

Semicontinuous  
**1 Sam. 3:1–10**  
 (11–20)  
**Ps. 139:1–6, 13–18**

Complementary  
**Deut. 5:12–15**  
**Ps. 81:1–10**  
**2 Cor. 4:5–12**  
**Mark 2:23–3:6**

# Doing Sabbath

## Goal for the Session

Adults will consider practices that observe Sabbath in light of Jesus' conflict with religious leaders over actions done on the Sabbath.

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Mark 2:23–3:6

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," Judith Hoch Wray

Mark 2:23–28 is linked to Mark 3:1–6 by two major themes: (a) what is permissible (or lawful) to do on the Sabbath; and (b) the relationship of humanity (*anthropos*) to the Sabbath. Mark's account prepares the way for the early Christian community to establish its distinct identity. The account ends with Jesus at the center of the synagogue, having demonstrated his lordship of the Sabbath, standing with the human whose hand is now restored. The accusers leave and, ironically, immediately demonstrate their own desecration of the Sabbath by plotting with the Herodians to kill Jesus.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," Wendy Farley

Each element of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees has to do with basic observances that characterize not only Jewish but also Christian piety: forgiveness of sins; conventions concerning what, when, and with whom we eat; honoring the Sabbath. These are particular ways in which we sanctify time and space. This conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees contrasts religion that hardens hearts with the gospel that opens hearts to the ubiquitous presence of God and gives birth to compassion and joy.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," Don E. Saliers

What was the intention of "Sabbath" in the first place? Here we recall that it was a day of rest directly related to the holiness and the goodness of creation. It also carries the resonance of liberation from captivity and slavery. If Jesus counters the pharisaic objection found in Mark by claiming the Sabbath was made for human beings, not the other way around, then we begin to understand that Jesus is actually calling for liberation and restoration of the meaning of Sabbath. Christ's authority is greater than any human voice, no matter how pious, no matter how deeply entrenched in religious tradition.

#### NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Nibs Stroupe

This passage asks of readers in every age: What are the essential categories of our lives that Jesus threatens? What have we made divine in our lives that should remain mortal and finite? Since the Sabbath is the central focus of conflict in this passage, we should look first at the concept of the Sabbath in our time. As always, there is powerful good news here. At the same time that we are threatened by Jesus, our hearts long for him. Who among us does not want to be freed from our consumer lifestyle that is killing our souls and polluting the earth? This text reminds us that the journey to life goes through the cross, but that the resurrection awaits as well.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Mark 2:23–3:6**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Adults in your group will have a variety of ideas and traditions that shape how they practice Sabbath, such as going to church, spending time with family, refraining from work, and others. Today's text challenges you and members of your group to hold your traditions in light of a simple question: what does *sabbath* mean? More specifically, what practices are consistent with Sabbath's purpose? Some adults are forced to revisit Sabbath's meaning and observance when their vocation requires them to work on Sunday. Adults of all age groups may likewise wonder how Sabbath as a *holy day* can survive the wider culture's emphasis on the weekend as a *holiday*.

*Holy God, may your Spirit guide me in my preparations for and in my leading of this session. In Jesus Christ, Amen.*

**YOU WILL NEED**

- newsprint, markers
- Bibles
- pens, pencils
- copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 1
- option 2: newsprint or board, markers
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 3

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, post two sheets of newsprint, one titled "Sabbath Means . . ." and the other "Ways to Keep Sabbath."

Welcome participants as they arrive. As you do, direct them to the two sheets of newsprint and markers. Ask each adult to write at least one entry on each sheet.

When all participants have added their responses on the newsprint sheets, invite them to spend a moment reading and reflecting on what everyone has written. Discuss connections and contrasts among the responses. Ask adults to briefly identify how they came to hold their understandings of Sabbath. (If you have a large group, form groups of four or five for the discussion.)

Relate that today's focus text involves a pair of stories about conflict between Jesus and religious leaders over the meaning and practices of keeping Sabbath. Pray aloud, using this prayer or one of your own:

*God, the giver of Sabbath, open our minds and traditions to Jesus' teachings and practices of Sabbath. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Sabbath Origins). Read and discuss the material in the paragraphs on the three "origin" texts regarding the Sabbath. Consider how they relate to the understandings and practices of Sabbath written on the newsprint sheets. Invite participants to hold the two sets of questions at the end of the resource sheet in mind, as well as the concluding paragraph, as they engage the focus passage.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Mark 2:23–28. Ask adults to imagine silently how they would have experienced this encounter and reacted to Jesus’ words if they were one of the disciples or one of the Pharisees. After a few moments form pairs and have partners discuss these perspectives.

Read aloud Mark 3:1–5 to the group. Again, ask adults to silently imagine how they would have experienced this encounter and Jesus’ words and actions if they were the man with the withered hand or those gathered in the synagogue. Following a few moments for reflection, have adults discuss these perspectives with their partners. Gather the group together. Invite pairs to summarize their imagined perspectives of these characters in both halves of today’s passage.

Note that Mark 3:1 says Jesus “again” enters the synagogue. Conflict stories between Jesus and religious leaders are not arguments for Jesus’ rejecting Judaism. Jesus was a practicing Jew who sought to reform, not destroy, Judaism’s traditions.

Direct attention to the first question at the end of Resource Sheet 2. Invite participants to lift up words or phrases from Mark 2:23—3:6 that, for them, relate to Sabbath themes of creation and rest. Besides identifying the words or phrases, encourage adults to dig deeper into what role these details play in the story on both sides of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Take up the second question at the end of Resource Sheet 2. Talk about ways in which the themes of freedom and deliverance are woven into this narrative and are part of the conflict that ensues. Ask these follow-up questions:

- ✪ What would the Pharisees identify as the freedom(s) and/or deliverance they defend?
- ✪ What would Jesus identify as the freedom(s) and/or deliverance he defends?

Have a volunteer read aloud Mark 2:27. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 and invite adults to silently read the “What” excerpt. Talk about the importance of Jesus’ words in verse 27. Form three groups: one representing the religious leaders, one representing the man with the withered hand, and one representing the other persons in the synagogue that day. Ask each group to discuss the following questions and bring a brief summary back to the whole group:

- ✪ Do you hear Jesus’ teaching on the Sabbath as a welcome or threatening word; why?
- ✪ What practices of Sabbath would Jesus’ words in verse 37 suggest to you?

After time for groups to discuss, gather together and ask groups to share their reports. Read aloud Mark 3:6. Invite silent reflection on the following questions:

- ✪ How does this verse communicate the seriousness with which the keeping of Sabbath was held in this time?
- ✪ How might the seriousness of Sabbath in Jesus’ day move us to reassess the value we place on Sabbath and its practices today?

EASY  
PREP

Be sensitive to the ways in which some adults may react to the possibility of “weekend” as a rival to, rather than an opportunity for, Sabbath.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. What Takes Precedence?** Jesus’ reordering of the priority of humankind over Sabbath presents an opportunity and challenge for us to revisit how and why we do Sabbath in our time. Read aloud the “So What” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Discuss how Jesus’ words about the relationship between humankind and Sabbath might renew understandings and practices of Sabbath today. Be specific. Encourage each adult to focus on renewing or adding one Sabbath practice this week that reflects Sabbath’s creation as a gift, not a burden, for human life.
- 2. Sabbath and/or Weekend** As Jesus’ teaching on and practice of doing Sabbath once conflicted with religious leaders, so it may conflict today with the secular exaltation of “weekend.” Brainstorm ideas on what “weekend” means today: as portrayed in commercials and culture, as actually practiced by adults. It may be helpful to record ideas on the board or newsprint. Discuss possible conflicts between the ideal of “weekend” and the purpose of Sabbath. Identify how individuals and families might keep Sabbath from being overwhelmed by or lost in the midst of weekend. Invite adults to focus on one new or renewed practice of Sabbath they will take on this coming week.
- 3. Prepare for Sabbath** Our consideration of what constitutes Sabbath practices invites prayerful preparation before the Sabbath arrives. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 3 (Preparing for Sabbath Practices). Review its opening paragraph with adults. Invite questions about the assignment it details. Encourage adults to use this guide in the coming week—and perhaps even in weeks following—to renew their practice(s) of Sabbath.

## CLOSING

Direct participants’ attention to the newsprint sheets about Sabbath’s meaning and practices completed in Gathering. Ask adults to call out what should be added to those lists based on the focus scripture and add them to the lists.

Gather in a circle. Invite participants to identify one thing they will remember most about Sabbath from this session. Affirm it may be a new insight, a question, or even a disagreement, by noting all of those are deeply involved in today’s passage.

Invite participants to join hands, and offer this or another prayer of closing:

*God of Sabbath, giver of its rest, source of its redeeming freedom: be with us in our keeping of Sabbath. And may our practices of doing Sabbath, whether old or new, be consistent with your good purposes not just for this day, but for the whole of humankind, for whose sake this day has been fashioned. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for June 9, 2024, or email it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

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## Sabbath Origins


### Origin 1 .....

Genesis 2:2 relates that on the seventh day of creation, God “rested” from the work of fashioning creation. The Hebrew word translated as “resting” is *shabath*, the root of the English *sabbath*. Before Sabbath was a day, it was a verb—the action of taking rest. Indeed, Genesis 2:3 goes on to say that the act of God’s *shabath* is why God “blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.” Sabbath is meant to convey God’s blessing on creation. 

### Origin 2 .....

In the listing of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, the commandment given in verses 8–11 opens with “remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.” This commandment’s ensuing injunctions against labor on that day are attributed in verse 11 directly back to the Genesis 2 account. God rested, and in that resting came blessing and consecration. Remembrance of Sabbath is remembrance of God’s hand in and then rest from the work of God’s good creation. 

### Origin 3 .....

The book of Exodus is not the only source for the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 5:6–21 likewise recounts the commandments God gave to Israel through Moses. And while the commandment given in Deuteronomy 5:12–15 also concerns Sabbath, it appeals to a different tradition for keeping Sabbath. “Observe the sabbath day,” verse 12 begins—but why? “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there . . . therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (v. 15). Observing Sabbath is remembrance of how God delivered the Hebrew people from slavery into freedom. And like the liturgy of the Passover ritual in Deuteronomy 6:20–21, such remembrance involves identifying ourselves as the ones God delivered. Sabbath is kept in remembering and reliving God’s redeeming actions. 

As you read Mark 2:23–3:6, keep these origins in mind by considering the following questions:

- Where, and in whom, do you see the nature of creation and the blessing of God’s “resting” playing out in these two episodes?
- In what ways do Deuteronomy’s Sabbath themes of deliverance and freedom shape the conflicts over keeping Sabbath in these two episodes?

*Please note:* the conflicts in Mark 2:23–3:6 do not arise because either of the two parties rejects the importance of Sabbath. The conflicts arise because Jesus and these religious leaders are both committed to their understandings of Sabbath.

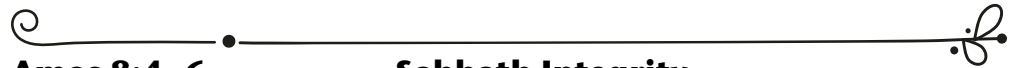
## Preparing for Sabbath Practices

It is not uncommon to think of Sabbath as preparing us for the week ahead. But what if we turned that equation around: how might we prepare for Sabbath—not simply for its coming, but for how Sabbath might be fully practiced? What follows are a set of daily readings, reflection questions, and activities to guide your preparation to practice Sabbath. Set aside a time each day to engage these words and to seek God’s guidance in shaping your Sabbath observance.



**Exodus 20:8**                      **Remember the Holy**

*The literal meaning of “holy” is “set apart or consecrated to God.”  
What is one specific practice you can do that will invest your keeping of Sabbath with that meaning?*



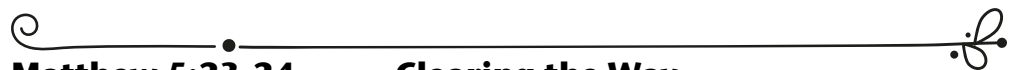
**Amos 8:4–6**                      **Sabbath Integrity**

*What practice might help you hold together Sabbath’s connection with God seamlessly with practices of justice and compassion toward neighbor?*



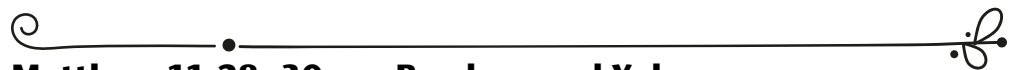
**Isaiah 30:15a**                      **Rest that Renews**

*Where in your life (emotionally, relationally) do you most need rest?  
How will you open yourself and that need to the gift and discipline of Sabbath as rest?*



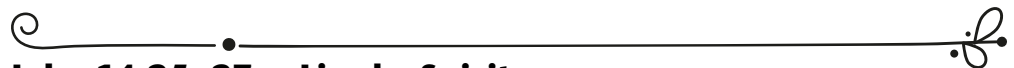
**Matthew 5:23-24**                      **Clearing the Way**

*What needs for reconciliation—with others, with self, with God—may need tending in order to more freely and honestly enter Sabbath?*



**Matthew 11:28–30**                      **Burdens and Yokes**

*What is one weight that you long to have taken from your shoulders?  
What is one discipline or service that following Jesus calls you to take on? Bring them to Sabbath.*



**John 14:25–27**                      **Live by Spirit**

*How do you experience Spirit in Sabbath gatherings and practices? Pray for Spirit’s leading in your keeping of Sabbath and in Sabbath’s empowerment of every day.*