



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

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

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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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

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.