



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Sabbath, a "Little Jubilee"
(*Sabbath*, pp. 9-16)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Sabbath as Liberation

Sabbath teachings and laws, by echoing the jubilee traditions, go to the heart of the biblical emphases on justice and compassion. Sabbath becomes an enduring sign of hope that the poor will see justice and the distraught find peace.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Leviticus 25:1-24 and Exodus 23:9-13

Responsive Reading†

The people pray: "Why do we fast, but you do not notice?"

And God answers: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"

"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?"

**"Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
to bring the homeless poor into your house,
and when you see the naked, to cover them?"**

"If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth."

**Then we shall call, and the LORD will answer;
we shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."**

Reflection

"By celebrating a hoped for world of abundance, self-restraint, and mutual care, the Bible's sabbath traditions critiqued ancient royal-imperial systems that created scarcity, overwork, and gross economic inequality," writes Richard Lowery. The jubilee and sabbath year traditions found in Leviticus 25 emphasize that God is the true owner of the land, and we are like 'aliens and tenants,' or stewards who 'lease' the land for no more than fifty years. Thus, woven through this tradition are themes of caring for the land, for the poor and landless, and for our common security. Other ancient societies allowed debt forgiveness and slave release on the whim (which is to say, the pressing political needs) of their king. With its regular seven- and forty-nine-year cycles, the jubilee tradition recognizes the kingship of God.

Exodus 23:9-13 links weekly sabbath keeping with the seventh year rest for the land. Both practices reflect concern for the "life," or "heart" (NRSV), of the resident alien, who epitomizes the poor person on the margin of that ancient economy (23:9, 12).

How did the seventh year law work according to 23:11? Perhaps this "regular release of agricultural produce for the economic support of the poor," Lowery says, "was a rotating 'set-aside' program, where farmers designated one-seventh of



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the fields and vineyards each year for use by poor households.”

Relief for ox and donkey (23:12) meant a day off for human laborers too; the weekly sabbath was “the ancient equivalent of turning off the machines and hanging the ‘closed’ sign on the factory door.” This sabbath passion for social justice for the poor and for workers echoes throughout the Bible. We hear it clearly in the poetry of Isaiah 58, which Jesus employs in the parable of God’s judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46.

The reference to “resident aliens” in Exodus 23:9 recalls the Exodus event, when God rescued Israel from enslavement in Egypt. When we fail to honor the sabbath, we are forgetting this heritage and ignoring the God who rescued us (23:13). “Sabbath celebrates this jubilee relationship with God,” notes Lowery. “Sabbath rest is God’s distinctive mark, a deep symbol of Israel’s intimate relationship with the one who frees rather than enslaves, who offers lavish blessing rather than endless toil.”

Study Questions

1. Consider Lowery’s claim: “These sabbath traditions can ... [offer] words of proportion, limits, social solidarity, and the need for rest, quiet reflection, and recreation in the face of never-ending work and consumption” (*Sabbath*, p. 9). Brainstorm some ways the central jubilee and sabbath teachings might apply to our economic system.
2. How do the more familiar versions of the sabbath law in Exodus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:14 focus on the responsibilities of wealthy homes, according to Lowery (*Sabbath*, p. 12)? How might these restrictions on the wealthy householder apply to our lives today?
3. When we read the sabbath teachings with the eyes of a resident alien, we notice other interesting details. For instance, how might the curious ban on lighting fires on the sabbath (Exodus 35:2-3) reflect a concern for vulnerable members of the household (cf. *Sabbath*, p. 12)?
4. How did other laws provide support for the poor in Israel’s agricultural society? Consider the laws of gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; cf. Ruth 2), the triennial tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28-29), and debt and slave release (Deuteronomy 15:1-18; Leviticus 25:8-55).

Departing Hymn: “Blest Day of God, Most Calm, Most Bright” (verses 1 and 4)

Blest day of God, most calm, most bright,
the first, the best of days;
the laborer’s rest, the saint’s delight,
the day of prayer and praise.

This day I must with God appear;
for, Lord, the day is Thine;
help me to spend it in Thy fear,
and thus to make it mine.

John Mason, *Songs of Praise* (1683)
Suggested Tune: MARTYRDOM

† Adapted from Isaiah 58 (NRSV).

Sabbath as Liberation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Leviticus 25:1-24	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 25:31-46
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (review all)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To understand the jubilee tradition and its connection to sabbath teachings.
2. To understand how the sabbath teachings and laws reflect the biblical emphasis on justice and compassion.
3. To distinguish true sabbath observance from ‘going through the ritual motions.’
4. To explore how Old Testament laws enjoined the protection of the poor.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sabbath (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the tune MARTYRDOM for “Blest Day of God, Most Calm, Most Bright” in your hymnbook (it is often paired with “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed”) or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“Sabbath is a unique holiday for a distinctive deity, who defines the divine-human relationship by rest, not by work. Israel’s neighbors were not so lucky. In the Babylonian creation myth, for example, the gods Marduk and Ea create human beings to do the gods’ grunt work. In Israel’s sacred story, by contrast, humans are created to rule the earth, not as slaves to do the gods’ tedious labor, but as kings and queens stamped with the image of God. Later, God “creates” Israel by liberating them from forced labor, canceling their debt, buying their freedom from slavery, and restoring their household property.” (Richard H. Lowery, “Sabbath, a Little ‘Jubilee’,” *Sabbath*, p. 12.)

This passage highlights the power of stories to shape our moral imagination. If the creation is abundant (as in Genesis 1) and God is a liberator (as in the Exodus stories), then what must the world be like? If the jubilee and sabbath teachings are true, then what is our place in the world, and how should we treat one another?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members in the following week will see and evaluate their own work and households through the eyes of the poor, the “resident aliens” of the sabbath tradition.

Scripture Reading

Ask members to read aloud Leviticus 25:1-24 and Exodus 23:9-13 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Members might think that there is little connection between sabbath observance and social justice, but this would misunderstand the sabbath teachings. Encourage members to explore this connection throughout the Old Testament. You may divide the lesson into two sessions to permit their review and discussion of more passages.

Many people are not familiar with the jubilee tradition. Allow them to ask questions about the Leviticus 25 passage. Instead of worrying over strictly following this tradition today, members might explore the central themes and ask how, in our industrial economy, the tradition might be continued. (For example, congregations may participate in the Jubilee USA Network, a contemporary Christian movement to apply jubilee tradition to international debt relief. See their Web site, www.jubileeusa.org.)

Scholars wonder if the sabbatical year and jubilee year laws were obeyed in ancient Israel. Leviticus 26:34-35 suggests these laws were difficult to enforce, yet 1 Maccabees 6:48-54 records how the sabbatical year was observed for a time, even during war.

Expand the discussion of Exodus 23:9-13 with Lowery's insights about the resident alien (non-citizen). The alien epitomizes the poor in ancient Israel's agricultural economy. Here the alien is chosen for special mention in order to remind us of the Exodus event, when Israel was created as a nation before God from among the resident aliens of Egypt.

Explain that Isaiah 58 (adapted in the responsive reading) reflects the relationship among authentic sabbath observance, social justice, and compassion. When Jesus describes God's ultimate judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46, he borrows from the language of Isaiah 58 on authentic sabbath keeping.

Study Questions

1. Members might focus on these key terms in Lowery's claim: (a) "proportion" and "limits," (b) "social solidarity," and (c) "need for rest, quiet reflection, and recreation." Our consumerist culture recognizes no limits on personal consumption, except the adjustable limits on our credit cards. How might concern for resting the land (and other natural resources) influence our purchasing decisions, keeping them in proportion or limits? Our individualism works against our appropriation of the sabbath traditions. How did these traditions in ancient Israel encourage identification with and require concern for the poor? Most of us, if we are not workaholics, take an interest in our own rest. Do we consider how our actions and economy affect the opportunities that others, especially the poor, have for rest, quiet reflection, and recreation?
2. These laws extend our reflection on sabbath rest to include the lives of people who "work" for us. Members might reflect on how our decisions, and how the economy and jobs that we have some influence over, support the sabbath rest, quiet reflection, and recreation of those who "work" for them. They should consider people in other places who are affected through the economy, as well as those who live closer to their homes.
3. Lowery suggests that since "home fires most often were for cooking, a job that typically fell to women and children," this ban "ensures that householders will not expect women to cook, while men enjoy sabbath rest. Sabbath knows no distinction of gender. Male or female, slave or free, everyone gets to rest on sabbath."
4. You might assign a member or small group to investigate each set of laws, then report back to the entire group. Whom does the law affect? Are they related by blood or kinship, or are they strangers to the more prosperous, secure person? What is required of the more prosperous persons?

Departing Hymn

Distribute copies of the tune MARTYRDOM. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.