

THE SEMI-CIRCLE

The very first commandment given to us by God was to “be fruitful and multiply.” We were not created just simply to exist. Our Creator expects us to produce an increase. Jesus told a story about three servants, each given an amount of money from their master. Two of the servants worked with the money to create a good return on their investments, while the third—called wicked and lazy when his master heard his story—sat on the money and did not produce an increase. The two who returned more than they started with were rewarded, while the one who gave back only what he was given was punished. Clearly we are not to be lazy and wicked servants; we were made to bear fruit.

But does this mean we are to be workaholics? Apparently many Christian leaders think so. Statistics bear the results of the work round-the-clock attitude many pastors have adopted. Studies suggest that more than a thousand pastors quit their churches every month. If this is not evidence of an epidemic of vocational burnout, we don’t know what is.

PRODUCTIVITY, STRESS, AND MEMORY FOAM

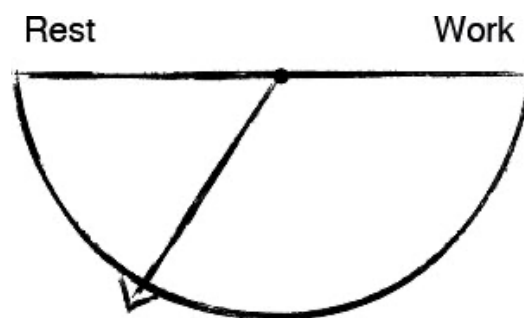
We all have stress in our lives, but it is not always bad stress. Stress, as we recall from our high school physics class, is simply force applied to an object to change its shape or course. Stress fractures occur when the object is unmoving or unbending. The right amount of stress on a violin string creates a beautiful note. Too little stress results in a maddening buzz; too much stress produces a shrill off-key sound. We can’t—and shouldn’t—try to avoid stress. It is part of life. But we are not made to bear too much stress. Studies estimate that forty-three percent of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress, and stress-related ailments account for seventy-five to ninety percent of all doctor’s visits.¹¹ It is estimated that the number of stress-related deaths in the UK to be 180,000 each year. Why do we stand for this level of stress in our lives?

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This pressure-filled lifestyle is just as prevalent among Christians. We may proclaim, “Cast your cares on him, for he cares for you,” but we don’t live it ourselves. We quote from Matthew, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light,” but we continue to pack heavy burdens on our backs. Something has gone very wrong.

God designed us to be productive. But we build our identities around our activities. We are not living in the truth of who God created us to be. We have become human “doings” rather than human “beings.” We need a biblical framework for a rhythm of life that allows us to be fruitful in balance with being at rest. We need to be secure in who we are, based on what Christ did for us on the cross and the very great promises we have that we are loved and accepted by him. We must stop striving to gain the acceptance of others by what we do, leading to a driven lifestyle.

We see in Scripture a pattern of life we are destined to live from the time of our birth. We can see it in the lives of Adam and Eve before the fall, and we see it lived out on a daily basis by Jesus. This is the pattern of life we call the Semi-Circle, so called from a picture of a pendulum swinging in a natural rhythm.



Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. —Genesis 1:26–2:3

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

—Genesis 2:15

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” —Genesis 3:8–9

We see in Genesis that on the sixth day, God created man in his image. We need to stop here and consider the word *image*—it is very important in our understanding of the Semi-Circle. To us, *image* brings the idea of a reflection in a mirror or a portrait reflecting the likeness of someone. If a picture taken by a photographer shows a person’s face, we say it is a good image of that person. But these thoughts would not have been in the mind of those who first heard these words. When Moses first composed these words, there were no mirrors, no portrait painters, and no one-hour photo labs. In those days, a person would get a reference point for how he or she looked by looking at others. But this is not the meaning of the image spoken of in Genesis 1. A better word would be *imprint* or *impression*. It is the picture of God leaving his handprint on us when he fashioned us from clay. There is an indentation on us that can only be filled by the hand of God. Yet from the fall of man onward, we have been pulling away from the touch of our Creator, trying to fill the imprints with all sorts of insufficient fixes. This was seen from the very beginning with the first man and woman—our ancestors.

Have you seen memory foam mattresses? You can place your hand on the top of the mattress, and the imprint made stays there for some time. This is an impression that can only be totally filled with the hand that made it. This is the same with us. We have an impression in our lives that can only be filled by the hand that made it. (But the impression God puts on us never fades away.)

WORKING TO BE HUMAN

God is walking in the garden he created in the cool of the evening. He desired the company of those he made, Adam and Eve. The indication from the text is that this was a regular event, a routine in their daily lives. At the end of the day the Lord would turn up and expect his beloved ones to be there to go on a stroll with him. God made himself visible each evening so Adam and Eve could feel connected to their Father. It was a daily reminder that God’s hand filled the imprint on each of them. This was how it was meant to be between the Creator and the created since the beginning of our time. This time of retreat and rest following a day of labor was not an optional “if you have time but if not don’t worry about it” event. It was built into us. It is how God created us to live.

But on this evening our fore parents failed to show up. They were hiding from the Hand that alone could fill them and make them feel complete. After a confrontation with God, they were cursed to work among thorns and thistles, sweating in the heat from backbreaking labor. But this is not how it was supposed to be.

Work itself is not a curse. Before the fall, before Adam and Eve decided to go it alone without the hand of God in their lives (this phrase takes on a whole new meaning when you picture the imprint of God on us, doesn't it?), God had given them instructions on how to care for the garden. Work was assigned before the fall. We were designed for intentional activity to produce a sense of fruitfulness in our lives. This leads us to several conclusions.

1. *Unemployment causes our lives to fall below what is standard.* When people become unemployed, it's as though they have fallen from their God-given call to lead productive lives. That's why people struggle so much when they lose their jobs. The focus of productivity and fruitfulness in their lives is lost; it's as though they stop being fully human. No wonder depression often accompanies unemployment.

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2. *There is no such thing as retirement.* If you leave your job voluntarily, it will not be long before you begin feeling the onset of depression. No amount of golf or fishing can take the place of being fruitful. And don't even get us started on sitting all day in front of the television. If you stop all productive activity in your life, you are pulling away from your God-designed calling. You cannot live a successful life as a human. In fact, many people die within a year or two of retirement because they cease to be fruitful.

In the movie *Secondhand Lions*, Hub and Garth (played brilliantly by Michael Caine and Robert Duvall)—brothers and former fighters in the French Foreign Legion—have retired to Texas. When fiery, hot-tempered Hub overexerts himself he suffers a blackout spell that lands him briefly in the hospital. After checking Hub out, the brothers stop at a diner and order barbecue. Garth begins probing to see what is bothering Hub.

Garth: "What's the matter, brother? Are you afraid of dying?"

Hub: "Hell, no, I'm not afraid of dying."

Garth: "Then what is it?"

Hub: "I'm afraid of being useless."¹²

It is not until Hub finds a new purpose—raising his great-nephew, Walter—that he recovers his will to live.

3. *There must be work in heaven.* If you were counting on sitting in an endless church service, sorry. There was work before the fall; therefore, there must be work after the redemption. This life is a foreshadowing of the real life yet to come.

Work is a strategic part of human existence. We are to live productive lives or we will fall away from our God-given calling and the standard of basic humanity. We were created on the sixth day of creation in order to work. But even more important is what happened on the seventh day.

God created man and woman on the sixth day, setting them in a garden full of wild, wonderful creatures and delicious foods. He gave them instruction on caring for the animals and plants in the garden. He told them to be fruitful. But on the first full day of existence for Adam and Eve, God rested. All of creation took a well-deserved break in activity. This was our first full day, a day of rest. Then the work began. ...

MURDER, ADULTERY, WORKAHOLIC

Rest is God's healthy starting point for us. We are human beings, not human doings. But we have it backward. We pride ourselves on our strong work ethic, even using it as a sign of godliness. The true sign of godliness—imitating God—is to pattern our lives after him. And for God, rest is vitally important. As a matter of fact, rest from our activities is listed in God's Top Ten. The commandment to keep the Sabbath is right up there with "don't kill," "don't steal," and "don't commit adultery." In other words, being a workaholic is, to God, just as bad as being a murderer or adulterer. Rest is not an option if we are to walk in the lifestyle of a disciple.

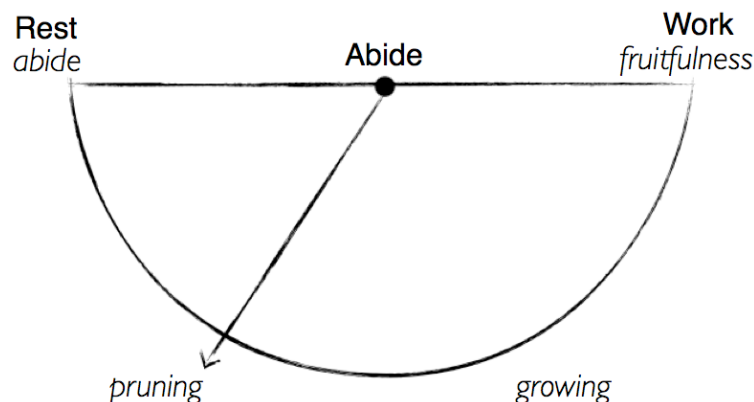
...Our first experience as created beings with our Creator was a day of rest;... [therefore] we must [prioritize] a place of rest [in our lives]. Resting in God—abiding in his presence—is the only way we can be successful in what he has called us to do. Yet how many of us schedule days of rest and relaxation on the calendar before we schedule meetings, conventions, and other days of work? Is this challenging to you?

You are facing pressure to be successful in your ministry. You are searching for ways to grow your church, build your business, reach more people with the Good News. This is good—you are meant to be fruitful. God wants your ministry to grow more than you do. Growth is a sign of life. But in order to be productive, as God wants you to be, you must live in the rhythm of the Semi-Circle.

THE PENDULUM SWING

Imagine a pendulum swinging in rhythm—back and forth, to and fro. The shape created by this swinging pendulum is a Semi-Circle. At one end of the pendulum's arc is fruitfulness. At the other end is abiding. We can't have one without the other. We [rest] in Christ, then go forth to bear fruit. We bear fruit; then we are pruned back and enter a time of abiding. Rest, work, work, rest. It is a rhythm we see in nature as well.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.



Fruitfulness happens in stages and seasons: [rest], grow, bear fruit, prune, abide. This is the rhythm of the swinging pendulum, the Semi-Circle. It's really all about timing. We cannot bear fruit if we do not spend time [resting]. But we cannot simply stay put in the [rest] mode, for a branch that does not eventually bear fruit will be cut off and cast into the fire.

GROWTH MUST HAPPEN BEFORE FRUIT IS PRODUCED. AND GROWTH COMES FROM KNOWING HOW TO ABIDE	It's interesting that nowhere in this text is growth mentioned. Growth seems to be a result of the right rhythm being established. Growth is not the same as bearing fruit. Sometimes we mistake spiritual growth for the fruit itself. This is not the case. We must grow before we can see fruit. An apple tree, for instance, does not bear fruit for three years. Grape vines are pruned back and forced not to bear fruit for two to three years so that their root systems can be established. Growth must happen before fruit is produced. And growth comes from knowing how to [rest and] abide.
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PERMISSION TO BE UNPRODUCTIVE

Let's take a closer look at the first-century process of growing grapes. At the time of Jesus' incarnation, a vine would be cultivated, planted, and left to grow for three years before being allowed to bear fruit. Every time it tried to bring forth a bunch of grapes, it would be cut back. After the third year, the grapes would be allowed to grow on their own. By then the branches were strong enough to support the weight of the grapes without breaking. After the harvest, the branches were pruned back for a time of nourishment and rest before the fruit-growing season began again.

Bearing fruit is the most natural thing in the world for a branch. It doesn't do it by straining to push out a grape. Looking at our lives, however, it would seem producing fruit-making disciples is strenuous. If fruit bearing is not coming naturally in our lives, could it be that we have not spent the proper season abiding? Could it be that we are overgrown branches, too weak to support a single grape, let alone a bunch? Pruning is not the fun part of life. We seldom see churches displaying banners advertising "40 Days of Pruning," or small groups practicing "pruning yourself to a better life." But if a grapevine is not pruned regularly, the branches grow spindly and weak. There is no abiding time when they gain their strength for the growing season.

We need to learn when it is our pruning time. This seems unproductive at first glance. After all, aren't we supposed to be pressing forth with all of our energy to do the work of the kingdom? In a word, no. We are supposed to pattern our lives after that of Jesus. It is not our energy and determination that impresses God, it is our living in the manner he made us that will produce the fruit he intends for us to bear. Pruning is not automatic for the branch. Left to its own plans, it would continue to grow, increasing in size but decreasing in strength, endurance, and health until it would be unable to hold the fruit it is intended to bear.

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We need to have times of pruning in our churches, times when most, if not all, activity ceases. Times of rest and abiding. This runs contrary to principles taught in most church growth courses and seminars. How can one grow a church larger by shutting it down for a season? Yet that is exactly what happens at many of the churches where we have discipled the leaders and introduced them to the principles of the Semi-Circle. We encourage them to stop all small groups and to drastically scale back the worship service. Often there is just a simple time of singing and a brief word of encouragement shared.

Many of the members go away on holiday or spend more time with friends and family. It looks to many like nothing is happening. But in this time of abiding, great strength is given to those who do the teaching, singing, and serving throughout the rest of the year. Without a time for their spiritual ground to lie fallow, there would be a very poor harvest in the year to come.

From [resting] we grow, from growing we bear fruit, from bearing fruit we are cut back. This is the pattern of the Semi-Circle, [always abiding in Jesus]. When the Lord is moving you into a time of pruning and [resting], surrender to him. There is much grace to be found in the place of abiding.

YOUR PERSONAL STYLE OF REST

Before you and your Huddle members begin to practice the rhythm of the Semi-Circle, it is important to discover how you rest. We don't all rest in the same way. Recognizing whether you are an introvert or extrovert is the first step in learning how you rest. Introverts and extroverts are refreshed and energized by different types of rest.

Extroverts prefer to direct and receive energy from the external world of people and activity. Introverts on the other hand prefer to direct and receive energy from the internal world of thought, reflection, and ideas. The following analogy may be helpful: Extroverts are by nature, "solar powered," their preferred energy source being external to themselves. Introverts on the other hand are more "battery powered," they prefer to recreate internally and away from external stimulation.

Introverts and extroverts process information in their preferred worlds. Extroverts love to think out loud—it is often only when all the words are out there that they can begin to formulate what they really think. Most extroverts know moments in their lives when they have thought out loud and really wished they could rewind history! Extroverts give breadth to life, they tend to know a lot of people and delight in trying a wide variety of hobbies. An extrovert's idea of a relaxing weekend would often include entertaining friends and lots of social interaction.

On the other hand, introverts like to process information in their preferred internal world. If you are going to get the best out of an introvert you often have to give them time to process away from the crowd. They tend to prefer written communication as it allows them to craft their response and only to press the send button when they are sure it reflects their considered response. Introverts give depth to life, usually preferring a small number of significant friendships. When they are among people they know well and feel comfortable around they often become gregarious and sociable. Attending social events where they don't know people well is invariably hard work for introverts, there being little chance of establishing deep friendships in such a short period of time. When they discover a hobby that fascinates them, introverts will often devote the time required to master it, spending their lives becoming more and more expert in their chosen interest. Introverts recreate on their own or with a small number of people they know well. They often enjoy reading and watching a good movie.

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When it comes to knowing how to rest, understanding how God has created us makes all the difference. If you are an extrovert, don't expect to come away from a quiet evening spent by yourself all refreshed. You will be pining for interaction with others and may actually feel more worn out from being without human contact. Of course, we are to set aside time to spend with the Lord alone. And as we get to know him more intimately, these times will be the most refreshing of all. But there is grace in being who God made us to be. If a cookout with friends is your way to relax, by all means fire up the grill. If you are an introvert needing to recharge, don't feel guilty saying no to the cookout invite from people you don't know well.

RHYTHM IN ACTION

God's intention is for us to have rhythm at every level in our lives.

Days

Each day should have structure to enable rest and work, relationships and recreation. We need to work out a healthy pattern that prioritizes our life's circumstances. This framework is the order of our day, our personal disciplines. We often encourage leaders to break the day down into eight hours of sleep, eight hours of work, four hours engaging, and four hours disengaging.

Weeks

The seven days of the week give the next level to work out our rhythm. This will involve at least one day for rest and others for work. Our weekly routines should make way for special family members, church, and neighbors God calls us to love as ourselves.

Months

These longer periods give another level to develop variety and contrast—the Semi-Circle in action. Again, a conscious effort is necessary to plan and establish biblical patterns of work and rest so that a dull routine does not take over. Regular times of celebration and retreat should be scheduled so they are not forgotten.

Seasons

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These are the phases of a year that enable us to rest for a longer time. Seasons are built into God's creation. We need to build similar seasons into our lives. Seasons include adolescence and adulthood; singleness and marriage; parenthood to empty nest. Working at a new career may require more of your time than a job you have been doing for a number of years. In each of these seasons, you must find time to [rest] and work.

HOW JESUS RESTED

We can find biblical examples of the Semi-Circle in the lives of many in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus lived the principles of the Semi-Circle in his life. If we are to be his disciples, we would do well to follow his example of abiding and fruit bearing. Jesus practiced a rhythm of life. He knew how to order his time in terms of being with his Father and doing the work of the kingdom.

Resting Through Extended Times of Retreat (Mark 1:12–13)

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Before Jesus began his ministry, he went out into the desert for forty days where he was tempted by Satan but made strong in the Spirit. He was alone, away from people, spending time with God. He knew exactly what he needed to do. He knew where he needed to start. He spent time retreating with his Father. The very first thing he did before he could begin his ministry was retreat. Jesus came out of the desert full of the Holy Spirit.

What does this say to us? We all need times of extended retreat, resting in the presence of God, focusing on him. Like Jesus, at the start of a new ministry or task or phase in our lives, we need to spend concentrated time receiving power and strength from the Father and sifting our motives.

Regular Daily Times of Quiet Resting with the Lord (Mark 1:35–39)

In this passage we read that Jesus got up early in the morning to go to a solitary place to pray. He was about to begin his second day of ministry and crowds had already gathered, but Jesus got up early to slip away. Before doing anything else, before starting his day, he rested in the presence of his Father and talked with him. A leader's demand for our time and energy will always exceed our capacity, working harder and longer is not the answer. Jesus said "I only do the things I see my Father doing." He didn't get a three year download to his Outlook calendar at his baptism, rather, each morning he had to retreat and establish the priorities for that day.

Teaching the Disciples to Rest (Mark 6:30–32)

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When you look at the pattern of life the disciples began to develop, it's clear that Jesus was trying to teach them the same thing. In this passage, the disciples gathered around Jesus, reporting back to him all that they had done after returning from being sent out in Mark 6:7. So many people were coming and going that they didn't have a chance to eat. Jesus told them to follow him to a quiet place where they could rest and eat. All this happened in the midst of what we would call revival. Jesus made rest a priority, and we are to follow his lifestyle.

Other biblical examples of Jesus following the Semi-Circle's pattern of rest and work are as follows:

- Mark 2:13—Jesus is alone at the lake before teaching
- Mark 3:7—Jesus withdraws with his disciples
- Mark 3:13—Jesus goes up the mountainside and calls his disciples
- Mark 4:35—Jesus leaves the crowds by getting into a boat
- Mark 5:1—Jesus at the lake/hillside
- Mark 5:21—Jesus crosses the lake to the other side again
- Mark 6:45–46—Jesus sends his disciples ahead, dismisses the crowd, and goes up a mountain to pray