



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 Bowling on the Sabbath
(*Sabbath*, pp. 66-72)

Suggested Article:

📖 Praying with the
Rhythms of Grace
(*Sabbath*, pp. 25-30)

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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Bowling on the Sabbath

As families and congregations today reopen the gift of sabbath observance, helpful resources may be found in the Jewish Shabbat rituals and in the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Leviticus 23:3

Responsive Reading†

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to declare your steadfast love in the morning and your faithfulness by night.

For you, O LORD, have made us glad by your work; at the works of your hands we sing for joy.

Your enemies, O LORD, shall perish. But the righteous shall flourish like the palm tree and like a cedar in Lebanon.

The righteous are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the LORD is faithful.

All: The LORD is our rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Reflection

"Our family observes sabbath from approximately 6 p.m. Saturday to 6 p.m. Sunday," Blaine and Sarah McCormick write. "This timing mirrors the Jewish Shabbat, which begins at sundown on Friday, but we have moved the holy time forward to the first day of the week to encompass our Christian beliefs."

On Saturday evening each family member lights a candle and prays, "May the light of the sabbath candles drive out from us the spirit of anger and the spirit of fear and the spirit of pride. Send your blessing that we may walk in the ways of your Word and your Light. Enter our hearts this night, O Lord." Then Blaine and Sarah bless each child by reading their favorite scripture, reflecting with them on the previous week, and offering a prayer. They might pass around a pleasant or pungent spice, to remind them how their lives are to be "a pleasant aroma" to God, or share a taste of bread strips dipped in honey as they remember how God's words are "sweeter than honey." They share a devotional or story before blowing out their sabbath candles.

The McCormick family consecrates their sabbath time by resting. They have a "no commerce" rule, and may adopt a "no technology" policy. Yet they are alert for sabbath policies turning into legalism, so they share these wise recommendations:

- ▶ *Be a priestly parent rather than a sabbath cop.* Say "Yes" to honoring the sabbath; exercise positive spiritual leadership by blessing the day and children. Sabbath cops merely patrol the house, saying "No" to things that break the sabbath rules.
- ▶ *Let your sabbath observance play a supporting role rather than a leading role.* Keep the family's overall mission focused on Christ-centered service, not on keeping sabbath rules.



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- ▶ *Some sabbath practice is better than none at all.* Don't try to leap from no sabbath to perfect sabbath in one weekend. Allow your observance to develop, and be flexible.
- ▶ *Bring order to your spiritual life.* Parents need sabbath rest in order to be effective spiritual leaders to their children. When faced with a difficult decision on the sabbath, ask, "Does this activity bring order to our spiritual lives?"

"We partially miss the point if we see sabbath keeping as only a commandment," Judy Henderson Prather reminds us, "for it is truly a gift.... God knows that we need meaningful work, so we can make a positive difference in the world. But God also knows we must periodically pause to allow God to make a difference in us." In sabbath keeping, we cease our labors and accept both our work and rest as gifts. She describes two forms of Christian contemplative prayer as ways of opening our lives to God:
- ▶ *Breath prayer.* Enjoy the rhythm and gift of slow, deliberate breathing. Imagine breathing in all that is God, and then allowing God to take away all that is not of God as you exhale. With this connection between breathing and prayer, we can find many ways of praying. We might breathe in God's presence and breathe out a burden that is not ours to carry, or breathe a favorite scripture as a prayer throughout our day, such as breathing in "Be still and know" and breathing out "that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). "God's presence is literally as near as our own breathing. When we discover that, we can begin to reclaim a rhythm of sabbath rest."
- ▶ *Scripture prayer, or "lectio divina."* Read a scripture passage slowly until a single verse or phrase strikes your spirit. Then repeat that phrase prayerfully over and over. "This practice should not replace the active study of the Bible, but it trains us to ... trust that the same Spirit through whom the text was written will be present now and speak a fitting word to us."

Study Questions

1. Why, according to the McCormicks and Prather, are ceremony and ritual important in sabbath observance?
2. Are the "no commerce" and "no technology" rules helpful in consecrating a time for sabbath rest, or are they legalistic barriers to faithful observance?
3. The McCormicks want to share their family sabbath with others. What might this look like? How might your congregation help families share sabbath together?
4. What single suggestion for sabbath observance will you try? How will you adapt it for yourself or your family?
5. "We often believe that sabbath is only about going to church," says Dorothy Bass. "Yet many congregations make that hard work, too, by scheduling meetings all day long" (*Sabbath*, p. 77). Do you agree? How might a congregation structure its Sunday to encourage sabbath rest?

Departing Hymn: "Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song"

† Adapted from Psalm 92 (NRSV)

Bowling on the Sabbath

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Responsive Reading | Responsive Reading |
| Highlight McCormick's practices | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1, and 2 or 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate the need for ceremony in sabbath observance.
2. To consider the proper role for rules for rest on the sabbath.
3. To explore how members might incorporate suggested practices in order to shape their own sabbath observance.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible verse in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sabbath (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Share the story about young Ellis McCormick's desire for a sabbath prayer and blessing. It begins, "Is sabbath keeping having any impact on our children?" on *Sabbath*, p. 71. This story alerts us to the importance of ritual and ceremony in sabbath observance, and it reminds us that at the heart of sabbath keeping is God's love for us and desire for relationship with us. Ellis knows this.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice common concerns of the group. Close by thanking God for the Sabbath, and for the opportunity to learn from one another's efforts to faithfully observe it.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Leviticus 23:3 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

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

Reflection

In this lesson we draw encouragement from two contemporary Christian testimonies of personal and family sabbath observance. Members may draw ideas from the Blaine and Sarah McCormick family and from Judy Prather. Despite their differing inspirations, Jewish Shabbat rituals in the first case and Christian contemplative prayer practices in the second, there are surprising convergences in these testimonies.

First, as the lesson describes, the McCormicks have a ritual to begin sabbath rest, and they are considering adding a ritual to mark the end of their sabbath observance. Prather emphasizes the need for rituals that allow room for God to enter and direct our lives.

The McCormicks explore the use of "no commerce" and "no technology" policies in order to clear time

for sabbath rest. Prather, too, advises that contemplative prayer is a way of stopping our work and receiving sabbath rest as a gift from God.

Prather and the McCormicks emphasize that our sabbath observance should be flexible and allowed to develop as we learn more about what God is doing in our families. This flexibility prevents the sabbath rules from becoming legalistic barriers to faithful discipleship.

Members may want to explore some notable differences between these testimonies. Prather's suggestions for prayer are intended to help us carry sabbath keeping moments throughout the week. On the other hand, the McCormicks focus on a single day of sabbath observance, though this practice surely shapes their lives throughout the week. Another difference is that an individual may follow Prather's practices, while the McCormick's rituals are rooted in a family economy. How might a young family incorporate Prather's suggestions concerning prayer? Could a group of friends or a couple without children adapt the rituals described by Blaine and Sarah McCormick?

Study Questions

1. For the McCormicks, rituals help them "make holy," or set apart, a day for sabbath rest. "Carefully chosen rituals of sabbath keeping," Prather agrees, "can change our emphasis and ground us in God's economy of time. Rituals may be as simple as repeating a certain scripture each morning when we first awaken, as common as speaking a word of grace before each meal, or as quiet as a cup of tea at sunset. As elegant as the cloth-covered table with our finest dishes and fresh flowers for a weekly sabbath meal, or as rambunctious as a weekly game of basketball with a few hard-working friends. Whether it is an ancient ritual practiced by the church for centuries or one we created this morning, the point is allowing its repetition to alter our rhythm and focus." Do members think that sabbath rituals should connect us with other Christians, across generations and cultures? Or, is it sufficient that a ritual be selected and important to the individual, as Prather suggests?
2. Members might discuss the McCormick's story about bowling on the sabbath, or the "questions and answers" insets on pp. 68-71 in *Sabbath*. Dorothy Bass also deals with the issue of sabbath rules, especially concerning commerce. "Orthodox Jews do not carry money on the sabbath," Bass notes. "That rang a bell with me, because—and this is a confession on my own part—the temptations of consumerism are what most separate me from a faithful way of life. When my mind is distracted from the needs of others and distracted from God, I'm probably thinking about 'what's the next thing I'm going to buy?'" (*Sabbath*, p. 77).
3. Members may consider how families could cooperate in sabbath keeping rituals, or how a family might involve single church members. How might a group of single adults, an intergenerational group of members, or a couples group agree to observe sabbath together?
4. Before the group session, you may want to make a list of the sabbath keeping suggestions by the McCormicks and Prather. In addition, you might glean ideas from the reviews, "Sabbath Keeping" by Stephen Brachlow (*Sabbath*, pp. 81-85) and "Sabbath Blessings" by Willow Hambrick (*Sabbath*, pp. 86-91). Dorothy Bass has a number of suggestions in her interview, "Opening the Gift of Sabbath" (*Sabbath*, pp. 73-80). Ask members to share other sabbath practices that they have followed, or would like to follow.
5. If their church is a busy place on Sunday, do members think that this enhances their sabbath rest, or is it a distraction from worship and sabbath keeping? Is it feasible to reschedule meetings, limit their length, or otherwise minimize their impact on sabbath keeping? Should the church have more shared fellowship times on Sunday?

Departing Hymn

"Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song" is on pp. 44-45 of *Sabbath*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.