

## A Guide to Sabbath Observance<sup>1</sup>

- I. **Cautionary Note:** When we look at any guide, steps or “procedures” to Sabbath observance, it is important that we never elevate procedures above principle. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees on this very issue (Mark 2:23-3:6, Luke 6:1-11), it was not the *principle* of the Sabbath that was in question but the Pharisees *procedures*. The disagreement is over practice. Jesus never canceled the use of the Sabbath, he corrected the abuse of it. The Sabbath is a gift of grace, not a chore. All procedures we implement in Sabbath observance must flow out of the Sabbath principle of grace. Therefore, we must not elevate procedures above principle. If grace is not producing obedience in our lives, then the only way we can make a stab at obedience is through legalism. This is surely to be avoided!
- II. **The Scriptures require two kinds of Sabbath observance, positive and negative.**
  - a. By negative observance it is meant that we must abstain from those things which ought not be done on the Sabbath day.
  - b. By positive observance, we must do those things which it is our duty to do on this day.
- III. **Negative Observance**
  - a. We are to abstain from all matters of sinful works and worldly employments (see distinction between works of necessity and mercy below). Some have also held that we are to abstain from worldly recreations (sports, movies, etc.), but many today do not see participation in such activities as violating the Sabbath principle if done for the proper motive (see IV.b below).
  - b. Idleness is prohibited on the Sabbath day. We are active and intelligent beings. We are living souls created in the image of God. Since God is an active God, he cannot be honored by human idleness on the Sabbath day.
- IV. **Positive Observance**
  - a. Our principle occupation on the Sabbath should be public and private exercises of worship.
    - i. Public worship is the gathering of the saints of the local church in a service where the Word of God is preached. Additionally, other church meetings such as Sunday School, Bible study, prayer meetings, etc.
    - ii. Private worship includes a) individual, such as personal Bible reading and prayer; b) family worship, religious instruction of children, etc.; or c) religious conversation and gathering with the saints (meals, fellowship, etc.).
  - b. Holy, spiritual resting does not simply mean abstaining from work or resting for rest’s sake. Instead, we are to rest with a religious motive as a manner of obedience and service to God. We are to rest as a form of devotion. For example, we should be resting in fellowship with other saints or resting in order to be of better service to God in our families and vocations the rest of the week, etc.
  - c. Other than the religious duties listed above, works of necessity and works of mercy are also permissible.

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<sup>1</sup> Largely a summary of Johannes Vos’ commentary on the Larger Catechism, [available here](#).

- i. Works of necessity are those which cannot be avoided or postponed to another day. Examples of this may include feeding our family and animals. Some work which may be postponed can also be performed on this day if it results in eliminating other and greater work on the Sabbath day. For example, if your car breaks down and your choice is between working for 15 minutes to repair it so you can get to church, or walking to church for 2 hours, it is legitimate to repair the car. There is of course room for differing opinions here over what makes a work of necessity. In many ways this is a matter of conscience. The summary principle here is a) that which cannot be postponed and b) that which results in eliminating the greatest possible amount of work on the Sabbath
- ii. Works of mercy is work done without any motive for financial or reputational gain, but instead is done because of sympathy and compassion for human suffering. For example, physicians and nurses may work if scheduled on the Sabbath day. They are entitled to compensation for this work. However, what makes this work legitimate on the Sabbath is not the profit gained but the relieving of suffering.

V. **How do we prepare for the Sabbath?**

- a. By preparing our hearts, to think about the Sabbath and its duties, privileges and blessings beforehand so that we might be in a worshipful state of mind on the Lord's Day.
- b. We must attend to our worldly business beforehand so that we will be free on the Sabbath day. Not only from the business itself, but also from unnecessary thought, worries or stress about worldly business.

VI. **Implications**

- a. The Sabbath is a gift. For many of us it remains unopened, and so we are left bewildered by its implications for our lives. It is a gift which frees us from the worries and burdens this life unnecessarily places on us. As a result of these burdens, many of us find ourselves stretched beyond capacity. The Sabbath is a means of freeing us from these burdens, that our lives may have a proper cadence of work and rest to them.
- b. Remember the motives for the Sabbath. It is grounded in creation (Genesis 2), it is grounded in the moral law (Exodus 28), and it is grounded in redemption (Deuteronomy 5:15).
- c. To take the Sabbath seriously, we must take the restructuring of our lives seriously. This means seriously taking inventory of what we do during the week, such that we set up Sunday to be a day of reverential use and genuine joy. As an example, Neva and I have tried our very hardest to not run errands on Sunday (groceries, etc.) of any kind. We are still working this out for ourselves, as we typically have habitually used Sunday as another weekend day to get "caught up" from the work week.
- d. We must not take this Sabbath principle and distort it to permit idleness. A common joke we say in our house on Sunday is, "Today I'm going to take a nap to the glory of God!" I believe we are permitted to do so – if our goal genuinely is to rest in order to be of better service and to glorify God. It is not permissible if the motive is selfish and born out of laziness.

- e. We have freedom to rest in appropriate ways that are done with the proper motive. However, we must be careful to genuinely test our motives. It is easy to say, “I am watching Netflix today because if I’m rested I will be of better service to God” while in our hearts what we mean is “I really just want to catch up on this show.”
- f. The Sabbath should create a culture where students don’t study on Sunday, consultants don’t catch up on work or put in overtime, and scheduled workers are free to tell their bosses they can’t work on Sunday.<sup>2</sup>
- g. The uniformity Christians have in obedience on this day will not be in our application, but in our principles. In other words, Sabbath observance will probably look a little (or a lot) different for various families and life stages. But the principles where we derive our procedures should be the same, and I’ve tried to lay out some of these principles above.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that this last point can be difficult. I’m not precisely sure how to resolve the tension of, “If I don’t work on Sunday, I’ll be fired and unable to provide for myself and family.” My thought would be if that is the case, then providing for yourself and your family takes precedent. However, an individual in this scenario should simultaneously be looking for a different job that allows them to be free on Sunday.