporate worship trains us, over time, to cease striving to make our own way and our own righteousness and to receive God’s means of grace.



Our sleep habits both reveal and shape our loves. A decent indicator of what we love is that for which we willingly give up sleep. I love my kids, so I sacrifice sleep for them (often)—I nurse our baby or comfort our eldest after a nightmare. I love my husband and my close friends so I stay up late to keep a good conversation going a bit longer. Or I rise early to pray or to take a friend to the airport.

But my willingness to sacrifice sleep also reveals less noble loves. I stay up later than I should, drowsy, collapsed on the couch, vaguely surfing the Internet, watching cute puppy videos. Or I stay up trying to squeeze more activity into the day, to pack it with as much productivity as possible. My disordered sleep reveals a disordered love, idols of entertainment or productivity.

My willingness to sacrifice much-needed rest and my prioritizing amusement or work over the basic needs of my body and the people around me (with whom I’m far more likely to be short-tempered after a night of little sleep) reveal that these good things—entertainment and work—have taken a place of ascendancy in my

life. In the nitty-gritty of my daily life, repentance for idolatry may look as pedestrian as shutting off my email an hour earlier or resisting that alluring clickbait to go to bed.

The truth is, I'm far more likely to give up sleep for entertainment than I am for prayer. When I turn on Hulu late at night I don't consciously think, "I value this episode of *Parks and Rec* more than my family, prayer, and my own body." But my habits reveal and shape what I love and what I value, whether I care to admit it or not.

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Sleep habits also reveal and shape what we trust. We lie awake fretting about our job or our health or the people we love. The wee hours greet us with our problems and our inability to solve them. What we trust in, lying in our beds at the end of a long day, is where our hearts truly lie.

The psalmist declares, "Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep" (Ps 127:1-2). It is God who watches over our city and who ultimately determines our safety. God has called us his beloved and he is faithful to provide for and protect his people, so we can savor his good gift of rest.

In the *Book of Common Prayer*, Anglicans have four short times of daily prayer—morning, noon, evening (known as Vespers), and

night. Of the four, my favorite is the night service, called Compline. The prayers are soothing and comforting. They seem to invite whispering. “Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.”²

Guard us and guide us, we pray.

In our nighttime prayers we remember the drama night holds, the stark vulnerability that we face from dusk till dawn: “Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. Amen.”³



Our need for sleep reveals that we have limits. We are unable to defend ourselves, to keep ourselves safe, to master the world around us. Sleep exposes reality. We are frail and weak. We need a guide and a guard.

No matter how much I love or fear something, ultimately my human need for rest kicks in. Even when my kids are sick and really need me, I can’t stay awake with them day and night for long. Our powerful need for sleep is a reminder that we are finite. God is the only one who never slumbers nor sleeps.

A few years ago a Sprint commercial proclaimed defiantly, “I want—no, I have the right—to be unlimited.” This is the message we receive from our culture: no limits. Nothing should stop you, slow you down, or limit your freedom. Not even human embodiment. You can be unlimited, and if you’re not, someone’s to blame. We believe that we need better technology, better efficiency, and better organization so that we can exist as people unbridled

