

LORD OF THE SABBATH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 12:1–14;
Mark 2:23–28; Luke
6:1–11

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.”
(Matt. 12:6)

Daily Bible Readings

M	July 7	Deut. 5:1–7, 12–15	Honor the Sabbath Day
T	July 8	Heb. 4:1–10	Strive to Enter God’s Rest
W	July 9	John 7:14–24	Who Defines the Sabbath?
Th	July 10	Ps. 92	Give Thanks and Sing God’s Praises
F	July 11	Luke 13:10–17	Jesus Sets Us Free from Satan
Sa	July 12	1 Sam. 21:1–6	Holy Bread for the Journey

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

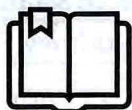
While the gospels record the earliest events depicted in the New Testament, they were not the first New Testament books to be written. That distinction goes to Paul’s letters. When the gospels began to appear, around the year 70 CE, they arrived as a new type of literature. Neither conventional biographies nor journalistic accounts of Jesus’ life, they were instead extended sermons in story form. They intended to relate the narratives of Jesus’ life for the purpose of confronting us, the readers, with a decision. At the end of each of the gospels, an implied question presents itself: having learned about Jesus, what are you going to do about him?

In Matthew’s Gospel, the implied final question might be stated like this: “Will you reject Jesus as so many within the pages of the gospel did, or will you accept his offer of new life and salvation from the oppressive powers of this world?” Part of the drama of Matthew’s telling of the Jesus story is a move from an earlier openness to and acceptance of Jesus’ work and teachings to a later rejection of them. In the first part of this gospel, we find twice as many descriptions of individuals or groups expressing amazement and approval of what Jesus

was doing as we do challenges or rejections of him. In the second part, these numbers are more than reversed; there are at least four stories that mention rejection for every one that shows approval.

The line separating the two sections runs through the beginning of chapter 12. This gives special weight to today's two stories of Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees over the Sabbath. The Sabbath was meant, not simply as a time of rest, but as a season of worship and focus on God. How absolute should this focus be? Do acts of mercy and service violate the Sabbath, or fulfill it?

God of the Sabbath, grant us the faith to lay aside anxiety about tomorrow and rest in you, even as we seek to love those among us in whom we see your face. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Matthew 12:1–8

12:1 At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” ³He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴How he entered the house of God, and they ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests? ⁵Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SABBATH

The disciples' eating from the grain fields and Jesus healing the man with a withered hand each involve criticism from the Pharisees for actions performed on the Sabbath. As we think about the meaning of these passages, it is important to remember the role of Sabbath observance in the life of Israel, especially its worship. The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy was among the most important in the Torah. In addition to honor-

ing the seventh day of creation, observing the Sabbath made a powerful statement about God as creator and sustainer of human life. Setting aside one's labor in an agrarian economy might mean that the family would go hungry. Sabbath rest was therefore a visible and consequential act of faith that God would provide. Likewise, it signaled one's gratitude for that provision, and worship of the One who gave it.

In Jesus' day, an argument took place among the rabbis about the relationship of the Sabbath to acts of mercy. One group argued that Sabbath rest should be seen as absolute, that even activities like healing constituted work. The other group countered, not so much that exceptions should be made, but that acts of mercy were a fulfillment of the Sabbath. Because human wholeness was the purpose of Sabbath rest, and hunger and disease compromised that wholeness, taking steps to alleviate such suffering was in keeping with the meaning of the Sabbath. A century later, the dispute had largely been solved, with most teachers of the Torah agreeing that acts of mercy were fully compatible with honoring the Sabbath.

It's important to note that Jesus joined the "acts of mercy are okay on the Sabbath" side of the argument, but he did not invent it. Far too much Christian preaching tries to portray Judaism during Jesus' day as insistent on a rigid observance of the Sabbath, and that Jesus was unique in proposing a different way to look at things. Even worse, it implies that Jesus believed that keeping the Sabbath was of secondary importance at best. In addition to demonstrating a subtle anti-Jewish bias, this approach fails to appreciate the importance that Jesus assigned to the Sabbath. When he says that "the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath," it is not to imply that he can declare Sabbath observance optional, but to add his own authority to the insistence that the Sabbath is a central part of our worship of God.



When you read or hear Jesus' words in these stories, do they make the Sabbath seem more or less important? Why?

SABBATH AND OUR JEWISH HERITAGE

There have been times when Christian interpretations of Jesus' ministry diminish the importance of his Jewish background and beliefs. Anti-Jewish bias is a longstanding problem in Christian biblical interpretation and theology. It traces back to the earliest days of the church, when the first generation of

Jewish followers of Jesus were joined and soon outnumbered by their Gentile counterparts. What followed was a protracted family squabble, with Gentile Christians failing to understand why their Jewish friends and neighbors refused to follow the one whom the Christians believed to be the Messiah of Israel. Jewish folks wondered why Jesus-following Christians were trying to coopt their religion. We see the beginnings of this underlying squabble in the New Testament. Biblical scholars believe, for example, that the Gospel of John arose from a Christian community whose Jewish Christian members had fallen out with their Jewish families and friends. The resultant hard feelings influenced the way that John's Gospel presents the story of Jesus. We know that the opposition to Jesus arose primarily from the priestly families and certain teachers of the Torah, both of whom saw Jesus as a threat (albeit for different reasons). Yet, when the Gospel of John refers to this opposition, it ascribes it to "the Jews," as though the whole Jewish people, and not simply some of their leaders, were complicit in the plot to arrest and execute Jesus (see, for example, John 19:12).

This kind of anti-Jewish lens through which to see the story of Jesus has consistently manifested itself in Christian preaching and teaching. It shows up often in the way Christians regard the practice of Sabbath. Earlier generations of Christians thought that legalistic rules and laws were the appropriate way to honor the Sabbath. When my wife and I lived in Texas as college students, we were taken aback when we needed to buy a mop one Sunday but found that the store was prohibited by law from selling us one. As such, "blue" laws have fallen out of favor; many Christians have adopted a dismissive attitude toward the Sabbath, assuming that as "lord of the Sabbath" Jesus has freed us from any sort of observance of it. Yet the human need for rest from the busyness of life, and to be freed from distraction as we seek to worship God, has only become more pervasive. To honor the Sabbath is to honor our need for fellowship with God and with one another.



Why is it hard to find time for Sabbath in our lives?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

It is simply impossible to separate what the Bible says about worship from the observance of Sabbath. Keeping Sabbath is arguably the most distinctive aspect of biblical religion. If this is

so, then why are we so bad at it? Part of the problem, no doubt, is that we don't want to get caught in the kind of legalism toward the Sabbath that earlier generations of Christians created. Yet, it is also likely that we have simply allowed busyness to so consume our lives that intentional periods of rest and renewal seem out of our grasp. Rather than surrender the idea of Sabbath to our workaholic and trivialized culture, perhaps we can think of ways to work Sabbath rest into our weekly lives.

The first practice seems obvious, but needs to be said nonetheless: we keep Sabbath by worshiping God. Seen through a worldly lens, Christian worship is an extravagant waste of time. It adds nothing to the bottom line, nor does it help others in need. Yet, at what other point during the week will we be as likely to focus our hearts on God for a full hour? And if our hearts are focused on God, perhaps our minds can rest from the anxiety and striving that take up so much of our daily attention.

Second, we can keep Sabbath by going outside. The connection between the Sabbath and creation is explicit in Scripture. On that first Sabbath God rested from the labors of creation. Yet that seventh day was also a coda to the six that preceded it, a final declaration that creation was indeed very good. To take ourselves out of our living space to go hiking or strolling, to tend a garden, or soak up some rays is to renew ourselves in the beauty of God's good creation. For many of us, time spent outdoors deprives us of the push to be "productive," which again is the whole purpose of Sabbath.

Finally, we can connect with others. Think about it: in the ancient world, if you weren't engaged in work, what else were you going to do? Beyond conversing with your family and neighbors, the options were limited. In a society under constant siege by electronic instruments of mass distraction, the temptation to ignore face-to-face connection with our fellow human beings is strong. Perhaps it's time to put the phones down and relearn the old-fashioned art of polite and leisurely conversation. Listening to one friend's funny story or another's memory of a beloved family member can be a powerful way to enter into Sabbath.



What practices of Sabbath do you try to keep regularly?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Matthew 11:1–12:50 is dominated by the people's growing doubts, rejection, and even overt hostility toward Jesus.
2. On regular days, it was legal to pick heads of grain from others' fields (Deut. 23:25; cf. Ruth 2:2); Pharisaic tradition, however, viewed such activity as work, and thus illegal on the Sabbath (cf. Exod. 31:13–14; 35:2). Scripture prohibited preparing food on the Sabbath (Exod. 16:22–30; 35:3), but Jewish tradition prohibited fasting on the Sabbath. Jesus' disciples might thus pick grain if other food was unavailable.
3. One would not find Pharisees in wheat fields on the Sabbath unless they were traveling with Jesus or seeking to evaluate his activity. Teachers were held responsible for their disciples' behavior.
4. During debates about what was permissible on the Sabbath or other holy days, Jewish teachers sometimes appealed to priests' activity in the temple on such days. Jesus says that priests who administered the sacrificial rites in the temple on the Sabbath (e.g., Num. 28:9–10) were at work but were not thought to be sinning.
5. Jesus claims to be greater than the temple; the same argument will be carried further in verses 41–42. Now that something greater than the temple is here (Jesus and his mission), he has the authority to determine what does and does not violate the Sabbath. His dismissal of Pharisaic tradition is in line with Hosea's principle that God is concerned with love before ritual (Matt. 12:7; see also 9:13).