



# YOUTH STUDY

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## LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

# Sabbath Keeping for Busy Teens: A Youth Lenten Study

*Sabbath is a response to anxiety*

## Introduction to This Lenten Study

Do the following scenarios sound like any youth you know?

Two classmates sit in the school cafeteria, their lunches untouched. One is engrossed in her phone, texting furiously with another friend who sits across the room. As her fingertips fly across the screen, alerts repeatedly pop up. A notification tells her she has been tagged in another friend's picture. Her heart skips a beat until she opens another app, inspects the picture, and then breathes a sigh of relief when she sees it fits in with the image she is working to cultivate. She returns to her texting and ignores the reminders that continue to appear as she tries to finish her conversation before the bell rings.

Next to her, a friend jumps from his chemistry textbook to his phone. He has a test next period, and his stomach is in knots. He didn't get home until almost ten the night before because he went straight from track practice back to the school yearbook office and was then pressured to go out for coffee with the rest of the yearbook staff. He fueled himself with caffeine in order to study all night for this test but ended up falling asleep around 2 a.m. without having accomplished much school work.

In February 2019, the Pew Research Center reported rising rates of anxiety and depression in U.S. teens:

## Session at a Glance

### ARRIVING

- The Ten Commandments

### GATHERING

- The Sabbath Commandment

### OPENING

- Share the goal of the session
- Opening prayer

### EXPLORING

- Skit: pharaoh's world
- Case study: pharaoh in today's world

### RESPONDING

- Reflection questions

### CLOSING

- Share responses
- Closing prayer

"Whether they personally suffer from these conditions or not, seven-in-ten teens today see them as major

problems among their peers. Concern about mental health cuts across gender, racial and socio-economic lines, with roughly equal shares of teens across demographic groups saying it is a significant issue in their community.”<sup>1</sup> Among the top concerns of those surveyed were getting good grades, looking good, fitting in socially, being involved in extracurricular activities, and being good at sports. Our country’s young people seem to be working themselves into a panic in a futile attempt to have it all: perfect résumé, social and physical conformity with their peers, and exceptional athletic ability.

The dilemma, like all social crises, begs the question: What will the church’s response be? The answer is already embedded in our tradition—the commandment to keep Sabbath. This six-week study, intended to be used during the season of Lent, is based on Walter Brueggemann’s book *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, first published in 2014 and then again in 2017 with a study guide for group discussion. As a Lenten series, this study offers a younger generation the opportunity to reflect on the frenetic consumer culture that demands their time, energy, and loyalties and consider how Sabbath can be a tool to resist the “culture of now.”

The sessions in this study will help participants see how, in our contemporary context of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath can be an act of resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it insists that our lives are not defined by production and consumption. It is an alternative to the demanding presence of advertising and the culture of social media. Sessions will explore how topics such as anxiety, exclusivism, and multitasking are consuming our lives and pulling us away from relationship with our God and neighbors.

This study is addressed to young people who find themselves “weary and . . . carrying heavy burdens” (Matt. 11:28) by the uncontrolled requirements of our society—particularly its social conformity that urges doing more and having more, assumes there is a technological solution for every human problem, and promotes greed and control. Through Sabbath, may they rediscover the God who has created and redeemed them and who longs to sustain them by offering them a place to lay down their burdens and find rest.

## Introduction to This Session

In the season of Lent, many Christians take time to examine our lives, identifying personal practices and

attitudes that keep us from being in true relationship with God and neighbor. We can use this period of liturgical time to cultivate practices that renew both of these relationships. One way to understand how we are to live in relationship to God and others is to look to the wisdom offered in the Ten Commandments.

A close look at the Ten Commandments shows us that the first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God and the final six commandments have to do with our relationships with our fellow humans. The fourth commandment on Sabbath is the “crucial bridge” that connects the Ten Commandments together.<sup>2</sup> The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Exod. 20:3–8). At the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments, which concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17). God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day. When one rests, all rest, and they do so alongside the God who creates and sustains them.

### Gods of “More”

In Exodus 5, the “gods of Egypt” demand endless produce and authorize endless systems of production. Pharaoh is the enforcer, demanding that slaves produce more and more bricks to be used to build more storage for the pharaoh’s endless supply of material wealth (grain). Because the system was designed to produce more and more surplus (Gen. 47:13–26), there was always more need for storage units that in turn generated more need for bricks with which to construct them.

In this system, there can be no Sabbath rest. There is no rest for the pharaoh as he supervises and monitors. There can be no rest for the pharaoh’s taskmasters. And of course, there can be no rest for the slaves who must satisfy the taskmasters in order to meet the pharaoh’s demanding quotas. In this context, all levels of social power—gods, the pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, slaves—are caught up in and committed to the grind of endless production.

### Restlessness

The reality of restlessness in our contemporary society is obvious. In our society, we experience an endless pursuit of greater security and greater happiness, a pursuit that is always unsatisfied, because we have never gotten or done enough. The gods (“other gods”)

of this system summon us to endless desires and needs that are never met but that always require yet greater effort.

It is impossible to overestimate the level of anxiety that now characterizes social relationships. Into this arena of restlessness comes the God of rest who offers relief from that anxiety-producing system. This God has no hunger for commodities. This God is attentive to the cries of those “left behind” and comes to open a new future by providing us an exit from systems of restlessness into the restfulness of neighborliness.

Sabbath is a practical no to restlessness so that neighborly engagement, rather than production and consumption, defines our lives. Our motors are set to run at brick-making speed. Therefore it is both urgent and difficult to find restfulness. However, our lives as individuals and within God’s community of believers depend on our willingness to pause and honor the Sabbath commandment.

## Goal for the Session

Participants will explore how the commandment to keep Sabbath can be a faithful response to a culture of anxiety.

## Preparing for the Session

- Read through this Leader’s Guide and determine how to best lead the session given the needs of your group. See the “Teaching Alternative” section at the end for additional ideas.
- Pray for all group members. As much as possible, pray for each person by name. Ask for the Spirit to move among the group and foster a lively, creative discussion.

## Materials Needed

- Bibles
- newsprint
- markers
- pens and paper for each participant
- copies of the Participant Handout

## Teaching Tip

One of the activities in this session is creating and performing a skit. Even if your group seems hesitant to perform their skits in front of one another, encourage them

to have fun with it. This activity is a great way for participants to become more comfortable with one another and may help foster more open conversation going forward.

## Arriving (5 minutes)

### 1. The Ten Commandments

Place a blank piece of newsprint on the wall in your gathering space. As participants arrive, encourage them to work together to name all ten commandments (in order). They are *not* to consult their Bibles or any other outside sources during this time.

## Gathering (10 minutes)

### 2. The Sabbath Commandment

Once most of your group has arrived, ask for a volunteer to read aloud Exodus 20:1–21 and have the rest of the group assess the list of commandments created in the Arriving activity for accuracy. Make any necessary edits so that the group’s list reflects the commandments as they appear in Scripture. Then point out the following to your group:

- Some scholars have noted that the first three commandments show us how to think about our relationship with God.
- The last six commandments show us how to think about our relationships with other people.
- Some think that the fourth commandment, on Sabbath, is a bridge between these two things.

Ask the group to brainstorm some ideas of what this could mean. How might Sabbath act as a bridge between our relationship with God and our relationships with others?

## Opening (5 minutes)

### 3. Share the Goal of the Session

Drawing on material provided in the introduction to the session, share with the group:

- In the season of Lent, Christians are called to examine our lives and identify personal practices and attitudes that keep us from being in true relationship with God and neighbor.
- We can use this period of liturgical time to cultivate practices that renew both of these relationships.

- One way to understand how we are to live in relationship to God and others is to look to the wisdom offered in the Ten Commandments.

Explain that in today's session, the group will look specifically at how keeping Sabbath can be a faithful response to a culture of anxiety.

#### 4. Opening Prayer

Lead your group in prayer, either with your own words or with the following:

God of Peace,  
we live in a busy world that is constantly calling us in different directions.  
We find ourselves anxious, overwhelmed, and struggling to follow you.  
Send your Spirit to be with us now. Let us hear what you have to say to us, and may we grow to new understandings of your Word through this time together.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### Exploring (20 minutes)

#### 5. Skit: Pharaoh's World

Have participants read together Exodus 5:1–23. Discuss as a group:

- What is happening in this story?
- How would you describe the tone of Pharaoh? Of the workers? Of Moses?

In smaller groups, ask participants to place the story found in Exodus 5:1–23 in a modern-day setting and create a skit. Some possible settings for their story are school, work, or an extracurricular event such as a sport or club. Once they have had some time to prepare their skits, have each group perform for the others. Then debrief with the following discussion questions:

- How do you deal with demands that cause anxiety in your life?
- Can you relate to any of the characters in this story? If so, who and why?
- Clearly in Exodus 5:1–23 there is a lack of Sabbath in all of the characters' lives. How would this story be different if the pharaoh himself practiced Sabbath?

#### 6. Case Study: Pharaoh in Today's World

Distribute the Participant Handout if you have not already done so, and ask participants to read the section titled "Case Study" about a family operating under a pharaoh-like atmosphere of production. Then ask participants how they might respond to this family using Exodus 20:1–20 as a basis for their advice. Draw from the following possible questions to further discuss the relationship between anxiety and Sabbath in this family:

- What things in this family's lives are keeping them from being closer to God and one another?
- How might the practice of Sabbath look for them?
- How would practicing Sabbath change their understanding of God and their relationships with one another?
- How is this family like/unlike your own?
- Why is it so hard to change our ways?

### Responding (10 minutes)

#### 7. Reflection Questions

Ask participants to take a few moments to respond to the reflection questions found in their Participant Handouts.

### Closing (5 minutes)

#### 8. Share Responses

Once participants have had some time to respond to the reflection questions, ask if there are any volunteers who might like to share their responses.

#### 9. Closing Prayer

Have the group close by praying together the prayer printed in their Participant Handout.

### Teaching Alternative

Your group may be interested in the article on anxiety and depression referenced in the introduction to this study. If so, print copies of the article for participants to read and discuss: "Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem among Their Peers," by Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graff at the Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/>.

## Key Scripture

Exodus 5:1–23; 20:1–21

## For More Information

Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

Research Center, Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/>.

2. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 117.

## Notes

1. Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graf, “Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem among Their Peers,” Pew

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SAMPLE SESSION





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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

# Sabbath Keeping for Busy Teens: A Youth Lenten Study

*Sabbath is a response to anxiety*

## Introduction

In this session, we will reflect on God's commandment to practice Sabbath in a world filled with anxiety.

## Scripture

Exodus 20:1–20; 5:1–23

## Case Study

Josh's alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m., and he immediately realizes he is sick. He feels chills but also is sweating. His eyes are heavy and watery. Still, he swings his legs out of bed because he knows he cannot miss school today.

In the kitchen, Josh's mom is already bustling around. She was at work until very late the night before, trying to help her team meet a deadline. Her boss has already declared that no one is to take time off until this latest project is finished. She drinks strong coffee as she tosses an energy bar and sports drink into Josh's backpack.

As Josh gets ready for school, he thinks about his day: he has two tests, band auditions, and track practice that will keep him at school until dinnertime. After that, his U.S. history study group is getting together to

work on a project they have to present at the end of the week.

"Are you OK?" his mom asks him as he walks into the kitchen. Clearly, he does not feel well.

"I'm fine," he says. He knows that if he misses his tests, he will only have to make them up. If he misses band auditions, he might not have the chance to play in the concert ensemble next year. If he misses track practice, his coach might not consider him for varsity. And if he misses his study group, he will let down his friends. Just as his mom pushes through and works late hours at the sacrifice of her own health and time with family, Josh knows he must do the same.

## Closing Prayer

God of Sabbath,  
in a world that is always asking more of us,  
help us remember that you call us to practice  
Sabbath.

When the demands become stronger,  
may we remember that all you ask of us  
is to love and serve you,  
just as you have loved and served us  
through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.  
Amen.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the “pharaohs” of today’s world?
2. What messages are these pharaohs sending to teens?
3. As a young person, what does it look like to follow commandments 1–4 in today’s world?
4. What is one thing you can do in the week ahead to practice Sabbath as resistance to anxiety?

SAMPLE SESSION