



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for Sabbath

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us open the gift of sabbath as a celebration of whom God has made us to become. The guides can be used in a series or individually. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Sabbath teachings and laws go to the heart of the biblical emphases on justice and compassion. How is sabbath an enduring sign of hope that the poor will see justice and the distraught find peace?
- Sabbath as Delight in Creation** 4
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Focus Article:

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

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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).



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Sabbath, a "Little Jubilee"
(*Sabbath*, pp. 9-16)
- 📖 Imagine a Sabbath Economy
(*Sabbath*, pp. 31-35)

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Sabbath as Delight in Creation

When we keep the sabbath, we are not fleeing from the anxious character of our world. Rather, we are sharing God's delight in creation, which always causes us to ask, "Are we promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?"

Prayer

Lord of the Sabbath, it is hard for us to stop working, and harder still to stop worshipping work. We confess that our busy-ness often substitutes for our holiness.

Forgive us, Lord, and help us to be still enough to know you. Help us to understand that your sabbath is the seam between the world of work and the work of worship. Help us to know that the sabbath is what keeps us from unraveling, that it knits up the harried and makes them holy, that it even helps to heal creation from the crash.

All: In this quiet, peaceful time, we honor you, we rest in you, we long to know you as maker and mender. Through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

Scripture Readings: Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:8-11

Reflection

"Sabbath sings a quiet song in echo of God's peace," begins Terry York's new hymn (*Sabbath*, p. 43), for sabbath invites us to share in God's rest on the seventh day of creation. But what does God's rest signify, and how do we participate in it?

- ▶ *God's rest indicates God's sovereign rule over creation.* The watery chaos (Genesis 1:1-2) has been subdued, and the world is restful and whole. "God rests at the end of creation because God is able to rest," says Richard Lowery. "God's benevolent rule in the universe is unchallenged. Sabbath celebrates God's complete, just, and compassionate rule in the world." We share in God's rest when we live in the confidence that *shalom*, or justice and peace, is fundamental in the world.
- ▶ *God's rest reflects the divine pleasure in a creation finely made.* God takes delight in the entire creation, even in parts that are of little or no interest to us, such as the calving of deer and frolicking of sea monsters (Job 39:1; 40:15). Humbly we realize "that creation is not primarily for us," Norman Wirzba points out. "It exists for God, and is the occasion for God's care, pleasure, and delight. It is a sabbath creation in which all the members of creation, including humanity, achieve their true end as they approximate God's own tranquility and joy." We share in God's rest when we affirm all creation, limit our consumption, and tune our habits to rejoice in and care for those aspects of creation of which we are not a part.

Just as divine rest crowns and colors all of God's creative activity, so our participation in God's rest should extend through all of our activities. Think of sabbath rest "as the peaceful and joyous flourishing of creation," Wirzba suggests, "and stop thinking of it primarily as the cessation of or temporary reprieve



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from our otherwise acceptable striving." Our weekly sabbath observance then will become a "prism through which all our thought and action receive their focus and direction."

To live daily in God's rest, confident in God's *shalom* and respecting the creation, we must believe that God is willing and able to provide enough for a good life. This truth is taught when God gives sustaining manna to the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16). The manna could not be hoarded; God commands each to collect only as much as each needs to eat. "Need is defined individually, not collectively," Lowery notes. "God fills the basket of every single person, regardless of strength and ability. God's reliable, providential care is limited only by the actual needs of each individual." Hoarding manna is a rejection of God's economy where everyone gets enough for a good life. "Greedy consumption is unfaith, rooted in the blasphemous fear that God is not the liberator of slaves, the loving creator who desires abundant life for all."

Study Questions:

1. "This [sabbath-grounded] vision of wealth and well-being universally shared ... is unlike the world most people know today," writes Lowery. "It calls us to examine the way we live, to make decisions that promote dignity, freedom, well-being, and life-giving power for all God's people" (*Sabbath*, pp. 15-16). What are some ways in which your daily work can promote this sabbath vision?
2. How do you respond to Lowery's view: "Renewing the world begins in families and communities, with sabbath disciplines of delight. Having fun with friends and family honors God. Gratefully enjoying the gifts of life is proper worship" (*Sabbath*, p. 16)?
3. Do you agree with Wirzba that an action as simple as eating a meal can reflect or distort God's rest (*Sabbath*, pp. 32-33)? How might you apply his insight to other daily activities?

Departing Hymn: "O Day of Rest and Gladness" (verses 1, 5, and 6)

O day of rest and gladness, O day of joy and light,
O balm of care and sadness, most beautiful, most bright:
on Thee, the high and lowly, through ages joined in tune,
sing holy, holy, holy, to the great God Triune.

Today on weary nations the heavenly manna falls;
to holy convocations the silver trumpet calls,
where Gospel light is glowing with pure and radiant beams,
and living water flowing, with soul refreshing streams.

New graces ever gaining from this our day of rest,
we reach the rest remaining to spirits of the blessed.
To Holy Ghost be praises, to Father, and to Son;
the church her voice upraises to Thee, blessed Three in One.

Christopher Wordsworth (1862)

Suggested Tune: ST. THEODULPH



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Focus Article:

📖 The Eighth Day
(*Sabbath*, pp. 17-24)

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The Eighth Day

When they celebrated Sunday as “the eighth day,” early Christians signaled that God’s new creation had begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What practices shaped their new “Sunday” way of life? How were these practices rooted in the traditions of Second Temple Judaism, with its focus on gatherings and worship on the sabbath?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:1-53

Responsive Reading

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is a day for peace and proclamation, for rest and reflection, for working at worship instead of worshipping work.

The sabbath day is a holy day, consecrated by the Creator as a gift to creation. We are commanded to honor and preserve it.

The sabbath day is a holy day, wherein we realize that all days are God’s days; a day of rest, wherein we realize that all work is God’s work; a day of peace wherein we can realize that God is our maker and our mender, too.

Together, let us keep the sabbath.

Reflection

Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday was the catalyst for “the eighth day” innovation in the early church. The early Christians now were convinced that God’s creative activity extended beyond the seven-day week, and so the first day, Sunday, was also the eighth day of God’s work.

Their dedication of Sunday for gathering and worship grew out of the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord. “These provided not only the proof of the resurrection (for alternative explanations for the empty tomb already were emerging),” David Capes notes, “but also the lively expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered.”

The initial resurrection appearances of Jesus took place on “the first day of the week.” On Sunday, first the women, then other men disciples, discovered that Jesus’ tomb was empty (Luke 24:1-12; cf. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1, 11-18). Two disciples journeying to Emmaus from Jerusalem “on that same day” recognized their risen Lord when he broke bread for them to eat. Later that evening the two disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their story only to hear that the Lord had appeared to Simon, too (Luke 24:13-35). That evening, as they celebrated the good news, Jesus appeared before the entire group and commissioned them to preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations (Luke 24:36-49; cf. John 20:19-23). The gospel of John records that because Thomas was not present at this meeting, the Lord appeared at their gathering “a week later” (on Sunday) to remove that disciple’s doubts (20:24-29).



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As they gathered in homes and at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:42) on “the first day of the week” (e.g., Acts 20:7-12; 1 Corinthians 16:2), the disciples broke bread, prayed, interpreted Scripture, rehearsed the good news, and prepared for ministry. By the end of the first century the designation “the first day of the week,” which reflects a Jewish way of reckoning time, was replaced by a uniquely Christian term, “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). The *Didache* (c. A.D. 50-150) instructs, “Every Lord’s day, gather together, eat a meal, and give thanks after having first confessed your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure (14.1, Ivan Lewis translation). These Sunday gatherings probably began early among Palestinian Jewish Christians and became common practice throughout the church by the mid-second century.

Paul warned Gentile believers in Colossae not to let others force them to keep the Jewish sabbath, since it is only a shadow of things to come, while the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). Apparently, he expected Jewish Christians to continue observing the sabbath regulations, but he did not require the same of Gentiles who entered the church.

Though “growing anti-Judaism in the second century and beyond meant that some distanced themselves from Jews and their practices,” Capes notes that “through the fourth century there is ample evidence that some Christians, even Gentile Christians, continued to observe sabbath.” The Christian theologian Tertullian, in *On Prayer* (c. 205), wrote as though corporate prayer on the sabbath were commonplace, and the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the fourth century taught that both sabbath and Sunday should be kept as festivals to the Lord. “Those Christians who maintained a sabbath practice took their cue from the Lord of the Sabbath, to whom the substance of the new creation belongs.”

Emperor Constantine decreed in A.D. 321 that workers should rest on the venerable day of the Sun. Over the next centuries, Christian believers began resting on Sunday and referring to the Lord’s Day as “the sabbath,” attaching to the eighth day the significance that is given to the seventh day in the Decalogue.

Study Questions

1. What events in the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord were imitated in the disciples’ Sunday gatherings? How did those resurrection appearances set the pattern for early Christian worship?
2. Why did Christians begin to gather for worship on Sunday? For centuries after that, Sunday was a workday, not a day of rest. How did Sunday become a day of rest associated with the sabbath tradition?
3. In what differing ways have Christians over the centuries understood the relation of Sunday worship and sabbath observance? What practice might Christians follow when Sunday is not a day of rest from commerce for them?
4. How would you summarize the significance and meaning of Sunday worship?

Departing Hymn: “This Day at Thy Creating Word”



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Focus Article:

📖 Lord Even of the Sabbath
(*Sabbath*, pp. 38-42)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Work of Rest and Worship
(*Sabbath*, pp. 52-54)

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Lord of the Sabbath

Sabbath is not about lazy inactivity. The gospel stories about Jesus' sabbath healings remind us that sabbath is a call to active rest, to finding and sharing redemption.

Prayer

Help us, O Lord, to grant to each and all a sabbath rest, a margin of mercy, a place of grace. Help us to work to free others from endless labor and struggle.

We pray for those locked in the grip of sickness, suffering, and addiction who are never free to rest. We pray for those tormented and overturned by the constant ebb and flow of life. We pray for those who are not at peace with themselves or with their neighbors. We pray for all who work and watch and weep today.

Help us to help them, Lord. Where we cannot help, we pray your presence, speaking peace.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God.

Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 6:1-11

Reflection

The rules for sabbath observance were detailed in Jesus' day. For example, the strict community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls required no foolish speech, no fasting, no discussion of future work, no preparation of food, no harvesting, restricted travel, wearing of clean clothes, no cruelty to animals, and no carrying of water, among other things. "Though we might frown upon these rules as examples of legalism," David Capes notes, "we can admire the fact that these covenant people had the audacity to believe that God's Word mattered greatly and the vitality to do everything imaginable to bring their lives into accord with God's will."

Jesus treasured the sabbath too, but his healings and the disciples' harvesting created ongoing controversies with some religious leaders concerning how to honor it. When they charged him and the disciples with violating the day of rest, Jesus declared, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath" (Luke 6:5).

What did Jesus mean? The gospel writer answers with a story (Luke 6:6-11). Though some scribes and Pharisees are hoping to accuse him of violating the sabbath law, when Jesus sees a man with a physical ailment, he calls him over, explains why he should heal on the sabbath in anticipation of their criticism, and cures the man. A manuscript illustration in *Codex Egberti* (c. 980) captures the heart of the gospel's "answer" (*Sabbath*, p. 39). It shows two Pharisees turned away and plotting against Jesus even before the man is healed. Yet two disciples stand with Jesus in the middle of the image, and one of these raises his hand in imitation of his Lord who commands the lame man to "Stretch out your hand" (6:10). In the flat, gestural style of Byzantine art, all of the figures are placed on the frontal plane as if they may slide off into our space.



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“When the Pharisees were quick to point out that Jesus was not resting,” comments Milton Brasher-Cunningham, “he responded that they were missing the point: meaningful, redemptive, relational work is what the sabbath is all about. What better redemptive act than to heal someone? If we are created in God’s image, why should we not be about re-creating lives through love?”

Study Questions

1. In the sabbath controversies, Jesus interprets his actions and commends them to his disciples. What similarities do you find in Jesus’ statements in these stories: healing a man with a withered hand (Luke 6:6-11), a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17), and a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6)? What differences do you find?
2. Compare Bartolomé Estaban Murillo’s painting, *Christ at the Pool of Bethesda*, to the story in John 5:1-9. (Murillo’s painting is on the cover of *Sabbath* and is discussed on pp. 36-37.) What portion of the story does the painter emphasize? Why is this theme appropriate, given the location and audience for his work?
3. The gospel of John develops to great length the story of Jesus’ healing of a man who was born blind (John 9:1-41). How does the gospel compare the man’s physical blindness to spiritual blindness? Are all Pharisees spiritually blind?
4. What episodes within the complex story of Jesus healing the man born blind are illustrated in the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* manuscript illumination (*Sabbath*, p. 41)? How well does the artist capture the meaning of those events in the story?
5. Do Jesus’ healings on the sabbath highlight the central meaning of sabbath observance, or are they exceptions to the general rule of sabbath keeping?

Departing Hymn: “Lord of the Sabbath, Hear Us Pray” (verses 1, 2, and 6)

Lord of the Sabbath, hear us pray,
in this Your house, on this Your day;
and own, as grateful sacrifice,
the songs which from Your temple rise.

Now met to pray and bless Your Name,
whose mercies flow each day the same;
whose kind compassions never cease,
we seek instruction, pardon, peace.

O long expected day, begin,
dawn on these realms of woe and sin!
Break, morn of God, upon our eyes;
and let the world’s true Sun arise!

Philip Doddridge (1737); altered by Thomas Cotterill (1819), et al.
Suggested tunes: GERMANY or MARYTON



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Focus Article:

📖 Changing Sunday Practices
(*Sabbath*, pp. 58-65)

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Changing Sunday Practices

Profound changes in American culture since the 1930s have transformed our Sundays to resemble other days of the week. What are the prospects for renewing sabbath keeping as individuals and congregations?

Prayer

Responsive Reading†

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

O that today we would listen to his voice!

The LORD answers,

Do not harden your hearts, as in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways." Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 3:16-4:11

Reflection

With brutal honesty the biblical tradition says the people of Israel, when newly liberated by God from slavery in Egypt, were a faithless, self-centered, and complaining crew. (In this, it seems, they were a lot like us, and folks we know.)

For instance, God had just instituted sabbath and provided manna for them to eat in the wilderness, "and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (Exodus 16:31). Yet when they ran short of water, the people complained about Moses (and God), saying, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us ... with thirst?" Still gracious and patient, God instructs Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with his staff, and more than enough water gushes forth (17:1-7).

Great damage was done by the people's faithlessness and a deep scar would mar their relationship with the LORD. Moses would remember that location as a place of testing (*Massah*) and quarreling (*Meribah*) with God (17:7). The parallel version of this story in Numbers 20:1-13 is even more bitter, for it concludes with God denying to this unfaithful generation and Moses their passage into "the land that I have given them."

This story of *Massah/Meribah* is a spiritual mirror. Reflected in it the psalmist sees both God's mercy and our own tendency toward faithless self-centeredness. The LORD "is the rock of our salvation," yet here is the warning: "O that today [this sabbath] you would listen to his voice!" (Psalm 95:1,7). The Promised Land denied to the unfaithful transposes (in the final words of this call to worship) to God withholding "[sabbath] rest" (95:11).

The writer of Hebrews, looking into the psalmist's *Massah/Meribah* mirror once again, not only recognizes the lingering



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temptation to faithless disobedience, but also rejoices in God's promise of an eternal sabbath rest to all who believe (3:16-4:11).

Today we might use the *Massah/Meribah* mirror as we appraise the changes in sabbath practices in our own society. The mirror reminds us that God has liberated us to enjoy sabbath rest marked by joyful obedience. Yet it also shows our habit of faithless self-centeredness.

We spend less time, in Calvin's words, "resting from our work so God can do God's work in us." Jack Marcum surveys some of the changes in sabbath observance from the 1930's to the 1990's, and says, "the best explanation for why Sundays have come to resemble other days of the week is that people wanted it that way. As opportunities to take part in other activities besides worship and rest have proliferated, people, including many in the church, have embraced them."

Do some of these changes reflect our self-centeredness? Should we judge other changes to be creative, faithful responses to God's invitation to sabbath rest? The psalmist invites us to look in the mirror.

Study Questions

1. Is Sunday now like any other day of the week? How is it different? (See Figure 1, "Is Sunday Still Different?" *Sabbath*, p. 59.)
2. In what activities did members of your family participate on the last few Sundays? How does your family's activities compare with those of the Presbyterian families surveyed recently (Figure 2, "Keeping the Lord's Day," *Sabbath*, p. 60)?
3. Were Sunday activities different when you were growing up? Compare your memories with those in the intergenerational survey discussed by Jack Marcum (*Sabbath*, pp. 61-62 and back cover appendix).
4. Discuss Marcum's opinion that it may be easier "to convince people to carve out small segments of time throughout the week than to persuade them to return to more traditional Sunday behavior. That's because ... sabbath keeping has become less an institutional affair, observed weekly, and more a private matter left to personal choice" (*Sabbath*, pp. 63-64).
5. Discuss this comment by Dorothy Bass: "Only half the jobs in the American economy are Monday to Friday jobs. Often the most disadvantaged are forced to work on Saturday and Sunday.... So adaptation is necessary, but it needs to be done carefully. Two things to avoid are letting sabbath be frittered away (for when a person is forced to rest on another day, it is tempting to make excuses and not take that day fully), and keeping it alone. Sabbath is a communal venture to be shared with companions, and I hope that people would not be forced to each one take a totally different time" (*Sabbath*, pp. 78-79). How does your congregation address these issues?

Departing Hymn: "Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song"

† Adapted from Psalm 95 (NRSV).



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.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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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)

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

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.

Sabbath as Delight in Creation

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Discuss Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:8-11	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

(Note: This study guide covers the second half of Richard Lowery's article, "Sabbath, a Little 'Jubilee'." The first half is discussed in the previous study guide, "Sabbath as Liberation.")

Teaching goals

1. To understand two meanings of God's rest on the seventh day of creation.
2. To reflect on how we might participate daily in God's rest by welcoming God's *shalom* and sharing the divine delight in the creation.
3. To recognize how, in the manna story, sabbath rest is opposed to greedy consumption and lack of faith in God's abundant provision.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sabbath (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. Locate the hymn tune ST. THEODULPH in your hymnbook or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Poem

Read the lines from the poem by Wendell Berry quoted on pp. 87-88 of *Sabbath*. The poem begins: "There are two healings: nature's, /and ours and nature's."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close this time of prayer by reading responsively the prayer of confession in the lesson. The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for two members to read aloud Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:8-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The lesson begins by focusing on two distinct meanings of God's rest: it signifies (1) that God's rule of justice and peace is unchallenged ultimately, and (2) that God values and takes pleasure in all of the creation. It encourages us to "live daily in God's rest," by allowing our weekly sabbath observance to become a "prism through which all our thought and action receive their daily focus."

- ▶ *God's rest indicates God's sovereign rule over creation.* You might enrich this section of the lesson by discussing the meaning of *bara'*, a Hebrew word that can mean both "to create" and "to be fat." This word, used in the Old Testament to describe only God's creative activity, suggests that God created the world for health and flourishing (see the section "Delight in Creation," *Sabbath*, pp. 13-14). Encourage members to think of concrete ways in which they can live in confidence that *shalom*

is fundamental to the world. How would this confidence enable us to truly rest from our striving? Does this confidence mean that we can use the world in any manner that we want? Or, does it put limits upon our desires and reshape them?

- ▶ *God's rest reflects the divine pleasure in a creation finely made.* Encourage members to mention specific ways in which we can respect, or even share God's pleasure in the created world. Norman Wirzba's article, "Imagine a Sabbath Economy," suggests several contexts in which we can ask the question, "Are we promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?"

The final portion of the lesson discusses the story of God providing manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16). This is another biblical account of the origin of sabbath. If time permits, ask a member to read the entire chapter in Exodus. How does the prohibition against hoarding in this story apply to our use of the resources that God has provided to us?

Study Questions

1. Members may mention, as instances of their "daily work," employment, childrearing, homemaking, volunteer positions, or church assignments. In each of these spheres, they can think of ways in which they promote (or distort) the dignity and well-being of other people. If members want to continue this line of thought, they may evaluate their collective actions as church members, participants in a neighborhood group or community, or as voting citizens.
2. This question begins a discussion that will be the focus of the lessons titled "Changing Sunday Practices" and "Bowling on the Sabbath." Do members agree that properly "enjoying the gifts" of friendship and family is a way of honoring God? When do friendship and family become barriers in the Christian life?
3. Wirzba suggests that we should be concerned with how our food is produced, prepared, and provided to us. We bear some responsibility if these processes are wasteful or disrespectful of God's creation, because we have choices about where and what we eat. Members might want to criticize his analysis. Or, they might want to apply his insight by thinking of their other daily activities that depend upon the actions of many other people or companies. Do we also bear some responsibility when these activities are wasteful or disrespectful of God's creation?

Departing Hymn

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

The Eighth Day

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Luke 24:13-35	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how Sunday worship practices imitate the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.
2. To reflect on differing ways in which Christians have understood the relation of Sunday worship and sabbath observance.
3. To appreciate the significance and meaning of Sunday worship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sabbath (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Anticipate a Story

Usually we begin the lesson with a story. But this time, we'll anticipate a story, or a collection of stories.

In the previous two lessons we have noticed that the sabbath day reminded the people of Israel of their formative stories—of God's resting on the final day of the creation of the world, of their rescue and exodus from Egypt, and of God's care for them in the wilderness by providing manna and water.

Gatherings for worship on Sunday—whether we call it “the first day of the week,” “the eighth day,” or “the Lord's day”—should remind Christians of our formative stories too. Which stories are those? We will share together in our scripture reading Luke's collection of them.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close this time of prayer.

Scripture Reading

Ask four members to read Luke 24:1-12, 13-35, 36-49, and 50-53 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

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

Reflection

The reflection begins by discussing the significance of calling Sunday “the eighth day.” This phrase is not in the Bible, but occurs in the following passage from *The Epistle of Barnabas*, a Christian teaching document probably written in Alexandria, Egypt about A.D. 130:

[God says] I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when He had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens. (*Barnabas* 15:8b-9 [Roberts-Donaldson translation])

Sunday is usually called “the first day of the week” in the New Testament, according to the Jewish way of marking time in which Saturday is the seventh day of the week and the day for sabbath rest. Revelation uses the phrase “the Lord’s Day,” which became common among Christians (1:10).

The significance of Sunday gatherings for the first Christians is evident in Luke 24:1-53. Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples as they were gathered together, interpreted Scripture to them, broke bread for them, rehearsed the good news, and commissioned them to proclamation and ministry of the gospel. After discussing the accounts in Luke 24, members may want to reflect on the brief passages that describe the first disciples’ Sunday activities (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:7-12; and 1 Corinthians 16:2). Recall that these activities occurred on a “work day” for those early Christians.

The story of how Christians came to see Sunday as a day of rest in fulfillment of the sabbath law is very long and complex. The lesson highlights three ways that Christians through the fourth century related sabbath to Sunday worship: (1) an early practice of adding Sunday worship to the keeping of Jewish sabbath on Saturday, (2) a practice of other Christians to worship on Sunday but not observe the Jewish sabbath, and (3) a later practice of combining sabbath rest with Christian worship on Sunday. The latter practice became widespread only after Sunday was declared a day for rest from commerce in the Roman Empire.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention praying, reading and teaching of scripture, sharing fellowship meals and the Lord’s Supper (or Communion), witnessing, reflecting upon the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, and preparing for proclamation and ministry. From other passages we learn that the early church added praising God, singing songs, giving alms, and preaching.
2. Christians remembered and imitated the post-resurrection appearances of their Lord, which occurred on “the first day.” After the Roman Emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity, decreed in A.D. 321 that “the day of the Sun” would be a day of rest from commerce, Christians gradually combined with their Sunday worship practice the observance of sabbath rest.
3. Some worshiped on Sunday and observed the sabbath on Saturday. Others worshiped on Sunday, but did not observe the Jewish sabbath. Later, many Christians celebrated sabbath rest on Sunday. In answering the second question, members might consider two cases: (1) societies in which some other weekday is an official religious holiday (such as Muslim societies in which Friday is a day of worship), and (2) situations in which an individual must work on Sunday.
4. Christians celebrate and proclaim the resurrection of their Lord, who is now free to join and lead their gatherings. They proclaim that God, through Jesus’ life and resurrection, has begun a new creation. Sunday is the appropriate day for worship, since Jesus rose from the dead on “the first day.” So, by worshipping on Sunday they proclaim that they are followers of Jesus Christ.

Departing Hymn

“This Day at Thy Creating Word” is on pp. 46-47 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.

Lord of the Sabbath

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	John 9:1-41
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss John 9:1-41
Question 1 or 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 5	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand Jesus' claim to be Lord of the sabbath.
2. To interpret sabbath rest as a call to participate in God's work in the world.
3. To see how sabbath controversy stories were presented in manuscript illuminations and Christian art.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sabbath (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the tune GERMANY for "Lord of the Sabbath, Hear Us Pray" in your hymnbook (it is often paired with "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life") or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org. The alternate hymn tune, MARYTON, is commonly paired with "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee."

Begin with a Story

"Working with a public charity, Wayne Muller regularly moves between the spacious offices of wealthy donors, the crowded rooms of social service agencies, and the simple homes of poor families. 'Remarkably, within this mosaic,' he notes 'there is a universal refrain: *I am so busy.*' For despite their good hearts and equally good intentions, most people do not find their work light, pleasant, or healing" (*Sabbath*, p. 26).

We do need encouragement to rest from work on the sabbath. But do strict regulations point to the central meaning of sabbath rest?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close this time of prayer by reading responsively the prayer of confession in the lesson. The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Luke 6:1-5 and 6:6-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The reflection focuses on two sabbath controversy events (*italicized* in the list below): the disciples plucking grain and Jesus healing the man with a withered hand. These are the two events that are recorded in the three synoptic gospels. The gospels of Luke and John have other sabbath controversy stories, as this complete listing shows:

- 📖 *Disciples plucking grain* (Matthew 12:1-8) (Mark 2:23-28) (Luke 6:1-5)
- 📖 *Jesus healing the man with a withered hand* (Matthew 12:9-14) (Mark 3:1-6) (Luke 6:6-11)
- 📖 *Jesus healing the crippled woman* (Luke 13:10-17)
- 📖 *Jesus healing the man with Dropsy* (Luke 14:1-6)
- 📖 *Jesus healing the lame man at the pool* (John 5:1-18)
- 📖 *Jesus' interpretation of the sabbath controversies* (John 7:19-24)
- 📖 *Jesus healing the man born blind* (John 9:1-41)

For focus and clarity, you may want to limit the group discussion to the first two events in Luke. (The reflection focuses on these events. The study questions allow members to research other stories in Luke and John. If you decide to expand this study to two sessions, you could study the complex story in John 9:1-41 in a second session.)

What is the point in these sabbath controversies? Jesus' own remarks are our best guide for interpreting these events.

First, some religious leaders pettily enforce their sabbath rules. Some "scribes and Pharisees" wanted to catch Jesus breaking the rules, but he responds that legitimate sabbath rest allows the doing of good and saving of life (Luke 6:9). In another controversy in Luke 13:15-16, Jesus accuses the synagogue leader of hypocrisy in applying the sabbath rules, for the leader is prepared to 'work' to save a domesticated animal's life, but objects when Jesus frees a crippled woman from the bondage of Satan.

Second, Jesus teaches that the heart of sabbath keeping is becoming aware of and joining the work of God. This is implicit in Luke (doing good, saving lives, freeing people from Satan's bondage, and curing illness is God's work), but this theme is more explicit in John's gospel, when Jesus says, "My Father is working, and I also am working" (5:17) and "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (9:4).

Study Questions

1. Compare Jesus' statements in Luke 6:9, 13:15-16, and 14:5. The first and second mention God's purposes, but the third does not. The second and third accuse the religious leaders of pettiness and hypocrisy in applying the sabbath rules. Jesus wants his disciples to discern God's purposes in the sabbath and to avoid pettiness and hypocrisy.
2. The interpretation in *Sabbath*, p. 37 can guide the group's discussion. Note how the disciples' stance imitates their Lord's in the act of healing the lame man. Murillo's painting both encourages the members of his order, The Brotherhood of Charity, and explains their work to others.
3. An explicit comparison of spiritual blindness with the man's physical blindness from birth is in John 9:35-41, but this comparison is implicit in the obstinate repetition of investigations (first the man, then his family, and finally the man again) in 9:13-34. The Pharisees initially are divided in their judgment (9:16). Jesus is "the light of the world" (9:5), but *some* Pharisees remain blinded at the end of the story (9:40-41).
4. The artist visually joins two episodes (Jesus putting mud in the man's blind eyes and the man washing his eyes in the pool of Siloam) by employing an interesting device: the man is doubled in the middle of the image. It is as though he merely turns his body from one episode into another. As a result, the crowd who watches the man wash also appears to be present at the miracle. Perhaps the artist is capturing the meaning of "Siloam," which means "Sent," for the man is 'sent' as a witness to what Jesus has done for him. Or the artist is depicting the man's testimony (9:11), which combines the two episodes.
5. One interpretation of these sabbath controversies is that Jesus is breaking sabbath in order to achieve something more important. Another interpretation is that Jesus is revealing the heart of sabbath keeping, and teaching that our sabbath practices should be pointers toward that central meaning—namely, becoming aware of and joining the work of God. Members should ask which interpretation is best, given that Jesus is "lord of the sabbath."

Departing Hymn

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

Changing Sunday Practices

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To learn how the *Massah/Meribah* story became a spiritual mirror for evaluating sabbath observance.
2. To understand how Sunday activities have changed in our culture recently.
3. To begin to discern whether each change reflects our self-centeredness, or is a creative, faithful response to God's invitation to sabbath rest.
4. To reflect on how our congregations can help their members to observe sabbath faithfully.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Sabbath (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. (If you plan to discuss question 3 together, please note that Table 1: "Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday" appears as an appendix inside the back cover of *Sabbath*.)

Begin with a Story

You may want to share a good personal memory about sabbath observance, or relate the following story from my experience: "I have fond memories of this parsonage routine on Sunday afternoons when I was growing up in the 1960's. Mom never cooked lunch; she warmed up a pot roast that she had prepared on Saturday evening. Meanwhile upstairs in the guest bedroom, Dad changed out of his preaching paraphernalia—Sunday suit and suspenders, dress shirt, and the still-fresh red rose bud from his lapel. He would give me the rose bud and ask my response to his sermon! Sometimes I had not understood it, and other times I disagreed. Those were wonderful debates of scripture, theology, and sermon illustrations—scented by Mom's pot roast, like incense wafting up from the kitchen. Our faith was to be discussed and enjoyed. The negative rules of no cooking and no work opened positive moments for talking and appreciating one another's presence."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close with a prayer asking that God will guide members' sabbath keeping and will help members to encourage one another in faithful Sabbath observance.

Responsive Reading

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

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Hebrews 3:16-4:11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The story of *Massah/Meribah* is the background of both the responsive reading (adapted from Psalm 95)

and the scripture reading from Hebrews 3:16-4:11. The Bible's commentary on earlier biblical events is always important, but in this instance it may become complex and difficult to follow. Clarify this material by emphasizing these points:

- Exodus 17:1-7 is the original story. (Though sabbath observance is not directly mentioned here, it is prominent in the immediately preceding and similar story in Exodus 16 about God's provision of manna.)
- Numbers 20:1-13 is slightly different in saying God denied their entrance to the Promised Land as punishment for the people's (and Moses'?) lack of trust.
- Psalm 95, since it is a community call to worship, places the story (including God's denial of the Promised Land) into a sabbath worship context. Obedience to God now is expressed in joyful sabbath observance, and disobedience is exemplified by refusing to hear God's call to true worship. The promise of land is replaced by the promise of God's sharing [sabbath] rest.
- Hebrews 3:16-4:11 reflects on the original story, but also on the Psalmist's sabbath interpretation of it. Hebrews interprets sabbath rest as eternal life with God, which is already being realized in the lives of believers.

The main goal is to provide members a biblical perspective for evaluating the changes in Sunday activities in our society, as well as the past or anticipated changes in their own sabbath observance. The Massah/Meribah story, as interpreted in Psalms and Hebrews, becomes a spiritual mirror that causes us to ask: "Do our sabbath activities creatively welcome God's presence through worship and rest, or do they reflect our faithlessness and lack of trust in God?"

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to draw from their own experiences. If they have lived in Christian communities in other parts of the world, they may have very different stories to share. Make sure that members have a copy of Figure 1, "Is Sunday Still Different." Jack Marcum summarizes some similarities and differences in contemporary American society (Sabbath, pp. 58-59).
2. Members may make individual lists or a common list of Sunday activities. They may start by looking at Figure 2, "Keeping the Lord's Day," Sabbath, p. 60, to get ideas for their own list. Be sure to highlight both differences and similarities to the activities and percentages in Figure 2.
3. This question may appeal more to older members, but it should be especially illuminating when used in an intergenerational study group. (Table 1: "Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday" is printed as an appendix in Sabbath and on the following page of this lesson planner. You may want to make extra copies to share with members.)
4. If members agree that "small segments of time throughout the week" would be helpful, encourage them to brainstorm on how their group or congregation can support such activities. They might mention worship, study, or prayer meetings on weeknights; alternate worship services on Saturday evening; study and worship activities that families can enjoy on vacation times; sharing worship with shut-in members of the congregation; and so on. On the other hand, do members worry that this suggestion will fragment and dilute sabbath observance?
5. Encourage members to discuss both issues: that an entire day (if possible) should be devoted to sabbath rest, and that sabbath observance should be communal. Does your congregation support group worship, study, and celebratory rest on any time other than Sunday? Would some members of the congregation need these opportunities?

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.

**Table 1. Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday
(referenced in "Changing Sunday Practices" on p. 61)**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Year of Birth</i>		<i>difference</i>
		<i>Born before 1930</i>	<i>Born after 1960</i>	
Sunday morning worship	every week	62%	51%	-11
	most weeks	22%	38%	16
	some weeks	14%	10%	-4
	never	2%	1%	-1
Sunday evening worship	every week	23%	5%	-18
	most weeks	13%	8%	-5
	some weeks	41%	28%	-13
	never	23%	59%	36
Children's activities at church	every week	43%	28%	-15
	most weeks	23%	37%	14
	some weeks	28%	30%	2
	never	6%	5%	-1
Family devotions	every week	9%	2%	-7
	most weeks	12%	6%	-6
	some weeks	49%	39%	-10
	never	31%	53%	22
Visiting shut-ins	every week	4%	0%	-4
	most weeks	5%	2%	-3
	some weeks	74%	50%	-24
	never	17%	48%	31
Fun activities as a family	every week	22%	16%	-6
	most weeks	33%	51%	18
	some weeks	42%	33%	-9
	never	3%	0%	-3
Special meal	every week	48%	33%	-15
	most weeks	37%	34%	-3
	some weeks	13%	28%	15
	never	2%	5%	3
Visiting family or friends	every week	14%	15%	1
	most weeks	29%	36%	7
	some weeks	53%	48%	-5
	never	4%	1%	-3
Lawn mowing and other yard work	every week	1%	6%	5
	most weeks	4%	24%	20
	some weeks	46%	56%	10
	never	49%	14%	-35
Attending sporting events	every week	0%	1%	1
	most weeks	4%	8%	4
	some weeks	44%	68%	24
	never	52%	23%	-29
Shopping	every week	0%	3%	3
	most weeks	1%	5%	4
	some weeks	22%	77%	55
	never	77%	15%	-62

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.