

**Touchstones Faith in Action**

**In-Reach / Out-Reach / Justice-Making**

**The Sabbath**

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**Introduction**

**1.0: Introduction**

Our thoughts of the Sabbath are shaped, in part, by Judaism and Christianity. Of the two, Judaism offers a more compelling observance. Unitarian Universalist Peter Fleck offers a brief history of how early Christianity moved from Sabbath observance to the celebration of the Lord’s Day on Sunday. It is from his sermon, *Taking a Rest*, in his 1987 book, *The Blessings of Imperfection: Reflections on the Mystery of Everyday Life*. Fleck wrote,

The Sabbath can be seen as …democratic: the free days are no longer limited to a few but in Israel as a nation all of it member, regardless of their social standing, masters and servants, slave owners and slaves, all are to observe the weekly holiday as God observed it in the beginning.

The early church switched the weekly day of rest from Saturday to Sunday, from the last day of the week to the first, from the commemoration of the Creation to the commemoration of the Resurrection. “Already in the year 321 [the emperor] Constantine had issued a decree which was to eliminate the observance of the Jewish Sabbath from Christian life…. [It] reads as follows: All Judges and common people in the city and all workers in all the crafts are to rest on the holy Sunday.” In 326, the Council of Nicea confirmed this decree. Still, the Jewish tradition apparently maintained itself for “a quarter of a century later—at the Council of Laodece another resolution had to use very harsh language. ‘The Christians,’ it said sternly, ‘must not Judaize and sit idly on the Sabbath, but ought to work on that day. They must honor the Lord’ Day… by resting inasmuch as they are Christians. But if they persist in being Jews, they ought to be anathema to Christ.’” With these prohibitions against the Christian observance of the Jewish Sabbath, Christianity severed one of the last remaining bonds with its parent religion.

The focus of the Christian Sunday tends toward corporate worship, while the focus of the Jewish Sabbath is anchored in the family observance on Friday evening combined with services at the synagogue on Friday evening and/or on Saturday.

In *Celebrating Shabbat in Many Ways*, Ari Goldman writes,

Technically, the laws of Shabbat can seem draconian. There are thirty-nine official “don’ts,” and they each have subcategories that add hundreds more. One cannot mow the lawn, hunt for food, light a fire, plant a seed, cook food, boil water, sew on a button, erect a tent, use a hammer, bake a cake, or gather kindling.

Derived from these ancient laws, a host of modern restrictions has been added by scholars, so now it is forbidden [according to Orthodox interpretation of the law] to turn on a computer, drive a car, flick on a light switch, talk on the phone, replace a battery, or watch television. The list is a long one. Conservative rabbis prohibit many of these same activities, but the level of observance among the Conservative laity is not as widespread as it is among the Orthodox. Reform rabbis, for the most part, say that these ancient restrictions are no longer binding, but they increasingly add that if people find meaning in the restrictions, they should incorporate them into their religious lives.

There are, of course, many ways to celebrate Shabbat. Some people light candles at the appointed hour, and others do it later in the evening when everyone arrives home and gathers around the table. Some remain for a family meal, and others say a blessing and scatter. Some relax by watching a family movie on HBO, and others catch up on their reading. Some unplug the phone, and others use it to connect with relatives they’ve been missing all week. Some won’t touch a car; others will use it to go to synagogue. Some will drive to synagogue but not to the mall. Some will drive to the beach but not the mall. And there are those who go to the mall but not to the office.

Source: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/celebrating-shabbat-in-many-ways/>

The approach to Sabbath-keeping can be individual or through family rituals and activities. Marva Dawn, author of *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (1989)*,* shares four ways to keep the Sabbath:

1. **Ceasing** (e.g., work, productivity, accomplishment, anxiety, worry, tension, trying to be God, possessiveness, enculturation, humdrum, and meaninglessness)
2. **Resting** (e.g., spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social.)
3. **Embracing** (e.g., intentionality, time instead of space, giving instead of requiring, our calling in life, wholeness—shalom, and the world.)
4. **Feasting** (e.g., on the Eternal, with music, with beauty, with food, and with affection)

In her article, *A Spiritual Practice: Sabbath*, Flora Slosson Wuellner also offers a four-fold model of sabbath keeping. She writes,

Do I give myself regular “Sabbaths”?

1. Each hour we need tiny Sabbath moments of inner renewal: gazing at a sunbeam on the floor, looking at a beloved painting, smelling a flower, touching a leaf, listening to a bird, stretching and breathing deeply, holding our hands under running water, gently palming our eyes…. Such tiny but powerful Sabbath moments are especially important after intensive thinking, working, or interaction with other people.
2. Each day, we should lay aside at least one hour of Sabbath time to be and do what delights us most. We might walk, enjoy a garden, listen to music, read a delightful book. Whatever we choose, we should do it with joy, not compulsion. …
3. We need one day a week for relaxing, joyous, humanizing activities. The original scriptural concept of Sabbath was not that of heavy church responsibilities or even of intense prolonged prayer. Originally it was given as a day of total peace and relaxation…. The act of resting is a holy act.
4. We need a week each year (not the regular family holiday) when we can go off alone or with a few like-minded friends or spouse for a quiet retreat. It need not be a time of intensive reading or contemplation but a time of walks, music, drawing, sleeping, keeping a journal—whatever refreshes and renews us most deeply.

Source: <https://www.upperroom.org/resources/a-spiritual-practice-sabbath>

In addition to Marva Dawn’s book, the book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives* (1999) by Wayne Muller is considered a classic for Sabbath-keeping with the theme of Sabbath as a spiritual practice. The sections of the book disclose his model for Sabbath-keeping: Rest, Rhythm, Time, Happiness, Wisdom, and Consecration.

**Resources**

**2.0: Resources**

**2.1:** *Making Space* by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

A simple practice for making space—whether in a drawer or our schedule—and the value of a weekly Sabbath of uncluttered time.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/18232/making-space>

**2.2:** *Practices for a Simple Sabbath* by Wayne Mueller

* **Light a candle:** Set aside sacred time for a family meal, for prayer or meditation or simply quiet reading. Set a candle before you, offer a simple blessing and let the world fall away.
* **Practice thanksgiving:** Give thanks before meals, upon rising, when going to sleep. During Sabbath, we are less concerned with what is missing and more grateful for what has already been given.
* **Bless your children:** Place your hand gently on their heads and offer your blessing. What do you most wish for them? Self-knowledge, courage, safety, joy? Let them hear your prayers for their happiness.
* **Invite a Sabbath pause:** Choose one common act -- touching a doorknob, turning on a faucet or hearing the phone ring. Throughout the day when this occurs, stop and take three silent, mindful breaths. Then go on.
* **Take a walk:** Stroll slowly to nowhere in particular for 30 minutes. Let your senses guide you. Stop and observe deeply whatever attracts you—a tree, a stone, a flower. Breathe.
* **Pamper your body:** Take a guilt-free nap. Take a leisurely bath with music, special scents, candles. Make love with your spouse. Walk barefoot in the grass. The Sabbath is a day of delight.
* **Create a Sabbath box:** Put your to-do list, your keys, your wallet—anything you don't need in Sabbath time—into the box. Or write down a particular worry or concern and drop it in. Just for now, let it go.
* **Turn off the telephone:** Or the computer, the TV, the washer and dryer. Create a period of time when you will not be disturbed or seduced by what our technologies demand of us.
* **Prepare a Sabbath meal or a Sabbath cup of tea:** Even if you are alone, you can choose foods you love, put flowers on the table, take time to enjoy every dish, give thanks for the bounty of the earth.
* **Seek companionship:** One of the most precious gifts we can offer is to be a place of refuge, a Sabbath for one another. Ask for companionship when you lose your way. Give quiet time and attention to others.
* **Reset your inner compass:** Make a list of the values and principles that guide your life—both those you follow and those you would like to follow. Speak them aloud, alone or with loved ones.
* **Surrender a problem:** The Sabbath reminds us that forces larger than ourselves are at work healing the world. Imagine that these forces already know how to solve your problem. Turn it over to their care.

Source: <https://www.waynemuller.com/cool_stuff/wednesdays/whatever_happened_to_sunday>

**2.3:** *The Sabbath Box* by [Wayne Muller](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/search?author_first=Wayne&author_last=Muller)

The Sabbath Box is a place for storing keys, cellphone, etc. as well as our to-do lists and all of the things that call to us because they are undone.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/practices/view/21700/the-sabbath-box>

**2.4:** *Sabbath: The spiritual practice of exhaling* by Jayne Hugo Davis

A thoughtful article on sabbath-keeping. The exhale is a metaphor for letting it all go.

Source: <https://baptistnews.com/article/sabbath-the-spiritual-practice-of-exhaling/#.XqRgEMhKjIU>

**2.5:** *Small Group Guide for Keeping the Sabbath* (16 pages)

Extensive resource for Sabbath-keeping through a Christian lens.

Source: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/living_well_small_group_guide_-_keeping_sabbath.pdf>

**2.6:** *Why we need to slow down our lives* by Pico Iyer

Explores the need for and value of a secular sabbath. Based on his book, *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere.*

Source: <https://ideas.ted.com/why-we-need-a-secular-sabbath/>

**2.7:** *Here's why—and how—to observe a digital Sabbath* by Jennifer Graham

A thoughtful article on the movement known as the digital sabbath.

Source: <https://www.deseret.com/2019/4/25/20671701/here-s-why-and-how-to-observe-a-digital-sabbath>