

## Sabbath

### Week 2: Ceasing

In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys; and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day; and I warned them at that time against selling food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of merchandise and sold them on the sabbath to the people of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I remonstrated with the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the sabbath day? Did not your ancestors act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."

When it began to be dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the sabbath. And I set some of my servants over the gates, to prevent any burden from being brought in on the sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

**Nehemiah 13:15-22**

"We start with the importance of ceasing on a day set apart as holy because the name *Sabbath* comes originally from the Hebrew verb *Shabbat*, which means primarily 'to cease or desist.' In Exodus 31:16-17 we are told that 'the Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant' because it is a 'sign between me [the LORD] and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.' Hebrew scholars translate the last phrase as 'he ceased and was refreshed.' Genesis 2:2 literally says that God 'ceased' on the seventh day...

"[Sabbath practice can help us] recognize the great healing that can take place in our lives when we get into the rhythm of setting aside every seventh day all of our efforts to provide for ourselves and make our way in the world. A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we learn to let God take care of us – not by becoming passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives."

**an excerpt from "Keeping the Sabbath Wholly" by Marva Dawn**

Nehemiah was fearful of reliving another exile. He knew that disobedience to Sabbath-keeping was one of the things that led the people of Israel to be exiled in the first place (Nehemiah 13:15-22). In the text above, he had to implement strong measures to get people to stop working.

"Work" is the primary thing we do to advance our own cause during the week—to make money, to make our name great, to achieve our own goals, to supply our own needs.

For some of us, work is going to class and doing homework. For some of us, work is email, meetings, projects or writing. For some of us, we work at our play, trying to improve as musicians, artists, or athletes.

While some of us may create art on Sabbath as a way to relax, for the artists among us, creating art may be our primary work. Others of us may go for a swim on Sabbath as a way to play, but for those on the team who are trying to drop times in our events, going for a swim is strongly linked to work.

What happens when we stop working and controlling the things around us? When we don't operate machines, or run errands, or answer emails? Consider this: when we cease interfering in the world we are acknowledging that it is God's world.

**Here are some questions to talk about with your group:**

What are the primary ways in which you work?

What are the primary ways in which you play?

Why do we resist stopping our work?

What is your greatest worry for the future? How are you trying to secure that future?

Why did God stop?

Does the impulse to produce and consume define your life?

In what areas of your life is it most difficult for you to stop working/producing?

The Heidelberg Catechism (one of the confessions of the reformed faith that helps us engage the Word of God) tells that an element of our Sabbath practice is meant for us to "rest from our sin." (Q&A 103)

- What is one thing in our lives we would really like to stop doing?
- Can we stop that thing for one day each week?
- How can others help you cease?

**Closing Prayer:**

*Lord of the Sabbath, it is hard for us to stop working, and harder still to stop worshipping work.*

*We confess that our busy-ness often substitutes for our holiness.*

*Forgive us, Lord, and help us to be still enough to know you. Help us to understand that the sabbath is what keeps us from unraveling, that it knits up the harried and makes them holy, that it even helps to heal creation from the fall. Amen.*