

The Sabbath



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 1:1–3; Matt. 12:1–5; Luke 4:16–21; John 5:16, 17; Matt. 24:20.*

Memory Text: “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.’” (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*).

Throughout His ministry, religious leaders challenged Christ's Sabbath observance. When criticized, Christ emphasized His authority as Lord of the Sabbath (*Matt. 12:8, Mark 2:28, Luke 6:5*). He also showed what correct observance of the Sabbath should be.

Today we are confronted not only with the challenge of “correct observance” of the Sabbath but also with the popular belief that Sunday, not Sabbath, is the day of rest. Those pushing for Sunday, however, have nothing in their favor in the Gospels. The Sabbath controversies in the Gospels dealt only with how the Sabbath was to be kept, never with when. Jesus' life and teachings leave no doubt that the seventh-day Sabbath would continue as God's day of rest, even after His death and resurrection.

This week we will discuss Christ's relationship to the origin and lordship of the Sabbath. Next, we will study the example and teachings of Jesus regarding the observance of the Sabbath. Finally, we'll look at the Sabbath as seen in His teachings and in the example of His disciples after the Resurrection.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 13.

Christ, the Creator of the Sabbath

What do the following texts indicate about Jesus' role in Creation? Why is this so important, especially when considering the origin of the Sabbath? See *John 1:1–3*; *Col. 1:16*; *Heb. 1:1, 2*.

John begins his Gospel with the famous statement: “In the beginning was the Word. . . . All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made” (*John 1:1–3, NKJV*). Both John and Paul leave no doubt as to the role of Christ in creation. God the Son, Jesus Christ, created all things: “By Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible. . . . All things were created through Him and for Him” (*Col. 1:16, NKJV*). Through Christ, God made the universe, including our solar system, the earth, and everything in it, animate and inanimate.

Christ, who was to be man's Redeemer, was also his Creator. And right there, at the end of Creation week, the Lord gave us a day of rest. “The Sabbath was made for man, it is the Lord's day. It belongs to Christ. . . . Since He made all things, He made the Sabbath. By Him it was set apart as a memorial of the work of creation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 288.

The same God who created humanity with the need to rest also provided the means to rest: a weekly day in which human beings are to set aside weekly toils and troubles and to rest in Him, the Creator. After finishing Creation, He Himself rested on the seventh day, not because of tiredness but in order to bless and sanctify the Sabbath and give us an example to follow. And He also rested on Sabbath when He finished our Redemption on the cross, not because He needed it but in order to (among other things) confirm the perpetual value of the Sabbath. Christ, who invites restless human beings to rest in Him (*Matt. 11:28, 29*), invites us to rest in a special way, once a week, every Sabbath day.

Sabbath keeping ties us to the beginning of earth's creation, to the very foundation of our existence. What better time to dwell upon the important question: What am I doing with the existence that God has given me?

Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath

Read Matthew 12:1, 2. What is going on here? Why would the Pharisees consider this action as “not lawful”?

Deuteronomy 23:25 states: “When you come into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor’s standing grain” (*NKJV*). The problem, therefore, was not the action itself, but the day on which it was done. Rabbinical regulations expressly prohibited many types of work on Sabbath, such as reaping, threshing, and winnowing. In the Pharisees’ opinion, by plucking the ears of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and separating the grain from the husks, the disciples were guilty of doing all of them.

What is the significance of the examples that Jesus used to answer the Pharisees? See *Matt. 12:3–5*.

With the first example (*1 Sam. 21:1–6*), Christ argued that, although in normal circumstances David and his men should not have eaten the bread meant for the priests (*Lev. 24:9*), yet because their lives were in danger, their actions should be considered a permissible violation of a ceremonial rule. The second example Jesus mentioned (*Matt. 12:5*) has to do with the sacrifices and offerings ordained for the Sabbath day in the temple service, which were twice as many as those offered on any other day (*Num. 28:9, 10*). The Jews themselves recognized that the temple service had priority over the Sabbath.

After citing these examples, Jesus made two statements that vindicate His authority to redefine the Pharisees’ burdensome observance of the Sabbath: (1) “ ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath’ ” (*Mark 2:27, NKJV*). Here Jesus reaffirms the Edenic origin of the Sabbath and redefines the incorrect priorities of the Pharisees regarding man and the Sabbath: the Sabbath was created to benefit human beings and continues as a God-given gift at the service of humanity, instead of humanity at the service of the Sabbath. And (2), by saying, “ ‘The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath’ ” (*vs. 28, NKJV*), Christ ratified His status as Creator and Legislator of the Sabbath. Therefore, He alone had the authority to free the Sabbath from these man-made laws.

The spiritual leaders of God’s people charged the Lord of the Sabbath with violating the day that He Himself had created and sanctified. What message should we all take from this about the dangers of spiritual blindness among those who should know better?

The Example of Jesus

What does Luke 4:16 tell us about Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath? Why is this so important for us today? See John 14:15, 1 Pet. 2:21.

The word Luke used in verse 16, *custom*, comes from a Greek word related to habits constant in time and practice. In other words, Jesus regularly attended the synagogue every Sabbath that He could. Moreover, this is so important to Luke that four times in his Gospel he mentions Jesus' attendance at the synagogue on different Sabbaths (Luke 4:16, 4:31, 6:6, 13:10). Also, Luke specifically identifies the Sabbath as the seventh day of the week (Luke 23:54–24:1). The fact that Jesus Christ, during His earthly ministry, observed the seventh-day Sabbath, along with the Jews, testifies that the weekly cycle had not been lost since the giving of the law at Sinai, or even since Creation. His example as an observer of the Sabbath is a model for Christians to follow, in both time and manner of observance.

What did Jesus read on that special occasion in the synagogue? Why is this significant? See Luke 4:16–21.

This wasn't the first time Jesus read and spoke at a synagogue. More than a year had already gone by since He was baptized in the Jordan River. However, this was Jesus' first visit to Nazareth after leaving the carpenter shop, where He spent the first 30 years of His life and where He attended the local synagogue. During His youth, "often in the synagogue on the Sabbath day He was called upon to read the lesson from the prophets, and the hearts of the hearers thrilled as a new light shone out from the familiar words of the sacred text."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 74.

But this time it was different. Jesus selected a particular passage, Isaiah 61:1, 2, a text that explains the Messiah's work on earth and how He will come "to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD" (Luke 4:19, NKJV). That was the Sabbatical, or jubilee, year, a time of rest. Appropriately, Jesus chose the day of rest, the Sabbath, to announce His ministry of redemption, liberation, and healing. Truly, we find rest in Jesus, a rest expressed in a tangible way every Sabbath day.

Miracles on the Sabbath

The Gospels mention numerous miraculous healings that Jesus carried out on the Sabbath day. It is interesting to note that, in most cases, the healing came by Jesus' initiative, as if He purposely wanted to heal on the Sabbath, though He could have done it any other day. Jesus was trying to make a point: healing on the Sabbath was not unlawful. On the contrary, it was more lawful than what many of the Pharisees and religious leaders were accustomed to doing on the Sabbath.

What arguments are given in each of these texts to justify Jesus' healings on the Sabbath? *Matt. 12:10–12; Luke 13:15, 16; John 5:16, 17.*

Although it is true that we must set aside our own interests during the Sabbath (*Exod. 20:9, Isa. 58:13*), it should never be considered as a period of useless idleness. In His controversies with the Pharisees, Christ clearly pointed out that “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (*Matt. 12:12, NKJV*). According to rabbinic traditions, a sick person could be treated on the Sabbath if the situation was life-threatening. Likewise, if a sheep or an ox fell into a pit, it was permissible to pull the animal out on the Sabbath day to save its life. Wasn't a person's life more valuable than an animal's? Unfortunately, Christ's critics showed more compassion toward their own animals than to suffering human beings. They approved watering an animal, but not restoring a person.

Jesus also stated: “ ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working’ ” (*John 5:17, NKJV*), referring to God's work in favor of His creatures. Even on the Sabbath day He continues giving life and sustaining the universe (*Heb. 1:2, 3*).

Jesus taught that we should not be legalistic when observing the Sabbath. To keep it means to “rest” from our own works (*Heb. 4:10*) and, even more important, to stop trying to work our way to salvation—which is impossible anyway. Satan wants to convince us to keep the Sabbath selfishly. If he cannot move us against the Sabbath, he will try to push us to the other extreme: legalism.

Though it's easy to be legalistic about the Sabbath, others can be very lax in keeping it. How do we strike the right balance? Also, why must we be careful in our response to how others keep the Sabbath (don't forget how the Pharisees viewed Christ's Sabbath keeping)?

The Sabbath After the Resurrection

Many Christians keep Sunday instead of the Sabbath, offering a host of reasons, the main one being the resurrection of Christ. Besides the fact that nothing in the New Testament, including the passages on the Resurrection, teaches that Sunday is to replace Sabbath, the New Testament shows that Christ intended for His Sabbath to be kept even after His resurrection.

What does Matthew 24:20 have to say about the Sabbath in the years following the resurrection of Jesus?

Christ's words in Matthew 24:20 show us that in A.D. 70, about forty years after His death, the Sabbath was to be considered as sacred as it had always been. The commotion, excitement, fear, and travel necessary to flee from Jerusalem would be inappropriate on the Sabbath day.

What other New Testament evidence do we find that shows the seventh-day Sabbath remained sacred after the resurrection of Christ? See *Acts 13:14, 42; 14:1; 17:1, 2; 18:4*.

For the disciples, going to the synagogue was what church attendance should be for us today: one of the best ways to observe the Sabbath. This is especially noticeable with the apostle Paul, who was present at the synagogue services on Sabbath when no Christian church was there. It was his custom, following Jesus' example (*Acts 17:2*). Although he was the apostle to the Gentiles and the champion of justification by faith, he usually went to the synagogue on Sabbath, not only to preach to the Jews but also to keep holy the Sabbath day.

One Sabbath, after the synagogue service was finished, the Gentiles begged Paul to preach the gospel to them. The apostle could have invited them to hear him the next day, Sunday, but he waited one week. " 'The next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God' " (*Acts 13:44, NKJV*). These texts provide powerful evidence that the early church knew nothing of the first day of the week as a replacement for the seventh.

OK, so we know we're right about the right Sabbath day. That's important, of course. How, though, can our Sabbath keeping make us Christians who are more compassionate, loving, and caring?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Sabbath,” pp. 281–289, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“ ‘Wherefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath.’ These words are full of instruction and comfort. . . . It [the Sabbath] points to Him as both the Creator and the Sanctifier. It declares that He who created all things in heaven and in earth, and by whom all things hold together, is the head of the church, and that by His power we are reconciled to God. For, speaking of Israel, He said, ‘I gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them,’—make them holy. Ezek. 20:12. Then the Sabbath is a sign of Christ’s power to make us holy. And it is given to all whom Christ makes holy. As a sign of His sanctifying power, the Sabbath is given to all who through Christ become a part of the Israel of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 288, 289.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 We are Christ’s, both by Creation and Redemption. How does the Sabbath especially remind us of these crucial truths?
- 2 What is the problem with a legalistic obedience of the fourth commandment? On the other hand, why is a watered-down observance of the Sabbath not the solution to legalism? What is the key element that makes keeping the Sabbath a real blessing?
- 3 Why should the Sabbath, and the opportunity to rest on the Sabbath day, be a special reminder to us of the crucial truth that we are not saved by our works but by the merits of Christ in our behalf?
- 4 What are ways that we can learn to have a deeper and richer experience with the Lord on the Sabbath?
- 5 What lessons about how to keep the Sabbath can we learn from Christ’s example of Sabbath healings? How do these healings help us understand better what the Sabbath should be about?
- 6 We are told to keep the Sabbath “holy.” Think through some of your Sabbath activities. How holy are they?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Mark 2:27, 28*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Compare the legalistic approach to Sabbath observance with Christ's example and teaching regarding the Sabbath.

Feel: Appreciate the Sabbath blessing of rest and fellowship with God offered to all believers.

Do: Keep the Sabbath consecrated to God for spiritual refreshment, physical rejuvenation, and relational cultivation.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus' Example and Teaching Regarding the Sabbath Fostered Spiritual Growth and Development.

A What impact does Christ's creation of the Sabbath have on our understanding of its importance?

B What impact does Christ's example of Sabbath keeping have on our practice of the same?

C How do Christ's Sabbath miracles contribute to our understanding of His Lordship over the Sabbath?

II. Feel: God Offers Believers Rest and Fellowship Through Sabbath Observance.

A How does the blessing of Sabbath rest and fellowship affect our attitude toward the other days of the week?

B How can Sabbath preparation and observance provide healing for the emotional bumps and bruises we may experience throughout the week?

C How does meticulous policing of Sabbath observance make people feel alienated from Sabbath keeping? Give reasons for your answer.

III. Do: Believers Will Delight in Keeping the Sabbath Holy for Spiritual Purposes and Physical Rejuvenation.

A How does Sabbath keeping safeguard believers against the temptation to believe that they are solely responsible for supporting themselves?

B How can parents turn a rule-oriented approach to a more positive attitude toward Sabbath keeping and foster a positive anticipation toward Sabbath among their children?

► **Summary:** Christ made the Sabbath for spiritual and physical rejuvenation.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Mark 2:27, 28*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *The blessings of Sabbath observance are available to every believer who trusts Christ for salvation.*

Just for Teachers: *The third and fourth chapters of Hebrews retrace the Israelites' wilderness rebellion. Jehovah promised rest connected with the Promised Land, but Israel refused to enter. Hardened hearts, filled with deceitfulness, caused their disobedience. Nevertheless, God's mercifulness opens another opportunity for spiritual repose and deliverance: His Sabbath.*

The seventh-day Sabbath is emblematic of that spiritual deliverance from the bondage of sin that is still offered to every person who craves spiritual freedom. That spiritual deliverance releases believers from futile efforts to achieve goodness. That which for generations had provided physical rejuvenation and spiritual refreshment was freshly invested with soteriological (salvation-related) significance. Challenging economic times sometimes encourage laborers to work incessantly as though missing opportunities would bring starvation. Sabbath observance recognizes that six-sevenths with God's blessing provides greater abundance than seven-sevenths without it. Emotional turmoil sometimes encourages Christians to attempt meritorious works as though God could be appeased by those feeble efforts. Sabbath observance recognizes that complete spiritual rest provides greater spiritual security than lifetimes of guilt-driven works ever could. This week's objective is helping our members experience both physical and spiritual rest.

Opening Activity: Allow several members to briefly describe their most memorable vacations or spiritual retreats. Discuss the physical benefits of getting away. Discuss how routines change during vacations and retreats as compared with work schedules. Describe the vacationer's emotional and physical status before and after vacation. Compare the guilt-ridden individual's emotional and physical status before and after salvation.

Consider This: Discuss how authentic Sabbath observance enhances emotional and physical health.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Debating Sabbath observance was, perhaps, the most widespread Pharisaical pastime during Jesus' earthly sojourn. Pharisaical dictums specified the length of travel, maximum transportable load weights, together with dozens upon dozens of stringent guidelines for acceptable Sabbath observance. Was Christ honored by these meticulous regulations? Scripture indicates Jesus was, instead, saddened. Sadly, history repeats itself among contemporary Sabbath keepers. Debating appropriate Sabbath observance is interminable. Has something, however, been overlooked? Perhaps the Sabbath's purpose and significance should take center stage. Then Spirit-guided internal ordering will transform external preparations so that the Sabbath might become the joyful experience God intended. Keep discussion focused upon the Sabbath's essential meaning rather than diverting valuable time to punctilious hairsplitting.

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus: Messiah, Creator, Exemplar, Sovereign Lord (*Review Colossians 1:16, Luke 4:16–21, and Matthew 12:1–8 with your class.*)

John's apocalyptic dictum regarding Scripture (neither adding nor subtracting) provides intelligent guidance for Sabbath keeping. Anciently, the Pharisees overloaded Sabbath keeping with human requirements. Sometimes contemporary believers do likewise; but another tendency dilutes Sabbath observance, stripping away all sanctity, effectively reducing Sabbath to a holiday or even everyday status. Either position misses God's intended blessing. Careless believers become enmeshed with worldly concerns and never experience rest. Hypervigilant believers become enmeshed with policing others' Sabbath practices and cannot find time for rest. Only those who conscientiously pursue Spirit-led, Scripture-informed Sabbath observance receive its blessing.

Jesus' example of Sabbath keeping is paramount. How did Jesus observe Sabbath? (1) Jesus gathered with other believers for Scripture study and worship (*Luke 4:16–21*). (2) He experienced nature, hiking through the Galilean countryside (*Matt. 12:1–8*). (3) He relieved human suffering (*vss. 9–14; Luke 13:15, 16; and John 5:16, 17*). (4) He rested from work (*Gen. 2:1–3*). (5) Because of Christ's strict scriptural adherence, we may also infer that Jesus refrained from merchandising (*Matt. 5:17–19 with Neh. 13:15–22*). (6) We may also infer from Jesus' disciples' conduct that He observed the preparation day (*Luke 23, 24; compare with Exodus 16*). Based upon Jesus' example, Christians should conscientiously craft Sabbath practice for today.

Consider This: What might happen if certain Christians attempted to be everyone's Sabbath conscience? Why should believers be silent whenever Scripture has not explicitly spoken? How can Christians be lovingly confrontational when Sabbath breaking is clearly taking place?

II. Sabbath Wonderment (*Review Matthew 12:10–12; 24:20; and Luke 23, 24 with your class.*)

Christ's miraculous Sabbath healings invested the day with special wonderment. Physical rejuvenation for everyone expanded to physical restoration for the infirmed.

The best, however, Christ saved for last. One dreary preparation day, Christ hung on Calvary's cross. Agony and despair engulfed humanity. Death's only worthy opponent was apparently vanquished. While Sabbath approached, the Roman detachment hastily removed Christ's bruised and broken corpse from the cross. Quietly Jesus rested according to His commandments as He customarily had. Joseph's tomb remained sealed. Restored and rejuvenated by God's Spirit after that divinely scheduled rest, Christ burst forth from Joseph's tomb, prepared for another work—the heavenly High Priesthood. Christians may share Christ's miraculous Sabbath wonderment, weekly bursting forth to fresh challenges, spiritually restored through Sabbath rest.

Consider This: How can believers experience weekly Sabbath wonderment?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Sincere discussions regarding what is appropriate Sabbath keeping can often become mired in legalities; that is, what is lawful versus unlawful to do on the Sabbath. Applying Christ's principles from another matter will prove helpful in restoring such discussions to a more meaningful sphere. Regarding demon possession, Jesus warned that expelling demons would ultimately prove useless unless the resulting emptiness was filled. Subsequently, the emptiness was filled with greater numbers of demons.

Complaining about Sabbath punctiliousness is insufficient. That emptiness must receive positive expressions of Sabbath keeping, thus preventing Sabbath abandonment. How can the blessings symbolized by Sabbath observance find positive expression? How can the characteristics of God embodied in Sabbath keeping (Creator, Redeemer, and Daily Sustainer) become embedded in meaningful contemporary practices? How can the historical practice of Sabbath observance and the blessings it offers be better appreciated?

Activity: Have class members construct a list of divine characteristics embedded in scriptural teachings regarding the Sabbath. Brainstorm ideas for activities or rituals that will highlight these beliefs. Design some for children, young adolescents, teenagers, young adults, and mature adults. Be mindful of these objectives: (1) these activities must be *enjoyable*; (2) these activities are better when they are *multisensory*; (3) these activities may be more serviceable if they are *cross-cultural and gender inclusive*; (4) consider *time appropriateness* (for example, tranquil meditations suitable for sunsets may play awkwardly for lunchtimes); and most important, (5) they must be *spiritually strengthening*.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Judaism historically reflected two strains of thought. One strain (Jewish or *halakha*) concentrated on protecting Sabbath observance. The thousand Jewish patriots who allowed themselves to be slaughtered by Syrian soldiers during the Maccabean period, rather than violating the Sabbath through warfare, and the Jewish defenders who abandoned their fortifications during Pompey's Jerusalem siege because Sabbath had arrived, are noteworthy examples, although somewhat extreme. Another example of this strain is the tractate entitled *Shabbath*, included in the Mishnah, which outlined 39 different categories of forbidden Sabbath activities. The communal sect called Essenes held that allowing animals or humans to drown was preferable to exerting efforts to save them because this violated their Sabbath regulations. Positively, the Romans conscripted fewer Jewish soldiers because their commanders feared that Jews might abandon ranks if pressed to fight on Sabbath.

The Jewish *haggadah* (scriptural commentary), however, reveals another train of thought. This second train emphasized Sabbath beauty. One such tradition held that humankind's first musical composition was a Sabbath hymn that Adam sang on the seventh day upon learning of God's forgiveness. Some commentators claimed that this composition had been preserved as the ninety-first psalm. Another tradition held that the Israelites had negotiated the Red Sea crossing on Sabbath, providing another soteriological connection with Sabbath observance. Tabernacle protocol also spotlighted Sabbath worship, increasing the sacrifices compared with everyday rituals (*Num. 28:9, 10*). Sabbath was special, worth celebrating.

Activity: Create poetry or songs based upon *historical* Sabbath keeping. Some starting points are suggested above. Other historical possibilities include researching traditions of Ethiopian and Celtic Sabbath keeping.