

Resting in Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 11:28–30; 12:1, 2; Luke 14:1–6; John 5:9–16; Matt. 12:9–14; Isa. 58:7–13.*

Memory Text: “‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’” (*Matthew 11:28, NIV*).

Christ was a living representative of the law. No violation of its holy precepts was found in His life. Looking upon a nation of witnesses who were seeking occasion to condemn Him, He could say unchallenged, ‘Which of you convicteth Me of sin?’—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 287.

Jesus’ life fully reflected the meaning of God’s law, the Ten Commandments. He was the law of God lived out in humanity, in human flesh. Thus, by studying His life, we learn what keeping the commandments is like and how to keep the commandments in a way that is not a dry and spiritless legalism.

And, of course, among those commandments is the fourth, the seventh-day Sabbath.

This week, as we continue our study of Matthew, we will look at a few of the Sabbath controversies and see in the life of Jesus a manifestation of what it means to keep the Sabbath. For if the law is, indeed, a reflection of the character of God, and if Jesus embodied that law, then, by learning how He kept the fourth commandment and what He taught about it, we can learn more about the character of God and, even more important, how we can reflect that character in our own lives.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 7.

The Light Yoke of Christ

In Matthew 11:20–27, Jesus begins with a powerful rebuke to some of the cities in Galilee that rejected His ministry. What makes the rebuke, and His warning of condemnation, so frightening is that these cities had been given great opportunities to know the truth. He, the Truth (*John 14:6*), had walked in the flesh among them. And if that weren't enough, He had performed many "mighty works" (*Matt. 11:20*) there, as well; and yet, they refused to repent. Indeed, He said that if the "mighty works" (*Matt. 11:23*) He had done in Capernaum had been done in Sodom, then "it would have remained until this day." In other words, they were worse than the Sodomites.

Right after that, in verses 25–27, Jesus starts praying to the Father, thanking Him and then talking about the close relationship between the Two. And He also acknowledges all that had been given Him by the Father, in a sense showing even more clearly why His rejection by those cities was so tragic.

Read Matthew 11:28–30. What is Jesus saying here, and why would it come right here, just after what He had just said?

After denouncing unbelief and reaffirming His closeness with the Father, Jesus offers everyone who is weary, rest in Him. In other words, He is telling the people not to make the mistake these others made by rejecting Him. He has the authority and power to do what He says, and He says that by coming to Him you will find rest for your souls. Given the context, that rest would include peace, assurance of salvation, and hope that those who reject Him don't and can't have.

What else does Jesus mean when He says He will give us rest? Does it mean laziness? Does it mean anything goes? Of course not. Jesus has a very high standard for us; we saw this in His Sermon on the Mount. But a relationship with Jesus is not intended to wear us out. By learning of Him, by emulating Him and His character, we can find a rest from many of the toils and troubles of life. And, as we will see, one expression of that rest is found in keeping the Sabbath.

How do you experience the promise Jesus offers here? What does being "gentle and lowly" have to do with bearing a light burden?

Unrest Over a Rest Day

If, as so much of the Christian world argues, the seventh-day Sabbath was abolished, replaced, superseded, fulfilled (whatever), then why did Jesus spend so much time dealing with how to keep the Sabbath?

Read the following verses. What are the issues under contention in these scenes, and what are *not* the issues? *Matt. 12:1, 2; Luke 14:1–6; Mark 2:23–28; John 5:9–16.*

Knowing that one of the reasons Israel had gone into Babylonian captivity was because the nation had defiled the Sabbath, the Pharisees had wanted to prevent that from happening again. Hence, they created a whole litany of rules and regulations about what was and was not acceptable on the Sabbath, with the idea of protecting its sanctity. What were some of those rules?

If a hen lays an egg on the Sabbath, is it OK to eat it? The majority opinion of the Pharisees was that if the hen was an egg-laying hen, then it was not OK to eat an egg laid on Sabbath because the hen was working. However, if a hen was not an egg-laying hen—if it was just a hen being fattened up to be eaten—then it was OK to eat the egg because this wasn't the hen's primary labor. (There was also a suggestion that you could eat an egg laid on Sabbath by a laying hen as long as you later killed the hen for breaking the Sabbath.)

Is it OK to look at yourself in a mirror on Sabbath? The answer? No, because if you see a gray hair you might be tempted to pluck it, and this would be reaping and, as such, a violation of the Sabbath.

If your house catches fire on Sabbath, is it OK to go salvage your clothes? The answer: you should carry out only one set of clothing. However, if you put on one set of clothing, then you may carry out another set. (By the way, if your home catches fire, it's not OK to ask a Gentile to put out the fire, but if the Gentile is putting out the fire anyway, that's OK.)

Is it OK to spit on Sabbath? The answer: you may spit on a rock, but you may not spit on the ground because that would be making mud or mortar.

We might laugh but, in our own way, how might we avoid doing the same thing, not just in regard to the Sabbath but in regard to every aspect of our faith; that is, losing sight of what is truly important and focusing, instead, on the trivial?

Jesus' Response

This was the climate that Jesus was ministering in: rigid impossibilities required for Sabbath keeping that ruined the original purpose of the Sabbath. It was to be a day to rest from our work; a day to worship God and fellowship with other believers in ways that we cannot do during the workweek; a day when kids knew their parents would be more available to them than they might have otherwise been; a day to especially rejoice in what has been done for us by our Creator and our Redeemer.

Read Matthew 12:3–8 to see how Jesus responds to the heavy yoke of the Pharisees. Also read 1 Samuel 21:1–6. What is Jesus' line of reasoning here?

Jesus was telling them what He would later say in a much stronger manner (*see Matt. 23:23, 24*), and that is for them to focus on what is really important. Jesus recounts the familiar story of the fugitive David taking bread from the tabernacle that was supposed to be eaten by priests only. In that situation, the hunger of David and his companions was more important than was a tabernacle ritual intended for another purpose. In the same way, the hunger of Jesus' followers was more important than Sabbath guidelines (about reaping) intended for another purpose.

Jesus also cites the work of the priests in the temple on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath allowed for the work of ministry. In the same way, the Sabbath allows for the work of Jesus' companions because Jesus and His work were greater than the temple.

Nothing Jesus said here or anywhere else in regard to keeping the Sabbath lessened in any way the divine command that we keep it. He was trying to break them free, not from the Sabbath but from meaningless rules that hid what the Sabbath was supposed to be about, and that is an expression of the rest that we have in Christ as our Creator and our Redeemer.

“In the days of Christ the Sabbath had become so perverted that its observance reflected the character of selfish and arbitrary men rather than the character of the loving heavenly Father.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 284. **Look at your actions and ask yourself what you could do to make sure that they reflect the character of our loving heavenly Father more than they do the character of self and arbitrariness.**

Healing on the Sabbath

It is very interesting to read through the Gospels and to see all the times that the writers recorded the Sabbath incidents between Jesus and the religious leaders. *Why would all four Gospel writers include in some cases numerous accounts of the struggle that Jesus had with the leaders over Sabbath keeping if the Sabbath were about to be abolished?* This point becomes even more salient when we remember that the Gospels were written down many years after the ministry of Jesus. Though scholars are divided over the exact dates, most place them at least 20 to 30 years after the death of Jesus. Thus, by then, if the seventh-day Sabbath had been replaced by Sunday (one common argument), this change is certainly not hinted at in any of the inspired accounts of Jesus' life. Thus, we have powerful evidence that the seventh-day Sabbath was not abolished, changed, or superseded, at least certainly not by any example or command of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. On the contrary, if we focus on Jesus' commands and example, the Gospels show us the continued validity of the seventh-day Sabbath.

Read Matthew 12:9–14. What is the issue here, and why would that be another cause for contention?

“Upon another Sabbath, as Jesus entered a synagogue, He saw there a man who had a withered hand. The Pharisees watched Him, eager to see what He would do. The Saviour well knew that in healing on the Sabbath He would be regarded as a transgressor, but He did not hesitate to break down the wall of traditional requirements that barricaded the Sabbath. . . . It was a maxim among the Jews that a failure to do good, when one had opportunity, was to do evil; to neglect to save life was to kill. Thus Jesus met the rabbis on their own ground.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 286.

Again, as in the previous Sabbath incident, Jesus was seeking to point people to the higher purpose of the law, to the higher purpose of what the life of faith is all about. These men would have been content to leave that man with his pain and suffering rather than violate their own man-made rules regarding the Sabbath, which had gotten so twisted that—though they would have pulled an ox out of a ditch on the Sabbath—they would not relieve a fellow human being's suffering.

How careful we need to be in making sure that our practice of faith does not get in the way of living our faith in the ways that God has called us to.

Keeping the Sabbath

As should be clear from the Gospel records, Jesus didn't abolish the Sabbath. If anything, He restored the Sabbath, freeing it from the cumbersome burdens people had placed on it. Hundreds of years later, Christians were still resting and worshiping on Sabbath. The fifth-century historian Socrates Scholasticus wrote: "Almost all churches throughout The World celebrated the sacred mysteries (the Lord's Supper) on the Sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, refuse to do this." —*Ecclesiastical History*, book 5, p. 289. No question, whatever the reasons all these incidents were recorded in the Gospels, it wasn't to point anyone away from the Sabbath.

Read again Matthew 12:12 and focus on the phrase: "Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (NKJV). What does that mean in the immediate context that Jesus was addressing? And what does that also tell us that Sabbath keeping should include?

Though Jewish law did permit giving medical attention on the Sabbath to a person whose life was in danger, Jesus took it further. Healings, perhaps even healings that could be done on another day, are permitted on the Sabbath. With all this in mind, look at what Jesus said later in Matthew: "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (*Matt. 13:52, NIV*). No question, Jesus was clearly bringing out new treasures, as well.

Read Isaiah 58:7–13. How does what is expressed here help reflect what it means to truly follow the Lord and to live out the principles of the law, including the Sabbath? How do we understand the phrase "repairer of the breach," especially in the context of the three angels' messages?

Further Thought: “With or without religion,” someone said, “you would have good people doing good things, and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.” In the 1600s, French mystic Blaise Pascal famously warned “men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” Though they are somewhat overstated, there is unfortunately some truth to these sentiments. This truth can be seen in the context of the week’s lesson, in regard to the Pharisees and the Sabbath. “When Jesus turned upon the Pharisees with the question whether it was lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill, He confronted them with their own wicked purposes. They were hunting His life with bitter hatred, while He was saving life and bringing happiness to multitudes. Was it better to slay upon the Sabbath, as they were planning to do, than to heal the afflicted, as He had done? Was it more righteous to have murder in the heart upon God’s holy day than love to all men, which finds expression in deeds of mercy?”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 287.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does Jesus mean when He says, “ ‘ “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” ’ ” (Matt. 12:7, NKJV)? As you formulate your answer, consider these texts as well: Matt. 9:10–13, Hos. 6:6, and Isa. 1:11–17.
- 2 Why, given the powerful evidence we have from Scripture, do you think that so many Christians, even many very faithful people who love Jesus, are so adamant in their rejection of the Sabbath? What are things that we could do, besides showing the evidence from the Bible, that perhaps could make these people more open to the Sabbath truth?
- 3 How do you keep the Sabbath? In what ways could you do more to get a deeper and richer experience from keeping the Sabbath?
- 4 Jesus said that “my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” Ask yourself a question: In what ways can I help lessen the burden and loosen the yoke of those around me?

Don't Wait

Note: In this first-person account, William, a young man from Fiji, shares a frightening experience that changed his life.

My dad paid for my brother and me to go to a Christian youth congress. I wasn't interested, but went to please Dad. One day I went home early, planning to return to the congress later.

That evening, something seemed wrong. I felt a lump of fear in my stomach and sensed that something bad was about to happen. On the way to the stadium, I felt light-headed. I began seeing strange things, but once at the congress, I felt better.

On the way home, my heart started beating hard. Suddenly a man appeared. His hair stuck out from his head, and his eyes glowed red. "Friend," he said, "I need money to get . . ." I mumbled that I had no money, then hurried home. I was sure I'd seen a demon.

The next morning, I was terrified that the demon might return. I told my parents, and Dad read a passage from his Bible and prayed for me.

Still, negative thoughts, fear, and guilt paralyzed me. I felt scared all the time. My family formed a circle around me and prayed. I began laughing out loud. I wanted to stop, but couldn't.

I hoped things would return to normal, but they didn't. I knew people were praying for me, but it was only when I started to pray for my own deliverance that I started to feel a change. I had to ask God to save me from this evil. Sometimes all I could say was, "God, help me. Take out the evil inside me, and give me strength to overcome." I knew I couldn't do it myself.

After praying, I began to feel stronger. I started reading my Bible and praying regularly, claiming Psalm 56:13 as my own.

My whole life is different now. I realize that God has been there all the time, but I hadn't taken His presence seriously. Now I'm careful to keep the avenue of my soul closed to evil and open only to God. I love going to Christian youth functions. Others have shared with me that they have gone through similar experiences.

I want young people to know that now is the time to take God seriously. This is no time to play around with God or straddle the line between God and Satan. We must take our stand today. Tomorrow may be too late. Don't wait to get close to God.

WILLIAM ULUILAKEBA was a student at the University of South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, when this was written.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 11:28*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize in Jesus the redemptive rest.

Feel: Experience the redemptive rest of Sabbath.

Do: Celebrate joyfully the Sabbath rest.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Recognize in Jesus the Redemptive Rest.

- Ⓐ What are the causes for restlessness and weariness?
- Ⓑ What kind of rest does Jesus offer? How comprehensive is that rest?
- Ⓒ What differentiates between the yoke one bears and the one Jesus offers?

II. Feel: Experience the Redemptive Rest in Sabbath.

- Ⓐ How is the rest Jesus offers related to Sabbath? How was the true meaning of the Sabbath that Jesus presented distorted by the religious leaders of His time?
- Ⓑ How was Jesus' offer of rest related to various burdens imposed by human traditions on Sabbath keeping?
- Ⓒ How did Jesus use Scripture to answer the questions regarding true Sabbath observance? Why is appeal to Scripture our best defense?

III. Do: Celebrate Joyfully the Sabbath Rest.

- Ⓐ How is the Sabbath a sign of redemptive rest?
- Ⓑ How does one experience the joy of redemption and Sabbath? How does this personal experience embrace the community?

▶ **Summary:** Sabbath, observed in its true spirit, is a powerful experience that celebrates our creation, redemption, and eternal rest and relationship in Jesus.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 11:28–30, 12:8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Most religions say, “Do this. Don’t do that.” They define salvation in terms of what one must and must not do. But Jesus says, “ ‘Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ ” (*Matt. 11:28, NKJV*). Salvation from sin and rest from all burdens are found, not in what we do but in the person of Jesus and in Him alone. By virtue of what He has accomplished on the cross, He alone can issue the universal invitation: “ ‘Come to Me, and find rest in Me.’ ”

Just for Teachers: “Cast your burden on the LORD, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved” (*Ps. 55:22, NKJV*). While acknowledging that life has its sorrows and burdens, Scripture provides the assurance that God’s care is sufficient to sustain us and to carry us through every burden. Invite class members to share their favorite Scripture passage that brings them comfort as they face heavy burdens.

Opening Discussion: In Matthew 11:28–30, “Christ is speaking to every human being. Whether they know it or not, all are weary and heavy-laden. All are weighed down with burdens that only Christ can remove. The heaviest burden that we bear is the burden of sin. If we were left to bear this burden, it would crush us. But the Sinless One has taken our place. . . . He invites us to cast all our care upon Him; for He carries us upon His heart.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 328, 329.

Discussion Question: How does Christ’s bearing our sins also relate to His removing our burdens not connected with sin?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: As a child, John would still be asleep when his father would leave home. After long hours of hard and exhaustive labor in the factory, his father would return close to sunset. John’s mother would have a bucket of water ready, heated on a woodstove. He would wash, bathe, and in a short while sit down with the family for worship and then for a meager supper. In the love he found in that warm water, in family togetherness, and in that supper, his father found release from the physical toil of the day. Sweat gave way to rest

in the embrace of sleep. He endured that routine for some thirty years because he loved his family, and he felt each night his burden lightened because he knew his family loved him in return. “Love . . . bears all things” (1 Cor. 13:4–7), wrote Paul, that great scholar of the law and foremost spokesperson of grace. The road to rest begins with the Lord of grace.

Our lesson today is on (1) the rest that only Jesus can give, (2) the perpetual symbol of that rest, and (3) the joy with which we can celebrate that rest.

Bible Commentary

I. The Rest That Only Jesus Can Give (Review Matthew 11:28–30 with the class.)

Matthew 11:28–30 is a summary of what the gospel is all about. Our burdens, the Savior’s invitation, His rest, and the certainty of the whole process from restlessness to an abiding rest are all spelled out.

But first one must come to Jesus. He alone has the antidote for humanity’s greatest burden—the burden of sin. Whether one likes it or not, one must face the fact that apart from Christ there is no remedy for sin. With sin, we are helpless, hopeless, and heavily burdened. The more we try to save ourselves from sin, the deeper the tragedy of restlessness. Sin is not a health problem, an occupational hazard, an environmental delusion, or even a moral failure. Sin is rebellion against God, and only God can provide a solution to that problem. He has provided that solution in Jesus, who said, “Come to Me.” The call is to a personal identification with Jesus—His cross, His grace, His way, and His yoke.

The rest offered by and through Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease and indulgence; instead, it is an exchange of yokes—from the yoke of self-righteousness to the delivering power of Christ’s righteousness; from the enslaving yoke of legalism to the empowering freedom of God’s grace. That deliverance and that empowerment make the yoke of a redeemed life restful in obedience and joyful in service. Above all, Jesus invites us to be His students: “Learn of Me.” One important lesson to learn is that His rest is not a joke; it is a real experience etched in a great symbol at Creation and in Redemption: the Sabbath.

Consider This: The Bible often describes the law as a gift of joy and delight. In Psalm 119, at least eight references proclaim the joy and delight one finds in the law (*Pss. 119:24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174*). Isaiah 58:13 hails the Sabbath as a “delight” and a “day of the LORD.” Jesus speaks of the law as immutable (*Matt. 5:17, 18*). Paul points to the inward man who delights “in the law of God” (*Rom. 7:22*). With all this testimony regarding the law, how does the law become burdensome?

II. The Rest of Sabbath *(Review Genesis 2:1–3 and Isaiah 66:22, 23 with the class.)*

Jesus, who offers rest to those who “labor and are heavy laden,” declares Himself the “Lord . . . of the Sabbath” (*Matt. 11:28; 12:8; Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*)—the gift of rest that had its origin in Creation and will remain part of life in the new heaven and earth (*Gen. 2:1–3; Isa. 66:22, 23*). Sabbath links us with the Creator to celebrate the joy of life and to recognize forever that life and redemption come not as a result of our work but as a gift from God’s grace. The One who made us also made the Sabbath. He rested on it, sanctified it, and commanded us to keep it holy in order that we may ever remember that we are restless until we rest in Him. Sabbath symbolizes that in Jesus we are freed from the bondage and tyranny of sin, and through Him we embrace and abide in the holiness of rest, worship, and fellowship.

Consider This: If Genesis 2:1–3 and Exodus 20:8–11 provide God’s creative act as the reason for Sabbath observance, Deuteronomy 5:15 supplies His redemptive act as another vital reason. Sabbath observance is thus a continual reminder that our lives, our rest from bondage, and our destinies in the new earth are not of our making; they are God’s. The breath of God created us; the blood of Jesus redeemed us. And the rest of the Sabbath invites us to worship the Creator and the Redeemer.

Discussion Question: How, then, should we understand Jesus’ claim that He is the Lord of the Sabbath (*Matt. 12:8*)?

III. The Rest That Restores *(Review Matthew 12:9–14 with the class.)*

Pharisees accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath because He did not rebuke His disciples when they plucked some grain and ate it on the Sabbath (*Matt. 12:2*) and because He healed on the Sabbath (*Matt. 12:9–14, Luke 6:6–11, Mark 3:3–6, John 5:1–16*). Jesus’ answer in each case is consistent with the meaning of Sabbath: its significance lies not in legalistic adherence to the letter but in lifting up the higher principle of saving life, in doing good deeds that glorify God. The Pharisaic obsession was legalism; the concern of Jesus was grace in action. Neither self-centered rigidity nor self-defined license will pass the scrutiny of grace. As Ellen White says, “God could not for a moment stay His hand, or man would faint and die. And man also has a work to perform on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 207.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ To the Pharisees who asked whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Jesus replied that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (*Matt. 12:9–14*). The Pharisees then went out and plotted to kill Jesus. What makes the difference between love that saves and legalism that seeks to kill?
- ❷ What does it mean to say, “love is the fulfillment of the law” (*Rom. 13:10, NKJV*)?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Some suggest that Jesus has set us free from such obligations as Sabbath observance. But by personally observing the Sabbath (*Luke 4:16*), Jesus affirmed powerfully the indispensable nature of Sabbath as an appointment with God. His example acknowledges that the Sabbath is God’s special time for fellowship with His people.

Discussion Questions:

With the above as background, discuss the following:

- ❶ How can a memorial of Creation and Redemption become a legalistic bondage?
- ❷ What is the meaning of Isaiah’s call to consider Sabbath a delight (*Isa. 58:13, 14*)?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson is about a two-part experience in the Christian life. First, coming to Jesus to find the rest of Redemption. Second, celebrating that rest in real time through Sabbath observance. Engage the class in some joy-filled activities such as the following:

Activities:

- ❶ Have your class sing “Burdens Are Lifted at Calvary” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 476) or a similar song or chorus. Let members share how they have found the rest that Jesus offers.

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- ❷ Invite class members to share their first real Sabbath experience and what it meant to them.
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