

# What Work is Lawful on the Sabbath?

## Description

A study related to the SDA  
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 3rd Quarter  
Rest in Christ  
Week 1  
by [Mary Zebrowski](#)  
Edited by [Trent Wilde](#)

This week's lesson is entitled, "Living in a 24-7 Society."

Yes, we do need physical rest in order to keep our bodies and minds functioning optimally. God definitely appointed a particular day, the Sabbath, to cease from the activity of the common things of life, the things that comprise our own work, and rest.

But in addition to giving our bodies and minds a rest from the common things of life, there is another reason to cease from our common activities on the Sabbath, that is, to focus on what is sacred. To do this, however, some related work (sacred work) is necessary on the Sabbath.

Isaiah 58:13-14 reads,

"If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,  
*From* doing your pleasure on My holy day,  
And call the Sabbath a delight,  
The holy *day* of the Lord honorable,  
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,  
Nor finding your own pleasure,  
Nor speaking *your own* words,

Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord;  
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,  
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.  
The mouth of the Lord has spoken."  
Isaiah 58:13-14

So, on the Sabbath, we are to focus on sacred work, the work that honors God. This would include the work of educating ourselves for righteousness (See [Education, chapter 29, "The Sabbath"](#) and the video study, ["Sabbath – God's Design for True Education and Activism"](#)), and the work of saving others through the communication of the everlasting gospel to them. But even in addition to these works, there are works of mercy that present themselves on the Sabbath, and also the work of sustaining ourselves and the necessities of the work of God that is required in order to carry out these sacred works on the Sabbath. Let's take a look at some of these examples in the scriptures.

We know that some Pharisees in the time of Jesus accused Him of breaking the Law by doing various works on the Sabbath, including healing and picking grain to eat. Their intention, of course, was to refute His message and obstruct His mission, but in attempting this, their misunderstanding of the purpose of the Law of God and the Sabbath was also revealed.

At the pool of Bethesda, a paralyzed man sat waiting for someone to help him get into the pool first after an angel stirred the waters, believing that this activity would cause him to be healed. Jesus came upon him on the Sabbath and asked him if he wanted to be healed. After the paralyzed man stated his dilemma – that no one would help him into the pool when the waters stirred – Jesus told him to “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” Immediately the man was made well, and he did as Jesus commanded.

So, the Pharisees then accused Jesus of doing work on the Sabbath. Jesus addressed their accusation by explaining to them that even God works on the Sabbath. Jesus said,

“My Father has been working UNTIL NOW, and I have been working.” John 5:17

Jesus said that His Father is working every day, even obviously on the Sabbath. To this, Ellen White said,

“At Jerusalem, where the Savior now was, many of the learned rabbis lived. Here their false ideas about the Sabbath were taught to the people. Great numbers came to worship at the Temple, and thus the rabbis’ teaching was spread far and wide. Christ wished to correct these errors. This was why He healed the man on the Sabbath day, and told him to carry his bed. He knew that this act would attract the attention of the rabbis, and thus would give Him an opportunity to instruct them. So it proved. The Pharisees brought Christ before the Sanhedrin, the chief council of the Jews, to answer the charge of Sabbathbreaking.

The Savior declared that His action was in harmony with the Sabbath law. It was in harmony with the will and the work of God. ‘My Father worketh hitherto,’ He said, ‘and I work’ (John 5:17).

God works continually in sustaining every living thing. Was His work to cease upon the Sabbath day? Should God forbid the sun to fulfill its office on the Sabbath? Should He cut off its rays from warming the earth and nourishing vegetation?

Should the brooks stay from watering the fields, and the waves of the sea still their ebbing and flowing? Must the wheat and maize stop growing, and the trees and flowers put forth no bud or blossom on the Sabbath?

Then people would miss the fruits of the earth, and the blessings that sustain their life. Nature must continue its work, or mortals would die. And they also have a work to do on this day. The necessities of life must be attended to, the sick must be cared for, the wants of the needy must be supplied. God does not desire His creatures to suffer an hour’s pain that may be relieved on the Sabbath or any other day.

Heaven’s work never ceases, and we should never rest from doing good. Our own work the law forbids us to do on the rest day of the Lord. The toil for a livelihood must cease; no labor for worldly pleasure or profit is lawful upon that day. But the Sabbath is not to be spent in useless inactivity. As God ceased from His labor of creating, and rested upon the Sabbath, so we are to rest. He bids us lay aside our daily occupations, and devote those sacred hours to healthful rest, to worship, and to holy deeds.” Ellen White, *The Story of Jesus*, p. 73-74

Jesus points this out in another scenario found in Matthew 12.

Jesus and His disciples are found picking grain on the Sabbath in order to sustain themselves on that day. The Pharisees again accuse Him of doing work thought to be unlawful on the Sabbath. Jesus responds by showing them a case in the scriptures where God allowed King David and those who were with him to eat the showbread which was intended only for the priests, in order to sustain themselves. And not only this, but Jesus goes on to explain that if the Pharisees were going to say that any work at all is unlawful on the Sabbath, that they would “prove too much” so to speak, because by saying this, they were saying that even the priests were “profaning the Sabbath” by doing work in the temple on the Sabbath.

Matthew 12: 1-7 reads,

<sup>1</sup> At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn and to eat. <sup>2</sup> But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

<sup>3</sup> But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;

<sup>4</sup> How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

<sup>5</sup> Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?

<sup>6</sup> But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.

<sup>7</sup> But if ye had known what this means, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice [from Hosea 6:6], ye would not have condemned the guiltless.

A. T. Jones, in an article entitled, “The Fourth Commandment,” published in the Signs of the Times, in 1887, elaborates on Jesus’ response to the encounter He had with the Pharisees recorded here in Matthew 12, and what kind of work may be done on the Sabbath. Jones writes,

“Then [after the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath] Jesus shows what kind of work may be done on the Sabbath day, without sin. He says: ‘Have ye not read in the law, how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?’ On the Sabbath day there was a double routine of priestly service in the sanctuary. Whereas during the week there was one lamb with the accompanying offerings in the morning, and another in the evening, on the Sabbath there were two of these in the morning and two in the evening. Thus the priests in the temple had double work to perform on the Sabbath, yet they were blameless. This did not violate the commandment at all, because it was not their work at all, nor for their own benefit; it was the Lord’s work and wholly in the conduct of his worship and the service of his sanctuary. From this it is evident that the words of the commandment, ‘In it thou shalt not do any work,’ is not a command to remain listlessly idle on the Sabbath, but a command not to do any of our own work, nor any which partakes of any material or worldly interest. The six days are given us for this, ‘Six days shalt thou labor and do all *thy* work,’ but the Sabbath is for the work, the worship, and the special service of the Lord, ‘in it thou shalt not do any [of thy] work.’” AT Jones, Signs of the Times, September 1, 1887, p. 534

Here Jones points out that we are to cease from doing any of our own work on the Sabbath, but the work necessary to provide for our physical needs as well as doing the Lord's work is acceptable and even required.

We do not cease from our work as some ritual observance, but for our refreshing, so we can pick it up again for the next week. But the Sabbath is not only a time for our refreshing, it is not only a time for remembering God's creative and redemptive acts, but it is also a time for the work involved in the edification of mankind – the sacred work of God.

In this wise, Jesus said,

“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:7