

24/6

— a prescription for a healthier, happier *life* —

MATTHEW SLEETH, MD

foreword by EUGENE PETERSON

*a prescription for a healthier, happier* **life** 



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TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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Designed by Daniel Farrell

Edited by Jonathan Schindler

Published in association with the literary agency of Daniel Literary Group,  
Nashville, TN.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sleeth, Matthew, date.

24/6 : a prescription for a healthier, happier life / Matthew Sleeth.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-7228-0 (sc)

1. Sunday. 2. Sabbath. 3. Rest—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Time management—  
Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV111.3.S54 2012

263'.3—dc23

2012025053

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Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Foreword

THE SUBJECT OF Sabbath keeping is in the air these days. I think I have read with admiration and appreciation most of the books and articles written on this subject in the last fifty years. Maybe you have too. No matter—you must read this latest entry in the genre. Matthew Sleeth has crafted a compelling invitation to consider and participate in Sabbath keeping, an invitation that is, in my experience, without peer.

His credentials are impressive. His years of experience as an ER physician in hospitals qualifies him as a veteran in a culture of demanding overwork. His entry into the Christian faith ten years ago provides a total reorientation of his imagination in the Hebrew/Christian culture of Sabbath keeping. And most impressive of all, he explores the many details of what is involved in practicing Sabbath in a world that is unrelenting in its distractions and pressures to work longer and harder. He does it not as an impersonal “expert” but firmly in the context of marriage

and family, with all the domestic and relational details involved in doing nothing where doing nothing always requires constant coordination and relationship.

Under Dr. Sleeth's pen, *Sabbath*, a dead word for so many, undergoes a resurrection, comes alive—not as a bare commandment, the fourth in the sequence of ten, but as a vigorous way to live in the present. This takes place in a freshly imagined (but not fanciful) recovery of the salvation and Jesus-context of the Scriptures. The writer's mastery of the entire biblical revelation raises Sabbath keeping far above an unadorned rule to be kept. In detail after detail it comes to be seen as a cornerstone for comprehending a world defined in all its daily living by God's rest, God's not-doing. He showcases Jesus' recovery of Sabbath keeping unfettered by the legalistic restrictions that had taken all the creativity and joy out of Sabbath in the world in which Jesus grew up. Jesus is still the primary antidote to the cheerless rule keeping associated with Sabbath in our time.

Which is to say that this is a book that restores Sabbath to its extensive biblical narrative context. Jesus, not rules, sets the tone. This Sabbath keeping is conveyed in stories—doctor stories, stories of friends, stories of family, Jesus stories. The stories keep Sabbath “nested”—integral to the time and place in which relationships form and develop. Everything is written in ways that give men and women dignity and room, atmosphere and space to be themselves in a good creation. There is not a hint of judgmentalism against any who are either unaware of or hostile to this holy day.

Sabbath is simply presented not as a rule to be kept but as a freedom to enter into.

Not the least of the attractions of *24/6* is the style of the writing—with wit, sharply observed phrasings, new ways to express old truths. Dr. Sleeth renames Sabbath “Stop Day.” And here are a few sentences that stopped me in my tracks:

If the Ten Commandments are written on apple pie and you get to choose which slice to have based upon size, choose the fourth. You will get more than a third of the pie put on your plate.

No one ever found the Lord on the day they won the lottery. Faith is more likely to blossom on the day we lose our job.

Stopping and resting are the working definitions of holy.

The seventh day is blessed as holy because the Lord stopped and rested.

And here is a meditative practice that I find attractive. Until now I’d never come across subtracting one word at a time from Psalm 46:10 to help me come to rest:

Be still and know that I am God.  
Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know that I.  
 Be still and know that.  
 Be still and know.  
 Be still and.  
 Be still.  
 Be.

The cumulative effect on me of this extended, comprehensive, and lively writing on Sabbath practice is a sense of how natural and inevitable it seems: *Yes, of course, this is the way we have been created to live well.* There is nothing obtrusive here, nothing that feels like an invasion of our privacy or an infringement of our “pursuit of happiness.” That is not to say that the difficulties we face in Sabbath practice in our culture are not formidable obstructions to how we embrace the practice. Edmund Burke is often quoted saying, “Beware the terrible simplifiers.” There is none of that here. But neither are there any onerous “Sabbath burdens” placed on us. In Sabbath keeping we become more ourselves, not less. In Dr. Sleeth’s pithy sentence, “Sabbath is a time to transition from human doings to human beings.”

*Eugene H. Peterson*

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PART 1



# Our 24/7 World

## Take Time to Be Holy

Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;  
Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word.  
Make friends of God's children; help those who are weak,  
Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.

Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;  
Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.  
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;  
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.

Take time to be holy, let Him be thy guide;  
And run not before Him whatever betide.  
In joy or in sorrow still follow thy Lord,  
And, looking to Jesus, still trust in His Word.

Take time to be holy, be calm in thy soul;  
Each thought and each motive beneath His control.  
Thus led by His Spirit to fountains of love,  
Thou soon shalt be fitted for service above.

*William D. Longstaff*

## CHAPTER 1

# What Is Missing *Does* Matter

As we keep or break the Sabbath day, we nobly save or  
meanly lose the last best hope by which man rises.

*Abraham Lincoln*

**SIX OF US** stood around a translucent, illuminated X-ray view screen. We were third-year medical students, and our overall knowledge of the basic sciences would never be better. We had mastered anatomy, pathology, physiology, and pharmacology. We knew everything about medicine—in theory.

Now we were ready for our first lesson in radiology. So we took a deep breath, squared our shoulders, and stared at the front and side views of the chest X-rays on the screen.

“See anything amiss?” the radiologist asked.

Quiet.

“Well, if you don’t see anything wrong, does anyone care to comment on what’s right?”

Still more quiet.

“Okay, let’s start with the basics. Who can tell me the sex of the patient?”

And so he began teaching us the fundamentals of reading an X-ray. *It was a she*, twenty to forty years of age. The diaphragm was normal, the heart was not enlarged. No infections could be seen in the lungs. We couldn’t see any tumors. After half an hour of tutelage, we were really getting the hang of radiology.

Then our professor began with some less obvious questions.

“Has she ever had chest trauma?”

Vacant stares.

“Does she have a partially collapsed lung?”

Whoops, forgot to look for that.

Lynn, the smallest of us and the one with the most pluck, interrupted the silence with the next best thing to an intelligent answer: “What is the history?”

“Good question. Cough for a few days. No fever. No chills. No weight loss or gain. No night sweats.”

Nothing in the patient’s history suggested anything other than a garden-variety cold.

Then we were asked to consider more subtle matters.

“Is she right- or left-handed? What kind of work does she do?”

Maybe there was a reason this fellow chaired the

department. We asked one another questions and thought of every obscure disease we had studied. For fleeting moments, each of us even saw evidence of various maladies. Finally, the X-ray held no secrets.

“Is there anything else, or did we get it all?” the radiologist asked.

An hour’s worth of looking had confirmed what our textbooks said was the hardest kind of X-ray to be certain of: a normal one. We’d gotten the point. A lesson had been learned. Our teacher moved to put the films away.

We looked at one another with newfound confidence. We’d gone from being mute to being able to describe subtleties. If we’d been better at eye–hand coordination and duller at memorizing, we might have given one another high fives.

As we turned toward lunch, our mentor spoke one last time. “This film was read by the doctor in charge of the emergency department last night—and the radiology resident on call last night and the one this morning—and they all agreed with you. But I called the patient to tell her I think she has cancer.”

We forgot about lunch and turned back to the X-rays. Again we stared at the films, but we couldn’t see any evidence of cancer, even as we tried to talk ourselves into it. We looked and looked, but to no avail.

“I’ll give you a hint,” he said. “It’s not something there but something *missing* that bothers me.”

Even with this clue, we came up blank. And we really

tried. We pointed to one thing after another, but each time the radiologist would shake his head no.

Someone's stomach rumbled. We were tired and hungry and ready to admit defeat. Our teacher mercifully gave away the answer in his final question: "Where is the left clavicle?"

Where was the left clavicle? It was missing. We hadn't seen it because it wasn't there. The patient's collarbone had been eaten away, almost certainly by cancer.

The take-home point? What's missing *does* matter.

## Something Missing

As a medical student and resident, I routinely worked a ridiculous number of hours. But you don't have to go to medical school to feel like your life is out of control. Whether we are doctors, lawyers, or Indian chiefs, most of us today work too much. Schoolteachers can't leave any child behind, truckers have logbooks, and camp directors need advanced degrees to run a ropes challenge course. It seems as if everyone is working harder. Nobody has a three-martini lunch. There's no time left to sleep on the job. We are all too busy.

And we don't just work at one thing anymore. We drink coffee and drive cars. We drive cars and talk on the phone. We talk on the phone and shop in the cloud . . . and fix dinner . . . and watch the news.

In the last twenty years, work is up 15 percent and

leisure is down 30 percent, and things are only going to get worse. Yet statistics tell only part of the story. They don't account for multitasking, nor do they reflect leisure time per entire family unit. Mom works two jobs, and so do Dad and Sis. Junior is in kindergarten, and he no longer takes a nap after lunch or goes home in the afternoon, as I did. He is in school all day, and if the bureaucrats have their way, Junior and Sis will soon lose their summer vacation.

When I was growing up during the baby boom, everyone was fascinated by the future. Films, books, and cartoons were filled with optimistic predictions. The Jetsons' robot did the laundry and cooked meals as aerocars whizzed through clean, blue skies. While tourists ogled displays at the 1964 World's Fair, sociologists began to predict that too much spare time might become a problem. How would everyone cope with a three-day workweek and four months of vacation every year?

Half a century later, these are moot questions. Too much leisure time is far from the reality that most people experience today. As the announcer on the Epcot ride intones, "The future is now!" We have robots, computers, and time-saving gadgets galore, but the promise of too much time on our hands hasn't materialized. In fact, most of us seem busier than ever. "There aren't enough hours in the day" is a common complaint. If the past fifty years have a lesson to teach, it is this: one more piece of technology will bring neither more time nor more happiness. Despite

a plethora of robotic vacuums, electric clothes dryers, and three-minute eggs cooked in thirty seconds, something seems to be missing.

## The Misplaced Day

Remember what the radiologist taught? It is hard to see something that's not there. Something *is* missing from our lives—something that until now had been safely passed along, generation upon generation.

Just a short while ago, almost everything in society stopped one day a week. Gas stations, banks, and grocery stores locked their doors at night and on Sundays. No more. We are no longer a society that goes to sleep at night or conducts business six days a week. Now we go 24/7. And in the metamorphosis to a 24/7 world, something, like the clavicle in the X-ray, has gone missing.

What got taken away is rest. Sunday was the day when libraries and pharmacies barred the door and people got dressed up and drove to church. Those without particular religious convictions simply took the day off. Jews marked Saturday as their holy day and called it *Sabbath*. Seventh-day Adventists did likewise. Most Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian clergy relaxed on Mondays. Irrespective of faith, all members of society were given and even guaranteed a day each week when they could rest.

Subtracting a day of rest each week has had a profound effect on our lives. How could it not? One day a week

adds up. Fifty-two days a year times an average life span is equal to more than eleven years. Take away eleven years of anything in a lifetime, and there will be a change. This is a law of the universe: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Subtract over a decade of sleep, work, or education, and the entire character of one's existence is altered. Multiply eleven years times a third of a billion Americans, and you are looking for a lost continent of time. Unfortunately, in our society, it's not Monday that got mislaid; it's our Sabbath, our day of rest. If there is to be any hope for recovering the Sabbath, we must first admit that something is missing. Despite reassurances of convenience, safety, and choice, America has been conned. My generation was raised with a day off each week. We witnessed the change to 24/7; we saw a cultural treasure stolen. Still, there was no outcry. It happened so quickly, and yet so gradually, that no one even protested. And now my children's generation does not have a day of rest at all. The song lyric "you don't know what you've got till it's gone" is only partially true. If you've never seen something, how do you know it's missing?

*Unfortunately, in our society,  
it's not Monday that got  
mislaid; it's our Sabbath, our  
day of rest.*

A weekly day of rest is like Cherry Garcia ice cream and hugs: we can survive without them, but we can't really live. I once asked an auditorium full of grade-school children sitting on bleachers about a weekly day of rest. "What do

you think about everyone stopping one day a week? No chores. No homework. No parents going off to work. No shopping. No errands. Does this sound like a good idea?” They stared, smiling at me like I was asking if it was okay to add another Christmas to the year, or if any of them would mind being able to fly.

Suppose that everyone got to take off one day a week. No one cheated. Six days a week is all any business could or would operate. If you’re open for business on Sunday, you have to close one other day of the week. If you’re closed on Saturdays, then you can operate Sundays. You get the idea. For the moment, put aside concerns about hospitals and emergencies and that sort of thing; we are simply considering what would be ideal. Everyone in the country works only six days a week. That’s the rule.

In a highly unscientific survey I conduct by asking people (when I remember), 100 percent of the respondents I’ve asked so far are in favor of this plan. It is ironic that if polled, 100 percent of Americans would say they believe that no one should steal, lie, or cheat. Keep in mind that there are many things people will not agree upon. Country, rap, and classical music are examples: some people love them, some not so much. But when everyone agrees on something and yet that something does not exist, be assured that we are dealing with the most important issues in the solar system. We are dealing with the deepest business of humanity.

A day of rest is missing from our lives, and as in the case

of the X-ray, what is missing is hard to see. To the radiologist, the missing clavicle was a sign of illness. As a barefoot theologian, I regard the missing day of rest as a worrisome sign.

The practice of stopping one day a week—of only going 24/6—is not new for humanity. It started the day after human history began, and it made it through the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. It didn't perish when it was exported to the New World. It survived the American Civil War and was still going strong when women got the vote. It prospered in the Depression, and it blasted off at the dawn of the Space Age. Only in the last few minutes of time has it been misplaced.

But where did our day of rest go—and can we live without it?