The Place of Temperance... and a Bit of Balance in Your Academic Journey

How play, worship, and a good nap may raise your GPA
By Jonathan Tran


Success in life isn’t usually graded by Sabbath keeping. Some even believe that the less rest one gets, the more success one can achieve. And by some measure, this might even be true. I’ve heard “really successful” people say things like, “I don’t need but four hours of sleep a night.” Wow. I guess most of us won’t be “really successful.” (Maybe that’s a good thing?) On the other side, I’ve heard it said that success requires rest. And when you think about the schedules of most Baylor undergrads (studying for the upcoming History midterm, preparing for next week’s Baylor Buddies meeting, editing a Lariat editorial, completing O Chem equations, running laps at the SLC, financing your college education, taking LSAT prep courses, emailing-IM’ing-texting-twittering-Facebooking-blogging, meeting with intimidating professors, leading a church small group Bible study, Skyping Mom and Dad, applying for summer internships, raising money for a retreat, hosting study groups, rushing a sorority, doing 10 hours of work-study a week...Whoosh, sounds exhausting doesn’t it?) maybe success really does require more than 4 hours of sleep. Perhaps rest is the Gatorade of the academic journey.

Or, maybe rest is not for anything, and maybe that’s the point. Maybe rest is for rest. Maybe we ought think of rest not as a means but as an end. Maybe rest is less about helping us get things done (for sure, rest does) and more about who we are. Instead of a quandary that pits “No Rest = Success” against “Rest = Success,” we might think of rest as good in itself.

“Be Still”

For Christians, rest is something that makes good work possible, but primarily, rest is itself the result of work, namely God’s work (Gen. 2.2; John 19:30). God’s faithfulness makes possible genuine rest. For the early church father Augustine of Hippo, the soul’s journey begins in and returns to God’s rest. According to the great ecclesia teacher St Thomas Aquinas, rest as temperance is a mark of the well-ordered life. The 20th century theologian Karl Barth thought Sabbath was the whole form of the Christian life; for Barth, Sunday both began and ended the Christian week. For these theologians, Christianity witnessed to the Gospel’s great promise of rest encapsulated in Psalm 37:
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...and patience of Psalm 37, the balanced life of work and rest, faithfulness and worship.

Such promises are demanding. Anyone who’s walked in the shoes of a Baylor undergrad knows “being still” is not easy. Students don’t normally get A’s for “enjoying safe pastures.” Indeed, Christian activity too often doesn’t look like patient waiting. In a world where poverty kills 34,000 children each day, doesn’t rest sound like a luxury we can no longer afford? When the intense pressures of undergraduate life demand all of our energies, aren’t things like play, worship, and a good nap quaint but unrealistic notions? Well, only if we forget the peace and patience the Gospel offers, for the same one who calls us to faithfulness also calls us to rest. Indeed, the one who calls us to faithfulness has himself accomplished all we are called to. Our efforts, as exhausting as they can seem, are but witness to what God has already done. Christians are not here to save the world, but to testify to the fact that the world has been saved in Christ. The goal of our lives is not one of success but faithfulness, making Sabbath rest, as Barth thought, the very form of the Christian life.

The great danger tempting Baylor students is not laziness but urgency (i.e. laziness the consequence of being overwhelmed by urgency). When we don’t rest, we suggest to the world that God has not been faithful so it’s up to us to make sure things turn out right, to take care of our own lives. When we rest, we let the world know God is good, trustworthy, and delightful. In this way, rest is one of our most powerful modes of evangelism for it tells a world crushed by burdens that God lightens our burdens. Because God is responsible for making things turn out right, we are not: by rest, do we know God is good, and because we know God is good, we rest. This is not a license to do nothing but the freedom to do everything. God’s rest rescues us from the paralyzing fear that results from being overwhelmed. Because we don’t have to do everything, we are freed to do anything.

Nap Parties

Plato thought that the best way to test a student’s character was to take him to drinking parties (see Plato’s Laws 638b-650c). Drink too much or too little and one lacks the temperance that characterizes the balanced and virtuous life. Well, Baylor professors won’t be hosting any such drinking parties any time soon. But one might think similarly about napping. To be sure, one can nap too much (or sleep in too late!). But one can also nap too little. A brief 20-minute nap in the middle of a workday may just demonstrate the peace and patience of Psalm 37, the balanced life of work and rest, faithfulness and worship. Studies show that productivity is actually increased by regular napping. But beyond the
question of productivity, naps speak of God. It says, “I can afford to take a 20-minute nap, to get enough sleep, to enjoy friends, to read Holy Scripture, to pray, and to enjoy God because I am not in charge, of the world or my life. I can rest because God’s work makes my rest possible.”

We are often tempted to make rest a type of work, the Gatorade view of rest mentioned earlier, something “I have to do” in order to get everything else done. In this vein, practices like prayer and worship just crowd all the other things I have to do, another event on the schedule that needs to be rushed to and from resulting in the opposite of rest. Here rest becomes a burden; here rest is no longer rest. Again, this misses the calm of Christianity and suggests that the only difference between Christians and non-Christians is that Christians are just busier, more hurried, their lives a bit more frenetic because of all their extra “religious” activities. By genuine rest, we offer the world so much more.

Making Room for God

Rest is not something to be done. Rest is who we are as reflections of who God is in his eternal rest as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rest is in part what we mean by salvation. God has saved us from the frenetic frantic lives so tempted by a world ruled by Martha’s worry rather than Mary’s peace. In Luke 10, Jesus comes to the home of sisters Martha and Mary. Wanting to impress their important visitor, Martha thinks it necessary to rush about in order to host Jesus. Yet her fuss proves less than hospitable to Jesus, the tyranny of the urgent creating no time to rest at Jesus’ feet, as her sister Mary does. Martha was right to want to be hospitable to Jesus, but she, like us often, went about it in ways that left no room for God. In her efforts, she forgot that God no more needs our hospitality than he needs us. God enjoys and loves us; he does not need us. We are not tasked with getting things done for God but instead ordering our lives for appropriately resting in the world God has created for our good rest, in this life and the life to come.

One of the problems with our restless natures (call it the Martha-Needs-Gatorade Tendency) is that it makes no room for God. In a hurry to get things done, we make no room for those things that matter most (The Gospel’s Good News for College Students: grades matter, but they don’t matter much). Thinking God needs us, we often forget God. Thinking we are serving God, we leave little room for the close-quarter discipleship of being served by God. The Martha-Needs-Gatorade Tendency rears its ugly head in ugly ways. Our schedule is too maxed out and we don’t sleep. Overburdened by schoolwork, we (as one undergrad said) “don’t have time for socializing.” Too bent on the future, we don’t have time for the present (much less treasures old and new from the past). Too intent on saving the world, we don’t let the world (strangers, children, the needy, the hungry, the wounded) in. Poorly ordered, life can undercut itself.

Sabbath Keeping Habits

How might we like Mary welcome God? How might we rest in ways demanded and promised by Psalm 37? Let me offer a few practices with which you might begin your
Baylor career. Some of these are keepers. Some are not. Experiment with them and discover how you specifically rest. Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out. You have time.

- Keep the Sabbath. From dusk Saturday until dawn Monday, rest. Go to church, read the bible, spend time in prayer. Take a nap. Share a walk at Cameron Park, or visit the zoo. Just don’t study. It’s a scary thought, 30 hours when you put the books down. But these 30 hours are your way of telling the world (and maybe your parents, and definitely yourself): God is in charge of my life. It is your way of trusting God, dwelling in the land, and delighting in the Lord. It is your way of having the Lord of Hosts meet your desires.

- Take advantage of the many sacred spaces on campus. Baylor has set aside places where the pressures of university life are kept at bay. Find these spaces and take time to rest. These include morning and evening prayer at Robbins Chapel in Brooks College, the prayer room at Bobo, contemplative spaces in almost every residence hall and most university buildings, or maybe just a quiet, pretty spot you christen as uniquely yours. Approach Chapel not as something you have to do, but something you get to do, something God has provided you in providing you rest. Sometimes Chapel will mean learning, sometimes singing, sometimes it may mean not speaking to anyone or reading anything but just gathering yourself; these 30 minutes are precious; honor them as such.

- Find others committed to your rest. Keeping the Sabbath is a command. For Christians, it is something God has mandated as a mode of worshipping him; to God it is no less important than not stealing and praying for enemies (without rest, it will be very difficult to pray for enemies). Your professors will keep you accountable for studying. Your parents will keep you accountable for finances. Your bosses will keep you on time. Find people who will keep you accountable for resting, who encourage you to get enough sleep, exercise, eat well, friends who help you enter into the restful presence of God.

- Play. Rest as play and play as rest orient you to what matters most. Eat a tasty meal, watch a wonderful film, listen to good music. Take hours to listen to a friend tell her story, asking questions as ways of searching out God’s goodness. Take a weekend where you and your friends read through Exodus or grab a guitar and some folks and lead spontaneous worship in your dorm room. Find the goofiest uniform imaginable and join the Baylor dodge ball tournament. Go and cheer on our Baylor Bears. Take a road trip! Plant a community garden. Attend to God’s amazing creation, which will remind you that all this was created for rest; tend God’s earth and you will attend to God’s peace.

- Slow down. I am often amazed how rushed students can be. In a hurry to get to the next thing, they often lose sight of what anything is about. Remember, after graduating you will have years (decades!) to do whatever it is you plan on doing. Don’t rush to get there because in rushing, you might just miss out on what you were after in the first place.

- Most importantly, rest. Don’t just plan on it; don’t just talk about it, but rest. Make rest the shape of your life, its beginning and end, the basis of everything you do. It is who you have been and are being made to be.
Will things like worship, play, and a good nap raise your GPA? I’m willing to bet they will. Having gotten into Baylor, you’ve already done lots well. At Baylor, you will learn to do lots more well. Make rest one of those things.

Reflection Questions

1. Prior to arriving at Baylor, what has “Sabbath keeping” meant to you? Have you ever kept a Sabbath? What did it look like? Jesus says that Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). What does it mean to you that Sabbath was made for you?

2. Would you say you rest well? For example, if you had to grade your ability to rest, what grade would you give yourself? Who do you know rests well, who has achieved a good balance between work and rest?

3. As you begin your Baylor academic career, what do you worry about most? What are you most in hurry of accomplishing? How might you develop greater peacefulness regarding these worries? What would it mean for you to “slow down” and smell the roses while seeking those accomplishments?

4. Above, the author states that, “by rest, do we know God is good, and because we know God is good, we rest.” How does knowing God’s faithfulness free you to rest? How does rest teach you about God’s faithfulness?

5. The sky the limit, what would a perfect day of rest and play look like to you? What would you do? Whom would you spend it with? How can you achieve versions of this perfect day of rest over the first year of your new life at Baylor?

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