



# Habitual Stillness

Be Still #3 | Jan 21, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Preached by Steve Howell

## Opening

Being called upon to do something *in the moment* is easier if we've been practicing regularly *outside the moment*.



*Example: One of my favorite stories from watching the National Hockey League took place back in 2018. Some of you might remember this story. The Chicago Blackhawks are playing the game, and their starting goaltender gets hurt. The backup netminder comes into the game...and then in the 3<sup>rd</sup> period, HE gets cramps.*

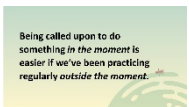
*Enter Scott Foster. Foster was serving as the **emergency backup goalie** for the game. Since teams only carry two players at that position, it is habit to have a backup available for situations like this. Technically, he could have played for either team if the situation arose, but on this day, Scott Foster became a **Blackhawk**.*

*An accountant by day, Scott entered the game with fourteen minutes to go. Facing the top level of talent in the world, he managed to stop all seven shots he faced, preserving the lead, and helping the Blackhawks secure the victory!*

*"A few hours ago, you're working your day job, and then you're living your dream," Foster told reporters afterward.*

*The headline is the stuff of legends: Accountant Saves the Day for NHL Team!*

*But Scott wasn't just plucked off the streets. Foster is a former college player from Western Michigan University, and he regularly plays in a recreational league in Chicago that features other former college players. The talent level is different, but the act of minding the net is something Scott does regularly.*



**Being called upon to do something *in the moment* is easier if we've been practicing regularly *outside the moment*.**

That applies to everything from home-repair dads who have to do drywall work, to moms who have to sew a patch on a uniform, to volunteers who get asked by the minister if they might consider playing the piano for worship! It's easier to do something when we've had practice...

...even if that something is *nothing*.



For the past two weeks, we have been discussing topics related to Psalm 46:10.

*“Be still, and know that I am God...”* (Psalm 46:10, ESV)

We said that trying to have spiritual success without waiting on God is a mistake. We need to **be still** (to “let go,” to “release,” to “be slack”) and allow God to work. The battle is not ours, so we need to take a step back and watch Him do His thing!

- In the first sermon, we talked about cultivating the spiritual disciplines of **silence and solitude** to leave more room for God to be in charge of our lives – to help us *be still* while He acts.
- In the second sermon, we talked about **patience** – how we wait, why we wait, and how long we wait. We said that none of us can wait *long enough*, so God empowers us to *let go* and trust Him.

Being still when you face a situation (*in the moment*) is easier if you’ve made a habit of practicing stillness before the situation (*outside the moment*)!

So how might we build this habit into our schedules? If only Scripture had some thoughts about making a regular, habitual practice of stillness...you know, like a time when we consistently rest from our striving and focus on trusting God... even like a *day* when we are supposed to rest....

Wouldn’t that be great?!? Well, yes...yes, it is. Scripture *does* have a regular time designed for this purpose. It’s a day you’ve heard about and maybe even observed. It’s a day called: the Sabbath.

And if we want to get better at being still, we need to better understand how this regular time of rest can prepare us to step back and give God control in any moment!

## ***The Day of Rest***

So, what exactly is the Sabbath? Let’s make sure we’re all on the same page as we move forward.

### ***Sabbath in the Old Testament***

Most of us were probably introduced to the Sabbath by reading the 10 Commandments. Exodus 20:8-11 gives us commandment number four, along with some explanation.



*“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”* (Exodus 20:8–11, ESV)



## Sabbath Times

The rule to “keep the Sabbath day holy” has its roots back in the story of creation. God ceased his universal creative work after six days – not because He was *tired*, but because He was *finished*. He stopped; He ceased; He was done; He (using the Hebrew verb) “sabbathed.”

While the completion of God’s creative efforts led Him to sanctify the seventh day in Genesis 2, it isn’t until Exodus 20 with the Ten Commandments that we get specific instructions for our own activity (or lack thereof) on the Sabbath day.

God commands the Israelites to “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*”

To do so, we need to know *when* the Sabbath is.

- The Sabbath **day** is day 7 of the Hebrew week. Officially it lasts from sundown Friday to sundown *Saturday* (practically, then, it is mostly Saturday).
- The law also stipulated Sabbath **years** (the seventh year) in which there was to be no planting or pruning (an agricultural Sabbath), and in which debts were forgiven and slaves released (an economic Sabbath).



## Sabbath Rules

We also need to know how to keep it *holy*.

- Keeping it **holy** means to treat it as *set apart* and *different*. The Jewish Law spells out what this means in terms of **work** and **sacrifice**.
  - The law specifies certain activities that **should cease**, such as gathering food (Exodus 16:29-30), plowing and harvesting (Exodus 34:21), kindling a fire (Exodus 35:3), or chopping wood (Numbers 15:32-36). In practice this was extended to a ban on work like commerce (e.g. Amos 8:5) or travel.
  - The law also specifies certain activities that **should be performed**, talking about sacrifices and ceremonies.
    - “*On the Sabbath day, [offer] two male lambs a year old without blemish, and two tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, and its drink offering: this is the burnt offering of every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.*” (Numbers 28:9–10, ESV)

The rules and the corollaries that came from the rules became very complicated over time. You had to pay attention to what you were doing, lest it be considered a violation of Sabbath law.

For example, you had to watch your steps and not travel over 2000 cubits from home (about a half-mile) on a Sabbath day's journey. This would be marked out for the community so you knew how far you were able to go.

*Fun Fact: However, anyone who wanted to “bend” the rule could carry a lunch sometime before the Sabbath to a place about half a mile from his home. Then, by eating it on the Sabbath, he could claim that place as a “legal” home and go another Sabbath day's journey [from there].<sup>1</sup>*

Creativity in bending Sabbath rules may seem irreverent, but it just goes to show how *seriously* the Israelites took the Sabbath laws. They wanted to make sure they didn't violate the letter of the law, even if they hoped to retain access to certain things that were normally prohibited by it.

And there was a good reason to keep the law. Failure to follow the Sabbath rules resulted in the death penalty!

*“Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.” (Exodus 35:2, ESV)*

Sabbath was important in the Old Testament!

## *Sabbath in the New Testament*

As we turn the page, Sabbath continues to be important in the New Testament, too...but it undergoes significant changes for Christian worshippers thanks to Jesus.

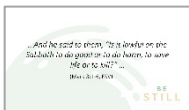
### ***Jesus and the Sabbath***

While Jesus is often shown honoring the Sabbath, Jesus also often got in trouble for his “failures” to follow Sabbath laws. Check out this interaction in the Gospel of Mark:

*“Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come here.” And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” (Mark 3:1–6, ESV)*

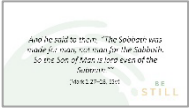
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<sup>1</sup> Fallis, W. J. (2003). *Sabbath Day's Journey*. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1427). Holman Bible Publishers.



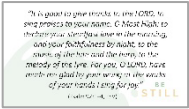


Whether it was healing on the Sabbath or plucking some grains in a field for a snack, Jesus dismissed some of the complications that had been tacked onto the Law by overcautious legalists. He followed God’s Law (rather than man’s rules) perfectly, but He also understood the intent behind the Sabbath better than anyone else ever has.



*“And he said to them, “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, ESV)

Jesus’ attitude toward Sabbath was less focused on legalism and more focused on the intent. It was less about restriction and more about celebration. It was more in line with the words of **Psalm 92**, also called, “*A song for the Sabbath.*”



*“It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.”*  
(Psalm 92:1–4, ESV)

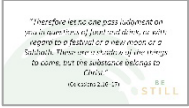
### ***The Early Church and the Sabbath***



And for the Christian, no work of God’s hand was greater than the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, demonstrating his victory over sin and death! As followers of Christ grew in number and in background (expanding from Jewish only to both Jews and Gentiles), many Christians kept the *focus* of Sabbath but applied it to a new day of the week. The *first* day of the week (the day on which Jesus arose!) was now the day to celebrate and be glad at the works of God’s hands. It grew to become more important than the last day of the week. *Sunday* became the New Testament equivalent of the original Saturday Sabbath.

Ex: *“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread...”* (Acts 20:7, ESV)

That change led to some disagreements about how closely Christians should follow Old Testament precedent, but Christian leaders like Paul tried to remind everyone of what was really important:



*“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”* (Colossians 2:16–17, ESV)

So, an Old Testament command becomes a modified New Testament practice, all while the emphasis on God’s holiness and God’s work remains. So where does that leave us now?

### ***Sabbaths Ignored***



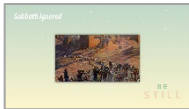
*Maybe the best test to figure out where we stand on Sabbath practice would be our opinions about Chick-Fil-A. How do you feel about Chick-Fil-A being closed on*

*Sunday? Are you excited that they try to honor God and allow their employees to worship on that day? Or are you upset because the Lord's Chicken isn't available on the Lord's Day? Vote?*



What Chick-Fil-A does on its own is what society used to do collectively. Many of you grew up with so-called “blue laws” – laws that restricted commerce and activity on Sundays. The stores were closed; the restaurants were closed; sports were off limits.

Some vestiges of those laws remain, especially related to alcohol sales (legal times for selling alcohol deviate from the times allowed the rest of the week), but for the most part, we have abandoned the idea of a day to *be still*. Instead, it has become another convenient place to schedule all sorts of activities.



God made it clear that neglecting Sabbath was wrong. For instance, the Jews completely ignored the Sabbath *Year* requirements, planting and harvesting like normal every season. Yet, when the nation was defeated and its people were sent into exile in the land of Babylon, God tied the length of their captivity to the number of times they ignored the Sabbath Year, just as he promised in Leviticus 26.

*“Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths.”*  
(Leviticus 26:34, ESV)



Today, Sabbath continues to be largely ignored. The concept may not mean the same for New Testament Christians as it did for Old Testament Jews, but it is still worth implementing.

Why then do we avoid it?!?

I have three reasons I can think of that probably apply.



1. Sabbath is **inconvenient**. It interrupts my plans and stops me from being able to do what I want. (e.g. Chick-Fil-A)
2. Sabbath **ignores** the world around me. It prevents me from joining in with those who don't worship like us. (e.g. Sleeping in on Sunday mornings, or enjoying a nice Sunday brunch)
3. Sabbath treats *my* work like it's **unimportant**. It gets in the way of things that demand my attention. (e.g. I need to be able to check my emails)

## ***Sabbath Restored***

Those are three reasons we avoid Sabbath. But there are three equally good reasons to implement Sabbath into our routine.

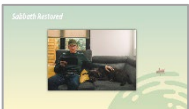
1. Sabbath is **inconvenient**. It interrupts my plans and stops me from being able to do what I want. (In other words, I'm reminded that some things are more important than my own priorities.)

2. Sabbath **ignores** the world around me. It prevents me from joining in with those who don't worship like us. (In other words, I'm reminded that a life devoted to God might take me on the narrow and not the broad path)
3. Sabbath treats my work like it's **unimportant**. It ignores the things that demand my attention. (In other words, I'm reminded that God is God and I am not. He doesn't *need* my work).

*That last one is probably the hardest for me to deal with. I get a lot of my value from being useful. I have always felt like I matter most to people when I'm able to do something for them or when I have the right answers – when I can provide information, keep things organized. It's a Martha attitude; not a Mary attitude (if you don't get that reference, read **Luke 10:38-42** later today), but it is how I interact with the world. And Sabbath calls me to do nothing. I can't be useful. I can't be productive.*

*Phew. That's tough.*

But it's exactly why I need it.



I need to know that the world spins on without me. I need to be reminded that my contributions are replaceable, that my position can always be filled. Rather than allowing that truth to send me spiraling down into depression, I need to allow that truth to free me from burden! I can do my work, and I can do it well. But my worth in God's eyes isn't related to my production.

I need to know that the important work is finished...and it is not mine! God has accomplished it! What he began in Creation *He* completed on the cross. Jesus' atoning sacrifice means no more work is needed. "It is finished!" We can rest!



*"So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his."  
(Hebrews 4:9–10, ESV)*

You and I *need* this kind of rest. We *need* to be still, no longer trying to do it ourselves, no longer striving to accomplish what has already been done for us in our spiritual lives. We can stop. We can be still. We can rest. We can Sabbath.

This is why we need to reclaim a regular Sabbath and participate in its purposes. You and I need to get better at being still. And being called upon to **do something in the moment is easier if we've been practicing regularly outside the moment.**

Sabbath is the habit we need in order to practice being still.

## *A Suggestion for Sabbath*



How can we do it? I'm not the expert on Sabbath, but I did come across a very helpful discussion of Sabbath in a book called *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* by Justin Earley.

*Side Note: The book has some really helpful tips for improving your spiritual life in the modern age! There's a website, too – [thecommonrule.org](http://thecommonrule.org)*

He makes this overall statement, which lines up very well with what we've already discovered today from Scripture:

*The weekly practice of sabbath teaches us that God sustains the world and that we don't. To make a countercultural embrace of our limitations, we stop our usual work for one day of rest. Sabbath is a gospel practice because it reminds us that the world doesn't hang on what we can accomplish, but rather on what God has accomplished for us.<sup>2</sup>*

From a practical standpoint, Sabbath doesn't just happen by itself. It requires intentional effort. It will only be included in our lives when it makes its way onto our planning calendars, when we hold it to be nonnegotiable.

## **When Do We Do It?**

Does it have to be Saturday? No. Does it have to be Sunday? No. Refer back to Paul's words in Colossians 2 and remember that we're not arguing this legalistically. We're just looking for a time to honor God in this way. In *The Common Rule*, Earley suggests choosing any 24-hour period that you can make work. For his family, it was Saturday evening to Sunday evening, but it could be a different time if you have odd work hours.

## **What Do We Do?**

And then what?

Rest. Not necessarily taking a nap, or just sitting there and doing nothing (although, yes!). Restful activities might look different for different folks. Early quotes a rabbinical point of view to back this up:

*"A man who works with his mind should sabbath with his hands. A man who works with his hands should sabbath with his mind."*

I like that idea. For me, I'm studying and reading a lot during the week to prepare sermons and lessons. A Bible study might not be restful...but maybe playing music is. If you've been scrambling in the ER all week, maybe reading a book is the rest you need.

## **Closing**

Whether it's with your hands or your mind, remember that as Christians we aren't bound by the Old Testament minutia related to Sabbath rules. We're just able to remember Jesus' words on the matter:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thecommonrule.org/sabbath>





*"...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, ESV)*

We aren't here for rules; we're here for worship! So, engage in activities that point you back to the Lord of the Sabbath! Whatever you do to rest – to be still – allow it to help you know that He is Lord!

It's easier to do something when we've had practice...even if that something is *nothing*. So take the steps to build Sabbath into your life, starting now, and *be still*.

## ***Prayer***

### ***Invitation***

**We're going to stand and sing our song of invitation. As always, if you have a prayer request you want us to lift up, or a spiritual decision you want to share, I want to invite you to share it with any of our church leaders who are here at this service (raise your hand, or come up here so they can pray with you)...or talk to your neighbor and pray right there. The prayer isn't more special because I pray it. We can ALL approach God's throne with confidence!**

Please stand and sing.

### ***PRAYER REQUESTS:***

# Notes

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## ***The Day of Rest***

***Sabbath in the Old Testament*** (Exodus 20:8–11)

***Sabbath Times***

***Sabbath Rules*** (Numbers 28:9–10; Exodus 35:2)

***Sabbath in the New Testament***

***Jesus and the Sabbath***

(Mark 3:1–6; Mark 2:27–28; Psalm 92:1–4)

***The Early Church and the Sabbath***

(Acts 20:7; Colossians 2:16–17)

***Sabbaths Ignored*** (Leviticus 26:34)

***Sabbath Restored***

***A Suggestion for Sabbath***

# Discussion Questions

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*Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.*

## ***Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose***

- What is the most restful activity you've ever done? When was the last time you got to do it?

## ***Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters***

- What is the Sabbath day? Why is it important? (See Exodus 20:8-11)
- What are some actions that were prohibited on the Sabbath? Look up Exodus 16:29-30; Exodus 34:21; Exodus 35:3; Numbers 15:32-36; Amos 8:5.
- If you lived under these laws, would you be inclined to find loopholes, or would you be more likely to honor the purpose of the laws? Why?
- Exodus 35:2 outlines the punishment for an Israelite who violated the Sabbath laws. Why do you think the punishment was so harsh? What does that tell you about the Sabbath's worth to God? Do you agree about its importance?
- Read Mark 3:1–6. Did Jesus violate the Sabbath rules? Why not?
- In what ways can the Sabbath be a joy and help you celebrate God? How does the fact that God *rested/finished His work* help you find joy in your own rest?
- What has been your typical observance of a time of Sabbath? If it has been absent in your life, are you planning to change? How? Share some details about how you could implement Sabbath more regularly.
- Who in your family needs to take the lead in guarding your Sabbath time? Who might benefit the most from this time? Who might be the hardest to convince?

## ***Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God***

- Pray for God to help you clear a spot in your schedule for Sabbath. Thank Him for accomplishing what we cannot!