

Why Rest, Retreat, Sabbath, and Solitude

Are Essential Disciplines

for the Christian Educator

By June Hetzel and David P. Castillo



Linda A. Schamer and Michael J. B. Jackson indicate that “teachers tend to be more affected by burnout than any other public service professional” (1996). In a profession in which the work is never done, teachers can be tempted to replace their God-designed rhythms of rest with work and achievement. Teachers can neglect the natural order of things, that is, the way that God designed them to live within limits and rhythms of rest. Seeking to achieve and serve their students, teachers often spiral down into depletion of body, mind, and soul by neglecting their bodies’ and minds’ need for rest and their souls’ need for rest and communion with their heavenly Father.

Teachers can burn out because they might, with good intentions, wrap their lives around success in the classroom as their primary good (for example, helping students and seeking high test scores), rather than first wrapping their hearts around Jesus and His kingdom as the primary good, gaining sustenance from Him. While helping students is a good aim, it is a secondary one. The highest good is rooting themselves deeply in Jesus and the things He is about, giving glory to Him (Philippians 2). The Spirit-led life in Jesus (Romans 8) is the primary good Christian educators must seek.

Following Jesus’ lifestyle, we learn to commune with God and retreat from the crowds as Jesus regularly modeled for His disciples. For example, in Mark 6:31 Jesus invites His disciples to come away by themselves “to a secluded place and rest a while,” where they communed with Jesus and each other before reentering their place of ministry

(NASB). Chuck Miller calls us to be “the people of God before we do the work of God” (2010). His metaphor of *Pitcher/Cup, Saucer/Plate* is a vivid reminder that God is the *Pitcher* and we are being poured into as a *cup*. The Godhead “tip the pitcher and pour Themselves into the *cup* of our lives ... so that what God is doing within your life spills over onto the *saucer*—spills into the relationships of your life, relationships that God has initiated by His love and sovereignty and for His glory” (Miller 2007, 196, emphasis added). It is only from here, being fully filled by God and each other, that we can then go out and do *plate*, that place of ministry the Lord does through us as a result of our being found in Him (*Pitcher/cup*) and grounded with one another (*saucer*). Here, ministry is paradoxically easy. This is why Jesus said, “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). Because as we find ourselves in Him and abiding in Him (John 15), and working within our giftedness in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4), we bear more fruit. *Plate* can be any part of our lives that receives the overflow of who we are in Christ as we serve others ... serving our families, teaching, serving in the church, organizing an event. Whatever the ministry or event—“the *plate*—receives further divine spillage that originated in the *Pitcher*, filled the *cup* to overflowing, and spilled over onto the *saucer* and now onto the *plate*. Notice—and remember—that the *Pitcher* is the source of all of this. The key to the event is the *Pitcher*, the Three-in-One pouring all of Their essence into our lives. [This] process develops an awareness in us that God initiated that event [or ministry] and is intimately involved” (Miller 2007, 196–197, emphasis added).



This is why the spiritual disciplines, such as *rest*, *retreat*, *Sabbath*, and *solitude*, are crucial for any educator. We must be filled up by Him first and then, out of the overflow, serve others well.

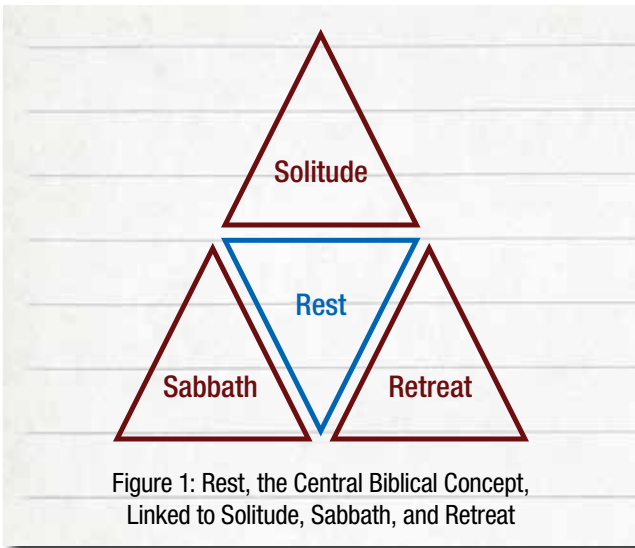


Figure 1: Rest, the Central Biblical Concept, Linked to Solitude, Sabbath, and Retreat

Rest

Rest is “honor[ing] God and ... human limitations through restful rhythms” (Calhoun 2005, 63), obeying God’s natural design through sleep or Sabbath, for instance. Rest is stopping the normal activities of the day to take a moment to listen for God, whether through pausing in the day to attend to Him, or scheduling margins—restful activities, vacations, seasonal times of retreat and sabbatical—or to enjoy God’s beauty in nature (Calhoun 2005, 63; Swenson 1998; Swenson 2004).

Common educator temptations that fight against rest include (1) trying to find one’s identity in accomplishments rather than finding one’s identity in Christ, (2) trying to impress people for personal acceptance, (3) working competitively rather than collaboratively, (4) driving oneself too hard because of perfectionist tendencies, (5) committing to too much and so being obligated to work beyond natural limits, or (6) lacking trust in God because one feels he or she must control the outcomes and be extra prepared for every assignment (Calhoun 2005).

Rest, according to God’s design, can also be experienced during retreat, Sabbath, and solitude.

Retreat

Calhoun defines *retreat* as “specific and regular times apart for quietly listening to God and delighting in his company. Retreats remove us from the daily battle into times of refreshing, retooling, renewing and unwinding” (Calhoun 2005, 66). Retreats can be times of solitude or times of fellowship, or a combination thereof, and they are usually anywhere from two nights to a month in length. Both of us have found the most rejuvenating retreats to be those of solitude, and we particularly appreciate a periodic weekend retreat to gain perspective and to reconnect with God in a deep way. In thinking of the spiritual life like a garden, our gardens need daily watering, but if we only sprinkle the water in a shallow way, the water never reaches the deepest roots. We need long periods of time in prayer and in God’s Word to hear God’s voice and to be deeply watered; a retreat allows us to get away from the busyness of life, to where we more readily hear God speaking to our hearts as our roots are deeply watered by His Spirit and the Word.

Jesus Himself modeled retreating from the crowds. Mark 6:31 says, “Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat” (NIV). Sound familiar? Seeing the need for rest and refreshment, Jesus urged His friends: “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” Is this not the same need of an educator, as well as any professional? The life of a professional is high demand, people intensive, and task intensive. *If we continue to live a too fast-paced life, we find ourselves exhausted and therefore less able to do the tasks that God has called us to do.* But implementing retreat will require leaving people in need, leaving tasks

undone, remembering that God is the One who ultimately cares best for those needs. He can take care of those needs while we are away so that we can be refreshed.

In God's economy, efficiency, as we might define it, is not always a primary value.

In Mark 6, we find one of the busiest periods of Jesus' ministry. We find Jesus being rejected by His own town and John the Baptist being beheaded. This was not a time, it would seem, to go rest and retreat. Still, retreat and rest were important enough for Jesus to call His disciples to be with Him away from the crowds. As we prioritize rest and retreat into our own lives, and spend prolonged time with Jesus, He can allow the pressing needs of our ministry to function, even in our absence.

Our temptation here will be to allow our calendars to fill up so that we do not have time to retreat, because every weekend, and potentially every week night, is already scheduled by school, church, or community needs. Taking pride in busyness, pride in accomplishments, or having a need to be seen by others, educators may be tempted to define themselves by their production, and so risk experiencing the "overload syndrome" (Swenson 1998 and Swenson 2004)—they become burned out, on edge, fatigued, impatient, and live life at a pace that is not pleasing to God.

Sabbath

Adele Calhoun defines *Sabbath* as "God's gift of repetitive and regular rest. It is given for our delight and communion with God. Time for *being* in the midst of a life of *doing* particularly characterizes the Sabbath" (2005, 40, emphasis added). A significant educator temptation is to try to get ahead on school projects on the Sabbath and be increasingly efficient, rather than communing with God and others. Ultimately, the temptation is to put work ahead of one's relationship with God and to alter the rhythm of life and pace at which God designed us to live (Muller 1999). The temptation is to try to accomplish more and fit more into the schedule, rather than focus on God and commune with Him on the Sabbath. In God's economy, efficiency, as we might define it, is not always a primary value.

When God gave manna to the children of Israel, He provided for them each day of the week. However, on the day before the Sabbath, He instructed them to gather food both for the current day *and* the Sabbath (Exodus 16:5). God thwarted the controlling plans of those who gathered more than they were called to, turning anything left over from the previous day to worms. It was a rhythm of six-to-one, work to Sabbath, to show that He was the *Pitcher* and that He would provide for the needs of His people. Could the Israelites trust Him for a day of rest? Can you?

When one plans for the Sabbath, the day can be set aside for worship, restoration, family, a nap, and even play. The "recovery period" of the Sabbath can restore the soul that is overworked, rushed, and harried. We both see a noticeable difference in our workweek when we make significant effort to rest on one of the preceding weekend days. Our bodies and emotions were not meant to work at high speed 24/7.

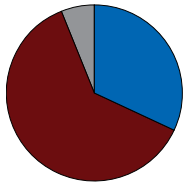
Solitude

Adele Calhoun defines *solitude* as "to leave people behind and enter into time alone with God" (2005, 111). Solitude is not intended for one to be completely alone, but for one to be completely alone with God. Jesus modeled this for us: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35, NIV). Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror" (Calhoun 2005, 111). As we spend time in solitude, we see that to which God is calling us, more clearly recognizing needed places of spiritual growth as He prepares and strengthens us for further ministry. As we spend time with Him in solitude, we practice abiding in the Vine and rooting ourselves in Him (John 15).

We have found that solitude enhances our ability to hear God and to enjoy nature through communing with Him. He enlarges our hearts in areas where we need His healing salve, increasing our love for those with whom we struggle. He increases compassion for those in need, and He gives much needed rest. Solitude allows us to remember where our help comes from, as the Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 121.

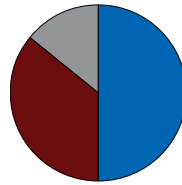
The Spiritual Lives of Teachers Survey

The need for teachers to increasingly practice the spiritual disciplines of *rest*, *retreat*, *Sabbath*, and *solitude* is seen in “The Spiritual Lives of Teachers” survey, conducted last May (Hetzl and Costillo 2013). In this study, we surveyed 1,509 ACSI educators in 38 countries regarding their spiritual lives. One of the questions we asked was, “With what frequency do you practice spiritual disciplines?” Here’s what we found about the disciplines of *rest*, *retreat*, *Sabbath*, and *solitude* as ACSI teachers responded from around the globe:



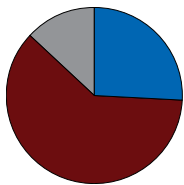
The Discipline of Rest

- 32% of teachers who responded to this item *regularly* practiced rest.
- 62% *sometimes* practiced rest.
- 6% *never* practice rest.



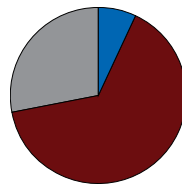
The Discipline of Sabbath

- 50% of teachers who responded to this item *regularly* practiced Sabbath.
- 36% *sometimes* practiced Sabbath.
- 14% *never* practice Sabbath.



The Discipline of Solitude

- 26% of teachers who responded to this item *regularly* practiced solitude.
- 61% *sometimes* practiced solitude.
- 13% *never* practice solitude.



The Discipline of Retreat

- 7% of teachers who responded to this item *regularly* practiced retreat.
- 65% *sometimes* practiced retreat.
- 28% *never* practice retreat.

Out of 22 disciplines on the “The Spiritual Lives of Teachers” survey (Hetzl and Costillo 2013), 50 percent of the ACSI teachers who responded to this item indicated that they regularly practiced Sabbath, while only 32 percent indicated that they regularly practiced rest, 26 percent indicated that they regularly practiced solitude, and 7 percent indicated they regularly practiced retreat. See Table A for detailed rankings of the 22 disciplines.

TABLE A: Ranked Disciplines by What Percent of Teachers Practiced This Discipline “Regularly”

Discipline	Rank	Regularity	Discipline	Rank	Regularity
Prayer	1	88%	Exercise	11	36%
Corporate Worship	1	88%	Rest	12	32%
Fellowship	2	80%	Meditation	13	28%
Music Worship	3	78%	Time in Nature	14	26%
Church Teaching	4	71%	Solitude	14	26%
Service to Others	5	61%	Simplicity	15	23%
Individual Worship	6	57%	Scripture Memory	16	19%
Individual Bible Study	6	56%	Journaling	17	14%
Sabbath	8	50%	Artistic Expression	18	12%
Group Bible Study	9	48%	Retreat	19	7%
Small Group Support	10	39%	Fasting	20	4

Conclusion

This idea of *Pitcher/Cup, Saucer/Plate* (Miller 2007), in which we are filled and restored by our Lord before doing ministry, is certainly illustrated in Mark 6:30–44. Take a moment to read the passage. And while we do not have the exact same circumstances that Jesus and His disciples had, there are similarities. We have teaching ministries that always need more. We have students, parents, and colleagues in those ministries that always need more. We are becoming an increasingly peculiar people in the world’s eyes, and many of us are serving where Christians are being persecuted and killed. Stress is rampant in our ministry roles. The way Jesus taught His disciples to reach out to meet those in need was not by kicking it up another notch in their own strength. Rather, He invited them into rest and retreat with Him. It is that simple: *Pitcher/Cup, Saucer/Plate*.

Take a few moments to prayerfully meditate on Mark 6:30–44 and Psalm 23:1–3a. Then respond to the following questions in your journal.

Think It Over

1. Do you rely on Jesus to be the Pitcher-Shepherd in your life, or do you just keep working harder? What happens in those situations in which you allow yourself to become depleted?
2. How is Jesus a fully sufficient Pitcher-Shepherd who can continue to restore you, the cup?

3. How might you reorder your behavioral patterns in order to more fully rely upon Him as the all-sufficient One in your life?
4. As you pray, how do you hear Him inviting you to (1) rely on Him more fully and (2) make space for spiritual disciplines, such as rest, retreat, Sabbath, and solitude?

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