

Theology of Rest and Sabbath

- Can I mow the grass on Sunday?
- Can my family participate with a sports team that plays on Sundays?
- What if I have to work on Sundays?
- Is the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday?

These questions can create guilt and anxiety for some Christians, especially those who grew up in a strict religious context or those who simply want to honor and obey God with their lives.

“The ‘Sabbath’ is one of the 10 Commandments, after all,” says your well-meaning grandmother or friend.

“Yeah, but didn’t Jesus come to fulfill the Old Testament? Aren’t the Sabbath rules only for Jews or people long ago?” says a younger Christian.

The Sabbath is a valuable theme to study because it intersects with so many other topics in the Bible and theology. Plus, the Sabbath is directly connected to the Good News of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and return. If we only think of the Sabbath as a set of do’s and don’ts, we will completely miss the point. As theologian Will Willimon wrote, “The clash...is not over the rules but over who rules.”

**This short study paper is designed to provide a framework for you to study, think, and pray about what God’s Word says about this important topic of Sabbath. The paper won’t answer all questions, but hopefully it will point you in some helpful directions. Maybe discuss it with your small group or family. Use it to guide your personal study. Let me know what you learn and where you agree or disagree. More than anything, I pray your study of Sabbath will lead you to worship and trust Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath and the One who provides true Sabbath Rest.

Important Related Topics

When approaching difficult theological questions, it can be helpful to think through what other topics or themes are related to the question you’re studying. When we ask -- “how should Christians keep the Sabbath?” -- here are some related topics that we need to keep in mind:

- *Relationship between the Law and the Gospel* - We believe Jesus fulfilled, but did not abolish, the Law. This creates a “ton!” of questions about how Christians should understand and relate to the Old Testament Law. The topic often boils down to which laws in the Old Testament that Christians should follow. Consider these verses:

- *Romans 7:6 - But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.*
 - *Galatians 5:13-14 - You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*
 - *Colossians 2:16 - Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ...*
 - *Hebrews 10:1 - For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*
- *The Body of Christ (Creating a Triage or Levels of Doctrines)* - We need to appreciate and learn from those in the Body of Christ (those who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior) who disagree with us about how to keep the Sabbath. One part of Christian maturity is determining which doctrines are necessary for salvation and which doctrines are the boundaries for a church/denomination but shouldn't cause us to view others as enemies or outsiders.
 - *Stewardship / Tithing* - I often find that a person's approach to the question of tithing is closely related to how they approach the Sabbath. Both tithing and Sabbath are matters of stewardship (use of money and time), and both are impacted by how we view the relationship between the Old and New Testament.
 - *Wisdom and "Extra-biblical" Instructions* - We need to acknowledge how few verses in the Bible provide specific instructions for the Sabbath. Most of the detailed instructions that we think about for the Sabbath come from Jewish writings outside the Scriptures or from church traditions passed down through the years. We can learn from these instructions, but most importantly, we want to grow in spiritual wisdom so we'll know how to apply biblical teaching to real-life situations.

Pathway to Wisdom

The pattern below can be used when approaching almost any theme in the Bible or any controversial topic in life and church. We want to watch out for lies and counter these lies with truth. We want to be shaped by God's Word, Spirit, and People. You might disagree with how I've labeled or organized the information, but I hope the overall plan will be helpful when thinking about the Sabbath or other similar questions.

1. God's Word (counters the Lies of the Devil)

a. *Passages* - What Bible passages speak directly, or indirectly, to the topic?

- Genesis 1-2
- Exodus 20
- Leviticus 16, 23
- Deuteronomy 5
- Joshua 21
- Mark 2:23-28
- John 5:17-18
- Romans 14:5-7
- 1 Corinthians 16:2
- Colossians 2:16-17
- Hebrews 4:9-11
- Revelation 1:10

b. *Principles/Patterns* - What general principles in a section of Scripture or theological patterns throughout the Bible apply to this topic?

- *Rest is good* - rest and sleep are part of God's design
- *Order and Seasons are good* - God created the world with order, not chaos; life is lived in seasons and life has a certain rhythm to it
- *Work is good* - work is not part of the Fall or an effect of Sin; work is good when done for God's glory, not to exploit others or to find personal identity and salvation
- *Jesus' Example* - Jesus upheld God's design but also pushed back against certain religious rules and practices (Mark 7 is a good example).

c. *Common Grace* - Psalm 19 reminds us that God speaks through His Word/Law (special revelation), but also through His World (what we might call general revelation or common grace). What can we learn from the world around us to approach hard topics?

- Research has shown the importance of Sleep and Rest/Recovery for overall health
- Progress has been made in recent years (especially over the past century or so) to provide rest and breaks for workers. We want to seek justice when workers are mistreated or when corporations exploit their employees.
- Nature (land, animals, resources) needs rest as well. Too many farming practices have hurt the land and animals, instead of stewarding these resources as a gift from God.
- Rest and rhythm are built-in parts of God's creation. Improvements in technology can blind us to this part of God's design. We weren't made to always be "on".

God's Spirit (counters the Lies of the Flesh)

b. Look Up - Worship - Prayer and Praise

- Prayer - Have I spent time in prayer (individually and with others) about this action/decision? Am I listening to God?
- Praise - Can I give glory and thanks to God for this action/decision?

Sabbath keeping should definitely include times of Prayer and Praise. Both prayer and praise require us to slow down. Many people struggle with prayer and praise because it can feel like we're not "doing" anything. And in some way, that's the point. Prayer is certainly "work" and "battle" but it's an admission that our help comes from the Lord. Stopping daily and weekly for prayer and praise is powerful. Sabbath helps us look UP.

c. Look In - Discipleship/Formation - Encourage and Equip

- Spirit versus Flesh (Galatians 5:19-26) - What kind of person am I becoming as a result of engaging in this action/behavior? How is this forming/shaping me?
- How will this action/decision impact my relationships?

Sabbath keeping has the ability to grow spiritual fruit in our lives. Working constantly, striving to achieve, and living a chaotic life are all actions that negatively affect both ourselves and others. The Sabbath should allow us to reconnect with family and friends, and also force us to move toward an emotionally healthy spirituality (to use Pete Scazzero's phrase) and move away from a production-oriented or consumeristic Christianity.

d. Look Out - Missions - Give and Go

- How does this topic/decision impact my ability to proclaim and display Jesus to my neighbors and to the nations?
- Does this topic/decision potentially hinder me from being able to "give and go"?

Sabbath is a profoundly counter-cultural act. Stopping to rest, worship, celebrate, and reflect cuts against many values in our world. Sabbath keeping sets us against the exploitative markets and corporations that tend to rule our lives. Sabbath is a time to give, serve, and seek justice. Instead of causing others simply to feel guilty, Sabbath keeping should cause others to ask about the hope and peace we have, which opens a door to share about the Good News of Jesus who provides rest for our souls.

2. God's People (counters the Lies of the World)

- a. *Historically* - Has the Church historically faced this issue (or one similar to it)?
What can we learn from history?

The history of Sabbath keeping is a fascinating (and somewhat debated) study. The practice of Sabbath has morphed based on the political situation, the influence of church leaders, and the force of the culture.

For the first several hundred years of the Church, many (most?) Christians would've worked as servants or in basic jobs that probably meant working 7 days per week. The idea of having a "day off" would not have been possible, but they still gathered for worship and communion. The early Church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, had to navigate the relationship between the 7th day (Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath) and the 1st day (Sunday, sometimes called the 8th day, the day of Jesus' Resurrection). We can see this push-and-pull happening throughout the early centuries.

With Constantine in 312AD, Sunday was declared a day of rest and righteousness. In 789AD, Charlemagne disallowed all ordinary labor on Sundays. Not until the 12th century do we see Sunday called the Christian Sabbath. So, the "transition" of Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday was not immediate or obvious. Christians varied about whether Sabbath should be associated with either of these days, or in some way transcends these days.

During the Reformation (16th century; Martin Luther, John Calvin, etc), views on the Sabbath continued to ebb and flow. With the rise of the Puritans in the 17th century and beyond, a greater emphasis was placed on Sabbath (usually Sunday) observance, especially abstaining from work and worldly entertainment. This discussion becomes extremely interesting and important when we consider the Puritans' influence on early America and the later development of laws and traditions in America. A key question that arose was whether the government should recognize a certain day from one religious tradition and to what degree the government should make laws regulating actions on this day.

- b. *Globally* - Is the Church facing an issue like this somewhere around the world?
What can we learn from believers who are different from us?

Many believers in the world don't have the benefit of weekends off or even a day off. We can learn from these believers about what it means to rest and to prioritize gathering with the church even when your surrounding culture is not supportive.

At the same time, other believers around the world live in places that emphasize rest. These believers often can teach us a lot about striving for rest and relationships instead of working constantly for success and advancement.

- c. *Locally* - What are my spiritual leaders and friends telling me about this issue?
How can I learn from the people God has placed around me?

As with most issues, Emmaus is a church full of people who have varied views about keeping the Sabbath. We emphasize gathering with the church for weekly worship. We want these gatherings not to be a “show” that you watch but a time of participation, worship, service, and encouragement (this is why I often talk about the time before and after the gathering being some of the most important worship and ministry that happens on Sunday mornings).

I hope you’ll learn from your small group/Sunday School class about how other people celebrate and honor the Sabbath. What have people tried? What convictions or practices do people have on this day? How can we learn from and encourage one another?

We live in a world where people crave certainty or black-and-white details about questions like the Sabbath, so this discussion can be frustrating. However, we shouldn’t miss how God’s Word and God’s People are able to help us grow in spiritual wisdom and faith

Dangers of Neglecting the Sabbath

1. *Losing a sense of worship and transcendence* - When we neglect a time of rest and worship each week, we can quickly come to see life only as a chaotic, hurried set of to-do lists and earthly pursuits. We need times when we slow down, refocus on the Lord, and remember what is eternal and transcendent.
2. *We’re always building habits and always being formed by these habits.* - When someone stops attending church or stops having a regular time for worship and rest each week, they can easily miss how quickly these choices begin to shape their values, goals, and actions. We are always being shaped and formed by our decisions and habits! Weekly sabbath isn’t a legalistic burden; it’s a gift from a loving Father who wants His children to know how to live freely and fully in His world.
3. *We replace Sabbath with “escape.”* - When most people think about the weekend or their day/time off, they think about “escaping” work. In our world, people work until they are exhausted (being driven to succeed and survive), then escape for a time of rest, hoping this rest will be enough to “get them through” the next week. Sabbath is not “escape” because we’re not slaves! In Christ, we’re not slaves to work or to the fear of death. It’s true that we need time to get away and escape from people and responsibilities (Jesus did this regularly in his ministry; vacations and prayer retreats are good!), but the Sabbath isn’t an escape. It’s a weekly opportunity to worship, celebrate, and connect with others so our work can flow from a place of rest and purpose.

Dangers of Legalistic Rest and Sabbath

1. *Losing Sight of the Lord and Savior and the Purpose of the Sabbath* - Without realizing it, our attempts to keep the Sabbath holy can cause us to lose sight of Christ and His Gospel. "The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27)
2. *Difficulty of Being Consistent with Interpretation and Application* - We often fail to appreciate how hard it is to be consistent with our interpretations and applications of Scripture.

If someone is going to be vigilant about details of Sabbath keeping, they need to:

- a. Recognize how few actual details are given about the Sabbath in the Old Testament and especially the New Testament. Which instructions will we follow? Why follow certain rules or laws, and not others?
 - b. Determine if they're going to focus only on the Weekly Sabbath, or on all of the Sabbatical and Jubilee Laws. (And, if we're only going to emphasize the weekly sabbath, why neglect these other days and festivals?)
 - c. Consider how to handle the verses and issues involved when navigating the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. Even if someone takes a strict view of the Sabbath, they need to approach these questions with humility.
 - d. Recognize that Sabbath was communal for the ancient Israelites – most modern questions about the Sabbath ("Can I mow the yard?") are more individualistic and miss the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath.
3. *Divisive toward the Body of Christ* - Strong views about the Sabbath can lead to an unnecessarily divisive approach to the Body of Christ. We can't look down on others or separate ourselves from people just because they have a different view on this topic (Romans 14:5).
 4. *Adding Requirements for Salvation* - At its worst, legalistic approaches to Sabbath can cause confusion about salvation. Salvation is found through faith in the Lord of the Sabbath who provides true and eternal rest; salvation does not come through keeping rules and regulations related to a day of the week.

Goals for the Sabbath

1. Remember / Celebrate
2. Gather / Worship
3. Rest / Reflect
4. Holiness / Doing Good for Others
5. Rebellion / Countercultural Living

A Framework for Rest and Sabbath

UP - Receive the Sabbath

- Dependence on God - deep sense of worship and faith
- Freedom in Christ - we are set free from sin and death (Leviticus 16; Hebrews 4). Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, and He alone provides rest. (Matthew 11:28-29)

IN - Experience the Sabbath

- Learn from Others (Humility; Wisdom)
- Stop Intentionally and Set Limits
- Daily AND Weekly/Regular Rest
- Remember, Gather, Celebrate
- Refocus on God's Mission and Work

OUT - Share the Sabbath

- Become a Source of Peace and Order for others
- Display Jesus as you show a different way to live in this chaotic world
- Let them see Christ's hope in your life (1 Peter 3:15)
 - *In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,*
- Bless others with your actions and words (Numbers 6:24-26)
 - *The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

How to Approach the Common Questions

- Study Scriptures for yourself and alongside your Church, Leaders, and Friends
- Spend time in Prayer
- Assess Your Motives
- Ask: How am I being formed by this decision?
 - How is my decision impacting my view of the Church?
 - How does this decision reveal my views about money, work, and identity?

Attempting to Answer Some Common Questions

- *Can I mow the grass on Sunday?*
 - Is mowing the grass causing me to neglect gathering with the Church for worship, neglect my family, or neglect serving others? In other words, am I using "mow the grass" as an excuse or an escape?
 - Am I mowing the grass because I'm addicted to a need to do something, to be productive, to stay busy? Is mowing the grass preventing me from the need to simply stop, rest, and reflect?

- If you enjoy mowing the grass – if you’re not neglecting more important matters – if mowing allows you to reflect and set your mind on Christ – then mow. Just don’t let it interfere with the core purposes of rest, worship, and delight.
 - If mowing or doing other chores on Sunday goes against your convictions and your reading of Scripture, then don’t mow.
 - Remember - sitting around “doing nothing” in a spirit of anxiety or apathy is not honorable on the Sabbath, so be careful about judging others who are “working”.
- *Can we join a weekend sports team?*
 - Are we willing, from the very beginning, to set limits? (“one or two weeks” can quickly become months, then seasons, then years)
 - Have we explored other options that would not require us to continually miss a day of rest and worship?
 - When hindered from gathering with the church for worship because of a game schedule, are we finding another time to get our family around God’s people for Scripture, prayer, and encouragement?
 - How do we see this decision impacting our kids? Do we see their priorities, interest in the Gospel, and attitudes changing? Kids pick up on priorities. How we speak about gathering with the church for worship will impact (to a large degree) how they think about church.
- *What if I have to work on Sunday?*
 - Remember - Christians worked on Sunday for most of the first 300 years of the Church, and many still have to do this around the world because of their cultural or economic situation.
 - When hindered from gathering with the church for worship because of work, am I finding another time to be around God’s people for Scripture, prayer, and encouragement?
 - How is the job impacting my attitude and view of the Church? Am I becoming hardened to spiritual things, or is my heart still soft toward God and others?
 - If I can’t be off on Sunday, is there another time that I can intentionally stop, reflect, celebrate God, delight in His creation, and connect with other believers?
- *Is the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday?*
 - Technically, the Sabbath – established for the Jewish people – is Saturday. As a day of rest based on Creation, it came on the 7th day of the week. Some Christians continue to emphasize special observance of this day.
 - With the death and resurrection of Jesus, the focus seems to have shifted. The Sabbath was fulfilled in Christ. His Resurrection brought a New Creation (an 8th Day), which meant rest for our souls and hope for eternal rest in the unshakable world to come. Sunday became this day of celebration, worship, and hope.

What are various views on the Sabbath? Spectrum of Groups/Perspectives

We acknowledge that everyone doesn't have the same approach to theological themes or how to live out the biblical commandments. Specifics about observance of the Sabbath shouldn't divide us from brothers and sisters in Christ, but we want to be discerning about how different views of the Sabbath might reveal deeper, underlying theological differences that are quite important.

I've tried to lay out a spectrum of perspectives on the Sabbath. I couldn't fit them left-to-right on this document, so they're listed in an order that (if we could put them on a horizontal line) would run left-to-right. The furthest view on each side (left and right) should cause great concerns theologically. In fact, these extreme views would, in almost every case, fall outside the bounds of Christian teaching and practice. The primary goal, however, wouldn't be to correct the person's actions, but to redirect their attention to Jesus and what He accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection.

To summarize the spectrum, towards the "left" are views that give less attention to the Sabbath or spiritualize/symbolize the Sabbath, and towards the "right" are views that have a very specific (often legalistic) approach to the Sabbath.

1. Abolished Sabbath - Do what You Want, when You Want

- Often draws too strong of a distinction between the Old Testament and New Testament (even implying the Old is "bad" and the New is "good")
- Focused on freedom from legalism - this view often has the feel of "Jesus is my friend", but misses that Jesus is also Savior and Lord
- Can lead to downplaying the importance of Gathered Worship

2. Spiritual or Symbolic Sabbath / Weekly Worship

- Like #1, this viewpoint doesn't emphasize particular rules for the Sabbath or emphasize one day of the week above another (in other words, weekly worship could just as easily happen on Saturday, as on Sunday)
- However, this viewpoint still emphasizes gathering for worship and often encourages some type of rest

3. Fulfilled Sabbath / Rule of Life

- Jesus has fulfilled the Sabbath, but he didn't abolish the commandment (Matthew 5:17-20)
- This viewpoint often provides more directions and rules for practicing the Sabbath, but allows for this "Sabbath" to be on a day other than Sunday.
- Worship is part of the Sabbath practice, but this viewpoint often emphasizes "delight" and "justice" along with gathering for worship.

4. *Lord's Day / Christian Sabbath*

- The biggest transition from #3 to #4 is that this viewpoint often emphasizes the day of the week (Sunday), church worship, and ceasing from certain activities (both work and certain forms of recreation).
- This viewpoint doesn't view Sabbath-keeping as a requirement for salvation, and certainly would believe that Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath. However, this viewpoint stresses the first day of the week as a form of Sabbath for the people of God.

5. *Messianic Jews / Messianic Churches / Saturday Church*

- #5 is usually similar to #4 in terms of how to approach the Sabbath, but this viewpoint emphasizes Saturday as the proper day for the Sabbath.
- Those who hold to this view will often observe many of the Old Testament festivals and laws (even some Old Testament laws usually understood as cultural or only related to the Jewish people).
- Gentiles (non-Jews) who follow this approach are often attempting to reconnect with their theological heritage as part of God's chosen people.
- People in this category don't see Sabbath as necessary for salvation. Instead, Sabbath is more a matter of sanctification and faithfulness. Plus, people in this category are rarely divisive about their approach (though, like anyone else, they probably think their approach is best!).

6. *Seventh Day Adventists*

- Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) place a strong emphasis on Saturday worship. Unlike group #5, they have some distinct, fringe doctrines built on very unconventional interpretations of Scripture. Unlike group #7, though, SDA holds to an orthodox view of the Trinity and Jesus's deity and resurrection.
- Within SDA, many are open to fellowship and dialogue with Sunday worshippers. SDA also has a very strict form that goes so far as requiring Saturday worship for salvation (based on what they view as authoritative teachings from their prophet named Ellen White).
- To learn more about SDA, see:
 - www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-seventh-day-adventism/

7. *Jehovah's Witnesses (Kingdom Hall; Watchtower)*

- Like Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses emphasize Saturday worship and strict Sabbath keeping. However, Jehovah's Witnesses also have several doctrines related to Christ's person and work that fall outside the bounds of Christian theology and biblical teaching.
- To learn more, see:
 - www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-jehovahs-witnesses/
 - www.watchman.org/fast-facts/fast-facts-on-jehovahs-witnesses/

A Few Other Resources on the Sabbath

- *Bible Project video* - <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/sabbath-video/>
- *Practicing the Way Website / Podcast Series* - www.practicingtheway.org/sabbath
- *The Allender Center (Books, Podcasts, Articles; similar to Practicing the Way)* - <https://theallendercenter.org/store/products/sabbath/>
- *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views, edited by Christopher John Donato* - part of a series of point-counterpoint books on various theological topics; all viewpoints would fall within Christian orthodoxy, and the scholars present their viewpoint and interact with one another in love and respect
- *The Sabbath in Crisis, by Dale Ratzlaff* (deals extensively with whether or not the “Sabbath” must be on Saturday)