

Sabbath as the Practice of Justice

A study session for Adults in the Church

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This study may be condensed to one session or expanded for several.

Part 1: Connecting Sabbath and Justice

Read aloud this section as an introduction.

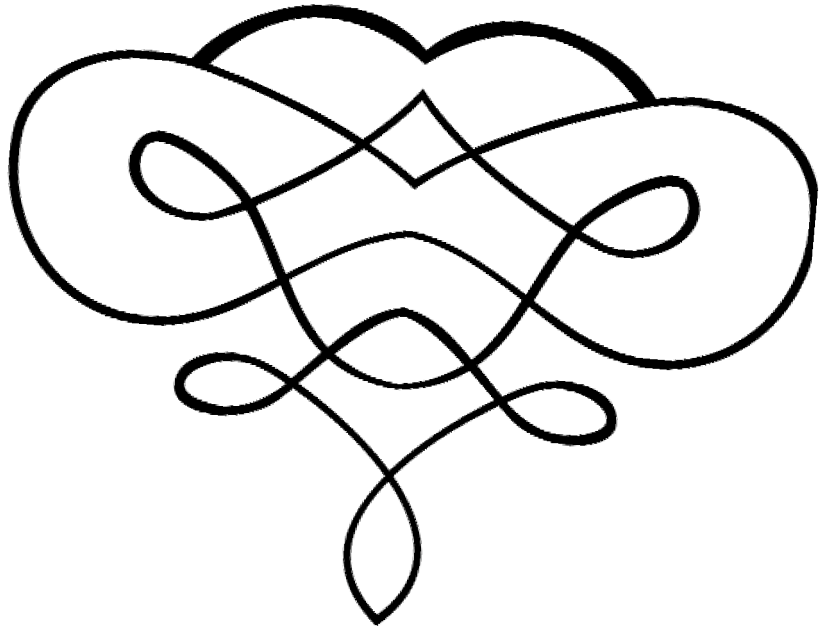
The word “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew verb “shabbath,”—to cease, rest, be completed. The word “justice” means to be equitable, righteous, fair. How can Sabbath be an expression or form of justice?

The prophet Isaiah describes a vision for a glorious new just world:

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
They shall not plant and another eat. (Isaiah 65:21-22a)

Imagine a world where labour and productivity are done without exploitation and oppression. Instead, we see a world where some enjoy a life of leisure while others experience unending and unrewarded labour.

The Israelites worked hard at establishing just living through the practices of Sabbath. In Leviticus 25, for instance, we read about a Jubilee year. The “Jubilee cycle” was a cycle of 50 years, punctuated by seven rounds of seven years. Certain practices were done to restore right relationships, cancel debts and free slaves at the end of each seven-year period and in the Jubilee year. While we cannot translate these principles directly into the 21st century, we can still learn from the Sabbath practices of the Bible.



Part 2: Exploring Some Things the Bible says about Sabbath

Read together, in large or small groups, Genesis 2:1-4a, Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Deuteronomy 15, Isaiah 1:13-17, Amos 8:4-5a. As you read, think about how these passages urge us to think and act differently, theologically and ethically.

As a group, make a list of some of the characteristics of Sabbath as they connect to just practices.

Part 3: The Themes of Sabbath and Justice

Read aloud this section. (Your group may have come up with many or all of these themes from their Bible study, but this is a good summary.)

There are several themes that emerge from the biblical passages above.

1. All were to have a weekly time of **rest from labour**. This rest was not only for the head of the household—the master and his immediate family—but it was for the servants, slaves and domestic animals as well. The leisure a lord took for granted was not to depend on the labour of others. Everyone was to have rest from their work.
2. There was to be **freedom from slavery**. Slavery is the most extreme form of appropriating the labour of another for one's own benefit. The Sabbath "rules" of the Bible decreed that a person may be held as a slave for only seven years and then freed. Furthermore, when the slave was freed, he was not to be sent away empty-handed, but rather the master was to be asked to "provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty which the Lord your God has blessed you. (Deut. 15:14)
3. There is to be **freedom from debt**. Debt also appropriates another's productivity, for the first call on what an indebted person (or nation) produces is repayment to the creditor. The Sabbath legislation in the Bible includes a time when debts may be cancelled.
4. There is **rest for the land**. Every seven years a rest for the land was mandated. In the absence of planting and harvest, this also meant that the landless poor who normally worked as hired labourers for landowners also had a year's rest from this demanding work. However, this also meant a period of unemployment for them. So, during this year, the landowner was to open his field for all (even wild animals) to gather whatever grew of itself.
5. There is to be **redistribution of wealth**. The most extensive Sabbath provision was the Jubilee injunction to restore sold land to the original owner if it had not already been redeemed. It is not likely that this was ever done in practice, but it is consistent with the Sabbath ideals. Such a redistribution of land in an agricultural society meant that no family was condemned to generation after generation of poverty. The promise of Sabbath is that "there will....be no one in need among you." (Deut. 15:4)

Part 4: Making the Connection of Sabbath and Justice Today

Choose from these activities:

Discussion

1. At the time of writing this resource (January, 2006), Malawi, Africa, is suffering a terrible famine with 6 of its 12 million people hungry. According to Mildred Sharra, Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation in Malawi, this situation resulted not only from drought but from government action. In 2001, the government sold almost all of Malawi's grain reserve on advice from donor agencies led by the International Monetary Fund.¹ If this is so, this is a mis-use of the principle of redistribution of wealth. Why is the Sabbath concept of redistribution of wealth so hard to put into practice?

¹ *Presbyterian Record*, January 2006, p.14

2. With the advent of 24 hour, 7 day a week shopping, how do we ensure that people get proper rest from their work?
3. Many people must juggle multiple jobs to make enough to survive. How does this affect family life?
4. Obviously we no longer have “slaves” in Canada. Are there ways, however, that people can be kept enslaved to their work?
5. In order to be open to a more even distribution of wealth, people must have generous hearts. How do people become generous? Is it possible to do this later in life, or is it a product of one’s upbringing?

Research

1. Discover the average student debt load of someone in your region who graduates from university. In what ways does this debt load affect the individual and society?
2. Research debt of the poorest countries in the world. Talk about how this affects the country. Find some countries where debt has been cancelled. How has this worked out?
3. Do some research in your local community. What are some signs of poverty? Are there signs that churches are making a difference by reaching out to others?
4. What is the average debt load in Canada? How does this affect how people live? How does it affect involvement in church?
5. Find out about the growing gap between rich and poor in Canada and the depletion of the middle class. How does this compare to the rest of the world?

Action

1. Visit a local low-income housing project or other community services for low-income families. Ask about social assistance, affordable housing, health and educational services, immigration and refugee settlement services. Think about how low-income issues impact your congregation.
2. Visit a farmer who takes seriously the issue of giving land a rest. How is this done and to what advantage?
3. Visit a First Nations reserve or a native friendship centre close to you. Ask First Nations people about their struggles, particularly their ability to support and develop viable economies.
4. Visit an agency or business in your region that focuses on environmental issues—climate change, commodification of natural resources, depletion and degradation of environment resources.
5. Use magazine pictures to make a poster or collage that describes Sabbath as justice. Display on a bulletin board at your church.

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