

Entering God's Rest: Rituals and Rhythms for Busy Families

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 6 and in it we’ll be exploring some practical tips designed to help us implement Sabbath in the midst of the realities of life, work, and family.
- 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 is a little shorter than the previous lessons and so it is more likely that you’ll be able to cover all 5 sections.*
- This lesson includes 5 parts: each part offers a practical tip for beginning to implement a Sabbath practice.
 - 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.

I. Establish Boundaries

- Read the first block of text out loud along with the discussion prompt
 - Background: One of the unhealthy by-products of the “Protestant work ethic” is that we often believe that if we are tough enough we won’t need to rest. In fact, taking time to rest is often seen as a sign of weakness or as an indication that we aren’t devoted to our work. At best, we fall into the trap of believing that we only “deserve” time off once all of our work is done. The problem, of course, is that we rarely feel that we reach the end of our work! There are always more emails, more errands, more items for our to-do list.
 - This mentality is contrary to the biblical witness. God rests on the seventh day of creation even though there is more work to be done in God’s on-going care of and involvement with the world. In a similar vein, Jesus often withdraws from the crowd to rest even though his ministry is not complete.
 - Unlike in previous lessons, many of the discussion prompts in this lesson begin with a concrete suggestion about practicing Sabbath. You might remind participants that these suggestions should not be seen as rigid rules. Rather, they are meant to prompt further thought and reflection about what it might look like to put the Sabbath into practice in their own lives. It will be helpful to remind everyone that there is no one, single way to keep Sabbath. In all likelihood, Sabbath practice will look quite different from person to person.
 - This first discussion point links back to the end of the previous lesson in which participants were invited to come up with a definition / description of what “counts” as work in their lives. If you did not discuss that question last week, you might start by asking: “How would you define work? Is your work easily contained within certain places (the office) or certain times (Mon-Fri)? At home, what sorts of activities feel like work?”
 - One of the practical applications of the Sabbath is to intentionally plan times during the week that are off limits for work. This might be a whole day (Sunday) or it might be certain times each day (e.g., after dinner or the like).
 - The final part of this question prompts participants to be as specific as possible in describing what sort of activities they would like to take a Sabbath from.
- Read the second block of text out loud along with the second discussion prompt
 - Background: MaryAnn McKibben Dana is a PC(USA) pastor in the northern Virginia area and is the mother of three young children. Her book, *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, offers a fresh, honest, and realistic look at what practicing Sabbath might look like in the midst of a busy family life.
 - Though not included in the participant’s guide, you might have individuals reflect on McKibben Dana’s recommended prayer to start off the Sabbath day: “**What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be.**” How would this prayer help you enter into the Sabbath with a more peaceful mindset?
 - As with the previous discussion prompt, encourage participants to be as specific as possible. The point here is for participants to begin to imagine what practicing Sabbath would look like in their own lives.

II. Start Small

- Read the first block of text out loud along with the first discussion prompt.
 - Background: One of the great obstacles to keeping Sabbath is simply knowing where to start. The Jewish tradition of Sabbath keeping seems daunting for most. It is important to emphasize that we should feel the freedom to start small in our own personal Sabbath practice.
 - It is also important to stress that Sabbath keeping isn't something that we have to "get right" on the first try. It is normal and healthy to experiment with different ways of keeping Sabbath until we find rhythms and practices that are most fruitful for where we are in life.
- Read the second block of text out loud along with the second discussion prompt
 - When Heschel wrote about "technology" in the 1950s, he most likely was referring to the radio and the rise of more automatically appliances (dishwashers, washers/dryers, etc.). His words are all the more true today.
 - The digital Sabbath is one very practical way participants can begin to experiment with Sabbath keeping.
 - In the discussion prompt, encourage participants to reflect on the second question.
 - Follow up the discussion prompt by reading the text about the "Sabbath box." Alternatively, this text might be read before the second discussion prompt.

III. Embrace Rituals

- Read the first block of text out loud along with the first discussion prompt.
 - Background: Especially in Protestant Christianity, rituals often get a bad rap. They are seen as being unnecessary to true faith and are occasionally seen as a form of overly rigid legalism. However, rituals play an important role in structuring our lives and worship practices.
 - As an introduction to this section, you might ask participants the following conversation starter: "What role do you think religious rituals should play in Christianity?"
 - If you are interested in learning more about Jewish Sabbath practices, you might explore the following website: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/shabbat-customs>
 - The point of this discussion is not necessarily to imitate Jewish rituals around the Sabbath. Rather, the point is to encourage participants to think about what rituals would be meaningful for them and how they would help structure their Sabbath practice.

IV. Experiment with Play

- Read the first block of text out loud along with the first discussion prompt.
 - Background: The beginning of this section recalls an earlier discussion in this series (week 1) about the apparent paradox in Genesis 2:2 – God is said to have completed all

of his work *and* rested on the seventh day. In attempt to resolve the question of whether God rested or worked on the seventh day, the rabbis said that God did both. Namely, God created *menuah* on the seventh day.

- As an introduction to this section, you might ask participants the following conversation starter: "How would you define 'play'? What role should play have in your adult life?"
- The goal of this section is to remind participants that the Sabbath is not just about abstaining from certain activities. Rather, it is about engaging in other activities that are life giving, physically, mentally, and spiritually.
- We often think of play in terms of passive entertainment, such as watching TV. While there is space for such activities in our lives, this form of "play" is often the result of sheer exhaustion and is not always as rejuvenating as we would hope.

V. Find Sacred Spaces

- Read the first block of text out loud along with the first discussion prompt.
 - Background: Most of the necessary background to Exodus 3:1-5 is provided in the printed text.
 - A second story about "sacred spaces" can be found in Luke 10:38-42, the story of Mary and Martha. The space around Jesus' feet, much like the space around the burning bush, was a place where Mary could experience silence, stillness, and a deeper sense of the sacred.
 - Another way of talking about sacred spaces is the Celtic notion of "thin places" – that is, those rare locales where the distance between heaven and Earth collapses. Many find such "thin places" in the mountains or in other beautiful spots in nature.
 - As an added discussion question, you might ask participants at the end to reflect on the Practicing Sabbath series as a whole. For instance, you might ask what their biggest "take away" was from the series.

For Further Study:

If you are interested in learning more about this topic, 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.