

Our Holy Habits: Restorative Play

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[0 : 00] All right, the last game that I played, we had some friends over last night, and they introduced us to a Chilean version of Phase 10. Is this the card game?

It was super fun. It was nice to have friends. What other games did you all play? Shout one out. Uno, classic. Can't go wrong with that. I saw, is it you, Christina? There was an Uno with a no card? I want that. That sounds fantastic. In general, I just want a no card that I can play in life. Like, if somebody comes up to me, I'm just like, no. You get like three a year or something like that, right? That'd be good. What other games? Pandemic. What's that? Pandemic? Too soon. Ticket to ride. Wonderful. Excellent. Excellent. Okay. Sorry, two more quick clarifications about the announcements.

I think the slide said 10 for the morning service. It is 10.30. It is 10.30, okay? If you show up at 10, we'll give you a prize.

[0 : 57] Okay. Thing number two, there is one of the parking validation tickets. We found it on the floor. It is now over by the validator. So now there are a bunch of you wondering, like, wait a second.

I can park and I can validate? You can talk to me later, okay? All right. So we've been on a series. We've been talking about our holy habits as a church. We have been talking about essentially what are our values as a community.

And some of the backstory of this is that the elders of the newly merged churches, the Table Church and Resurrection City, D.C., came together and talked for a long time, about a year, about what our values are as a community.

And these values are meant to be sort of reality-based, what's true of us right now, as well as have some sort of aspirational aspect to them as well. What do we want to be true of us?

So we've talked about radical friendship and relentless curiosity. We've talked about rooted improvisation. And we've talked about revolutionary justice.

[1 : 57] This is our fifth and final one before we get into a series on Jonah next week. And our fifth and final value or holy habit as a community is all about restorative play.

Restorative play. Now, before we get into that, let me tell you about the worst boss I've ever had. I've been in paid professional ministry for about 13, 14 years.

And then I did ministry sort of on a volunteer basis before that. And so I've worked under a lot of pastors and ministry directors and all that. And, you know, I'm going to throw one under the bus today.

Okay? So this worst boss I've ever had, whenever I went on vacation, they would, like, insist, like, nag me. Check your email.

Always be available at all times. Have your phone with you. Always be available. That's what pastors need to do. They would have me set goals. And then I would achieve that goal. And then, like, the first question out of their mouth was, like, why didn't you surpass the goal?

[2 : 57] Like, really discouraging sort of stuff. I would go on vacation. And they would ask, like, are you sure that's a good idea? There's, you know, about a dozen or a hundred dozen more things that you could do. I would show up early.

And they would be there already. And they would be like, oh, how nice of you to show up. And then if I stayed late, they'd be there saying things like, hey, why aren't you spending more time with your family? If I wanted to start a new project, they would interject with things like, why do you think that's a good idea?

Why do you think you're the one to do it? There's probably someone more capable than you. If I tried to move a responsibility off my plate, that boss would be like, oh, you think you're too good for

this? No job is beneath you.

You're a pastor. You've got to be willing to do any job. I could not win with this boss. And in fact, I still can't because that boss is me. All right?

That boss is the inner monologue that's lived in my head for a very long time about how not quite good enough, could always be doing more, probably need to be checking the email more often, probably should feel bad about checking the email that often, probably need to spend more time at work and more time with family and all those things.

[4 : 03] We have this inner monologue that tells me, keep working, keep plugging ahead, never stop. And I bring up this terrible boss inside of me because it's a boss that I think prevents me and I dare say maybe quite a few of us to engage in things like restorative play.

We've talked about Sabbath and rest a couple times already in my few years here at the table. And in one of those conversations, I was talking with a group of people, like a small group of people, and almost to a person, as we talked about Sabbath and rest and play and taking breaks, almost to a person, every one of them said, like, just that idea of taking a break brought up anxiety within them. Of just like, oh, if I stop, if I put aside the work for a moment, whatever the work was, things might fall apart. Or if I stay still for too long, I just get antsy inside.

And I can relate to this. So I just came back from a sabbatical this summer. I was off for the better part of June, July, August. And that first month of sabbatical, I felt that sort of anxious energy of, like, I need to be doing something.

And I wrote about this a little bit of just, like, that first month of the sabbatical, I was cataloging every book in my library. And I was starting a newsletter. And I was taking everything that I had written from, like, high school through grad school.

[5 : 32] And I was putting it in a searchable database because that was a good use of my time, apparently. Like, I just felt this need to keep going. So oftentimes when we talk about sabbatical and rest, at least with some of the folks I've met here, it brings up this sense of there's too much to do.

The balls will drop. Sitting around doing nothing sounds terrible. And words like sabbatical and rest can feel kind of passive to, honestly, a group of activists and justice seekers and folks who, you know, you want to get stuff done.

Now, sabbatical and rest are not meant to be entirely passive. Though, you know, a conversation for a different day is maybe there's nothing terrible about passivity, but we'll talk about that some other time.

Sabbath and rest are not meant to be entirely passive. They're supposed to be about engaging our souls and our bodies in ways detached from productivity, from producing something.

Sabbath and rest are meant to be about reminding our humanity that we have value outside of what we get done.

[6 : 49] And therefore, the value that we wanted to name as a church, as a community, that I think is both true of us at least has been at times, but I feel like maybe one of the more aspirational values is the idea of restorative play.

Now, kids get play. You know, my kids will ask all the time for play dates. Hey, can so-and-so come over and play? We set play dates. We go to play grounds.

They ask mom and dad, can you play with me? And grown-ups are not sort of wired for this anymore. We're far too serious for play. We have work sessions and stand-up meetings and work lunches and work trips and corporate accounts.

And if I, like, were to, at the end of the service, like, say to one of you, hey, do you want to come over and play? You'd probably slap me and or sue me. Like, it's just a weird thing to say to a fellow adult, right?

Industrialization, increase in technology, all of this stuff was, like, had this promise that we would have more leisure time. It used to be that the way that you could tell, like, a, quote-unquote, successful society from a not-so-successful society was the number of people and the number of hours that they had for leisure, for rest, for play.

[8 : 05] But as more people moved to the city and fewer people were sort of attached to the agricultural calendar, as industry grew more efficient, we were promised an age of relaxation.

And instead, we got an age of more and more demand for productivity. The number of total hours any given person has for leisure has dropped over the decades.

Americans have around 15 hours of leisure per week. And the number of hours each person works in a week has only gone up since the 70s, hovering around an average of 55 hours. And the younger you are, congratulations, the more hours per week you get to generally put in. Part of it is that we may have some terrible bosses, either, you know, real-life ones or internal ones. But the fact of the matter is, play, rest, restoration, it's necessary. It's a necessary part of being human.

[9 : 05] It's a necessary part of, you know, actually contributing to a community. And it is following in the path of Jesus and the way that God has set out for us.

So a couple things about how play shapes the brain. Play is critical not only to being happy, but critical to also sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person. When the expectation is that you just produce or create or make all the time, and then there's never any margin for rest or play or, you know, not producing something.

You're diminishing your ability to be creative and to be productive and to sustain social relationships. Play is a catalyst. The benefits of getting just a little true play can spread out through your entire life, actually making us more productive and happier.

Play speeds up learning. It enhances productivity. It increases job satisfaction. It increases bonding and communication. Playfulness reduces stress. It increases coping skills. It attracts romantic partners.

[10 : 14] But play is not just a tool to become a more useful cog in the machine of society. Play is what it means to be in the imago Dei, the image of God.

There are verses in Proverbs and Job where God creates out of just pleasure, out of the desire to be playful. It's part of what it means to not just be a machine.

There's a story of a young woman growing up in 1930s London. And this young woman was always doing terribly in school. She was fidgeting. She never paid attention. People today would probably diagnose or label her with something like ADHD, although that diagnosis wasn't available at the time.

Instead, school officials told this young woman's parents that she was disabled, mentally disabled. So the mother took her daughter to see a specialist, to talk to the girl about school while the girl sat on her hands, trying not to fidget.

After about 20 minutes, the doctor asked to speak to her mother alone in the hallway. As they were leaving the office, the doctor flipped on the little radio so they could listen inside, to listen to music in the room for the girl.

[11 : 24] And when the doctor and the mom were in the hallway, the doctor pointed through the little window back into the office and said, look, your daughter is not sick.

Because the little girl had gotten up and she started to dance with the music. Your daughter is not sick. She's a dancer. And that young girl, her name was Jillian Lynn, who went on to become the principal dancer in the Royal Ballet and eventually became a West End choreographer.

The things that inside of us, that once playdates and playgrounds as a kid, eventually sort of gets squeezed out through the process of higher education and the need to get a job and make a paycheck and all of that.

And so we're either diagnosable or it's just sort of this thing that is at rest sitting inside of us but not allowed to come out anymore.

Now, what on earth does this have to do with Scripture and with being a Christian community? Well, to begin with, in the very first story of Scripture, Genesis 1 into the first couple verses of Genesis 2, you have a story about God creating and then resting.

[12 : 34] A story about God engaging in rhythms of making and also giving creation the ability to create itself. And then on the seventh day, God was finished with his work and he rested.

And it's this fundamental story set at the very first verses of Scripture that even the creator of all the cosmos, all the universe, desires, wants, needs rest.

You see this pattern then set up throughout the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures where this is meant to be the rhythm of all of society where there are times for resting and there's a time for work.

And notice that the very first day that the human is alive is a day where God says, now rest. You are created.

I have breathed life into you. I have given you a job to attend for creation. And day one of the job is rest. So this notion of not working so that you can rest, but rest comes first.

[13 : 44] And then the work comes out of the rest. And then there are larger rhythms as well. Every seven years, letting, you know, in an agricultural society, the ground lay fallow. Every 49 years, releasing debts.

All of that set out in the Hebrew Scriptures. Mark chapter 6. The apostles have been, the 12, have been sent out on a mission of discipleship, of telling people the good news about the kingdom that is coming to earth.

And then the disciples come back. This is Mark 6, verse 30. And they gather around Jesus and began to tell him all that they had done and taught. And then, because so many people were coming and going, they didn't even have a chance to eat, Jesus says to them, come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

So here's Jesus. Jesus, who may have some notion that he's got a limited time on earth. He's got his disciples who have a limited time on earth. They're doing what is probably, you know, the most important thing that could possibly be done, announcing the coming of the kingdom of God.

And Jesus says, come away with me to a quiet place and get some rest. They go on a retreat. I mean, so many of Jesus' ministries, so much of the Jesus story is about Jesus just sort of like relaxing.

[15 : 04] As Jesus was walking along the sea, such and such a thing happened. As Jesus was lounging and eating with some friends, such and such a thing happened. The very first miracle of Jesus is making 500 gallons of wine so the wedding party can keep raging on into the day and night and day and night and day and night.

Jesus knew something about what it meant to play. And of course, we read the stories in the gospels and the scriptures about all the other stuff and we skip over the, and then Jesus took his disciples to a quiet place to get away.

And then Jesus went to a quiet place and rested or prayed or was alone or was with some good friends. Paul picks up on some of these themes in Colossians chapter one.

And this is the message translation. I like the sort of powerful way that this translation puts it. Paul's talking about the ways that the church in Colossae have, out of a desire to be holy and pure, have created like all these tenets of a religion that Paul doesn't recognize.

And so Paul says this, he says, so then, if with Christ you've put all that pretentious and infantile religion behind you, why do you let yourselves be bullied by it?

[16 : 22] Don't touch this. Don't taste that. Don't go near this. Do you think that things that are here today and gone tomorrow are worth that kind of attention? Such things sound impressive if said in a deep enough voice.

They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic. But they're just another way of showing off and making yourselves look important. I don't know if you're anything like me.

I've definitely been in religious circles that create lots of rules about what you can and cannot do.

The music you can listen to or not listen to. The movies that you can see or not see. You know, like the phrase, don't drink, don't chew, don't go with girls who do.

That sort of thing. And it's all done out of a desire to be pious. It's that inner boss again, right? Oh, don't, don't. You don't want to be seen. You don't want to be noticed doing the wrong thing.

Don't even want the impression of being evil. That sort of voice. And Paul's like, you're sucking the joy right out of your relationship with Christ. You're sucking the joy right out of it because you're granting power to things that have no power.

[17 : 30] So the sort of pious asceticism that says there are all these things you cannot touch, ways that you cannot play, ways that you cannot waste your time, wasting your time is in fact sinful, that sort of form of religiosity will kill you from the inside out.

It's important to bring up at this moment the restorative part of restorative play. Like, again, if you're anything like me, you're lying in bed or on the couch and you're flipping through TikTok.

And then you'll see the most hilarious comedian that you've ever seen or heard. And it will get this sort of thing from you. You know, the little nasal exhale of laughter.

That's hilarious. Flip. Right? There's not much restorative about that. I mean, at least maybe you're lying down on a couch or something. But like, the intention of what that comedian is doing, creating laughter, is then being filtered through like a thousand layers of disassociation so that the thing that is meant to make you laugh in community with others gets the nasal exhale.

And that's it. Restorative play does require some intention. It's hard to accident your way into restorative play. Because it means that you have to create the margin, you have to push things out of the way, you have to be willing to say no to the nasty boss inside your head or in the glass office. [18:59] You have to be willing to say no to all the distractions that want you just sort of disassociating on a couch. And rather say, I choose to spend my time to play in this way.

And there's a lot of pressures in our society that want to make those choices for you. So you don't actually get any restoration out of the play and the play turns into work again.

Restorative play, my sort of rubric for this is like, it's restorative if you feel better afterwards and it's disassociation if you don't. If you've got, you know, an hour long TikTok session and that's how you intended to spend your hour and you feel better, great.

If you've got an hour long TikTok session and you just kind of feel like crap afterwards, it might be time to question if that was the best use of your time. Was that restorative or not? Another scripture, one that goes in my list of scriptures that I could just about quote every single sermon.

This is Matthew 11, verses 28 through 30. Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion? This is Jesus talking, come to me, get away with me and you'll recover your life.

[20:10] I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me and watch how I do it. And then this is Eugene Peterson's translation and this is what makes Eugene Peterson the rock star.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, Jesus says, and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Let me read that again without the interruptions. Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion? Come to me, get away with me and you'll recover your life.

I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. Life with Jesus should feel like freedom.

[21:21] And if it does not feel like freedom, I'm not sure it's Jesus. If it does not feel like freedom, I'm pretty sure it's not Jesus. And so these unforced rhythms of grace cannot demand you to work yourself to the bone even in the name of something great.

Great. And that's why these values, these holy habits interweave together. If you want radical friendship, then you're going to need some curiosity towards other people in your life.

And that curiosity works really well with restorative play because curiosity and playfulness go really well together in terms of learning. And learning and curiosity and playfulness are what we need for radical, or sorry, revolutionary justice to recognize what is right in the world and what is wrong in the world and to gather with some friends and to have some time together so that then we can enter into the world that desperately needs a word of hope and a word of freedom and then we can restore something worthwhile in this broken, dark world.

You need all of these to mix-match together because if all you focus on is just radical friendship, radical friendship, radical friendship, there's a lot of suffering people that need radical friends that you're just going to ignore.

If all you focus on is justice, you're going to wear yourself to the bone, noticing everything wrong with the world and then exhaust yourself and burn yourself out and do no one any earthly good anymore because you died at the tender age of 22 wondering about how you can fix everything.

[22:55] And if all you focus on is just restorative play, that can go awry as well. These all have to work together and we all need to hold each other accountable towards like, have you rested recently? Have you made a move towards friendship recently?

Have you shown any curiosity recently? Have you improvised, like left the plan behind so that you can embark in something new? We need that mutual invitation in each other's lives so that we can flourish together.

So life with Jesus should look like freedom, those unforced rhythms with grace, and then that freedom should lead to mutual thriving. If your freedom comes at the cost of someone else's slavery, you ain't living in freedom.

If your freedom comes at the cost of somebody else's suffering, you're not living in freedom.

Freedom needs to lead to mutual thriving together. So those unforced rhythms of grace are not merely an invitation to you, it's an invitation to the broader community.

And so restorative play is not just you on a getaway alone somewhere, maybe every so often you'll need that, but if that's all that ever is, then you're forsaking the mutual thriving of the community, of the city, of the neighborhood.

[24 : 03] Are you with me? Yeah? A couple of you. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. So these values work together. Friendship needs curiosity, which can accomplish justice.

To accomplish justice, we'll need friends, we'll need margin to rest and to play. We'll need to be adaptable, we'll need to learn how to improvise, we'll need friends to help us, we'll need to be able to play and laugh at ourselves.

So my invitation and my challenge for you this week is to one, you know, if you have an inner boss that's awful towards you, fire them.

Fire the inner boss that says that you do not have permission to rest or play or that it's a waste of your time. All that anxiety that builds up when you dare to sit back for a moment, fire that boss if at all possible.

And then, you know, the invitation and challenge to quit something, to say no. The ability to have restorative play in your life means that you've got to, you've got to be able to say no to things and to build margin so that then you can give your best yes to what matters and to what counts.

[25 : 20] So you quit something, you fire the inner boss that's telling you that you can't do this and then you quit something so that you can say yes to something better.

Would you pray with me? Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit, Mother of us all, you, in the very first pages of Scripture, show us the way.

you give us the gift of creation, the gift of community, the gift of people, the gift of being made in your image, and the image of God is invited to rest.

And so God, may we not forsake those commands, may we not pretend that rest and Sabbath and play are just frivolous extras, but rather core and integral to what it means to be human and what it means to be a community patterned after the way of Jesus.

God, we pray that you would grant us the margin, the time, the moments to reclaim so that we can have friends, we can play games, we can laugh with our whole bodies, our whole diaphragms engaged and not just little nasal exhales.

[26 : 43] God, we all know that this world throws at us constant, continual turmoil, hard things, tragedies in our own lives and the lives of our friends and family and our neighbors in this city and across the world.

God, may we not believe the lie that the solution to tragedy is to burn ourselves out.

May we not believe the deception that in order to be the most on fire, the most on purpose, the most productive that we can be, that we have to say no to every opportunity to rest.

God, may we trust that instead that when you invite us to get away with you and to rest, that you will care for all things and that you are God and we are not.

We pray these things in the unity of the Spirit in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.