

The Lord's Day

Devotional Reading: Psalm 118:19–24

Background Scripture: Genesis 2:2–3; Matthew 12:1–14; 28:1–10

Exodus 20:8–11

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Romans 14:4–6

⁴ Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Revelation 1:10

¹⁰ On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,



Key Text

“In six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” —Exodus 20:11

Enduring Beliefs of the Church

Unit 3: The Church and Its Teachings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Exodus 20:8–11.
2. Compare and contrast the Old Testament command to honor the Sabbath with the practices of worship in the early church.
3. List ways to bring rest and worship together in the upcoming week.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Great Birthday Debate
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Sabbath Day (Exodus 20:8–11)

- A. Keep It Holy (v. 8)
- B. Not for Labor (vv. 9–10)
- C. Created by God (v. 11)
Resting Well

II. Honoring Special Days (Romans 14:4–6)

- A. No Basis to Judge (v. 4)
- B. Needs Reflection (v. 5)
- C. Always for the Lord (v. 6)
Not How, but Why

III. The Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10)

Conclusion

- A. King of Creation, Lord of Every Day
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Great Birthday Debate

I have never liked birthday celebrations. I can't keep track of dates; I can't find the right words for a card; and I don't even like cake.

But when I got married, I learned that my opinion was not popular—not by a long shot. I think I knew that beforehand, but my wife would never let me impose my anti-birthday views on others. In her family, birthdays were a time when a person felt valued, when other priorities could be postponed.

You can probably guess which side my kids chose in the “great birthday debate.” I have to admit, it gives me pause to see our birthday traditions evolve each year. I witness that the simple acts of *remembering* and *doing something* change my son or daughter's perspective. They wake with abundant joy to face a day of attention, and I think they've started to chip away at my indifference. I suppose we could honor one another on *any day*, but it sure helps when it's on the calendar.

B. Lesson Context

The giving of the Sinai covenant comes at a key point in the history of Israel. The Ten Commandments or *Decalogue* (which means “ten words”) convey wisdom from God. By following these commands, the Israelites were invited to live at peace with one another and with the God who had just freed them from servitude in Egypt (Exodus 19:4–6).

The fourth of these commandments, Sabbath, describes a practice of refraining from work on the final day of each week. It is without any precise equivalent in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The distinctiveness of Sabbath practice became especially apparent when inhabitants of Judah went into exile and later returned to the land after it had been repopulated with other groups (sixth century BC). Alongside infant circumcision (Leviticus 12:3) and restrictive food laws (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), Sabbath became a mark of Jewish identity in the Persian, Greek, and Roman periods and the centuries before the birth of Jesus.

But as Christianity, which began as a Jewish movement, grew to include many Gentiles, a question that the earliest of churches had to answer was,

When shall we meet? Christian “voluntary associations,” which is how churches were seen by Romans, chose to meet before dawn on the first day of the week (Sunday rather than Saturday). Outsiders noticed the habit of Christians to gather on Sunday mornings. For instance, Pliny the Younger—a second-century Roman authority trying to root out the Christians in his region—reports to the emperor Trajan that Christians gather before dawn on a particular day, when they sing hymns to Christ.

I. The Sabbath Day

(Exodus 20:8–11)

A. Keep It Holy (v. 8)

8. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

The Ten Commandments are a concise summary of Israel’s covenant obligations. Israelites would speak of the Mosaic Law as a blessing and a gift, not as an onerous set of expectations. And Israel’s poets, the psalmists, find “delight” in keeping God’s law, for the statutes of God are a guide and a fount of understanding, not a burden (Psalms 1:2; 19:7–11; 119:70, 77; etc.). Much later, a Pharisee-turned-ambassador of Christ, the apostle Paul, will write, “In my inner being I delight in God’s law” (Romans 7:22).

“Observe the sabbath” is wording that will appear in Exodus 31:14, 16; but the main verb of the verse before us is *remember*. Since something that is *holy* is set aside for God’s use, the Israelites must give attention to *the Sabbath day* for the purpose of reserving it for God to use. Other things can be set aside for sacred use: a space for God’s presence to manifest, parts of a sacrifice designated for God, or even the altar for sacrifices (Exodus 19:23; 29:27, 36–37).

But exactly what does it mean to remember a day and, in so doing, consecrate a day for God? We find the answer from the origin of Sabbath, which is explained by two related contexts. First, Sabbath, the last of a seven-day week, caps off and concludes the activity of God’s creation of the universe (Genesis 2:1–3; compare Exodus 20:11, below). Second, Sabbath observance recalls God’s rescue of the Israelites from oppression in Egypt, where rest was not

allowed (see Deuteronomy 5:15). Thus, the imperative *remember the Sabbath day* invites people to credit God for his supreme work of bringing order to creation and his deliverance of his people from “rest-less” oppression. Only God can give order, purpose, and freedom, both to the cosmos and to the covenant people with whom he dwells.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do you set aside a day of the week for sacred use and worship?

Digging Deeper

What challenges do you face when doing so? What barriers keep you from remembering and setting aside a day?

B. Not for Labor (vv. 9–10)

9. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

The kind of remembrance that retains Sabbath for God’s use is not just “remember that Sabbath exists” or “remember that Saturday comes after Friday.” God provides a framework that will require active preparation during the *six days* before each Sabbath. Each of the six days that are not Sabbath are also set aside, but for *labor*. As in the collection of manna, which required extra *work* before the Sabbath, the Israelites must prepare (Exodus 16:21–30).

To the ancient audience, an incentive to work is already obvious. For tribal nomads, work is always at hand. And to anyone who does not tend livestock or work in an agrarian economy, the labor of ancient Israelites would seem endless: tarry long enough, and animals will suffer; fail to gather firewood, and your family might freeze; stop producing fabric, and you will soon have no clothes. But because the work of living is endless, the radical invitation of this verse is to restrain from work so that each day is not the same.

The invitation is a generous gift. For a group who had just emerged from slavery and unrelenting labor, God demonstrates that faithfulness to his command and his rule will not result in want.

10. “but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any

God rested. Are you resting?



Visual for Lesson 11. Ask learners to consider their own habits of rest. How can this lesson inform their weekly practices?

work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

To be deliberately unproductive for a day each week is an act of trust. It requires extra work in advance so that the Sabbath is not a day without food or water. Yet God knows that humans will look for loopholes. God prevents the redistribution of duties onto others (children, servants, even animals), a temptation to maintain the mere appearance of personal observance while making everyone else's life harder. The call is for a total cessation of labor, from the highest to the lowest, even during the busiest seasons of harvest (Exodus 34:21).

The concern for any *foreigner residing in your towns* is explained later in Exodus 22:21, which recounts the experience of God's people as foreigners in Egypt. The inclusion of the foreigner is an extension of the gift of Sabbath. Whereas Pharaoh oppressed the Hebrews (foreigners to the Egyptians), the Israelites shall invite foreigners to share in Sabbath and find respite from work.

The regular cessation of work might be healthy for people and animals, or it might even lead to greater productivity during the workweek, but the text cites none of these rationalizations for Sabbath. Neither do the instructions cite human enjoyment, for the Sabbath belongs to *the Lord your God*. Yet by ordering working lives before God and keeping the agreement struck at Sinai, the Israelites shall be promised a series of abun-

dant blessings (see Deuteronomy 28:1–14). The blessings that only God can bring are far more important than the lost labor of a day.

C. Created by God (v. 11)

11. “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

This verse explains the basis for Sabbath: God's ordered cosmos began with an ordered creation. The very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, describes the creation of *the heavens and the earth* (compare Genesis 2:4). God is the creative maker who separates, orders, and gives purpose to each domain: *earth, the sea, and all that is in them*.

God *rested on the seventh day* from the work of creation, not because he had grown tired or needed a break from strenuous activity. That might be why humans rest, but not why God rests. God rests because creation is his kingdom, and he sits enthroned above it all. Just as God finds rest in his temple on Mount Zion (Psalm 132:13–14), God rests on the seventh day as the grand finale to creation.

Thus, Israel shall remember the Sabbath and celebrate God's role as the Creator. By placing God at the center of their lives—which is the only way to accommodate a recurring day without productive work—Israel can be shaped by the habit of observing Sabbath and setting it aside for God's purposes.

What Do You Think?

How might God's decision to rest after his act of creation affect your understanding of a weekly day of rest?

Digging Deeper

Compare Deuteronomy 5:15; how does this verse contribute to your understanding?

Resting Well

One summer, I worked in a vineyard in France. Each workday began at sunrise and continued until sunset. By the time the sunlight faded, our hands were bruised from picking, our fingers were

red from grape sap, and our legs were tired from lifting heavy buckets of the season's bounty.

At dusk, we set down our tools, climbed into a three-wheeled cart, and went for a hot meal. We spent evenings enjoying one another's company, giving thanks, eating local food, and, on occasion, enjoying the fruit of our toil: freshly pressed juice!

Instructions about work and Sabbath remind me of the delicate work-rest balance of the vineyard. We worked hard; we also rested well. What do your current rhythms of work and rest look like? How are they honoring God and his creation? —N. V.

II. Honoring Special Days

(Romans 14:4–6)

A. No Basis to Judge (v. 4)

4. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Many centuries after the giving of the Sinai covenant, the apostle Paul writes to Christ-followers who gather within households in the city of Rome (Romans 16:5). He faces a new situation. Instead of speaking to an exclusively Jewish audience (who would be included under the Sinai covenant), Paul writes to Jews and Gentiles—those who have given their allegiance to God's Messiah, Jesus. The Gentile Christians have neither become Jews nor adopted all the same practices.

Paul cannot point to stipulations of the Sinai covenant as if these are agreed-upon foundations for universal behavior, but neither shall Paul say that any part of Scripture is irrelevant or outdated. To that he would say, "Not at all!" or "Certainly not!" (Romans

3:4, 6, 31). When necessary, Paul is unafraid of demanding strict adherence to a code of conduct (13:13; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5; etc.). But is that how Paul should regulate the observance of sacred days for mixed-ethnic communities of early Christians?

Paul asks a rhetorical question: *Who are you to judge?* We know that Paul wants his audience to avoid a particular kind of judging here since there are other times when he speaks of judging in a positive sense (1 Corinthians 5:12; 6:1–6; etc.). Paul does not say to give up discriminating right from wrong. But he wants his audience to give up acting like a final authority over things that call for individual discernment, certain topics he calls "disputable matters" (Romans 14:1). If we condemn others for these—write people off as hopeless—we risk condemning ourselves when we fall short (2:1–4). Specifically, Paul describes food laws and calendar observances as requiring individual scrutiny (14:2, 5).

Only one person can be our ultimate judge: Christ himself. Paul uses an example from his audience's everyday experience: for *someone else's servant*, what the *master* deems appropriate is what really matters. The metaphor is fitting because the Greek word translated as *master* is the same as *Lord* in this verse. The Lord here is none other than Christ, who is the only worthy judge, the one whose sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection provides a means to salvation and freedom from the enslavement of sin (Romans 6:6).

In other letters, Paul speaks of perseverance for the last days as standing "firm in the Lord" (Philippians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:8), standing "by faith" (2 Corinthians 1:24), or standing "firm in one Spirit" (Philippians 1:27). Just earlier in Romans 5:2, Paul mentions the "grace in which we now stand." Thus, the fuller meaning behind *make them stand* is "make a person fit to be judged favorably on the last day." God can do that, but not us.

B. Needs Reflection (v. 5)

5. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul first mentions

How to Say It

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|-------------|------------------------------|
| Decalogue | Dek-uh-log. |
| Deuteronomy | Due-ter-ahn-uh-me. |
| Galatians | Guh-lay-shunz. |
| Gentiles | Jen-tiles. |
| Leviticus | Leh-vit-ih-kus. |
| Patmos | Pat-muss. |
| Sinai | Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye. |

diet as a matter of personal decision (Romans 14:2), and here, he adds calendar observances as another way that individual habits may differ. Observance of special days would, naturally, include the Sabbath (as explicitly specified in Colossians 2:16). The word translated *considers* is the same as the word translated “judge” in the previous verse. The difference is, whereas Paul is against judging people by these matters, here he presumes that his audience will judge the days—judging days, not people.

Paul does not specify the identity of those “whose faith is weak” or “who are strong” (Romans 14:1; 15:1). These labels do not appear to neatly divide Jewish from Gentile Christians, since only Jewish Christians would have any history of Sabbath practice and observing food laws. Instead, Paul generalizes: some have set aside Sabbath and food laws while others keep them. But the standard is the same for all, Jewish or Gentile. Each is accountable before God (compare Ephesians 4:4–6).

The phrase *each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind* speaks to individual discernment and confidence before God, no matter the choice in such cases. Paul permits differences within the churches. God will accept both the weak and the strong.

What Do You Think?

How can we determine which beliefs are essential (no room for compromise) and which are nonessential?

Digging Deeper

How does this quote inform your approach: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity”?

C. Always for the Lord (v. 6)

6. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Because all servants should be submitted before their mutual *Lord*, Paul precludes any from issuing judgments or blanket demands on other faithful servants, those who maintain a different religious

calendar or diet. If a person *regards one day* as sacred to the Lord, the decision comes by heartfelt devotion. Because honoring Sabbath means respecting God’s rule over space and time, Paul allows that some may deem “every day alike” (Romans 14:5, above), thereby signaling devotion to the creator of each day. The repetition of *to the Lord* conveys the sole criterion for faithfulness in these matters.

Paul’s allowance for individual discernment is harmonious with Christ’s words: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28). Jesus defends a freedom for his disciples to go about their mission without hindrance, at his command. Because Jesus is Lord and ruler of creation, he is free to judge the manner in which his disciples shall honor him.

Paul pairs together the issues of revering days and observing dietary restrictions, showing that he has a greater goal in mind. Paul’s desire is for the peace and unity of Christian communities—and unity does not mean uniformity. He advises selfless consideration before others, giving no reason for any to find offense (Romans 14:13–15). In the end, what matters is life together under the rightful king’s rule, for “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17).

Not How, but Why

Our Christmas Eve meal is a long-standing tradition. Several generations of my family gather around a large table to eat honey-roasted ham, farm eggs, and thick-cut fries—a feast lovingly prepared over several days. It has been this way for as long as I can remember.

However, when I was six I realized that a decadent meal is not a universal habit for Christmas Eve. Some families enjoy a full roast dinner, but others prefer something far simpler. It finally made sense when my mother explained that what matters most is not *how* something is celebrated but *why* it is celebrated—and *for whom*.

The Old Testament goes into great detail regarding the *how*, *when*, and *where* of celebrations and observances, yet Paul downplays those in favor of the *why*. We do not celebrate certain

days because we think it's necessary for everyone else to follow our lead. We celebrate them because they are important to us, our families, and for our personal relationship with God. —N. V.

III. The Lord's Day

(Revelation 1:10)

10. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,

Another early Christian writer—John, while on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9)—uses a phrase that comes to distinguish the weekly observances of Christians: *the Lord's Day*. On this occasion, John describes being *in the Spirit*, meaning a trancelike state of prayerful meditation before God.

The phrase *the Lord's Day* appears here alone in the entire New Testament. But elsewhere, Christians are already said to be gathering on “the first day of the week” for the sharing of a meal (Acts 20:7). The same wording is repeated in the texts of all four Gospels (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19). The Evangelists all say that Jesus’ resurrection occurred on “the first day of the week”—that is, Sunday.

Christians of the first and second centuries developed a reputation for meeting before dawn on Sunday, the resurrection morning that began God’s new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). Because the Sabbath is a practice that honors the Creator, it is only fitting that Jesus—who was with the Father from the beginning, coequal, and responsible for all that was made (John 1:1; Colossians 1:15–17)—is honored in this observance.

today? Answers to this question have needlessly divided congregations and families who seek to devote time and space to God. A consistent thread runs from the gift of Sabbath, to the discernment of early churches, to the earliest Christians who designate Sunday for celebratory songs: God is king of creation, and Christ the Lord is worthy of praise.

For those who worship the Creator in reverent submission, the fitting response is to place God at the center of all life, to orient everything else around a mission to serve the king. Sabbath honors the rhythms of God’s productive creation, even as God’s people join him in productive work on days that are not Sabbath. According to Paul, we now have the freedom to act with confidence, as Christ’s own servants. Perhaps we may find that a particular day should be reserved for prayer, and we clear space for God by setting aside all distractions. Perhaps, like the earliest Christians, we find that rising early to gather on Sunday will make us peculiar.

But whatever our king expects of us, our duty is not to go about asserting ourselves as the final judge. We can anticipate that, in the splendor of God’s kingdom, there are servants of Christ whose “orders from the king” differ from ours. If we seek peace together, as Paul teaches, we shall communicate best through humble actions, the kindnesses that point back to Christ as Lord of our lives.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do your congregation's Lord's Day services honor God as Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Digging Deeper

How do the service's various practices lead you into a deeper worship of God?

What Do You Think?

How will you seek peace with believers who may have different interpretations of the significance of Sabbath?

Digging Deeper

In what ways has this lesson informed your interpretation of God's gifts of rest and worship?

Conclusion

A. King of Creation, Lord of Every Day

What does the Sabbath mean for Christians

B. Prayer

Lord, you order time and space. We worship you as Lord of our lives. Show us how to devote our time to your kingdom's purposes in both work and rest. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

All our time should be devoted to God.