Busyness has become America’s new status symbol. It’s now chic and trendy to be busy. If you doubt what I say, pay attention to our conversations and you’ll notice our penchant for playing the how-busy-are-you game.

Busy has become the default response to the customary “How are you doing?” greeting. When you greet people this way, some seize the moment to enumerate their busyness—You wouldn’t believe how busy our trip was to Aruba, or junior’s busy travel soccer schedule. It’s boring to be on the receiving end of such conversation. Maybe I’m not supposed to say such things, given my profession. Just the same, I think it.

Busyness has become the new spirituality. I suspect we talk about busyness so much because it gives us some measure of existential reassurance. It makes us feel important and sought after. When I am busy, the devil whispers in my ear, you are incredibly important. It’s a lie, of course. As much as I inflate my importance, I’m not indispensable, after all.

We used to call cell phones and the internet time-saving devices. How quaint! Technology now comes with a price. People lament that they can no longer get away from social media. A professor at the University of Maryland has done the research. She concludes that today’s college students are “functionally unable” to unplug from the digital world.

Even children are busy now. Parents are made to feel remiss if they are not shuttling their children from one skill-enhancing activity to the next.

Much of our busyness, let’s be honest, is self-imposed. We don’t have to live this way. We really don’t.

God spent the first six days of creation working. On the seventh day, God rested. That’s right! God took the seventh day off!

When it comes time to write down the Ten Commandments, God places Sabbath-keeping fourth on the list. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:9). The justification for keeping Sabbath originates with what God earlier modeled in creation. God worked six days and rested on the Sabbath (20:11).

This Sabbath-keeping provision is mandated soon after God’s people have been released from 400 years of
Egyptian slavery. The only thing they have known for the past four centuries is work. This command to observe a day of rest must have seemed to them as exquisitely liberating.

The one practice that distinguishes Jews from Gentiles is Sabbath-keeping. Gentiles could work 24/7 but one in seven days was commanded to be a Sabbath day for Jewish people. They still practice Sabbath on the seventh day.

So, why do Christians practice Sabbath on Sunday? The New Testament makes repeated use of the phrase, “On the first day of the week.” The women arrive “on the first day of the week” to anoint Jesus’ body for burial (Luke 24:1). Jesus’ disciples gather to break bread “on the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7). Jesus is resurrected “on the first day of the week.” Early Christians made the switch to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection “on the first day of the week.”

What constitutes work on the Sabbath? Inquiring minds want to know. This question sent leading rabbis to the white board to arrive at a working definition. Their answer, recorded in the ancient Talmud, lists 39 categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath. Son of Man is Jesus’ preferred self-designation. He avoids the politically loaded term, Son of God. Jesus prefers this little-known phrase from the prophet Daniel, who has a vision of one coming “like the Son of Man who is given authority and sovereign power, whose dominion shall not pass away and whose kingdom will never end” (7:13-14).

At this point in the narrative, Luke bolts a second story about Sabbath-keeping to this first story. A man with deformed classifications of work prohibited on the Sabbath. They rub the heads of grain in their hands, separating wheat grains from the chaff. Winnowing and preparing food are also considered no-no’s on this list of Sabbath restrictions.

The religious leaders, called Pharisees, have been bird-dogging Jesus for some time now. When Jesus breaks the Sabbath, they protest: “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus reminds them of a story from Scripture about David, who eats consecrated bread on the Sabbath (1 Samuel 21:1-6). This bread, which was normally reserved for priests, is consumed by David while he is fleeing King Saul. If David can forego Sabbath restrictions to satisfy his hunger, Jesus can do likewise.

Jesus closes their conversation with the cryptic words, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Son of Man is Jesus’ preferred self-designation. He avoids the politically loaded term, Son of God. Jesus prefers this little-known phrase from the prophet Daniel, who has a vision of one coming “like the Son of Man who is given authority and sovereign power, whose dominion shall not pass away and whose kingdom will never end” (7:13-14).
hand worships at the synagogue on a Sabbath when Jesus is teaching. Jesus singles this man out from the crowd and asks, “What is lawful on the Sabbath, to go good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” Jesus deliberately provokes his critics, yet nobody says a word. He silences these fault finders with his own impeccable logic.

You know what’s coming next! Jesus orders the man to stretch out his withered hand and heals him. The religious leaders huddle together to decide what to do next. I tell you, the irony is unmistakable. The Pharisees are enraged about Jesus breaking the fourth command while their plotting is a violation of the sixth commandment, dealing with premeditated murder.

If you want an exhibit A of how it’s possible for people to run perfectly good religion into the ground, this story qualifies. Saddles people with all sorts of rules and reg’s; reduce everything to picayune laws and catch Jesus on a technicality.

We talk about God’s Big Story in this church, using three words: creation, fall and redemption. The first word, creation, reminds us that God creates us for relationship, not rule-keeping. Keeping commandments make sense only in relationship to God. God intends people to honor family covenants, not for purposes of rule keeping but for relationship.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus says to these same detractors, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (2:27). The Sabbath may be a great servant, but it’s a lousy master. God didn’t create us to keep the Sabbath; God creates the Sabbath for our benefit. If Sabbath-keeping gets in the way of loving God, we’ve got a problem.

Honoring the Sabbath has two primary functions. First, it offers us rest. Sabbath offers us respite from the things that consume our lives the other six days. Naturally, this includes work, but it also extends to debilitating worry. Rest affords us distance from anxiety and stress. As long as we’re in perpetual motion, everything takes on exaggerated proportion.

Second, Sabbath-keeping restores our relationship to God through worship and related spiritual practices. No matter how much we seek to be present to God, our everyday pursuits have a way of causing slippage in this relationship. Devoting so much attention to material pursuits and temporal concerns robs us of things that have lasting significance. We gather for worship on the Sabbath to recalibrate our bodies and souls.

If Sabbath offers us this much promise, why are we missing out? Many of us have been running in this hamster wheel so long that we don’t know how to stop. At this
Inviting Jesus Christ to become Lord of your Sabbath.

I need to make a confession. I’m deficient when it comes to Sabbath-keeping. I take a day off each week, but I primarily use this day to run errands and do household chores. I need to more intentionally incorporate restful activities into my week.

I’m inviting you, who are likewise caught in this busy trap, to join me in incorporating Sabbath into your routine. There are four weeks in February, so why not reserve one day each week for Sabbath-keeping. If you can’t manage a full day, begin with a half day. This assignment will challenge those of you with young children or special family circumstances.

Take the next step. Build counterbalancing exercises into your routine to moderate work. Why not begin by identifying a few rest-filled activities into your Sabbath. Take a long walk. I don’t mean a hike, where the goal is getting somewhere as fast as possible, but one in which you take time to enjoy the beauty of God’s creation. Enjoy a leisurely meal with friends or family. Not a meal in which you shovel down food before the next task but one in which you actually enjoy the cuisine and relish each other’s company. Surely you can identify activities that replenish you. Steer clear of things on the Sabbath that add more stress. Bill paying and preparing tax returns come immediately to my mind.

Here’s a novel idea. Unplug your phone or computer. This is not going to be easy for some of you. Social media has become addictive in our day. One-half of Facebook users check it during the night or the first thing in the morning. Studies have determined that social media is more addictive than alcohol or cigarettes. It’s that bad, folks!

Invite Jesus Christ to become Lord of your Sabbath. That’s right, ask Jesus to become part of your Sabbath. Begin your Sabbath in prayer. Center your day in God’s Word. Our devotional can help you in this respect. Since most of you will practice Sabbath on Sunday, make it a point to worship on the Lord’s Day. Don’t just drag your half dead carcass into worship. Come with an attitude of expectancy. Ask God to reveal things to you in worship.

Doesn’t your heart yearn for such things? If Sabbath offers this much promise, you wouldn’t want to miss out!