

## OBSERVING SABBATH

“Stop for one whole day every week, and you will remember what it means to be created in the image of God, who rested on the seventh day not from weariness but for complete freedom. The clear promise is that those who rest like God find themselves free like God, no longer slaves to the thousand compulsions that send others rushing toward their graves.” Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church

### Definition

Sabbath is 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 Sabbath.

### Scripture

- Remember the Sabbath, keep it holy, six days labor, seventh day rest ... In six days God made the heavens and the earth, and the sea and everything in it, and rested on the seventh day. (Exodus 20:8-11; Genesis 2:3)
- Remember you were a slave in Egypt... and Lord brought you out of there (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

In the Book of Exodus, the Sabbath is justified by the way God behaved in creating a universe. Keeping the Sabbath thus means imitating God’s own example, one might almost say being like God or, to use the language of the Genesis, to be in God’s image. Deuteronomy, for its part, relates the Sabbath to the act of liberation from servitude in Egypt. Although work is the natural condition of human beings, human sinfulness turns them into slaves and transforms meaningful labor, which is a sharing in God’s creative activity, into harsh and unrewarding toil. By being freed periodically from work, then, Israel remembers that God called it from slavery to freedom; this freedom is explicitly recalled and celebrated at least once each week. But beyond these specific justifications, the essential reasons for keeping the Sabbath is because it is holy, in other words because it belongs to God. The days of the weeks are given to human beings for their use and enjoyment...but not all of them. God put God’s mark even on the passage of time, retaining one day as God’s personal possession. (Reading the Ten Commandments Anew: Toward a Land of Freedom by Brother John of Taize)

- The promise of entering God’s rest still stands (Hebrews 4:1-9-11)
- Jesus heals on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-11)

### Background Information

The Jewish understanding of Sabbath embraced a special twenty-four hours that was different from every other day. Other days of the week were given over to work, but the Sabbath reminded people that they were finite. They could not constantly be on the go.

There were limits to their energy. And to honor these limitations was to honor the infinite God, who worked *and* rested.”

The Jewish Sabbath began in the evening when the family set aside the to do's of the work week. As the lamps were lit, everyone settled into the evening calm of Shabbat - the candles, prayers, blessing, food, the empty chair at the table – it all represented delight and refreshment in the presence of God and each other. When bedtime came, the family rested in God's covenant protection. They woke on Sabbath morning to a world they didn't make and a friendship with God they didn't earn”. (Spiritual Disciplines Handbook by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun)

Over time, this like other rituals practiced, turned from refreshment and delight into a sobering legalistic exercise. The day God had given as a respite from work now seemed like work.

“Jesus took specific aim at this misunderstanding of the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-14, Luke 6:1-10) he freely interpreted the Sabbath command, claiming that God gave it to people as a restorative and recuperative gift. God did not intend for it to be all effort, so God punctuated each week with twenty-four hours of Sabbath rest during which people could remember what life is about and who it is for.

“Sadly, everything about us works against slowing down. Our compulsion to produce and not waste time invades the space God gave for us to rest. Children's athletics, national sporting events, round-the-clock accessibility to work, email and stores also fill up the Sabbath day, so we never stop. When you get indignant over how seemingly incompatible Sabbath is with the tiring and relentless demands already facing you, consider what your tiredness means.

Sabbath is God's way of saying, “Stop. Notice your limits. Don't burn out.” It is a day God gave us to remember who and what work is for as well as what matters most. Sabbath generously hands us hours to look into the eyes of those we love. We have time for loving and being loved.

Marvin Dawn in her book, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly writes “The pressure of life puts us out of touch with our deepest feelings and inner desires. A day of Sabbath rest satisfies our profound need for time to allow ourselves to feel, to be sensitive, to experience life more fully. We discover all the emotions that have been buried in the rush of work.”

Rhythmically, the Sabbath reminds us that we belong to the worldwide family of God. We are citizens of another kingdom – a kingdom not ruled by the clock and the tyranny of the urgent. God's Sabbath reality calls us to trust that the Creator can manage all that

concerns us in this world as we settle into God's rest" (Spiritual Disciplines Handbook by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun)

As followers of Jesus, we look to Jesus for how our life should be patterned and lived. So, what did Jesus actually do on the Sabbath? He not only ceased from laboring and worshiped, he also made sure to embrace others. And so, when he comes across a man with a withered hand and has the capacity to help him, he does so. He reaches out his own hand and thus heals the man with the withered hand. He helped the man who could not help himself. He stopped long enough to hear and see another's pain. He reached across the aisle. Jesus demonstrated for us that not only ceasing and resting are on the "to do" list for Sabbath keeping, so is embracing. The Sabbath is meant to be a time when what you do brings healing to others, when what you do is nothing more or less than helping them be brought or restored into community.

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath: scripture and tradition tells us it means:

*Not working one day a week,*

So what is work? Work is anything you must do, should do or ought to do.

So, what is work for one may not be work for another. Some will cook on the Sabbath, because it is not work for them. Others will not vacuum on the Sabbath because that feels like work to them.

*Not buying or selling on the Sabbath:*

Chris Hedges in his book, Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America writes, "Sabbath is the antidote to popular culture. It is designed to make you think, to fight the forces of materialism, selfishness, acquisition, competitiveness, self-gratification and entitlement"

The Sabbath is not only a time for *ceasing, resting and embracing*; it is also a time for feasting. This element of Sabbath keeping is the cure to the break neck speed where we barely have time to notice what is beautiful and good and wonderful around us, and where we are constantly working toward yet another goal and thus fail to revel, savor and celebrate the good of the present moment. The Sabbath is a day for *feasting*. Six days we keep the pace, we forget to stop and enjoy and yet God has given us the seventh day, so this pattern may be broken and we may fill our lives once again not only to the brim, but to overflowing with that which is good. You may want to even treat yourself to something you would not normally eat (on the other six days of the week); this then would be one way to "feast" on the Sabbath.

Sabbath keeping means taking a day (24 hours) to attune yourself to the rhythm of: ceasing, resting, embracing and feasting. To keep the Sabbath is to experience the wholeness and joy that come from observing God's order for life—a rhythm of working six days and setting apart one day for *rest, worship, festivity, and relationships*.

“While the promise of entering God’s rest is still open, let us take care that none of us should seem to have failed to reach it.” (Hebrews 4:1)

‘The Sabbath is a day that ennobles the soul and makes the body wise.’ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

### Practice

1. Plan a twenty-four hour Sabbath you can enter with anticipation. The night before your Sabbath, remind your body how long it has to luxuriate and rest in God. Consider the things that nourish you: worship, music, a nap, loving, walking, reading, playing with children, afternoon tea. Plan them spaciouly into the day.
2. Prepare a ‘Sabbath box or basket.’ Choose a basket or cover a grocery-size box with gift paper. As you begin your Sabbath, put all the things you don’t need to take with you into your Sabbath (drop cell phones, credit cards, pagers, work projects and homework) into the box/basket. Pray to receive the gift of Sabbath.
3. Gather your family together to discuss how to arrange your Sabbath for refreshment, renewal and relationships. Ask “How do you intentionally leave the school and work behind?” Let everyone tell one thing they would love to do on the Sabbath. Talk about what relationships you would like to nurture or who you would like to visit or have over. Then ask that person(s) to do something with you on the Sabbath or do something for them on the Sabbath. If entertaining seems like work, then do not make a home-cooked meal. Instead, buy something pre-made and just heat it up or go somewhere together instead of having to clean so they can come over to your house. Discuss how you can approach Sabbath in ways that do not force, rush or demand.

### Resources

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting by Marva Dawn

The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath by Mark Buchanan

The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Reading the Ten Commandments Anew: Towards a Land of Freedom by Brother John of Taize

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