



study guide



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BIBLE STUDY: A Sabbath Worth Keeping

Verse 24 “*what is not lawful on the Sabbath*”

The Sabbath had been reduced to a list of do’s and don’ts. A “Sabbath” that is about keeping a list of rules is not a Sabbath worth keeping.

Verse 27 They had confused the purpose of the Sabbath. They didn’t remember that God had made it for people. A “Sabbath” that *values the day more than the people it was meant to bless* is not a Sabbath worth keeping. A “Sabbath” that is *more about God taking from us than God giving to us* is not a Sabbath worth keeping.

Verse 28 Jesus didn’t try to do away with the Sabbath. He sought to re-establish himself as the Lord of the Sabbath. They were more concerned about their rules than the rule of Christ. A “Sabbath” that does not belong to God is not a Sabbath worth keeping.

Matthew 12:1-8 tells the same story with a few different details. In verse 7 Jesus reminded the Jews, when they accused his disciples of breaking the Sabbath, that God desires mercy over sacrifices. He referred to a repeated Old Testament message that God is more interested in the inner heart of worship than the outer act of worship (Matthew 12:7; Matthew 9:13, Hosea 6:6, 1 Samuel 14:22; Micah 6:6-8). A “Sabbath” that is more about outward action than inner sincerity is not a Sabbath worth keeping.

In a final, ultimate example of a Sabbath not worth keeping, the Jews decided to break Jesus’ legs to end his life early, in order to not break the Sabbath. They found he was already dead so there were no broken bones (John 19:31-33). They were so concerned about “keeping the Sabbath” that they were willing to kill Christ as an act of Sabbath keeping. **A *Christless Sabbath* is not a Sabbath worth keeping!** Sabbath is a relational experience with God. We cannot take Jesus out of it.



Sabbath Practice #1: REST

stoning at the command of God for the crime of gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Not working on the Sabbath is a big deal. If I were to only get this one glimpse of the Sabbath, I would conclude that the Sabbath is worth keeping, but not for the right reasons.

It is ok if there are things in the Bible we don't fully understand. But consider an interpretive tool that can help us get some value out of the passages that issued the death penalty for breaking the Sabbath. Paul interprets God's displeasure and overthrow of the Israelites in the wilderness as being an example to us (1 Corinthians 10:1-11). Yes, these Old Testament stories really happened. They also serve as examples. The death penalty for working on the Sabbath is, in part, a prophetic example. It reveals what will happen if we don't rest. We will work ourselves to death(karoshi).

Expanded Sabbath Prohibitions

We have to be careful with going further than God has gone with Sabbath prohibitions. The Jewish Talmud details 39 categories of work. All are prohibited on the Sabbath. We might find some customized prohibitions in our own Sabbath traditions. The Bible does give some specific examples of work that should not be done on the Sabbath. Notice that the list is not long and it doesn't leave us with firm or dogmatic conclusions.

Here is what we find.

- No buying and selling (Nehemiah 10:31)
- No carrying a burden (Jeremiah 17:21-22).
- No kindling a fire (Exodus 35:3)
- No going out of our place (often interpreted as traveling) (Exodus 16:29).

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These examples do make clear that Sabbath rest from our labor is an important and broad concept. Remember, the work prohibition extends to everyone in our influence, servants, children, animals, guests (Exodus 20:8-11). These details can be interpreted in problematic ways. We could make a detailed list of good and bad Sabbath activities and legalistically adhere to it. Rather than focusing on the debatable particulars, I suggest we focus on the clear principles. These additional prohibitions underscore the importance and broadness of the call to rest. We should guard our practice of Sabbath rest with intentionality so that it enriches everything within our influence.

REFLECT

What do you need to rest from?

As you reflect, consider this. Sabbath rest is not about resting from bad things. Some people approach Sabbath rest by temporarily abstaining from the perverted things they fill their life with on the other six days. Sabbath is more than a day to not listen to raunchy music. God doesn't want us indulging in sin any day of the week. He has called us to rest from work. Work is not bad. God has given us six out of seven days to do it. Sabbath rest involves routinely setting aside good things that might distract us from God. We rest from anything that might keep us from resting in the right things. God gives us the strength and drive to produce, push and provide. These are good things. We can't do them continually. What good things do you need to rest from in order to connect with God?

Why would God want us to rest? It is not because he wants to ruin our plans or cut our hours. The 2nd grade teacher doesn't punish the student by sending them to recess. When math is prohibited, it is generally not seen as a burden. God's reasons for our rest are all for our good! What do you think his reasons are?



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—What to Rest In—

What we rest from is important. But it is not the main point. It is simply a necessary step to bring us to what we rest in.

As we continue in Exodus 31, we find something new. We have read earlier that God rested on the Sabbath (Genesis 2) but here the text adds that he was refreshed. This is a beautiful description of Sabbath rest. But also, an intriguing one. This is God we are talking about; he doesn't struggle with being fresh.

The Hebrew word for "refresh" (used here) is "naphash". It is used 4 times in the Old Testament, twice about being refreshed by the Sabbath (Exodus 23:12), once about being refreshed by rest (2 Samuel 16:14) and the other time, well it is hard to spot it in the text, because it is translated as "breathed" (Joshua 11:14). The word literally means to take a breath, to inhale. Try it. Take a deep breath. This is to your physical body what Sabbath is to your spiritual health. Sabbath is a weekly rhythm of refreshing like the rhythm of breathing.

For six days God created. How did he do it? He spoke. Speaking requires breath. When we project a word, we are exhaling. God's work was accomplished with an exhale. How did he create Adam? He took dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into it. For six days God was exhaling. He was giving out. He was producing. On the seventh day he took in a deep breath. To spiritually inhale is to take a break from our constant output to take in the things we need to sustain life.



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It is a desperate experience when we are not able to breathe. It is called suffocation. You can relate if you've ever been underwater until you needed air. You can breathe out, until there is nothing more to breathe out. But until you surface, an inhale would only fill your lungs with water. With the Sabbath we surface.

The physical experience of breathing is an illustration of what we rest in on the Sabbath. Our body needs oxygen. We can choose to inhale something else, but it will not deliver what our body needs. Our soul needs God. The deep breath is not simply time off, self-help, or rest. It is resting in God. With Sabbath we breathe deep of God.

As God rested from his completed work of creation, we rest in his completed work of redemption. On earth's first Sabbath God rested in his completed work (Gen 2:1-3). Adam was created on the previous day. He had not done any work yet. He didn't need to rest. But that is the point. The Sabbath calls us to rest in God's completed work. We rest from our work, to rest in his completed work. This is a weekly experience of righteousness by faith. This term refers to the way God makes us righteous. We are made righteous, not by our works, but by the completed work of God. Christ is our righteousness. Sabbath is not only about not going to work at your place of employment, it is also a spiritual rest in which we are reminded that we are not saved by our own works but by resting in God's completed work!

Hebrews 4:1-10 assures us that there remains a Sabbath rest for people to experience. The text makes it clear that the rest we enter is "his" rest (verse 1,3,5,9). The rest we enter into on Sabbath is not our rest, it is his rest. God invites us to rest in him.



Sabbath Practice #1: REST

REFLECT

What aspects of God do you most need to rest in?
 What realities make it a struggle for you to rest in God?

Sabbath is for you! A Biblical principle that is a continuing theme of our 5-week journey is that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. How has our study of rest helped you to see that the Sabbath is for you?

RHYTHMS & RITUALS

What weekly rhythms or rituals could you practice to help you rest from your work?
 What weekly rhythms or rituals could you practice to help you rest in God?



Sabbath Practice #2

TRUST

It's your third and longest layover. You are exhausted but you stay awake to watch over your carry-ons and your kids who have fallen asleep on the floor in front of you. That's when the shady looking man you saw earlier, making a scene at the security checkpoint, approaches and suggests that you relax and take a nap, he will keep an eye on everything for you. You don't take his offer. Why not?

You hang 45 feet above the ground by a harness at a ropes course at the church summer camp. It was supposed to be fun but you're terrified as the 15-year-old camp volunteer tries to remember how to tie the knot to the carabiner. You freeze and hold to the only secure cable you see. He says, "You have to relax. I can't hook you to the zipline when you hold so stiff." You decide to go back down the way you came up.

When we don't trust we have a hard time relaxing.

A Sabbath worth keeping is an invitation to trust!

—Trust God to provide for you!—

Read Exodus 16:23-30. The first time the word "Sabbath" is used in the Bible is in Exodus 16:23. It comes in the story of God providing manna and quail for the Israelites. They complained that they had been brought to the wilderness to

Sabbath Practice #2: TRUST

—Trust God to prepare you!—

Preparing to rest is hard work! The people were commanded to prepare for the Sabbath by gathering double the day before. Relaxing vacations don't just happen. They require preparation (planning, packing, budgeting, booking...). When we don't prepare, we scramble the night before to find someone to watch the dogs, we miss the flight, we learn that there is no vacancy right about the time we wish we could relax in the hot tub, we are forced to take with us the work we didn't finish, we leave home sleep deprived and stressed and come home needing the rest we didn't get. Resting is not as easy as just taking time off. It is deeper than simply stopping our work. Our brain and body hang on to stress. To rest well, we must prepare well. Exodus 16 gives us a clear example of Sabbath preparations.

REFLECT

How could you better use your six days, especially Fridays, to prepare for deeper rest on the seventh?

What do you need to trust God for in the six work days to be better prepared to rest? (Energy, diligence, productivity...)

What do you not trust God to provide if you were to keep the Sabbath more fully than you do now? Time? Entertainment? Pleasure? Income?

The God who provides what we need can be trusted to preserve it as long as we need it. He provided in such a perfect way that those who gathered

Sabbath Practice #2: TRUST

— *Trust God to preserve what you need!* —

The God who provides what we need can be trusted to preserve it as long as we need it. He provided in such a perfect way that those who gathered much had no leftovers and those who gathered little had no lack (v.18). When leftovers were kept, they were stinky and full of worms the next morning (vv.19-20), except for on Sabbath morning (v. 24). On Sabbath God didn't provide food to gather, he preserved the food that was already gathered.

REFLECT

How might trusting God's preservation help you to rest?

How could the Sabbath preserve you, your family, your mental health, or your possessions?

— *We have trust issues!* —

Verse 27 “Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none.” God told them not to go out. They didn't trust him. *There is no benefit in pushing where God is not providing.* If he doesn't rain down food, it doesn't matter how hard you look, it won't be there.

Sabbath Practice #2: TRUST

Gathering food was not excessively difficult. They weren't hunting. The food fell from heaven! They simply gathered it. It would not have been much effort for them to do that on the Sabbath. The people were commanded not to gather, not so much because it was hard, but because it was distracting. We have to be careful about those seemingly little distractions that we let into our Sabbath practice. Work is sneaky. It doesn't take much distraction to hijack our Sabbath rest.

REFLECT

What trust issues do you have about the Sabbath?

How do you struggle to trust him to provide, prepare and preserve?

In verse 28 Moses asks, "How long?" God has been calling you to trust him. What makes this time of life a time when you will choose to do it?

Sabbath is for you! A Biblical principle that is a continuing theme of our 5-week journey is that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath". We get this reminder in Exodus 31:29 when Moses said, "Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days". It is a gift! How has our study of trust helped you to see that the Sabbath is for you?

RHYTHMS & RITUALS

What weekly rhythms or rituals could you adopt to better prepare for the Sabbath?

What weekly rhythms or rituals could you adopt to make trust more a part of your Sabbath experience?



Sabbath Practice #3 WORSHIP

I have been an American every day of my life. But on the Fourth of July the reminders are everywhere. That day stands apart to impress on my mind the good things about being American that are true of every other day. That is what holidays do. I should be thankful every day but on the third Thursday of November it is always on my mind. St. Patrick has an incredible story, but I probably wouldn't have thought about it much if I didn't wear green once a year and hear his name. My mom and dad are always my mom and dad. But on Mother's Day and Father's Day we celebrate the parents they are throughout the year. The celebration on the one day helps us remember it's importance throughout the year.

Sabbath is the original holiday. On it we celebrate our God. He is worthy of worship continually, but one day a week there is a special occasion for worship. It recenters us as creatures whose existence is centered on worship. It helps us bring worship into the other six days.

Psalm 92 is a psalm of the Sabbath. It is not a prayer for wisdom or for help with enemies. It is not a lament. It is not a recitation of God's law. It is a psalm of worship. It praises God for who he is and what he has done.

A Sabbath worth keeping is a call to worship.

—Worship in Special Ways—

God gave his people instructions about offerings as an act of worship in Numbers 28-29. He told them to be careful to offer each at its appointed time (28:3). First were the instructions for the daily offering (29:3-8). Worship is a practice for every day. Then there were instructions for special offerings for all the appointed feasts. The first of those special offerings was for the weekly Sabbath (28:9-10). Sabbath is set apart as a special day of worship. Worship every day. Worship in a special way on Sabbath.

Sabbath Practice #4: SERVICE

Then Jesus showed up with a persistent and clear message...
Sabbath keeping includes serving people!

I've done some counting. The word "Sabbath" is used 50 times in the four gospels. It appears as a point of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders 41 of those times. Another 7 of these occurrences are in the context of the death of Christ, more conflict. The other main emphasis we see in this word study is service. There are also 41 occurrences of the word Sabbath that show up in the context of serving people, with 25 of those being specifically about healing on the Sabbath. There is only one instance in which Jesus healed on the Sabbath and it didn't result in immediate conflict with the religious leaders (Mark 1:21, also in Luke 4:31). There is only one occurrence of the word Sabbath in the gospels in which it doesn't have to do with conflict with religious leaders, serving people, or Christ's death (Matthew 24:20).

The numbers make two points incredibly clear:

1. Jesus and the religious leaders did not agree about what was lawful on the Sabbath.
2. Jesus saw the Sabbath as a time to serve people.

Luke 4 provides a good introduction to the ongoing disagreement. Jesus' mission on earth was one of life-giving service for people (v.18-19). He announced that mission on a Sabbath (v.16), then said it was fulfilled "today" (v.21). Because of his claims, the religious leaders tried to kill him (v.29), on the Sabbath. That was Jesus' Sabbath experience in Nazareth.

He then spent a Sabbath in Capernaum (v.31) where he healed a demon possessed man (v.35). We learn that *Sabbath is a day to advance God's mission*. Jesus didn't just announce his mission on a Sabbath, he intended to carry it out on the Sabbath. We also learn that *Sabbath is not a day to take life but to give life*. Jesus gave life by healing on the Sabbath. The religious

Sabbath Practice #4: SERVICE

leaders were ready to take his life because he violated their Sabbath rules. They were willing to kill to protect their tradition. Jesus was willing to break their tradition to give life. They attacked Jesus to defend their rules. Jesus attacked the forces of evil to set people free. Jesus asked, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). In the end of the conflict these two attitudes toward the Sabbath would be played out in a climactic way as Jesus lay in a tomb, on a Sabbath, killed by the Jews while simultaneously saving the life of all who would believe. Throughout this Sabbath conflict we are reminded that the *Sabbath was made for man* (Mark 2:27).

What follows is a quick trip through the Sabbath healings of Jesus. Each of them reinforces the dynamics already identified. A full reading of each is a rich but lengthy study. Here, we will simply summarize the story and highlight any features that add a new dynamic to the message of serving people on the Sabbath.

The Man with a Withered Hand (Luke 6:6-11, Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6)

This was a trap designed to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath. They asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?". Before healing the man in front of their eyes, on the Sabbath, Jesus responded, "*It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*" Here is a main principal of Jesus' Sabbath message. Doing good things for people is a core Sabbath practice.

The Woman with a Disabling Spirit of 18 Years (Luke 13:10-17)

Jesus was teaching on a Sabbath and paused to heal a woman, mid sermon. It didn't take much work, just a word and a touch. The religious leaders were indignant. They pointed out that this healing could have been done on any of the other six days of the week. Again, their response shows a higher value for rules than for people. In Jesus' response we see that the *Sabbath is a day to help people find freedom from the things that bind them.*



Sabbath Practice #5: DELIGHT

A great irony is that in an effort to “obey” the Biblical instruction to not carry a burden (Jeremiah 17:21-27) many have made their obedience a burden. When Sabbath keeping is motivated by duty it quickly becomes a burden. And then, is it really even Sabbath keeping? When Jesus calls us to rest in him in Matthew 28:11 he tells us that his burden is light. Resting in Jesus is not a burden. It lifts our burden.

The ultimate Sabbath rest will be our eternal delight with Christ in the New Jerusalem. We are most certainly not there yet. We can live one day out of every seven as a preview of heaven. Keeping the Sabbath is like practicing heaven. God has given us an invitation to set aside all else and be lifted above the sickness of this broken world to live for 24 hours as if we were already home. How would this not be a delight?

REFLECT

How has your practice of Sabbath been motivated by duty?
How has it been motivated by delight?

There is a difference between “calling the Sabbath a delight” and “doing our own pleasure”!

Read Isaiah 58:13-14. God wants us to “call the Sabbath a delight” but doesn’t want us to “do our own pleasure” on the Sabbath. We need to understand this distinction.

I am pretty sure that calling the Sabbath a delight means that we enjoy it. Sabbath should be fun! But it is the object of our delight that determines if it



Sabbath Practice #5: DELIGHT

is the delight God desires. We are to call the Sabbath a delight. The object of our delight is the Sabbath, the gift God has given us. We delight in the gift because we delight in the giver. When the Sabbath is kept as a delight, God says, "Then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth." God is the object of our delight and he is ready to make the extent of our delight reach as high as is earthly possible. The Sabbath is an invitation to delight in God, not a launch pad to find pleasure in something other than God. The Sabbath should never be a drudgery. It is a day of celebration centered on God.

This distinction does not give us a list of approved and unapproved activities. The activity we find enjoyable is not the point. It is the object of our delight that makes the activity meaningful. The focus should not be on our actions but the affection behind them. We all celebrate a bit different. But we celebrate the same God. Delight in God and in the things that delight him!

God is not anti-pleasure. He delights in our delighting in him!

REFLECT

How do you understand the difference between "calling the Sabbath a delight" and "doing our own pleasure" on the Sabbath?

How might it guide your Sabbath experience?

How do you feel about delight and pleasure and celebration being one of the central practices of Sabbath keeping? Is it a new thought? Is it an uncomfortable thought? Is it a liberating thought?
