

CHRISTIAN LIVING

A Parent's Guide to
**SABBATH &
REST**

axis

written by Dr. Julie Canlis

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Sabbath is Old Testament legalism, right?

Whenever “keeping the Sabbath holy” is presented as an arbitrary command, God quickly turns into a dictator whose job is to [invent rules to make us miserable](#). In the New Testament, Jesus often broke the Sabbath to prove to law-keepers that they had missed the whole point: *God has a vision for human flourishing*. God has a specific shape of life in which we can be blessed—and believe it or not, resting is part of this. In fact, teenagers (whose whole goal in life is to sleep in as late as humanly possible, amiright?) might be better Sabbath-keepers than we parents.

Let’s explore the “big picture” of God’s design for human flourishing and, from this, begin to understand why the Sabbath is relevant (and even fun!) for families today.

Was God tired? Is that why He started it?

In Genesis, after God’s extraordinary burst of creativity for six days, God “rested” and delighted and enjoyed His creation ([Genesis 2:2-3](#)). After all, it was very good. The spirituality of Sabbath flows from this sense of delight, rest, and the goodness of creation and life itself. Families that try and “keep the Sabbath” without this sense of holy play and extravagant “wasting of time” will certainly not be keeping it “holy”!

On this seventh day of rest, God’s activity transitioned from creating to creation-care and delight. The newly created image-bearers, Adam and Eve, are welcomed into God’s restful activity on the seventh day. As His image-bearers, they are not told to “do nothing” but instead are invited into God’s own love of gardening. So the “rest” of the seventh day is not because God was tuckered out from a busy six days of productivity; rather, it’s our invitation to enter into God’s work, work that He is maintaining from His own stance of rest. God didn’t jump off the bandwagon on the seventh day; it’s the day that humans jumped on the bandwagon—through resting in Him.

What does “Sabbath” mean?

The Hebrew word for “Sabbath” literally means “[STOP](#).”

When did Sabbath begin?

Actually, when the sun went down. This had an interesting impact upon the Israelites' consciousness, conditioning them against workaholism and conditioning them to live in grace. What if we began our "day" by going to sleep, entrusting everything we were involved in to the Lord only to wake up later, when the Lord has been at work for hours and hours already? In his book [Answering God](#), Eugene Peterson writes about beginning our "day" at the start of evening like this:

The Hebrew evening/morning sequence conditions us to the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins his work. As we sleep he develops his covenant. We wake and are called out to participate in God's creative action. We respond in faith, in word. But always grace is previous. Grace is primary. We wake into a world we didn't make, into a salvation we didn't earn. Evening: God begins, without our help, his creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated. Creation and covenant are sheer grace and are there to greet us every morning.

What if our day began by entering into God's mercies? What if we did not begin the day with our productivity, but with God's? Can we switch off enough to rest, knowing that God neither slumbers nor sleeps? Our rest is not earned by having been productive enough (when do we really feel productive "enough," anyway?). Instead, our rest is a statement of deep trust that someone else is in charge. The Sabbath isn't what we get to do when our work is finished. It rescues us from the tyranny of unfinished work.

Why did the Israelites keep it?

As God set to marking His people off from the rest of the world, so that nations could look at them and say, "Hey, they are different! They treat their slaves differently. . . . They treat their land differently. . . . Could this be a different kind of god?" He did so by laying down certain guidelines to make them stand out. He set up an elaborate temple system with sacrifices that were based on grace, not bargaining. He set up circumcision. He set up kosher food laws. He even laid down primitive hygiene laws that would have been revolutionary for nomadic wanderers. And He laid down an ethical ideal (in the form

of the Ten Commandments) that protected relationships and nurtured community. Central to this ideal is that God’s people should keep the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was based on two revolutionary truths about identity:

1. We are God’s image-bearers (Exodus); and
2. We are not slaves (Deuteronomy).

Exodus focuses on the Sabbath as flowing from God’s own resting. “You want to show the world that you are the image-bearers? Then rest like I do,” [Exodus 20:11](#) declares. (“And while you are at it,” Exodus goes on to say, “make sure that you aren’t hoarding the blessing. Pass it on. Give your servants a break. Give your animals a break. This blessing isn’t meant to be hoarded but is meant to reflect my own delight in you and how I created you. . .”)

Deuteronomy, on the other hand, focuses on the Sabbath as a protest against the idols and the gods of this age. Having just emerged from more than 10 generations of slavery, the Israelites would have had trouble really believing that they were now free—even if they had physically entered the Promised Land. Could they ever shake their slave-mentality? Part of God’s plan for their rehabilitation was to challenge their belief that they had been made for ceaseless work. A restating of [Deuteronomy 5:15](#) could be: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, therefore you must observe the Sabbath day. You must act your way into a new way of thinking and behaving! You are not human doings. You are human beings!” The Sabbath was a weekly reboot for the Israelites’ Operating System. For ancient Israel, Sabbath was also an act of resistance. Unlike Pharaoh, who required the Israelites to “make more bricks” and even “make bricks without straw,” Yahweh is not an insatiable overlord driven by a production and consumption economy. In God’s economy, both His people and His land are allowed to rest due to His mercy and grace.

Both of these are helpful for families in the 21st century as we begin to wonder how our Sabbath can keep reflecting the fact that we are made in God’s image. We must begin by asking: How can our Sabbath serve as a defense against idolatrous thinking and behaving?

Since they couldn't do much, did they just sit around then?

The simple statement in Genesis about God resting, blessing the seventh day, and making it holy became considerably more complicated by Jewish tradition over the years. By late Friday afternoon, all housekeeping and meal preparation had to be finished, with the common family table becoming the center of all liturgical action. There were unspoken regulations for the meal, for the liturgy said over the meal, and for all reminders of work to be hidden from view (perhaps to keep temptation out of the way?!). As Jewish writer Judith Shulevitz [noted about the Sabbath](#), “The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. They were meant to communicate the insight that interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will.”

Throughout medieval Europe, Jewish families spread all over the continent were connected by this common meal with candles, prayers, ritual hand-washing, wine, and conversation. Often before going to bed, they would share what they had left with the poor. Following the morning synagogue service, another meal, and an afternoon spent resting or making social calls on friends and relatives, the Sabbath was concluded with a final meal and service.

Did early Christians observe the Sabbath?

Yes, but in a new way. The book of Hebrews didn't get rid of the Sabbath, but refocused it from what people were *not allowed to do* to what *God was already doing for them*. Hebrews applies the Sabbath to salvation, where “resting” is now defined as being *in Christ* and His relationship with the Father. Sabbath is shorthand for living in this state of total trust, where our action is caught up and integrated into God's action.

The early Christians began to think of the Sabbath in this completely Christ-centered way, in which “rest” means us getting out of the way so that God can do the work. So they began to worship on Sundays, in an effort to put themselves smack in the center of God's resurrection action in the world. The Reformers picked up on this and said the Sabbath is a grace—a grace that we don't often extend to ourselves (so much that God

has to nearly force us to give ourselves this grace and rest from our works!). Although the Sabbath was given to the Jews and not to the Gentiles ([Colossians 2:16-17](#)), many Christians continued observing a Sunday Sabbath in celebration of Christ being our true spiritual rest ([Hebrews 4:1-11](#)). But a spiritual rest doesn't mean we believe that our bodies don't also need this rest as well. That's [dualism](#)!

Is the Sabbath relevant now?

Absolutely! Although it can simply look like enforced nap-taking, the Sabbath really is about **Christian identity**. The Sabbath can protect us from false identities because it is so counter-cultural to a consumer driven society. For example, one of the greatest values in our culture is productivity and “making it” on our own. To take time to escape the rat race and proclaim that other values order our time and our lives is saying “no” to one of the greatest the idols of our time. Theologian Walter Brueggemann said it best when [he wrote](#):

In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.

In fact, one of the greatest gifts of the Sabbath is it reveals our idols as well. When we ask ourselves, *What do I wish I could be doing instead of taking this time out to sleep or play with my family or go on a hike?* then we have a pretty good clue as to what we really value. Here's perhaps a different way of asking the same thing: What will I miss out on if I keep the Sabbath? These things are probably not bad in and of themselves, but they probably represent what we are grasping after too hard. They might be work (or even leisure) idolized and somehow associated with our self-worth.

Even children today are put under tremendous pressure to perform, whether through Sunday sports tournaments or the regular practicing of instruments or weekend homework and studying. Sometimes that pressure even comes from us as parents, since we worry that our children may not be able to get the scholarships or turn pro if they have one day off each week. . . .But if that's the case, let's first call this fallacy what it is: a fallacy. In fact, by giving our kids dedicated time off each week—time that's also

spent focused on who God is and what He wants for us—we might actually be giving them what they need to fulfill their true potential (whether or not they have what it takes to be a professional athlete/artist/writer/etc. is a different story altogether).

Then let's take some time to reflect. How might we model for our children the discipline of rest? Or model the faith-filled belief that our children's future is in God's hands (not just in the amount of studying or practicing that they can cram in over the weekend)? How can we explain to our kids that following God's command to rest is also a show of faith that we trust God in all things? It might take some creativity and work (this is the right kind of work!), but Sabbath could become a day where we reconnect and play as families instead of perpetuate the frantic pace of the week.

If all of God's commands are gifts, then the Sabbath commandment was an expression of God's desire to bless us. If the Sabbath becomes a time where we feel deprived of what we love, then something is probably wrong, either with how we're approaching the Sabbath or with our desires! Jesus made it clear that we miss the point if we spend all our time obsessing over what to do (or what not to do) on the Sabbath (e.g. "Should I pull my donkey out of this pit or not?" [Luke 14:5](#)). God's laws are a series of runway lights, showing our hearts where to land. So whenever there are small "no"s in the Bible, these are for a much bigger "YES"es that God is proclaiming over us. He wants us to have life and have it abundantly.

What is the Sabbath saying no to?

Slave-mentality. The Sabbath says NO to anything that makes us a slave. As Tim Keller wrote in his book [Every Good Endeavor](#):

Anyone who cannot obey God's command to observe the Sabbath is a slave, even a self-imposed one. Your own heart, or our materialistic culture, or an exploitative organization, or all of the above, will be abusing you if you don't have the ability to be disciplined in your practice of Sabbath. Sabbath is therefore a declaration of our freedom. It means you are not a slave—not to your culture's expectations, your family's hopes, your medical school's demands, not even to your own insecurities. It is important that you learn to speak this truth to yourself with a note of triumph—otherwise you will feel guilty for taking time off, or you will be

unable to truly unplug.

You might be enslaved to a wrong view of work and productivity. It could be [FOMO](#) (check out our “[Parent’s Guide to Teen FOMO](#)” for more on this!). It could be a clean house. It could be that you are a slave to control, that you really don’t trust God to provide your daily bread. It could be habits of “resting” that are not really deeply soulful but resemble addictive habits, like binge-watching. It could be kinds of social media that enslave us to image-making. It could be such enslavement to busyness that a “nap” seems out of the question.

Our entire culture is stressed out, over-busy, and looking for ways to escape. Its answers are to find ways to be *more productive* while at the same time offering short-term ways to escape. **The Sabbath is not an escape.** Instead, it reveals the things *to which we escape* to alleviate our stress. The Sabbath stands as a refuge from the “crazy”—whether we can afford the time or not—and puts us in a position of trust and dependence in God. It encourages us to unwind in ways that put us more deeply in touch with ourselves, our friends/family, the world, and God. As [Wendell Berry writes](#), “Sabbath observance invites us to stop. It invites us to rest. It asks us to notice that while we rest, the world continues without our help. It invites us to delight in the world’s beauty and abundance.”

It’s not an accident that the Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as she was leaving her years of slavery and idolatry, rediscovering her true identity. The Sabbath will always expose our idols and help us leave our slavery behind.

What is the Sabbath saying yes to?

Being an image-bearer. The Sabbath says YES to the way we were created, which is as creatures, with limits, created for relationships. Even Adam and Eve, before the Fall, needed to sleep! They had needs! Their goodness included the real physical limitations they had. In this way, the Sabbath beckons us to let God be God, and to let us be very *good* creatures (with limits and needs) who can’t save ourselves by our workaholicism or our perfectionism or our frantic efforts to rest. If we refuse rest, we are refusing the way that God created us and a specific way that we can be an Image-bearer. God could pull off in six days what we can’t hope to achieve in seven. So why don’t we just rest?

Sabbath-keeping is not about legalism, but about image-bearing. And the second way we are in God's image is that we are created for relationships ("The Lord God saw that it was not good that the man should be alone. . . ."). So for this "rest" to truly be restful, it must honor the other way in which we are created, which is to be deeply connected with our primary relationships: friends, family, ourselves (yes, we are in a relationship with ourselves!), and, of course, with the Lord.

How can I keep it? I'm overwhelmed!

Start small! And stick to it. Perhaps it simply involves permission to sleep more on a specific day. And ask yourself what idols are getting in your way of resting. [Hebrews 4](#) speaks of Christ as our Sabbath, but then says, "There is *still a rest for the people of God...*" (emphasis added). Being overwhelmed is probably getting in the way of doing what you really want. Re-prioritize. And receive your limitations as a gift! Remember that Jesus is the self-proclaimed Lord of the Sabbath. Rest in Him.

How do I start?

Full disclosure: We didn't tell our kids that we were starting to have a "Sabbath" (and have them howl and groan and complain). We just started doing it, and they didn't really know it was a "Sabbath," but they knew they loved mom's and dad's undivided attention, phone-restrictions, great dinner, sharing together, etc. It was "fun" but not in a hyped-up way (then it wouldn't be a Sabbath for us parents!) and more in a deeply intentional, relational way. We have family books that we're reading through together that get prime time on our Sabbath evening. We have a pretty typical meal (and a loose "liturgy" around this meal that invites deep sharing). We have alternating movie nights and game nights. Sometimes we hike or have an adventure. Whatever your family temperament, craft this time around things that nurture relationships and (probably) extended time together.

What if I don't have a normal day off? What if we do sports?

Sabbath is less about Sunday than it is about blocking off time to keep the idols at bay. But I would still recommend a fairly predictable day that your kids can count on. What matters more to children—by whom much of life is “caught” not “taught”—is that they see this happening regularly, come hell or high water. Also, that it be supremely *fun*.

Sports are difficult and are a tension for every family. For example, we allow each child to do one club sport, for 1 to 2 seasons, in their entire high school career. We negotiate with coaches as to how many Sundays they will miss. And then we work hard to ensure that their primary community doesn't become their sports team but their church youth group. But for some families, this isn't an option. So just apply some of the principles of Sabbath that involve set (and regular) practices that denounce the idols and also build up your image-bearing. And the Lord will lead you.

In our family, ministry is a part of our “day jobs,” so a Sabbath on Sunday is never an option. For a few years, we tried flirting with Mondays, then Thursdays. Our current schedule is Fridays, but it begins Thursday night with a family meal. On Friday morning, the children head off to school while my husband and I get the day together, then when they return from school, they continue in the family time that began the evening before.

Other friends have blocked off Friday night to Saturday around noon. If their kids are invited to friends' houses that night, sometimes the kids don't want to go because they will miss Sabbath together! This family's Sabbath is fairly unusual: no electricity used! So the fire is lit in the fireplace, computers and phones are put away (although every once in a while they'll watch a movie), books come out . . . and then Saturday morning continues around the fire with more books and coffee and a special breakfast and leisure. We've never even come close to that!

Any other ideas for family Sabbath practices?

Don't begin with what you should give up, but with what you want to incorporate—that

will help you know what to prune. Bring in hobbies, puzzles, and games. Take hikes, naps, or drives. Try to have repeated activities or foods, as this meets a need for ritual and regularity in children. And try to bring in *unscheduled* time, perhaps even with solitude and/or silence. Mental rest is as important as physical rest!

We know Sabbath has begun when we have our “Sabbath” meal that looks like no other meal of the week. (And yes, sometimes this meal moves around! But for the most part, it’s on Friday night.) When the familiar candles are lit, and the smells of the Jewish *challah* bread begin wafting around the room, our entire family senses that we are about to deeply exhale.

The following is a Sabbath Liturgy we’ve adapted over the years. (Note: We adapted this from multiple Sabbath liturgies that are online and in books—with a giant nod to the fulfillment of the Sabbath, *Jesus*. The echoes of this liturgy can still be heard in Jewish homes all over the world. An easy overview with recipes can be found in Martha Zimmerman’s [Celebrating Biblical Feasts in Your Home or Church](#).)

Gather your family together (if the *challah* bread hasn’t gathered them already). The table is set and beautiful, with two white unlit candles. A wine glass has grape juice or wine. *Challah* bread in a basket. A bowl of water with a dishcloth stands nearby.

The Mother’s (or parent’s) Prayer (lighting the first candle)

This candle represents creation.
Blessed are you, O Lord our God,
King of the Universe,
Who brings forth light out of darkness.

The Mother’s (or parent’s) Prayer (lighting second candle)

This candle represents redemption.
For Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.”
And He invites us to be light with Him, saying
“You are the light of the world.”

The Father’s (or parent’s) Blessing

(Bless your children individually, according to their gifts and in light of their previous week. Express your delight in particular qualities, acknowledging their perseverance in hardship. Bless by standing behind the seated child,

with a hand on their head).

The Father's Blessing of the Mother

An excellent wife, who can find?
She looks well to the ways of her household.
And does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and bless her;
Her husband also, and he praises her, saying
“Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.”
A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

(For women who do not warm to Proverbs 31, this might redeem it for you! From verses 10, 27-30).

The Father's (or parent's) Prayer over the Wine

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,
King of the Universe,
Who creates fruit from the vine.

(Each child recites the blessing before they take a sip, and passes it to the next person).

The Oldest Child Recites a Blessing before Washing Hands

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,
King of the Universe,
Who has sanctified us by your commandments,
and who has instructed us concerning the washing of hands.

(Now a parent stands and holds a bowl of water, with a dish towel over their arm. Everyone is invited to reflect on their week, and when they are ready, to wash their hands in the water and ask the Lord wash them of something from the past week. “I would like to be washed of my stress over finals this week.” (At this point I am thinking, *They were stressed out this week?!)* “I would like to be washed of my bad attitude toward mom.” (I am thinking, *Amen, sister!)* etc. etc. This part of the liturgy is short and simple, but provides every family member a small window into one another's interior lives.)

The Father's (or parent's) Prayer over the Bread

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,

King of the Universe,
Who brings forth bread from the earth.
(Each child recites the blessing before they rip off a piece, and passes it to the next person).

Then dinner is served!

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to "Ordinary" Time](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Sleep](#)
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- Children's picture book: [Mrs. Moskowitz' Sabbath Candlesticks](#)
- Film: [Fiddler on the Roof](#)
- Documentary (30 min.): [Godspeed](#)
- Small-Group Video Curriculum (8 weeks): [Godspeed: An Eight-Week Video & Study](#)
- [A Theology of the Ordinary](#) by Julie Canlis
- [The Sabbath](#) by Abraham Heschel (a Jewish perspective)
- [Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting](#) by Marva Dawn
- "[Bring Back the Sabbath,](#)" *The New York Times*

About Dr. Julie Canlis

Julie holds a PhD from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and is the author of *Calvin's Ladder* (Eerdmans) and *A Theology of the Ordinary* (Godspeed Press). She and her husband Matt started their family and ministered in the Church of Scotland for 13 years, and together produced the documentary *Godspeed*. Julie is committed to slow food and slow church.

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A Parent's Guide to **SABBATH & REST**

Recap

- In Genesis, after God's extraordinary burst of creativity for six days, God "rested" and delighted and enjoyed His creation. The spirituality of Sabbath flows from this sense of delight, rest, and the goodness of creation and life itself.
- The Hebrew word for "Sabbath" literally means "stop."
- Our rest is a statement of deep trust that God is in control.
- The Sabbath was based on two truths about identity: We are God's image-bearers (Exodus); and we are not slaves (Deuteronomy).
- The Sabbath serves as a defense against idolatrous thinking and behaving.
- God set rules in place for the Sabbath not to torture the faithful, but to show that interrupting the ceaseless rund of striving takes a strenuous act of will!
- Hebrews refocused the Sabbath from what people were *not allowed to do* to what God was *already doing for them*.
- Resting now means being *in Christ*. It's us getting out of the way so that God can do the work.
- Biblical rest is resistance because it's a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.
- The Sabbath reveals the things to which we escape, exposing our idols.
- We're all busy! So start small and stick to it. A Sabbath should not be stressful.
- Start incorporating new routines for your family, while showing your kids that the Sabbath can be fun!

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

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Discussion Questions

- On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being bored out of our minds, 10 being mind-blowingly busy), how busy would you say we are as a family?
- What activities would you give up if you could?
- What activities would be hard to give up? Why?
- What activities do you wish Mom/Dad would give up? Why?
- If we were to have a free day as a family once a week, what would you want us to do?
- What would you like to do regularly as a family together that we seldom do?
- When do you feel most relaxed?
- What could we do as a family to fight busyness more?
- Why do you think God commands us to rest?
- What do you think it looks like to rest as God did?
- When you think of Sabbath, what comes to mind?
- Is it possible to do things that seem restful but actually don't help us rejuvenate? Why or why not?
- Does incorporating Sabbath seem impossible to you? Why or why not?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!