



YOUTH STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

LEADER'S GUIDE
Session 4

Sabbath Keeping for Busy Teens: A Youth Lenten Study

Sabbath reminds us to include others

Introduction to the Session

Israel's Membership

Social belonging, membership in groups, and the sharp pain of exclusivism will not be unfamiliar topics to youth. In this Lenten study, it is important to stress that we do not find our belonging in the body of Christ because we have achieved some standard of perfection. In fact, quite the opposite is true—one thing we all have in common is that the grace we know in Jesus is deep and wide enough to be inclusive of us and all our sins. Bearing this reality in mind, we now turn to the issue of exclusivism as Israel entered the promised land.

After the exodus, it did not take very long for Israel to try to give order to its life and establish boundaries of membership, to determine who was in and who was not. In general, the insiders are those who obey the commandments of Sinai. While the book of Leviticus provides guidelines for every phase of life to be sure that membership in Israel consists only of those who sustain intentional purity, the book of Deuteronomy takes the Sinai commandments in a somewhat different direction. It places emphasis on justice and is concerned with the vulnerable who need protection from the community: the poor, alongside widows, orphans, and immigrants. Israel consists of those who practice such protective justice:

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Membership qualifications

GATHERING

- Reflect on membership

OPENING

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

EXPLORING

- Membership in the body of Christ
- Case study: résumé of a Sabbath keeper

RESPONDING

- Reflect on our own Sabbath keeping

CLOSING

- Closing prayer

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Deut. 16:19–20)

Membership in the Worshiping Community

In Isaiah 56:3–8, we see a move toward *inclusiveness* against ancient *exclusivism*. It advocates the option of including two groups of applicants for membership in Israel. First, welcome the *foreigners*!

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from his
people”;

.....

And the foreigners who join themselves to the
LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it.
Isaiah 56:3a, 6

Second, admit eunuchs! (A eunuch was a man who had been castrated and was often tasked with guarding women and their living areas.)

And do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”
For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep by sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 56:3b, 4–5

The conditions of admission clearly do not concern race, ethnicity, or any sort of standard of perfect purity. There is a generic requirement of the new recruit simply to keep Torah. But there is only one specific requirement spelled out: keep Sabbath! This is the single, solitary mark of membership that lets the life of God’s Israel spill over among those who have been excluded but are now

welcomed. Sabbath represents a radical disengagement from the producer-consumer rat race of the empire. The community welcomes members of any race or nation, any gender or social condition, so long as that person is defined by justice, mercy, and compassion and not competition, achievement, production, or acquisition:

Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered
Isaiah 56:8

Membership Today

We now read this ancient text in a contemporary moment of deciding. Ours is a time of scattering in fear. We are so fearful that we want to fence the world in order to keep all the others out:

- Some of the church still wants to fence out women.
- We build fences to keep out immigrants.
- The church in many places fences out gays.
- The issue of race is still a powerful tool used for fencing.

Sabbath deconstructs the notion of being qualified for membership. Later on, John the Baptist dealt with the professional insiders. They were so proud that they bragged about their pedigree, their entitlements, their ancestors: “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matt. 3:9).

What counts is not pedigree. What counts is fruit. What counts are the outcomes of your life. Paul said of this fruit: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Gal. 5:22–23).

The “good fruits” arise from the “peaceableness” of Sabbath. The “destructive fruits” are generated by rat-race living. The advocates in Isaiah 56 want no rat-race companions. They want, rather, the fruits that arise from work stoppage. Those who refuse Sabbath produce only sour grapes, the grapes of wrath and violence and envy and, finally, death. Sabbath is a refusal of the grapes of wrath, an embrace of good fruits of life and joy, of praise and *shalom*.

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore how Sabbath keeping calls us to a more inclusive way of life.

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.
- On pieces of newsprint, write out the group descriptions for the Arriving activity and post them around your meeting space.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- newsprint
- markers
- pens and paper for each participant
- copies of the Participant Handout

Teaching Tip

In the Exploring activity section called “Membership in the Body of Christ,” participants are asked to think about how the church has become a more inclusive institution throughout the years and how some may still feel excluded from the church. In this activity, it is important to distinguish between feeling excluded and being truly discriminated against. Be sure to lift up this distinction during this time of conversation and explore the differences with your group.

Arriving (5 minutes)

1. Membership Qualifications

Around your space, post pieces of newsprint with descriptions of various groups your youth may have the opportunity to try out for written at the top. (Some examples might include Varsity Basketball Team, National Honor Society, Honor Band, Competition Dance Team, Student Council Officer.) It may be helpful to tailor these groups to ones you know your youth participate in. As youth arrive, ask them to write under each group title things one must do or qualities one must have in order to be able to join this group.

Gathering (5 minutes)

2. Reflect on Membership

Once most of your group has arrived, review each group and its qualifications. Talk about which groups in their

schools are the most exclusive and hardest to gain membership to. Are there other groups that have not yet been mentioned? Then ask participants to consider:

- How is membership in these school-sponsored groups different from membership in a church?
- What does one have to do to become a member of a church?

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 3. Some key points to highlight include:

- When the Israelites finally make their way through the wilderness and are about to enter the promised land, Moses stops and gives them a long list of instructions. He reminds them of where they have come from, because he’s afraid that once they are in a land of prosperity, they will forget the struggles they went through to get there.
- Sabbath becomes an important practice in the life of the community to stop and remember where they have come from and how they are called to honor all people in the community.

4. Share the Goal of the Session

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

After the exodus, it did not take very long for Israel to try to give order to its life and establish boundaries of membership, to determine who was in and who was not.

While the book of Leviticus provides guidelines for every phase of life to be sure that membership in Israel consists only of those who sustain intentional purity, the book of Deuteronomy places emphasis on justice and is concerned with the vulnerable who need protection from the community: the poor, widows, orphans, and immigrants.

In Isaiah, we see a move toward *inclusiveness* against ancient *exclusivism*.

The conditions of admission clearly do not concern race, ethnicity, or any sort of standard of perfect purity. There is only one specific requirement spelled out: keep Sabbath!

Explain that in today's session, the group will look specifically at how Sabbath keeping calls us to a more inclusive way of life.

5. Opening Prayer

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

God of us all,
just as you called together Jews and Gentiles,
and men and women,
and slaves and free
to be one in Christ Jesus,
do the same for us now,
and help us to seek Sabbath
so that all may find their rest in you.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Exploring (20 minutes)

6. Membership in the Body of Christ

Begin by reiterating the danger of creating insiders and outsiders in the church: if we believe we are truly "one in Christ Jesus," we have a duty to reflect this in our daily lives.

Ask for a volunteer to read Isaiah 56:3a, 6, 8. In partners or small groups, ask participants to focus on verse 8 and respond to the following questions (written in their Participant Handout):

- How has the church become more inclusive throughout history (racially, ecumenically, regarding gender and sexual orientation)?
- In what ways does the church still practice exclusivism in both official and unofficial ways?
- What is the difference between feeling excluded and being discriminated against? How can we help in each situation?
- How can the church make all children of God feel more welcome?
- How does Sabbath play a part in this effort?

7. Case Study: Résumé of a Sabbath Keeper

Participants will study a sample résumé in their Participant Handout of an academically and athletically high-achieving student. They will be asked to reflect on the following questions (written in their Participant Handout):

- How do you think this person keeps (or does not keep) Sabbath?

- How do the groups this person is involved in influence who she interacts with on a daily basis?
- Based on this résumé, do you think she has relationships with a diverse group of people or not?
- How could this person create more time for Sabbath keeping and justice seeking in her life?

Responding (5 minutes)

8. Reflect on Our Own Sabbath Keeping

Ask for volunteers to share some of their responses from the resume activity. Then ask the group to brainstorm aloud:

- What are some opportunities in our own lives to be more intentional about keeping the Sabbath?
- How might keeping Sabbath regularly help us be more inclusive and justice-seeking people?

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Closing Prayer

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

Teaching Alternative

This session can also create an opportunity for discussing inclusive language for God. Download the brochure "Well Chosen Words!" from the PC(USA) website (other denominations may have a similar document to reference) at http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/pw/pdfs/wellchosenwords.pdf and discuss as a group how the language we use as a community of faith can help create an environment that is either exclusive or inclusive of those seeking membership and a sense of belonging.

Key Scriptures

Isaiah 56:3a, 6, 8

For More Information

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

Kathy Wolf Reed is copastor of First Presbyterian Church of Auburn, Alabama, where she lives with her husband and three children.