



YOUTH STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 2

Sabbath Keeping for Busy Teens: A Youth Lenten Study

Sabbath helps us see our neighbors as friends, not competitors

Introduction to the Session

The season of Lent is often understood as being solely about our personal relationship with God. Often, churches will encourage their members to give up or take on a personal practice during this season with the goal of becoming more aware of our sin. However, Lent is ultimately about much more than the individual. In this session, participants will be invited to consider how Sabbath frees us to not just serve our God as individual believers but also to serve our neighbor and strengthen our identity as a community of faith, the body of Christ.

We begin at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20:8–11. The people of Israel have escaped the pharaoh's Egypt. They come to the mountain to enact a "regime change," turning away from pharaoh to embrace God's authority. Here, they are instructed on how to love their God and love their neighbor in respectful and life-giving ways.

Everyone gathered at Sinai that day could remember what it had been like in the world of the pharaoh:

- They could remember the pharaoh: an absolute authority with uncontrollable demands.
- They could remember that Egypt's socioeconomic power was organized like a pyramid, with a workforce producing wealth, all of which flowed upward to the elite and eventually to pharaoh.

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Competitors and neighbors

GATHERING

- Discuss arriving activity

OPENING

- Summarize previous week's session
- Share the goal of the session
- Opening prayer

EXPLORING

- Straw challenges
- Case study: neighborly leadership

RESPONDING

- Guided reflection on Matthew 6:25–31

CLOSING

- Share responses
- Closing prayer

- They could remember that the frantic policies of the pharaoh would lead to misery and the need to keep working and keep producing in order to meet impossible quotas.
- They could remember when the God of Sinai announced God’s self as the one “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2).

At Sinai, God gave Israel new promises and possibilities. Israel was so eager to embrace this new way of life that they gladly signed on for the new regime.

The Sabbath Commandment

Of the Ten Commandments given to the people of Israel, the first three spoke to the exclusivity of God and the last six to the cultivation of a neighborly community. Nestled right between them was the fourth commandment:

Remember the sabbath day, and 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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day . . . and consecrated it. (20:8–11)

The fourth commandment must have come as a shock to the listening Israelites. There had been no Sabbath in Egypt, no work stoppage, not even for the pharaoh, because frantic productivity drove the entire system. And now God commands them to instead redirect their energy to the cultivation of neighborliness.

Freedom to Be Neighborly

God invites those at Sinai to a new life of neighborly freedom in which Sabbath is the cornerstone. Such faithful practice of work stoppage declares that we will not participate in the anxiety system that turns us against one another as competitors. We will not be defined by pursuit of more, in either our economics or our personal relations or anywhere in our lives.

It is no wonder that Jesus invited his disciples out of the anxiety system:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or

about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” (Matt. 6:25–31)

The birds and the lilies are attestation that creation works! Trust it and live out righteousness, and your heavenly God—the Creator—will see to your well-being. The other gods are agents of anxiety. But we, by discipline, by resolve, by baptism, by Eucharist, and by passion, resist such seductions. In so doing, we stand alongside the Creator in whose image we are made. By the end of six days, God had done all that was necessary for creation . . . so have we!

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore how the Sabbath commandment encourages us to see our fellow human beings as neighbors, not competitors.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through this Leader’s Guide and determine how to best lead the session given the needs of your group. See the “Teaching Alternative” section at the end for additional ideas.
- Pray for all group members.
- Arrange your space so that you will have enough room for participants to comfortably participate in the Exploring activity challenges.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- newsprint
- markers

- pens and paper for each participant
- copies of the Participant Handout
- straws (enough for each participant)
- ping pong balls or another type of small, light object (enough for one per participant)
- masking tape

Teaching Tip

One of the activities in this session includes a set of challenges that will be more active for your group. Note that while the instructions say the activity should take place on the floor, the same activity could be done on a tabletop if that makes it easier for all individuals present to participate. This activity may also be substituted with the one in “Teaching Alternative.”

Arriving (5 minutes)

1. Competitors and Neighbors

Place two pieces of newsprint on the wall in your gathering space. At the top of one, write, “Who is my competitor?” At the top of the other, write, “Who is my neighbor?” Encourage participants to write as many responses to each prompt as they can think of as the group gathers.

Gathering (5 minutes)

2. Discuss Arriving Activity

Once most of your group has arrived, review the responses to the Arriving activity together and add any other responses that come to mind. Ask them to reflect on the following questions:

- Are there any individuals or groups that appear on both lists?
- In general, what feelings do we have toward our competitors?
- In general, what feelings do we have toward our neighbors?

Opening (10 minutes)

3. Summarize the Previous Week’s Session

For those who were not present the previous week, ask for a few volunteers to share what was discussed in session 1. Some key points to highlight include:

- In Exodus, pharaoh created a world filled with anxiety, concerned only with production.

- Our own world today and its demands don’t look that different than the pharaoh’s world in Exodus.
- The commandment to keep Sabbath is God’s way of helping us respond to a culture of anxiety.

4. Share the Goal of the Session

Drawing on material provided in the introduction to the session, share with the group:

- The season of Lent is not just about the individual.
- In Lent, God calls us to serve our neighbors and strengthen our identity as a community of faith, the body of Christ.
- In this session, we will look at how the pharaoh’s leadership divided the community and how God’s Sabbath commandment united it.

Explain that in today’s session, the group will look specifically at how the Sabbath commandment encourages us to see our fellow human beings as neighbors, not competitors.

5. Opening Prayer

Open your group in prayer, either with your own words or with the following:

God of Unity,
so often we see our fellow humans as our enemies.
We begin to believe that there is not enough love,
time, or opportunity for all of us.
Please use this time to remind us that, in your
eyes and through your ways,
there is always enough.
In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Exploring (20 minutes)

6. Straw Challenges

The group will participate in two different challenges meant to demonstrate the difference between relating to one another as competitors and relating to one another as neighbors. If you have a large group, it may be helpful to form two smaller groups to perform the challenges.

Challenge One

Give each participant a straw and a ping pong ball (or other small, light object). Tape a designated “start” and “finish” line on the floor and explain that participants are to move the ping pong ball from start to finish using *only* breath from the straw to move the ball. They must

keep their hands behind their backs at all times. Make it clear that they are all to attempt this challenge at the same time, and they are competing against one another. Once they have completed the challenge, be sure to designate a clear winner and declare the rest of the group losers.

Challenge Two

Perform the challenge again, but this time, remove the start and finish line from the floor and instead use the tape to outline a small square in the middle of the room (large enough to eventually hold all of the ping pong balls or small objects). Have participants toss their ping pong balls onto the floor but explain that it is not important that they keep track of their own ball. Again using only breath from their straws, their goal is to move all the ping pong balls into the box in the center of the space. However, this time they are working together as a team.

Once the second challenge is completed, put away the straws and ping pong balls and ask the group to reflect on the following:

- How would you describe the atmosphere in the first challenge?
- How did you relate to or feel about your fellow participants in the first challenge?
- How would you describe the atmosphere in the second challenge?
- How did you relate to or feel about your fellow participants in the second challenge?

Ask for a volunteer to read Exodus 20:8–11 aloud. Remember how, in the pharaoh’s world, life was all about production and people were often competing against one another to see who could work harder and create more. Ask the group to consider: How does the Sabbath commandment encourage neighborliness instead of competition?

7. Case Study: Neighborly Leadership

Distribute the Participant Handouts if you have not already done so, and ask participants to read the section titled “Case Study: Neighborly Leadership” about a crew working together on a service project. Then ask participants how they might shape their own leadership style using Exodus 20:8–11 as a guide. Draw from the following possible questions to further discuss the case study:

- What are some situations you have been in before where you have witnessed pharaoh-like leadership?
- What are some situations you have been in before where you have witnessed neighborly leadership?
- Think about familiar stories from the Gospels in which Jesus is leading his disciples. Can you think of some specific examples of times he encourages neighborliness in his leadership?

Responding (10 minutes)

8. Guided Reflection on Matthew 6:25–31

Ask participants to listen as you slowly read aloud Matthew 6:25–31. (They may close their eyes during this time or read along in their Participant Handout.) Then have the group take a few moments to respond to the reflection questions in their Participant Handouts.

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Share Responses

Once participants have had some time to respond to the reflection questions, ask if there are any volunteers who might like to share their responses.

10. Closing Prayer

Have the group close by praying together the prayer printed in their Participant Handout.

Teaching Alternative

Ask participants to think of leaders (teachers, church leaders, coaches, etc.) in their lives who have encouraged either competition or neighborliness. Have them reflect on the benefits and challenges to each of these approaches in context.

Key Scriptures

Exodus 20:8–11

Matthew 6:25–31

For More Information

Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

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