

The Sabbath in the New Testament: The Work of Worship and the Grace of Sunday

Please remember that the participant guide includes more information and topics than can be covered in a normal 45-minute Sunday School class. Please review the lesson and pick which sections you would like your class to focus on.

Welcome & Prayer

- Allow class to gather and have fellowship
- By 9:55am, convene everyone for general announcements and attendance
- Remind everyone about the First in Focus series and how it works. For instance:
 - “First in Focus is a special six-week Sunday School series designed to generate church-wide conversations around important topics in Christian faith and theology. In weeks 1 and 4, all participants gather for a lecture in Fifield Hall. In weeks 2-3 and 5-6, participants meet in their individual Sunday School classes to explore the topic further with the help of a curriculum.”
 - “This is week 3 and in it we’ll be exploring how the notion of the Sabbath is developed and discussed in the New Testament.”
- Begin in prayer

Introduction

- Handout this week’s curriculum
- Read, or have someone else in the class read, the **Introduction** and the **Lesson at a Glance** sections printed in the curriculum:
 - The Introduction offers a brief overview of the role and importance of Sabbath in the NT.
 - The Lesson at a Glance offers an outline of the lesson; you might signal to the class which sections you will be focusing on; participants can explore the sections not covered in Sunday School on their own and as a follow up to the lesson.
- This lesson includes 4 parts: the first three have to do with Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath and the final section looks at how the book of Hebrews uses the idea of “entering God’s rest.”
- Pose the “conversation starter” question to the class.
 - You could have an open discussion or you could ask participants to turn to someone beside them and discuss this question in pairs before reporting back to the group.

I. Sabbath and Healing Controversies

- Background: There are 8 occasions in the Gospels where we find Jesus debating with the Pharisees over a Sabbath-related issue. In 6 of these occasions, the issue has to do with whether it is permissible for Jesus to heal on this day.
- Read Matthew 12:9-14 and Luke 13:10-16 along with the accompanying question.
 - The Pharisees believed that healing was a type of work and thus should not be done on the Sabbath. However, it is important to note that not all Jews around the 1st c. CE would have agreed. In fact, in later Jewish tradition, healing is not listed among the 39 categories of activities prohibited on the Sabbath.
 - Nevertheless, the Pharisees took this very seriously. In John 5:18, we learn that Pharisees were seeking all the more to kill Jesus because they believed him to be breaking the Sabbath by, among other things, healing people. In Matthew 12:14, the dispute over Sabbath keeping prompts the Pharisees to look for an opportunity to conspire against Jesus and destroy him.
- This section makes two points about the Sabbath and healing controversies, and for each point, a question is posed.
 - Point 1 (on Luke 13): Sabbath keeping entails freeing others from what burdens them
 - It is often thought that in these stories Jesus is trying to abolish the Sabbath or is attempting to show that healing isn't really a type of work. But this is not exactly the case.
 - Note that Jesus never directly addresses the issue of whether healing is a type of work.
 - Instead, Jesus points out the inconsistencies in the Pharisees own understanding and application of the Sabbath principle.
 - Recall from the 10 Commandments, that Sabbath keeping always was supposed to entail freeing others from the burden of work (see Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14).
 - Jesus likely calls the Pharisees hypocrites because he notes that they themselves already do work on the Sabbath by untying ox or donkey and leading them to water.
 - If the Pharisees can do this type of "work" on the Sabbath, then why criticize Jesus for doing the "work" of healing on the Sabbath? This point is more clear in the original Greek, where the verb used for "untie" in v. 15 and "set free" in v. 16 are the same (*luō*).
 - Because of this, Jesus is not suggesting that the Pharisees should take the Sabbath less seriously; rather, he is saying that the Pharisees aren't going far enough in terms of applying the Sabbath principle to how they treat their neighbors.
 - Point 2 (on Matthew 12): It is consistent with OT law to do good for others on the Sabbath

- In Israelite law, provisions were included that allowed one to do “work” on the Sabbath in cases in which an animal was in immediate danger. You may want to read Exod 23:5 and Deut 22:4 as examples.
- Jesus’ response to the Pharisee is known as a “lesser to the greater” argument: If it is lawful to do good to animals on the Sabbath how much more so should it be lawful to do good to one’s fellow human?
- Here again, Jesus is not breaking the Sabbath; rather, he is extending and even intensifying the Sabbath by applying its core principle to his care for others.

II. The Grace of Sabbath

- Background: Luke 4:16-22 follows immediately after the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. In this scene, Jesus returns to Nazareth where he was raised to inaugurate his official ministry. Word was beginning to spread about his teaching and his miracles. It was Jesus’ custom to teach in synagogues on the Sabbath and his message was still generally well received.
- Read Luke 4:16-22 along with the accompanying questions.
 - In this text, Jesus is faithful to the Israelite practice of Sabbath insofar as he goes to synagogue worship and studies Scripture (that is, the OT).
 - At this time, what we know as the OT was not available in a single, bound volume; rather, individual books from the OT were recorded on their own scrolls and kept at synagogues. Here Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll.
 - While Luke 4:17 seems to imply that Jesus read from only one passage, what he quotes is actually a combination of two separate passages: Isa 58:6 and 61:1-2.
 - Combining two or more passages in this fashion was common practice in the ancient Jewish interpretation. The verses are brought together on the basis of a “catchword” – i.e., a word shared in common between both passages.
 - In this case, that catchword is the Greek term *a-phe-sis*, which is translated as “go free” in Isa 58:6 and “release” in Isa 61:1.
- This section makes two points about the grace of Sabbath, and for each point, questions are posed.
 - Point 1: there is a close connection between the Sabbath principle of “release” and the notion of forgiveness
 - Both of the texts from Isaiah speak of God’s mission to release people from that which binds, burdens, or oppresses them.
 - At the most basic level, the Sabbath is intended to release us from (at least some) of these burdens
 - When the Sabbath principle is transformed into a 1-in-7 year pattern, the notion of release is applied to one’s slaves and debtors (see week 2 of this study)
 - One of the main words for “forgiveness” in the NT is *aphesis* – the very same word used in these OT passages to describe the core principle of the Sabbath
 - What we see Jesus doing here is describing the whole purpose of his ministry – to bring forgiveness and reconciliation to the world – in terms of the Sabbath.

- In this sense, Jesus is a fulfillment of the Sabbath, meaning that he is its ultimate *telos* or goal.
- Point 2: we, like the crowd, should receive the idea of the Sabbath as a gift of “grace”
 - The crowd’s response stands in contrast to how many Christians see the Sabbath – that is, we tend to see it as a duty to fulfill rather than a delight we get to experience as a sign of God’s grace.
 - You could ask one or both of the questions in this sub-section.

III. The Work of Worship

- Background: The Pharisees understood plucking grain to be a form of harvesting, which is one of the 39 categories of activities that Jewish tradition prohibited on the Sabbath.
 - However, it is important to note that there was not a consensus on this issue in ancient Judaism. In the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish interpretations from around 200 CE, plucking grain is not prohibited. It is possible that the Pharisees were extreme sabbatarians.
 - As with the healing controversies addressed in section I, note that Jesus does not defend the disciples’ behavior by addressing whether plucking grain is prohibited or not.
- Read Mark 2:23-28 and Matt 12:1-8, along with the accompanying question
 - These are two parallel accounts of the same story; a third parallel account can be found in Luke 6:1-5.
 - Verses 5-7 in the Matthew version are not found in Mark’s or Luke’s version. We’ll return to this in a moment.
 - “son of man” is a common designation for Jesus in the Gospels (it appears 69x); this term has its origins in the OT (see Dan 7:13).
 - The word translated “lord” in Mark 2:28 and Matt 12:8 is *kurios* – one of the common titles applied to Jesus in the NT. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, *kurios* was a title applied to Caesar.
 - It is often assumed that when Jesus claims to be “lord of the Sabbath” it means that he has the authority to do away with the Sabbath. But as we’ll see, what Jesus actually does is to challenge how the Pharisees interpret the Sabbath.
- This section makes two points about the Sabbath and healing controversies, and for each point, a question is posed.
 - Point 1: There is flexibility in the letter of the law that allows space for attending to human need
 - 1 Sam 21:1-6 is not about Sabbath keeping. However, in this story we find that the priest does something out of the strict letter of the law (i.e., he gave the consecrated bread to a non-priest) out of his compassion for David’s precarious situation (Saul was seeking to kill him).

- Jesus uses this story – with which the Pharisees certainly would have been familiar – to make a similar point regarding regulations concerning what is prohibited on the Sabbath.
- While Sabbath keeping is to be taken seriously, it is not to be done at the expense of human suffering.
- Point 2: Sabbath entails doing the “work” of worship
 - In Matthew’s version of this story, a second biblical precedent is offered as a defense for the disciples’ actions.
 - Jesus reminds the Pharisees that priests ALWAYS do work on the Sabbath in the form of their leadership and service in temple worship. However, they are never held guilty for doing this type of work.
 - One way of understanding Sabbath is not simply as the cessation of work but rather as a shift in work – from the work we do in our jobs to the work of worship.
 - Seeing worship as a form of work can help prompt us to be more active and engaged on Sunday mornings. If we only see Sundays as a time of rest, we might be inclined to approach church in a more passive and less engaged fashion.
 - This perspective also might be helpful to families who regularly experience the really hard work of getting the kids out the door to church on Sunday mornings. If practicing Sabbath was only about rest, then we would encourage families with kids to stay at home!

IV. Entering God’s Rest

- Background: Sabbath is a present reality we are invited to enter on a weekly basis. However, the book of Hebrews also speaks of entering God’s rest as a promise yet to come.
 - In this sense, we might say that there is an eschatological dimension to God’s rest.
 - Our passage in this section is actually the culmination of a longer discourse on God’s rest that begins back in Heb 3:7. You may wish to read Heb 3:7-19 with your group as well.
 - In Heb 3:7-19, the author offers an admonition against weariness in faith, urging readers on to continued faithfulness and endurance.
 - As a cautionary tale, the author cites the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, a story told in the book of Numbers.
 - The author claims that due to their sin and rebellion, this generation of Israelites never entered God’s rest, by which he means the promised land.
- Read Hebrews 4:1-10 along with the accompanying questions.
 - The author returns to this earlier point in chapter and clarifies that there is a promise of rest yet to come, even for those Israelites who did enter the promised land under Joshua.

- This future rest could be salvation in Christ; however, since the author is addressing “the people of God,” it seems that this future rest points beyond salvation and toward God’s future redemption of the world.
- This section makes one point about the connection between the Sabbath and entering God’s rest, and poses 3 discussions for further reflection.
 - Point 1: In keeping Sabbath, we experience a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth
 - The questions included in this section are not so much intended to get participants to dig deeper into Hebrews but rather to process the whole of the study.

For Further Study:

If you are interested in learning more about the topic of "Sabbath in the New Testament," please consult the following two resources. These are **optional** and need not be read in order to facilitate this week's study. However, you may wish to make these resources available to members of your class and/or incorporate insights into the written curriculum.

Resource 1:

Dan Allender, *Sabbath*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009.

In talking about the Sabbath as a day of delight for body and soul, Allender begins to expand our idea of Sabbath keeping beyond just not doing work. Explores the place of delight, feasting, playfulness, and beauty in the principle of Sabbath.

Resource 2:

"Sabbath." Entry in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* offers scholarly but accessible introductory essays on a number of important topics in biblical studies. In a separate file, excerpts from the Sabbath entry in *ABD* are provided.