

# Celebrate Sabbath

MATTHEW 12:1–8

## GOAL

Adults explore the intentions behind Sabbath and let go of some assumptions about why we observe Sabbath.

Note: bit.ly addresses are case-sensitive.



Visit our YouTube channel, [bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR](https://bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR), for conversation starter videos.

## PRAYER

As I dive into your Word and message around Sabbath, may I reframe my Sabbath practice toward celebrating and strengthening relationships with you and your people. Amen.

## THIS SESSION

Sabbath is something we are told to remember, observe, keep, and honor. Historically, this came with prohibitions for certain activities that could take our focus off God. There was a sense that the less we did, the more we were observing the holy day. Increasingly today, weekend days fill with a busyness that mirrors our workdays.

Practicing Sabbath calls us to stop. We are invited to cease the frenzied push to fill our lives and our days with hectic obligations. Honoring Sabbath encourages us to move differently, to take a break from the rhythm of the everyday, to set aside a holy day for holy purposes. We celebrate God's gift of Sabbath by creating time in our lives to honor the need for rest, restoration, mercy, and compassion. Honoring Sabbath allows us to reorient ourselves to relationships with God, ourselves, and others. We are called to forget a legalistic enforcement of Sabbath and to step away from a culturally co-opted Sabbath. Instead, we choose Sabbath practices that draw us into a more meaningful encounter with God and the world around us.

## THE BIBLE STORY

In Matthew 12:1–8, the Pharisees chastise Jesus and his disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath. Jesus defends his disciples, pointing out that people do things that are technically unlawful on the Sabbath all the time and are yet innocent—including the Pharisees! Jesus redefines and reshapes Sabbath, returning it to God's original intent: a day of feasting and celebration with God. Obviously, hunger was not appropriate on a day of feasting. He tells the Pharisees that meeting human need through mercy and compassion is more important than adhering to the letter of religious laws regarding Sabbath observance. Jesus concludes by emphasizing that he is Lord of the Sabbath; he has the divine authority to determine faithful ways to honor Sabbath.

## SESSION PREPARATION

Depending on the options you choose:

- “Tracing Sabbath through Scripture” (p. 6): On separate index cards, write the Scripture references listed. Number the index cards 1–14.

# GETTING STARTED

## WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Welcome participants and allow time for gathering activities particular to your group (*introductions, offering, prayer concerns, and announcements*). Review the summary of the practice found in the Unit Overview on page 4 of the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Explain that a more detailed discussion of the practice can be found in the foundational essay that begins on page 45 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Encourage participants to read the essay during the course of the next four sessions.

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- This and all sessions require that the leader and participants have their copy of the *Adult Reflection Guide* with them.

## WELCOMING SABBATH RITUAL

Invite participants to say the words of Psalm 46:10 aloud: “Be still, and know that I am God.” One person says the verse, emphasizing the first word. The person to their right repeats the verse, emphasizing the second word, and so on. If there are more than eight people in your group, have the next person emphasize the first word again and continue in the same manner until each person has said the verse.

# INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or more options.

## CONVERSATION STARTER VIDEO

Show the “*Welcoming Sabbath Overview*” video and the “*Celebrate Sabbath, Session 1*” video from the Growing Faith YouTube channel ([bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR](https://bit.ly/FMYouTubeGFR)). Lead a brief conversation about participants’ thoughts and questions the videos prompt as you introduce the practice.

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## SHABBAT

Direct participants to read the opening paragraph in the “Unit Overview” on page 4 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Ask:

- ➔ What have you been taught about keeping Sabbath?
- ➔ In what ways do you keep Sabbath now? What motivates you to do this?
- ➔ What appeals to you about taking one day a week off to celebrate and rest?

## THINKING ABOUT SABBATH

Refer participants to the quote bubbles on page 5 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Read aloud the quotations and use the questions on the page for discussion:

- ➔ Which quotation resonates with you as you think about honoring Sabbath?
- ➔ What do you *not do* on Sabbath?
- ➔ What do you *do* on Sabbath?
- ➔ How does the quotation from Isaiah 30:15 inform your thinking about Sabbath?

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Choose one or both options.

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Bibles

## REINTERPRETING SABBATH LAW

Before reading Matthew 12:1–8, introduce the passage using the paragraph beginning with “Matthew 12:1–8” on page 9 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Have participants take turns reading aloud the Scripture verse-by-verse. Discuss:

- ➔ What new interpretation of Scripture does Jesus offer? How does it apply to his disciples’ actions?
- ➔ What is “greater than the temple” that Jesus references here?
- ➔ How does this apply to your understanding of Sabbath law? To your observance of Sabbath?

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Bibles

## KEEPING SABBATH

Invite volunteers to read the parts of Narrator, Jesus, and Pharisee. Read Matthew 12:1–8 in parts while others follow in their Bibles. Invite participants to ask questions and to share what the story brings up for them. Discuss:

- ➔ Why did Jesus’ disciples pluck grain from the fields?
- ➔ Do you think the disciples were wrong for doing this? How could they have done things differently?
- ➔ Jesus responds with two answers: (1) others have ignored Sabbath laws; (2) there is something greater than temple practices here. How do Jesus’ responses challenge the Pharisees?
- ➔ What do these responses teach us about Sabbath? About Jesus?

# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Choose one or both options.

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## KEEPING SABBATH HOLY

The *Adult Reflection Guide* suggests a couple of videos to watch that talk about Sabbath on page 10. If people have watched them, invite them to tell what they learned. An additional video that summarizes some of the information covered in this practice might be helpful to see. It is produced by the YouTube channel “Life, Hope & Truth” sponsored by the Church of God, a theologically conservative denomination. Show the YouTube video “The 4th Commandment: Keeping the Sabbath Holy” ([bit.ly/FMFourthCommandment](https://bit.ly/FMFourthCommandment), 5:30). Discuss:

- ➔ What new insights were presented about Sabbath as “set apart by God”?
- ➔ How does “keeping Sabbath holy” differ from taking a day off from work?
- ➔ How can keeping Sabbath strengthen our relationship with God, others, and our world?
- ➔ Did you disagree with anything the presenter said? Why?

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Bibles

Prepared index cards and pens

## TRACING SABBATH THROUGH SCRIPTURE

On separate index cards, write these Scripture references. Number the cards 1–14. For smaller groups, give participants more than one card.

- Genesis 2:1–3
- Leviticus 23:1–3
- Exodus 20:8–11
- Numbers 15:32–36

- Numbers 28:9–10
- Nehemiah 13:15–22
- Psalm 23:1–3
- Isaiah 1:10–17
- Isaiah 58:13–14
- Jeremiah 17:21–27
- Ezekiel 20:12–16; 23:38
- Matthew 12:1–8
- Colossian 2:16–17
- Hebrews 4:9–11

Explain that, throughout Scripture, there are models, instructions, laws, and advice for God’s people regarding Sabbath. Distribute prepared index cards to participants. Have each person read the Scripture on their card and summarize what is said about Sabbath. Participants tell about their assigned Scripture to gain a perspective on ways Sabbath has been practiced across the scope of the Bible. Ask:

- ➔ What consistencies around keeping Sabbath do you find across Scripture?
- ➔ What do you find about keeping Sabbath that surprises you?
- ➔ How do these messages about keeping Sabbath inform the way you understand or practice Sabbath?

## PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Choose one or both options.

### PRACTICING SABBATH

Direct participants to “Practicing the Practice” on pages 12–13 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Read aloud the opening questions. The two key questions for celebrating Sabbath keeping are:

- ➔ What will you stop doing on the Sabbath?
- ➔ What will you do on the Sabbath?

Have participants work independently to list their responses to these questions in their *Adult Reflection Guides*. They may refer to the common Sabbath practices on page 11 and suggestions on pages 12 and 13 for things people stop doing on Sabbath and ones they intentionally do and then record their personal lists.

As participants work, draw a T-chart on a sheet on newsprint. Gather the group and invite them to share their lists as they are comfortable. Record these on the newsprint chart. Encourage participants to add new ideas to their own notes. Challenge them to identify at least one activity to stop and one to do to honor Sabbath in the coming week. They will be invited to talk about their experience in the next session.

### WALKING WITH JESUS

Use the suggestion for resisting society’s consumeristic narrative on page 14 in the *Adult Reflection Guide* to lead the group in a guided meditation for walking and talking with Jesus. Use these instructions:

- Invite participants to relax and sit comfortably. Place their hands in their laps and their feet on the ground. Close their eyes and pay attention to their breathing.
- Tell them to imagine that they are in a warm, sunlit wheat field, walking with Jesus and his disciples. See the wheat stalks bending gently in the breeze, their husks plump and ready for picking.

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- Pens
  - Newsprint and markers

- Imagine that, as they walk, Jesus says, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath. Come to me with your needs and your questions.”
- Imagine turning to Jesus and asking him a question about keeping Sabbath today.
  - What would you ask? Ask him a question.
  - What might Jesus’ answer be? Listen for his answer.
- Imagine living into Jesus’ advice. Notice the feelings that surround this Sabbath practice.
- Tell participants to return to this space and slowly open their eyes.

Invite volunteers to talk about insights gained on practicing Sabbath from the guided meditation or from activities in this session.

## FOLLOWING JESUS

### CELEBRATING GOD’S SABBATH

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Explain that the Hebrew phrase *Shalom Alehem* is a traditional Jewish poem recited upon returning home from worship on the night of the Sabbath. It roughly translates, “Peace be upon you.”

In 2018, a flashmob gathered in Israel’s Ben Gurion International Airport to mark the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel. The group of young musicians and dancers broke into joyful singing and dancing, welcoming young people traveling to Israel from around the world for a Birthright Israel pilgrimage (*Taglit*). The song is a fitting celebration of God’s blessing and Sabbath.

Show the YouTube video “הבאנו שלום עליכם”—Hevenu Shalom Alehem—Jerusalem Academy Flashmob for Taglit at Ben Gurion Airport” ([bit.ly/FMHevenu](https://bit.ly/FMHevenu), 3:00). Ask:

- When have you experienced or expressed such joy?
- When have you known Sabbath to include joy like this?
- How is this song fitting for celebrating Sabbath?

### CLOSING PRAYER

Refer to the closing prayer on page 14 in the *Adult Reflection Guide*. Invite participants to pray it in unison.