

FAQ's About the Sabbath

Becoming a Sabbath Community: A Guide for Churches

FAQ's About the Sabbath

Taken from Peter Scazzero's 'Emotionally Healthy Discipleship'...

Q: Why do I need to keep Sabbath for a whole 24-hour period each week?

A: God created us in His image for a rhythm of work and rest. When we violate that rhythm, we do violence to our own souls. Moreover, we are not defined by what we do or what we produce. We are defined by God's unconditional love for us in Christ Jesus. Therefore, we don't keep Sabbath to earn God's love. Rather, Sabbath is God's gift to keep us centered and rooted in that amazing reality. It is not an accident that this essential spiritual formation practice is found in the fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments.

Q: How do I go about deciding what specific activities are acceptable and unacceptable on the Sabbath?

A: Reflect on the following questions as you sort out God's pathway for you:

1. What do I need to stop that relates to my work --- paid and unpaid?
2. List the activities that create delight and rest for you?
3. How can you structure your day to cultivate a greater awareness of God in your life and in the world?
4. What might help you see God's goodness and miracles all around you today?

Q: Do I have to take my Sabbath on a particular day of the week?

A: In the fourth commandment on Sabbath-keeping, the specific day (Saturday or Sunday) is not mentioned, but instead, it's noted that Sabbath-keeping is to be celebrated every "seventh" day. There are Biblical examples of the Sabbath being kept on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2), and it's true that once the Christian calendar was adopted worldwide, the first day of the week most naturally fell to Sunday. However, the heart of Sabbath is that it was to serve us (Mark 2:27), and there are certainly factors in the larger culture that contribute to people taking another Sabbath day instead of Sunday. The important principle is not necessarily to take one specific day as Sabbath, but rather one regular day to stop, rest, delight, and contemplate unto the Lord (Col. 2:16-17, Rom 14:5-6).

We encourage people to take either Friday night - Saturday night or Saturday night - Sunday night because in today's culture, the breaks from work usually fall on one of those times. However, if one's break from work does not fall on one of those days, we encourage you to choose another 24-hour period.

Q: Which day is the Sabbath? Sunday or Saturday?

A: Paul addresses this very issue in the Jew/Gentile/multicultural church in Romans 14:1-8. He writes: "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord..." I believe the key principle is keeping a rhythm for the same day of the week each week. Doing it around the Sunday gathering of worship is clearly best when possible, I believe, as this is part of our contemplation.

Historical Background: God established the rhythm of six-days-of work, one-day-of rest pattern, in Genesis 1-2. It has guided Judaism ever since, celebrating Sabbath from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. With the coming of Jesus, the Sabbath took on new meaning. Not only did it point back to creation, but it anticipated the eternal Sabbath rest and peace we will enjoy once we see Him face to face. Thus, early in the church the Sabbath was shifted to Sunday – the day of Jesus' resurrection.

While many Jewish Christians continued to celebrate Sabbath on Saturday, Sunday also became a day for Christians to gather for worship, prayer, and an "agape" meal that included the Lords' Supper. In 321, the Emperor Constantine decreed Sunday instead of Saturday to a day of no work, thus changing officially the Sabbath to the first day of the week.

Q: Can I serve at my local church as a volunteer on the Sabbath? Or, should I stop?

A: Yes, you can serve at your church on Sabbath. For most of us, our primary work is not at our local church. We work as secretaries, social workers, teachers, lawyers, accountants, moms/dads at home, and students. Serving at church is likely not your job. Hopefully, there is delight in serving Christ as a children's worker, parking lot attendant, usher, or greeter, etc. It is also important to remember that showing mercy and compassion was the missing element Jesus brought back into God's original intention of Sabbath-keeping. Treating people, whether children, youth, or adults, like Christ is the heart of what we seek to do in the local church.

Q: Do I need a day-off and a Sabbath?

A: You will need at least a half-day, or several hours, to prepare for Sabbath. Part of the Sabbath experience is the preparation time. What needs to happen before Sabbath starts so you (or your family) can experience true rest on the day itself? A basic list of what needs to get done before Sabbath starts might include getting the errands and chores of life done (e.g. food shopping, laundry, cleaning the house, bringing closure to your work, final phone-calls, paying bills). These things make Sabbath more restful and communicate the order and peace many of us long for.

Q: Do I spend the Sabbath alone or with other people?

A: The question to ask is: What do you need for a day of rest? Time with people or time alone? Both? In what proportion? This may change for you depending on the seasons and circumstances of your life.

Q: What do I do about my tendency to perfectionism?

A: We don't ever get Sabbath "right." Sabbath is a day to let go of perfectionism and let God run the universe. Inconsistencies, bad choices and learning from our mistakes are part of the point. Do your best to stop working, letting God worry about what you're not doing right, taking your focus off yourself so you can rest in Him.

Q: Isn't Jesus our Sabbath-rest? Is this another works-righteousness?

A: Jesus reinforced the gift of Sabbath amidst all the abuses of His day. He reminds us, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). To keep Sabbath is to exercise one's freedom, to declare oneself to be neither a tool to be "employed" nor a beast to be burdened. Sabbath-keeping is an invitation to rest because God rested. This rest serves as a sign of contemplation and abundance. God's gifts to humanity are so generous that we are able to rest. Our rest indicates that we depend completely on the God who redeemed us from sin, death and evil.

Q: How do I cease from the work of parenting?

A: You cannot stop changing diapers of course. But you can cease from tidying up, cooking, laundry, and running errands. You can do some things together as a family. You can hire a babysitter so you, and with your spouse, can get time alone. You can take time alone for yourself, leaving parenting to your spouse. Then, you take the children and give equal time to him/her.

Q: What about my children who aren't interested in Sabbath?

A: The important thing to remember is that this is not a day of deprivation. Sabbath is to be a delight. Rather than simply taking things away, think about things you can add (e.g. special desserts, a movie, a creative family activity) – depending on the ages of your children. It doesn't have to be a forced family day. If your children are older, they are going to naturally going to want to connect with their friends. That is okay. You will go through many transitions in keeping Sabbath depending on your children's ages and temperaments. But, whenever possible, remember this is a wonderful opportunity to build rhythm, intentionality and sacred traditions into your family.

Q: What about sports and extra-curricular activities your children may be involved in?

A: There may be some activities you want to eliminate because of the stress involved. But there may be others (e.g. if your child loves soccer) that you do, but you will do it in a different spirit. You may go to the soccer game but you are doing it without multi-tasking, talking on the phone, reading e-mails, or reading work-related paperwork at halftime or during time outs. You can focus on enjoying the game, interacting with other parents, or delight in the very gift of the human body to participate in athletics.

Q: How, like Jesus, can we exercise compassion on the Sabbath without turning it into work?

A: The Jews have longed believed that showing compassion on the Sabbath reflects the glorious abundance of the day. We rest from work in order to turn our hearts toward God, and God is always concerned with human need. When we stop for Sabbath, it may happen that we become more attentive to the problems of the world around us. This ultimately leads us to show more, not less, compassion. Maybe the Good Samaritan was on his Sabbath! Just be careful that it is not a "should." Rejoice in small acts of caring, allowing them to connect us to our compassionate God.