

The Sabbath in the City: Doing Less in a Culture of More

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 5 and in it we’ll be exploring how practicing Sabbath can serve as an antidote to the epidemic of busyness in our lives and culture.
- 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 busyness of our lives and the pressures we face to in a culture that values production and performance.
 - 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: each part looks at a way in which practicing Sabbath can help us and our families begin to resist the pressure to become over-busy and over-committed.
 - Remember that weeks 5 and 6 of this series shifts attention from the biblical *principle* of Sabbath to the *practice* of Sabbath in our lives today
 - As a result, the nature of the lesson is somewhat different; there is less explicit focus on biblical texts and more space is created for open-ended conversations about the practical application of Sabbath keeping
- 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. Saying No to Good Things

- Background: The story presented in Exodus 18 follows almost immediately after God had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses was their unquestioned leader. He had brought the Israelites through the Red Sea unscathed (Exodus 14-15) and he weathered their various complaints as they wandered through the wilderness. (Exodus 16-17).
- Read Exod 18:13-18 along with the accompanying commentary and questions. Remind folks not to read ahead so as to preserve some of the drama of how the story unfolds.
 - Notes on the text and question
 - To “sit as judge” (v. 13) is an ancient semitic idiom that refers to carrying out the official duties of a judicial figure
 - That the people come to Moses “to inquire of God” (v. 15) implies that Moses functioned as a type of intermediary between the people and God.
 - Jethro seems to have noticed that Moses was over-worked, though he does not call into question whether the type of work Moses was doing was necessary or good
 - Moses seems to justify his amount of work by pointing to the value of his work. We often do this ourselves.
 - It’s not *what* Moses is doing that is “not good” only *how much* he is doing.
 - The Hebrew verb translated as “wear yourself out” (v. 18) can also mean “to be foolish.” In Hebrew, this play on words would have been readily evident: In wearing himself out, Moses was acting *foolish*.
 - Moses’ work, while good, has no borders or limits
 - The story doesn’t reveal how Moses would have reacted to his father-in-law’s critique. So we are left to wonder: What sort of crisis of ego did Moses face? How much of his identity was wrapped up in doing it all? Was he addicted to the pace and frenzy of his power?
- Read Exodus 18:19-23 along with the accompanying commentary and questions.
 - Notes on the text and question:
 - Jethro’s solution is for Moses to train others and delegate some of his authority; interestingly, in Deut 1:9-18, Moses takes credit for coming up with this idea on his own!
 - Notice how Moses still retains his leadership position; but through delegation the people help bear part of the burden.
 - The result is that Moses will be able to “endure” (v. 23)
 - One interpretation of the story is that Jethro is asking Moses to utter what I (Ryan) call a “holy NO!” to some of his work. We often feel bad about saying no to things, but sometimes saying no can be a “holy” thing to do.

- The final questions in this section invite participants to reflect on what it looks like to say “no” to good things

II. Setting Limits for What's Enough

- **Background:** One of the prevailing “stories” that culture tells us is that more is better. We work more in order to earn more money so we can buy bigger houses, which have to be filled with more furniture which costs more money compelling us to work more. And so the cycle continues.
 - This mentality is not only accepted, but it is often valorized.
 - A poignant examples is a 2014 Cadillac ELR (hybrid) commercial.
- Read the excerpt from the transcript of this commercial.
 - If you have access to a projector or computer, the whole commercial can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WKgSCPqY4M>
 - The commercial was widely criticized, both abroad and stateside; it was soon pulled off the air by Cadillac.
 - Ford launched a wonderful parody, which can be found here: <http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/ford-trashes-cadillac-great-parody-poolside-ad-everyone-hated-156597>
 - The main goal of this section is simply to get participants to interact about the worldview expressed in the commercial itself.
 - The implicit message of the commercial is that we should take pride in being “crazy driven” and not taking vacation.
 - But we might ask: If the nice car is the “up-side” of crazy driven-ness, what is the downside? what is the collateral damage of this way of living?
- Our driven-ness to work and produce is often reinforced by Christian theology.
 - One of the by-products of the Reformation was the notion of the “protestant work ethic.” Developed in the 17th c., this perspective suggests that it is a person's duty to achieve success through hard work and thrift as a sign that one is saved.
 - This perspective has deeply informed the values of modern western civilization
 - More recent Christian theologians have challenged this perspective, including Karl Barth
 - In addition to – or as an alternative to – Barth’s quote, you might ask participants to respond to a similar idea by Henri Nouwen:
 - “The story of our salvation stands radically over and against the philosophy of upward mobility. The great paradox which Scripture reveals to us is that real and total freedom is only found through downward mobility. The Word of God came down to us and lived among us as a slave. The divine way is indeed the downward way.”
 - Whether you use Barth’s quote or Nouwen’s, the point is to invite participants to think theologically about the purpose and function of limits in our life.
- Read Isaiah 58:13-14 along with the accompanying question.
 - Note the connection between keeping Sabbath and experiencing delight

- You may ask participants to discuss where they experience delight in their life and how setting limits (whether through Sabbath keeping or in other ways) can help them become more attuned to delight.

III. Slowing Down the Pace of Life

- Background: Faced with ever-increasing duties and demands, we often turn to multitasking and other means of increasing “efficiency” in order to get everything done.
- Read Galatians 5:22-23, along with the accompanying question
 - This list of the “fruits of the Spirit” is well known by Christians. We often point to this list as a set of virtues we should strive to cultivate in our lives.
 - However, we rarely think about how the pace of our lives affects our ability to manifest such characteristics.
 - The point of this question is to demonstrate that these fruits of the spirit – and perhaps ethics more broadly – are often left behind as the speed of our lives increases.
 - You may wish to ask the converse of the question provided in the participant’s guide: That is, which of these fruits of the Spirit would become more noticeable in your life if you slowed down?
 - In this case, you might extend the metaphor implied in this verse by asking participants how they can actively cultivate the soil of their lives in a way that would nurture the growth of this “fruit.”
 - If you wish, you might consider relating the following study done at Princeton Theological Seminary
 - Some students were interviewed about their vocations and then were sent to another building for what would be an important follow up seminar on the same topic.
 - 1/3 were told to hurry because their seminar had already begun; 1/3 were told they were on time but shouldn't delay; and 1/3 were told they had plenty of time but ought to start to head over there
 - meanwhile, researchers placed an actor in a nearby alley who coughed and groaned in clear distress when the students walked by; his story was that he had just taken medicine for respiratory problem and was waiting for it to kick in
 - some students stopped to help the man, others didn't;
 - only one variable could predict when the student would stop: how hurried they were. The students in the first 2 groups generally did not stop, while the students in the third group (who thought they had plenty of time” tended to stop to help
 - “ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases”
- This second section shifts focus to the notion of multitasking.
 - You may wish to start the conversation by asking participants for a definition of multitasking.
 - Or, you could ask participants for examples of how they multitask in their daily lives.

- We often think that multitasking helps us become more efficient and effective at our work; but studies show that when we multitask we are more prone to make errors and less proficient at the tasks at hand.
- The question provided is intended to open up conversations about the unintended consequences of multitasking.
 - Possibilities include never being fully present with loved ones, dangerous behavior (texting while driving), feeling perpetually distracted and fragmented, lack of focus, inattention to details, etc.
- One practical suggestion for those wishing to try out Sabbath keeping is to take a Sabbath from just one thing each week. You might talk about the idea of taking a Sabbath from multitasking
- Reading Matthew 14:22-27 along with the accompany commentary and questions.
 - The third section shifts focuses on an example of Jesus withdrawing from the crowds in order to find silence and stillness in God's presence.
 - This story follows immediately after Jesus fed the five thousand.
 - In the Gospels, Jesus frequently withdraws from the crowd, even though the work of his teaching and healing was not finished.
 - We often don't feel that we have time to slow down because the duties and demands of our lives are too important, too pressing. But in Jesus we find a model of someone who prioritizes time for solitude and stillness, even in the midst of his important ministry.

IV. Surrendering Control of our Schedules

- Background: Maintaining a schedule is not only crucial at work, but it also makes it possible to negotiate our family life. Closely following a calendar of events and tasks is by no means a bad thing.
 - What this section invites participants to do is to begin to think theologically about their schedules and how we might see them as a "barometer" of our spiritual well-being.
- Read Matthew 6:24 along with the accompanying question.
 - In Christian circles, it is often said that our checkbooks (or online bank accounts) are spiritual documents.
 - In many cases, what we spend money on reveals our deepest values and priorities.
 - Much of the same can be said of our schedules and calendars.
 - What we schedule (or not schedule) reveals a lot about what we think is important in our lives.
 - Though this question is not written out in the participant's guide, you might ask: Suppose Matthew were writing his Gospel today and said, "You cannot serve God and iCals."
 - How would you respond? In what sense can both wealth and our calendars control our lives?

- Continue on to the question posed about what a stranger might infer about our values and priorities from our schedules.
- The rest of this section names two ways in which we might begin to think theologically about our schedules. You may explore one or both of these topics.
 - First. When and how do we schedule moments of rest in a given week? Do we observe a day of Sabbath? If so, which day is it? Or, do we schedule small “moments” of Sabbath throughout the week? What are the pros and cons of each approach?
 - One of the arguments against observing Sabbath moments throughout the week as opposed to a set day is that we still get to be in control of when and where and how and if we rest. That is, we can schedule Sabbath moments when they are convenient. While this practice still has enormous benefits, it might not help us surrender control of our calendars.
 - Second. How would you define work? Is your work easily contained within certain places (the office) or certain times (Mon-Fri)? Is work only something you are paid for? At home, what sorts of activities feel like work? How would establishing a definition of work in your life help you experience more peace of mind and rest?
 - Defining work is increasingly difficult in our day and age. More and more people work from home and more and more often work is hard to contain in a typical Monday through Friday, 8:00-5:00 schedule.
 - It is important to stress that individuals likely will define work in different ways. Some things that constitute work for some will not constitute work for others.
 - Defining work is one of the most important steps we can take in learning how to practice Sabbath. This can help us identify the types of activities we need to rest from and it can help us be more mindful of the role and place of work throughout our week.

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:

MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012.

A PC(USA) pastor and mother of three, McKibben Dana and her family undertake a year experiment of what it looks like to keep Sabbath in the midst of the pressures and demands of life today. Honest and funny. A must read for anyone wondering if or how Sabbath keeping is possible with little kids and two working spouses.

Resource 2:

Wayne Mueller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

My favorite book on Sabbath hands down. Mueller blends thoughtful biblical and theological reflection with great suggestions for practice. Emphasizes the importance of Sabbath keeping in our spiritual formation.