

# CELEBRATE SABBATH

MATTHEW 12:1-8



Gwen, in her nineties, often recounts her father's stories about the Sabbaths of his childhood around the turn of the last century. Her father was a physically active, outgoing man who remembered Sundays that seemed to have a hundred hours in them. He had to sit still at church in the morning, all afternoon in the parlor with his older sisters, and then all evening at church again. His sisters could embroider during those endless afternoons, but what could an active boy do? What could be more boring than sitting still? His childhood taught him not to expect any joy from following God, and as an adult, he went to church as seldom as possible.

Gwen, like so many others, had to reclaim the central joy of Sabbath rest in order to structure a day that could be a gift, as the Sabbath was designed to be. Throughout her adult life as a homemaker, Gwen did no housework, laundry, or shopping after church on Sundays. She enjoyed board games with her kids, then leisurely family dinners when the kids got older. After her kids left home, a staple of her Sundays has become curling up in the afternoon with the thick Sunday newspaper; and those Sunday afternoons on the couch often include a nap.

Gwen had to reframe the lessons she heard from her father about a day of rest. Other people have to do that too. Parents of young children cannot curl up with a newspaper all afternoon on their Sabbath day, so they have to change any expectations they might have that a Sabbath involves a quiet day. Nurses, paramedics, and retail and service workers sometimes have to work on Sundays. They have to restructure their expectations of having the same weekly rhythm as other people. If they want to observe a Sabbath, they need to think creatively about what day of the week might work. A good number of people do not work for pay. Retirees and many others have to think creatively about how to set apart one day a week from the other days.

All of the commandments, not just the one about Sabbath, are for our flourishing and health, not for judgment or punishment. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10-11).



➤ What does the word *Sabbath* bring to mind? Memories? Thoughts? Feelings?

➤ What appeals to you about the idea of taking one day a week off to celebrate and rest?

### WELCOMING THE SABBATH

Read Psalm 46:10 aloud: "Be still, and know that I am God." Then repeat it slowly eight more times, the first time putting an emphasis on the first word, the second time emphasizing the second word, and so on.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE



*“Sabbath is much more than doing nothing. We are enjoined this day to remember, recall, recollect, and re-create. We are not simply to remember that we ought to keep the Sabbath, but we are to remember who God is—active and loving, resourceful beyond our actions and resources. We are to remember who we are—gifted, sustained and blessed beyond our striving and achieving.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Sabbath was an identifying feature of the people of ancient Israel and set them off from others. Its importance came from their understanding of how God had acted in their lives and what God intended for humanity. Many would say the foundational event that formed the people of ancient Israel was the exodus from Egypt. The Hebrews were a diverse group of enslaved people living in terrible conditions, working nonstop for the Egyptian government. God heard their cries and rescued them under Moses’ leadership, taking them to the wilderness where they spent forty years being organized as a people

All of the other conflicts about the Sabbath between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders center on healings:

- The man with the withered hand (Matthew 12:9–14; Mark 3:1–6; and Luke 6:6–11)
- The woman bowed down with infirmity (Luke 13:10–17)
- The man with *dropsy*, a past word for swelling (Luke 14:1–6)
- The man who had been infirm for 38 years (John 5:1–17)
- The man born blind (John 9:1–41)

and religion. The command to rest and allow others to rest, including animals and immigrants, was a reminder of where they came from. It reminded them that all creation is here for all to enjoy. God did not create this world for people to work themselves, or others, to death.

The fourth of the Ten Commandments gives precise instructions and detailed reasons for Sabbath observance (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15). The Old Testament prophets insisted that God desires faithful Sabbath observance. Again, the reason to keep Sabbath was always related to ensuring that all creation deserved to rest and remember God’s intent that we enjoy this world and make sure everyone else does as well. Isaiah warned against “trampling the sabbath” (Isaiah 58:13), and Ezekiel

said that the people have “profaned my sabbaths” (Ezekiel 23:38). The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the dramas and conflicts in Jerusalem after the people of Israel return from exile in Babylon in the fifth century BCE. The challenge of keeping the Sabbath plays a significant role for the people (Nehemiah 13:15–22).

The specific rules of the Sabbath day—the prohibition of work in many forms—were designed to promote feasting, joy, freedom, warm family life, and well-being of people and animals. In the years between Nehemiah and Jesus, the rabbis became increasingly specific in what could not be done on the Sabbath. Jewish texts dating from around

1. Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 58, 59.

Jesus' time prohibited thirty-nine specific acts on the Sabbath, including sowing, plowing, reaping, threshing, winnowing, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, spinning, weaving, hunting, slaughtering, building, hammering, and transporting.

Matthew 12:1–8 recounts one of six conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders about the Sabbath. As Jesus and his disciples walk through a field, they pluck heads of grain to satisfy their hunger. They were *reaping*, one of the forbidden acts for the Sabbath day, and the religious leaders reacted with outrage. Matthew had a good reason to lift up this particular illustration because Jesus interprets the Hebrew Scriptures in new ways.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

—Matthew 12:1–8

Some Christians believe that Jesus abolished the Sabbath, but most scholars argue that he redefined and reshaped it, returning it back to God's original intent: a day of feasting and enjoyment. Obviously, hunger was not appropriate on a day of feasting. Jesus seems to be saying through his actions in this incident. Of course, he and his disciples would eat the grain that was readily available, even if reaping (i.e., working) on a small scale was involved.

Jesus claims that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath, an intriguing parallel with his statement that he came to fulfill the law, not to abolish it (Matthew 5:17). As we see and interpret Scripture through the life of Jesus, we see someone who kept the same commandments he asks us to keep. We also see someone who offers instruction and correction to people with the hope that their joy may be complete, not just so they can say they kept the commandments.

In Mark's account of the disciples plucking grain from a field, Jesus says, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath was given to us so we could learn to rest in God's abundance, so we could recognize and remember the rhythm between work and rest, life and death, planting and harvesting, emptiness and fullness.

➤ Worship is one activity Christians do during Sabbath. In your experience, how does worship reflect the intent seen in the Bible?

➤ What for you does a good Sabbath practice entail?

# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Observing Sabbath—resting from producing and reorienting ourselves and creation to what is important—is radical and countercultural. It always has been. In the book *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann explains that taking a rest from production is dangerous to systems that run on profit and greed. Perhaps, because it is so counter-intuitive to our daily submission to the demands of production, it is difficult for many to embrace the practice. Most of us are programmed to go-go-go, produce-produce-produce.

The third session (pp. 25–34) tells some of the history of the practice in Jewish and Christian communities. How people kept Sabbath throughout the centuries has varied widely. At times, strict observance was endorsed legalistically, while at other times, Christians ignored the commandment altogether. Yet there tends to be common agreement that keeping Sabbath is about not doing some things one day a week and doing some others, including resting.

The foundational essay for this practice titled this first aspect of honoring Sabbath “Forget Sabbath.” For anyone who has seen or experienced rigid Sabbath days with strict rules, some reinterpretation of the biblical Sabbath pattern will be necessary. People who have always viewed life through the lens of 24/7/365 will also have to do some forgetting. Carving out time for Sabbath rest is a challenge in a world that never slows down. Stores are open almost every day of the year. Activities are routinely scheduled seven days a week. A shift in thinking about time is necessary.

Two YouTube videos are suggested for viewing that help understand just what Sabbath is and how it is practiced by many.

- The YouTube video “What Is Shabbat? Intro to the Jewish Sabbath” ([bit.ly/FMWhatIsShabbat](https://bit.ly/FMWhatIsShabbat), 2:53) offers a brief overview of a Jewish understanding of Sabbath keeping.
- The YouTube video “Sabbath” ([bit.ly/FMSabbath](https://bit.ly/FMSabbath), 5:26) is created by the Bible Project and attempts to provide a biblical summary of Sabbath from the Bible. It gives an excellent overview of the themes discussed in this *Adult Reflection Guide*.

Following are some of the benefits of Sabbath keeping affirmed through time:

- Sabbath reminds us that humans are not meant to be slaves. By insisting that everyone deserves to rest one full day a week, including immigrants, the dignity of all is protected.
- Sabbath reminds us we are meant to be free. Our religion began from a group of enslaved Hebrews who were saved by God and freed. Slavery is not God’s intent for anyone. Those who are forced to work seven days a week are slaves to economic systems of greed. Even the rich millionaire who insists on working every day is simply a rich slave.



We humans love clarity. Rigid rules for a Sabbath day can seem attractive because at least we will know we're doing it right. No rules at all—total freedom of choice at every moment—can also seem attractive. Healthy and life-giving practices for the Sabbath require navigating a path somewhere in between rules and total freedom. What are you most attracted to: clear rules or absence of any structure? Why? How have you navigated that preference in your choices and life patterns?

- Sabbath strengthens family ties and friendships as we spend time with others.
- Sabbath grants animals rest. When we respect animals at least one day a week, we are more likely to treat them better the rest of the week.
- Sabbath is available to anyone, not just Jews and Christians. Yet it has been Jews and Christians who have kept the practice alive for centuries.
- When we practice Sabbath, we affirm that there is a creator. Life is not meaningless, and we all have meaning and purpose.

Some common Sabbath practices include:



Embracing a Sabbath day requires forgetting some of the things we have believed or known.

- What do you need to forget in order to keep a Sabbath?

# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

The two key questions for celebrating Sabbath keeping are:

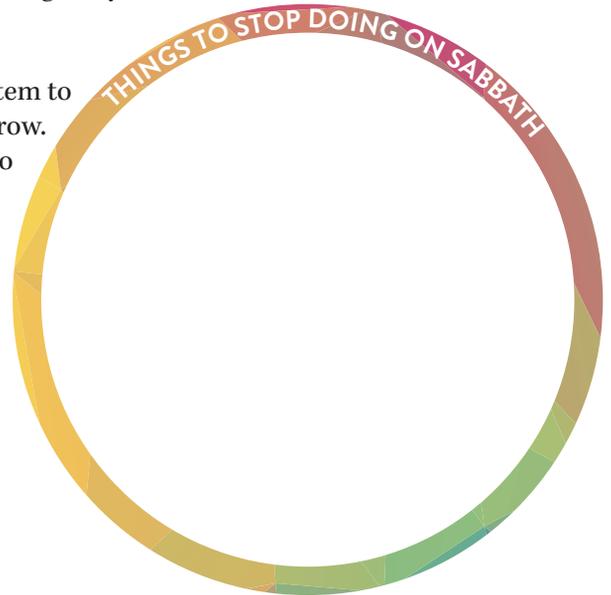
- What will you stop doing on the Sabbath?
- What will you do on the Sabbath?

Read through these lists of things people stop doing on Sabbath and ones they intentionally do. Consider which ones you might try, and write them down.

## STOP DOING ONE THING

Consider starting small. Choose one item to try one day each week for four weeks in a row.

- Think about an activity that you do many days of the week and stop that one thing.
- Make a list of home appliances you could refrain from using one day each week.
- Don't drive.
- Don't answer email.
- Don't use social media.
- Don't open your briefcase.
- Don't turn on your laptop.



## REDUCE STRESS

Think about the daily activities that prevent you from feeling close to God, maybe multitasking, or worrying about work, family, or relationships. Take a day off from thinking about these things.

## STOP FAVORITE ACTIVITIES TO CREATE A WEEKLY RHYTHM

John, in his mid-70s and retired, paints with watercolors almost every day. His art has been a major joy in retirement. Even though it is just about his favorite thing to do, on his Sabbath day he doesn't paint. He wants to have a rhythm to his weeks, so on his Sabbath day he tries to spend more time with family and do more reading.

## STOP THINKING ABOUT OR USING MONEY

In the Jewish tradition, one Sabbath practice is to avoid using or thinking about money. This removes shopping as an option for the day. Avoiding thinking about money reduces worry.





## LIGHT A CANDLE

It doesn't have to be a fancy, special candle (although that's fine too). When you have a few minutes, sit down in a comfortable chair. Place both feet on the ground and feel the connection to the ground. Set your candle before you and, as you light it, say a quick prayer for yourself or for someone you love. Take a few mindful breaths, feeling your lungs fill with air, feeling the release as you exhale.

## EAT MORE SLOWLY

Jesus and his disciples ate grain because they were hungry. They rubbed the grains together to remove the chaff, so they were eating small handfuls of raw grain. The rubbing and chewing would have lasted for a long time. A modern-day parallel might involve eating a meal in slow stages—perhaps several small courses—rather than all at once. Or simply chew each bite longer to savor the flavors more deeply.

## DO THINGS MORE SLOWLY

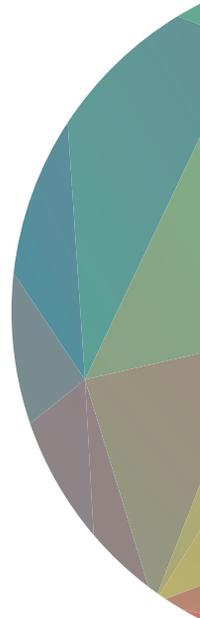
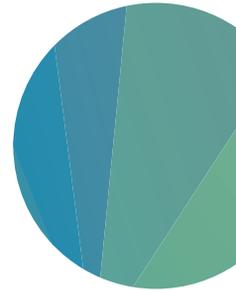
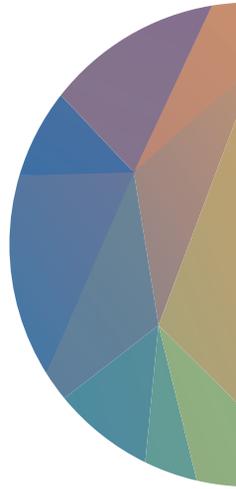
Many people don't shop on their Sabbath, but Donna loves to buy groceries slowly and carefully on that one day of the week. She savors the color and texture of the vegetables, and chooses her produce carefully, thanking God for bringing food from the earth. Donna has spent her whole career as a youth and children's director in churches, and she has always taken a Thursday Sabbath. For some of her career, her husband has been able to take Thursday off too, so they have done things together on that day. During some years, when her husband had to work on Thursdays, she hiked with friends or spent time alone, sometimes shopping slowly and happily for groceries.

## DO ONE TASK AT A TIME

For Linda, cooking on weekdays always involves multitasking. She throws some food into a pan, sets the timer, and races to her home office to get a few things done before the next step in preparing the food. On her Sabbath, she tries to simply cook.

## PRAY CREATIVELY

The Sabbath is a wonderful time to pray with a family member or another prayer partner. You might want to try some new forms of prayer, such as lament. You may want to spend an extended time of prayer focused only on thankfulness. Mike, a missionary, gets emails throughout the week that contain prayer requests. He prints them off when they come in, and on Sunday afternoons, he sits down with the prayer requests from the previous week and prays for them.



# FOLLOWING JESUS

“Good Sabbath-keeping includes both praying and playing. Prayerful Sabbaths without play or playful Sabbaths without prayer are only half-Sabbaths. Prayer without play can degenerate into a dutiful and cheerless religion. Play without prayer can become mind-numbing escape.”<sup>2</sup>



In resisting the consumeristic narrative that society has conditioned us in, Sabbath promises sacred moments in time where our identities are repeatedly reoriented around our past, in the present, with a vision of our future. Imagine you are walking with Jesus through the wheat field, and you hear Jesus say that he is Lord of the Sabbath. Imagine that you turn to him and ask him a question about keeping Sabbath in your life today.

➤ What would you ask?

➤ What do you think his answer might be?

Do you believe you have any amount of addiction to *doing*? Spend some time praying about your fears of unstructured time, the ways you take comfort in productivity, and the obstacles you experience to Sabbath keeping. Ask God to help you work your way through these fears and obstacles.

Good shepherd, seek me out,  
And bring me again to your fold.  
Smile upon me with your favor,  
That I may dwell in your house  
All the days of my life,  
And praise your name forever. **Amen.**

—Based on a prayer of Jerome (c. 342–420)<sup>3</sup>



2. Don Postema, *Catch Your Breath: God's Invitation to Sabbath Rest* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1997), 71.  
3. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 1102.