

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF RECREATION

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 31:12–13;
Zechariah 8:5;
Matthew 11:16–19;
Mark 2:18–28;
6:30–32; John 2:1–11

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[Jesus] said to [the Pharisees], “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”
(Mark 2:27–28)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	May 18	John 2:1–11	A Feast of Finest Wine
T	May 19	Gen. 21:1–8	Celebrate God’s Blessings
W	May 20	Zech. 8:1–5	Playing Children Signal God’s Grace
Th	May 21	Col. 2:16–23	All Religious Work and No Play
F	May 22	Matt. 11:7–11, 16–19	A Time for Feasting and Joy
Sa	May 23	Jer. 31:10–14	Rejoice and Be Glad

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

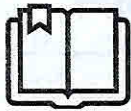
Decades ago, Americans experienced Sunday as a day apart—a day when stores were closed and it was simply not possible to catch up with the errands we’d overlooked during the week. This is still true in some European countries, many of which are now considerably less church-going than the United States.

But today, workers are rewarded financially for putting in overtime, executives are praised for clocking 14-hour days, and parents of young children are free to work at home via cell phones and home computers. Consumers crave the convenience of dropping into stores for furnace filters or fresh fruit, seven days a week. Still, refusal to keep a Sabbath diminishes our sense of balance. Just because it is easy—even encouraged—to keep moving through a day of rest, we shouldn’t just cave in to this temptation. Nonstop activity harms people, and it threatens our health as individuals and as a society.

Members of congregations are no better than most people in keeping the Sabbath. Sports schedules compete aggressively with the worship hour, and sales at stores lure people away from the sacraments. In a Washington Post article,

Henry Brinton told of a family's struggle with Sabbath-keeping. "All select soccer games are on Sunday," lamented one member of Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, reflecting on her daughter's competitive sports league, "and last season, most of the games were at noon on Sunday. On top of this, three or four weekends a year, there is travel for tournaments." Such scheduling creates a real dilemma for people who want to be supportive of both their children and their church. Even today, on Pentecost, the birthday of the church, sporting events are pulling families away from worship.

Spirit of God, may you move among us today, inspiring us to understand the true value of the Sabbath, as taught by your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Mark 2:18–28

2:18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹Jesus said to them, "The wedding attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²Similarly, no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins, but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

²³One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, ²⁶how he entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions?" ²⁷Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

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

FOLLOWING THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

In the second chapter of Mark, Jesus and his disciples are walking through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and the hungry disciples begin to pluck heads of grain. A group of Jewish leaders called the Pharisees criticize them by saying, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (Mark 2:24). Jesus tells them the story of David and his companions breaking the laws of the temple to eat bread when they were hungry, and then Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). He wants them to know that the laws of the Sabbath were created to benefit humans. When they are not beneficial, these laws can be broken. Helping trumps Sabbath-keeping.

“Certainly this passage affirms the claim that meeting human need takes priority over strict observance of religious ritual,” says New Testament professor Mikeal C. Parsons. But it is not a celebration of human freedom over tradition. Instead, the passage is an invitation for us to see Jesus as “lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28), and to submit ourselves completely to the lordship of Christ. Sometimes, this will involve feeding the hungry and healing the sick, in defiance of Sabbath rest. But at other times, says Parsons, it will involve observing the Sabbath “as a day of corporate worship and rest.”¹ The key is to follow Christ, who is lord of the Sabbath.

So, what does Jesus desire for us to do? Scripture suggests that he is supportive of eating and drinking, even in the company of “tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19). His first miracle is turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, so that a celebration could continue (John 2:1–11). He invites his followers to go “to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6:31), but even there he has compassion for a crowd and feeds five thousand people. Jesus wants us to heal and help people in need, just as he healed a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). Eating, drinking, resting, helping, and healing are all ways for us to serve the one who is “lord even of the sabbath.”

1. Mikeal C. Parsons, “Mark 2:23-28,” *Interpretation*, 59, no. 1, January 2005, 57–60.

? On the Sabbath, how do your activities show, or fail to show, your obedience to Christ the Lord?

PRAYING AND PLAYING

In religious terms, the heart of Sabbath-keeping is enthusiastic praying and playing—activities that are designed to be privileges rather than demanding responsibilities. The challenge for us is to break away from work patterns and engage in worship, service, hobbies, recreation, social gatherings, or artistic activities (“Sabbath” is related to the Hebrew verb meaning “to cease, stop, interrupt”). Theologian Marva Dawn, author of *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, recommends that we spend “more time with people in a friendly way, with meals [and] extended conversations, but no talk related to work.”

The Sabbath is the day to break out of life’s usual rhythms, whatever they are. Christians who carve out time for prayer on Sunday mornings and play on Sunday afternoons will be happier, healthier, and more productive, Monday through Saturday. Bill Parent, a Roman Catholic priest and long-distance runner, reports that a recognized training principle is that a runner becomes faster by taking a day off from training each week. “The Sabbath principle,” he concludes, “is built into our physical bodies.” There’s also a saying among artists that you must know when to stop painting—if you don’t, you’ll make one stroke too many and ruin the painting. Overworking can have the same disastrous results as over-painting.

One group that desperately needs time to pray and play each week is our children. They need us to take them to church, have fun with them, and also give them time to be themselves. Days of rest are almost certainly more valuable to them in the long run than additional clubs or classes or teams. Sabbath is a reminder to us that we are more than members of a club or team, more than cogs in a wheel, more than students or workers who are valued for our contributions. On our day of rest, we discover we are valuable simply because we exist. We would all be well served by beginning each week with a Sabbath, a day of peace, and using the serenity of that day as the foundation for our ongoing activities.



What steps can you take to build praying and playing into your Sabbath, and what will be the benefit to you?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

If we ignore the Sabbath, we hurt ourselves as individuals, families, and communities. Wayne Muller, a therapist and minister, is convinced that modern life has become a violent enterprise. We make war on our bodies by pushing them beyond their limits, war on our children by failing to give them our time, and war on our communities by failing to be connected to our neighbors. To end this destruction, we have to establish a healthier balance between work and rest.

A true Sabbath gives us time to refresh and renew ourselves, regain proper perspective, and reconnect with God and with Jesus, the one who is “lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28). There is something positive and creative about allowing ourselves to take a break, as is noted in the Bible when it says that God finishes the work of creation on the seventh day . . . by resting (Gen. 2:2). Resting is an act of creativity; recreation literally means “re-creation.”

For much of this country’s history, blue laws kept businesses closed on Sundays, forcing Americans to focus on churchgoing, rest, and relaxation. Although many people resented these limitations, the laws had the beneficial effect of creating a day of rest. But in the past century, and particularly since the 1960s, states have relaxed these rules. Today, almost every mall, theater, and restaurant operate seven days a week.

Given this history, Sabbath-keeping is a countercultural activity, one requiring commitment and creativity. A day of rest does not have to be a Sunday, but it should be one day out of seven, and qualitatively different from the other six. During his professional baseball career, pitcher Pedro Martinez rested by engaging in gardening; for a professional gardener Sabbath-keeping might involve playing baseball.

The Christian view of rest and recreation has a communal dimension as well, one that supports healthy relationships in our families and communities. Shared meals, games and outings are important parts of Sabbath-keeping. At the end of life, we’ll remember and cherish these times far more than hours toiling in the office. As the saying goes, no one ever says from his or her deathbed, “I wish I had spent more time at the office.” Sabbath-keeping improves our quality of life, every week and over a lifetime.



Where do you find creativity and community in a day of rest?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

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

1. In Jeremiah 31:12–13, God will gather the Babylonian exiles and will continue to love and rescue the people of Israel and Judah. Water and the abundance that it brings in a dry land culminates in the rejoicing of the people, with dancing and joy, and an end to mourning and sadness. Joy comes from God's action in gathering, leading, and caring for the people, especially those most vulnerable, and not from a conquering army gaining their city and kingdom back again through force. This is a new, redeemed people, happy to rest in the grace of God.
2. Zechariah 8:5 tells of a future time in which the streets of Jerusalem will be full of joyful, playing children. Play, recreation, is a sign of the restored city; slaves and exiles have no leisure time. Our playfulness is testimony to the promises of God to redeem and restore.
3. Jesus plays with the traditions related to rules around fasting and Sabbath-keeping in Mark 2:18–28. The fasting conversation echoes Matthew 11:16–19, about “reading the room” and fitting to the occasion. We play wedding feast while the bridegroom is with us. The new wine, Jesus eating with sinners at a party, doesn't fit into the old wineskin of proper repentance, fasting, and mourning.
4. Jesus escapes to a deserted place to be restored in Mark 6:30–32. Compare with the commandment to remember the Sabbath. (The passive verb “be restored” is often used in the Septuagint to describe Sabbath rest.) Rest here is not idleness or laziness. It is more than taking a nap; Jesus's rest is purposeful, with a restorative quality.