

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (NIV)

¹²“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NRSV)

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

What do we mean by Sabbath? Is it still relevant in our world? If it is still important, how we could we begin genuinely to practice Sabbath?

Compassion . . . shepherd . . . rest

We live frantic lives. We fill our days with so many activities and obligations that it can sometimes feel like we are barely hanging on. It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus and his disciples were often pushed hard by the crowds that came seeking healing and teaching. In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus knows that his disciples¹ desperately

Sabbath

Of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to practice Sabbath is the most richly detailed (Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Out of his love and genuine concern for his people, God commands that they rest on one day out of seven. This rest is to be extended to all – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (see Galatians 3:28 for a thought-provoking parallel) – even the livestock! Further, this rest is explicitly tied to God’s redemption of his people from bondage in Egypt. Sabbath is to be a holy time, set apart for God, in whom we find true rest.

Jews observed Sabbath on Saturday but marked days from sunset to sunset. Thus, the Jewish Sabbath began about 6pm on Friday. Because Jesus was resurrected on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, Christians came to adopt Sunday as the principal day for worship.

¹ You’ll notice in the scripture passage that Jesus uses the word “apostles.” This is the only occurrence of “apostle” in Mark’s Gospel. Usually, of course, Jesus’ closest followers are referred to as “disciples” in the Gospels. “Disciple” is akin to student or apprentice. “Apostle” means “messenger” or “one who is sent

need some rest and renewal. Understandably, Jesus tells them to get away, to find a deserted place and get some rest. Again, perhaps paralleling our own best intentions, the crowds foil the disciples' plans. Jesus and his helpers simply cannot escape. Nonetheless, Jesus has compassion for the surging crowds and, like a good shepherd, sets aside his own needs and gives the throng what they had come seeking.

We misread the story if we think that all Jesus had in mind for himself and his disciples was a little time away from the office. For many of us, we manage to make vacations and other so-called "downtime" every bit as frantic as the rest of our lives. But if the "rest" of which Jesus speaks isn't simply downtime, what is it?

Hard work

Not only are our lives pretty frantic, but we are hard workers, achievement-focused Type A's. Hard work is a good thing; after all, Adam and Eve were given the Garden of Eden to work *before* their rejection of God. Nonetheless, we have a tendency to turn work into an idol, just as we do most else in life. We are little idol-factories. Here's Eugene Peterson on turning work into an idol:

"Along the way [of our Christian journey] the primacy of God and his work in our lives gives way ever so slightly to the primacy of our work in God's kingdom. . . . It usually takes a long time for the significance of the shift to show up. But when it does it turns out that we have not so much been worshipping God as enlisting him as a trusted and valuable assistant . . . Why not ask God to help us in our work? He invited us to, didn't he, when he said, 'Ask and you shall receive . . .' ? Well, yes, he did. The problem is that, taken out of the context of the wonder of creation and resurrection, any prayer soon becomes an act of idolatry, reducing God to what I can use for my purposes, however noble and useful."

Frankly, it is pretty hard for us to pay anything more than lip service to the God's teaching on Sabbath. Worse, we are tempted to turn it into a relic of the past that just isn't realistic in this 24/7 world we've made for ourselves. Instead, we ought to recapture the notion of Sabbath and see it as more than the mere absence of work, as blessed a time as that may be.

In their book, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon² urge us to see that the Sabbath is not merely about resting, it is about time spent focusing on God and his work, rather than our own.

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. . . .

At the last, Sabbath ought to be an occasion when we avoid making unnecessary demands upon others. Sabbath keeping is a defense against the exploitive, purely pragmatic, and ruthlessly utilitarian tendencies of the world. Like the Jubilee year in which Israel was to free slaves and land, so the Sabbath ought to be our time to enjoy one another. We know a family who for years has kept the Sabbath. Their rule is you can do no work on the Sabbath unless it is a joy. If planting bulbs in the yard is work, then it must wait until Monday. If it is a joy, then it is Sabbath work.

forth." Here (6:30), Mark probably uses "apostle" because in 6:7 Jesus "sends" the disciples out in two-man teams to spread the Good News.

² p. 57 and 64.

Sabbath in Jesus' Day

The Jews were God's chosen people. Of all the nations on the planet, God had made a covenant with them. For hundreds of years, ever since the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews had struggled to stay true to YHWH, to resist the pressures of cultural assimilation by their oppressors. There were several potent symbols of Jewish distinctiveness – and they were non-negotiable. Sabbath-keeping was one of these symbols. By definition, Jews were those who kept the Sabbath.

In Luke 13, Jesus heals a crippled woman whose body had been in bondage to Satan for 18 years. To the dismay of the local synagogue leader, Jesus heals her on the Sabbath. Jesus' confrontation with this leader is not really about the legal niceties of Sabbath law, but about Jesus' frustration that so many Jews are unable to see that the great Sabbath day, the day of Israel's release from bondage, was breaking in upon them all. Thus, after the confrontation, Jesus teaches not about the law, but about the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:18-21). As Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote, "With Shabbat, we get what Jewish tradition calls a foretaste . . . of the Messianic Age, a higher Eden."¹

1. This is from an article, "Radical Shabbat," in *Sojourners* magazine. The article is available online at www.sojo.net in their magazine archive.

Practicing Sabbath

More than a decade ago, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA urged its clergy and congregations to rediscover the gift of Sabbath. Calling on both scriptural teachings and centuries-old Christian traditions, the Presbyterians articulated well the larger sense of Sabbath among God's people. They noted that the "gift of Sabbath" serves many purposes:³

- "*Sabbath is for our joy and our rest.*" John Calvin⁴ wrote, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing." As God rested on the seventh day to rejoice in the goodness of his creation, Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is!
- "*Sabbath is for deepened communion with the Living God.*" Sabbath is a time that we set aside for God to shape us within.
- "*Sabbath draws us into the sacred rhythm God has woven into all of life and all creation.*" In addition to a Sabbath day, God commanded that his people honor a Sabbath year. Every seventh year the fields were not to be sown and the vines were not to be pruned. The land itself was to have a Sabbath to God. After seven Sabbath years there was to be a year of Jubilee, when land was to be returned to its original family, for it was God's land, not the Israelites' (Leviticus 25). In the Jubilee year, slaves were to be freed, just as God had redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. The Sabbath is about the need for and goodness of rest, redemption, and renewal.
- "*Sabbath is profoundly prophetic.*" Again Calvin: "Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God."
- "*Sabbath is for our life in community.*" Sabbath is not a private gift from God. The Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as the entire community of God's people.

³The quotations and much of this section are taken from "An Invitation to Sabbath: Rediscovering a Gift," written by the Sabbath Keeping Work Group of the PCUSA General Assembly in 2000.

⁴John Calvin was one of the great Protestant reformers and a near-contemporary of Martin Luther. Calvin was the founder of what is known as the "Reformed" branch of Protestantism. The Presbyterian Church USA is the largest Calvinist/Reformed denomination in America, as the United Methodist Church is the largest Wesleyan denomination.

This topic demands some reflective thought on our part. I guess that is because many of us associate “Sabbath” simply with no work and stores closed on Sunday! But as I read in preparation for writing this study, I gained a deeper appreciation for the true meaning of Sabbath. It is about much more than simply my leisure. It is about God, and about community, and about reconnecting with God and one another as we pull ourselves away from the craziness of our daily lives. We do need to rediscover the gift of Sabbath.

YEAR OF JUBILEE¹

The 50th year after seven cycles of seven years (Lev. 25:10) in which Israel’s land and people gained freedom. It was begun with a blast from a ram’s horn on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:9). During this year of joy and liberation the law stipulated three respects in which the land and people were to be sanctified: (1) It was to be a time of rest for the soil as well as people (Lev. 25:11). The unattended growth of the field was for the poor to glean and for the beasts of the field (Exod. 23:11). (2) All land was to revert to the original owner (Lev. 25:10–34; 27:16–24). The original distribution of land was to remain intact. All property which the original owner had been obligated to sell (and had not yet been redeemed) was to revert (without payment) to the original owner or his lawful heirs. Some exceptions to this pattern are noted in Lev. 25:29–30; 27:17–21. (3) Every Israelite who had sold himself—either to his fellow countryman or to a foreigner settled in the land—because of poverty and remained unredeemed was to be freed along with his children (Lev. 25:39–46).

The Year of Jubilee prevented the Israelites from oppression of one another (Lev. 25:17). It had a leveling effect on Israel’s culture by giving everyone a chance for a new start. It discouraged excessive, permanent accumulations of wealth and the deprivation of an Israelite of his inheritance in the land. Families and tribes were preserved by the return of freed bondservants to their own families. Permanent slavery in Israel was rendered impossible.

This year was a constant reminder of God’s interest in economic freedom (Ezek. 46:17). Purchase of property was actually tantamount to assuming a lease for a maximum of 49 years, and the seller always retained the right to cancel the purchase by settling with the buyer on the amount of money that was still payable, taking into account the number of years that the buyer had made use of the property. If the seller was either incapable or not desirous of making use of this right of redemption, the property nevertheless returned to his possession automatically in the next Year of Jubilee. So the sale of a house, for example, was equivalent to renting it for a specified period of time (Lev. 25:29–34). This made it difficult to accumulate vast permanent holdings of wealth (cp. Isa. 5:8; Mic. 2:2). God’s designed arrangement was against both large estates and pauperism. The Israelites were repeatedly given the opportunity to begin anew, and the impoverished were enabled to maintain themselves in society.

This year also reflected God’s provision for the soil’s conservation (Lev. 25:11–12, 18–21) During the year of Jubilee, the Israelites were once again taught that they were to live in faith, that the Lord would satisfy their needs (cp. Exod. 16:17–18).

¹ Brand, C., Draper, C., England, A., Bond, S., Clendenen, E. R., Butler, T. C., & Latta, B. (2003). *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1694–1695). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We don’t really make much of Sabbath keeping anymore. In the Bible, Sabbath is a gift from God and an honor due God. Should we try to rediscover this gift? If so, how? Why? Should we restore the practice of keeping every seventh day as the Lord’s Day . . . keeping it holy? Do you think that we are talking about the activities of a single day or the ways in which we order our lives? The Presbyterian working group I referred to in the study suggests some simple Sabbath acts in which we might engage: seeking rest from daily occupation, sharing with others in worship, taking time with God’s word, engaging in acts of compassion, and enjoying activities that refresh and renew the spirit. Are there others you might add to this list? Which of these would most help you to rediscover the gift of Sabbath?

2. When the practice of our faith turns to something like the Sabbath, we have a tendency to make it all about rules. But Sabbath keeping is not about following arbitrary rules. It is about listening to God’s guidance as to how we can go about building the sorts of lives that we all seek and that God wishes for us. Avoiding your job on Sundays isn’t going to make God love you anymore . . . and shopping isn’t going to cause God to love you less! How do we avoid letting a discussion about Sabbath keeping degenerate into rule-making?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Leviticus 25 The Sabbath year and Jubilee</p>	<p>Tuesday, Amos 8:1-6 The Lord warns those who wish the Sabbath to be over so they can get back to work (v.5)!</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 13:10-21 Jesus heals on the Sabbath and tells parables about the Kingdom of God.</p>	<p>Thursday, Mark 2:23-28 Jesus calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath.</p>
<p>Friday, Luke 13:10-21 Jesus heals on the Sabbath and tells parables about the Kingdom of God.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

