

# Enough for our needs, enough for the needs of all Sabbath economics

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**T**he Sabbath stream in Scripture offers an essential constructive framing of God’s purposes for our material existence and our relationships with property. As Christ’s incarnation and death make love tangible, so the biblical calls and commands related to Sabbath give concrete form to stewardship.

## A backward look: Paul and Exodus 16

For a canonical perspective on how Sabbath addresses economic justice, it’s helpful to start toward the end of the trajectory, with

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the witness of Paul in 2 Corinthians 8. In verses 1–11, Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to fulfill—and even increase—their pledge to the financial collection Paul was gathering for the distressed Jerusalem church. In the climax of his exhortation Paul points to the purpose of the Corinthians’ sharing from their financial abundance to meet the need in Jerusalem: it is “a matter of equality” so “that there may be equality” or “a fair balance” (vv. 13, 14). This text offers a teleological principle to conform to what God in Christ had already established (8:9): the aim or purpose of the collection is equality. Paul concludes his argument with an appeal to Exodus 16:18, which describes the collection of manna by each Hebrew house-

hold in the wilderness: “The one who gathered more didn’t have too much, and the one who gathered less didn’t have too little.”<sup>11</sup>

Paul makes no explicit reference to Sabbath here, but his association of the Greco-Roman socioethical term *isotes* (equality, equity, fairness) with the manna story in Exodus 16 sets us on the

trail of the role and purpose of Sabbath as exemplified in this account. In Exodus 16 we find the freed Hebrew slaves between their deliverance by God at the Red Sea and God's covenant commands at Mt. Sinai. To feed their hunger, God sends manna daily for everyone to gather as food, and "everyone collected just as much as they could eat" (16:18), with no one having too much and no one having too little. In verses 22–30, we read that God provided twice as much manna on the sixth day, instructing the people to bake or boil it and to keep the leftovers until morning; then on the seventh day, the Sabbath, people would rest. The story describes God's determination to meet the needs of the whole people. And it also describes their resistance to relying on God.

Sabbath appears in this context for the first time in the story of Israel, a fact that calls our attention to three aspects of this provision. First, the command to observe the Sabbath is, narratively speaking, the first commandment in the wilderness. Before Moses receives the covenant commandments on Mt. Sinai, even before God speaks the Ten Commandments to all the people at Mt. Sinai, the people are summoned to practice Sabbath. Like the place of Sabbath in the creation story (Gen. 2:2–3), this placement indicates that Sabbath has a significance and importance prior to and extending beyond the Mosaic covenant.

Second, Sabbath has to do with our reception of God's material provision, and it addresses our resistance to relying on God's provision. Traditionally, much Sabbath practice focuses our awareness on God's provision of enough time to rest from productivity, but this story focuses on God's supply of enough food, enough material sustenance, to meet the people's needs, and it also gives attention to the difficulty we humans have with trusting God to provide for us. The narrative placement of this story in the wilderness reminds us that this Sabbath command deals with God's intentions for how hunger is to be addressed, and it speaks to a misguided human temptation to accumulate more than we need.

Finally, the manna in this Sabbath story signifies God's material provision of enough for all the people. Everyone collected enough for what they needed, with the result that those who had more than others didn't have too much, and those who had less

didn't have too little. Everyone had only as much as they could use. While many interpreters take this description in verse 18 to imply a miraculous divine leveling, others (such as John Calvin) read the text as also allowing a human redistribution during the

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measuring-out process. As much as Sabbath orients people to rely on God to supply enough for our needs, Sabbath also and inseparably orients us to accept God’s provision for the needs of *all* the people. Everyone enjoyed the benefits of God’s material provision equitably, and this enjoyment was related to a boundary or limitation on how much each individual could gather or store up. Hoarding was excluded; it conflicted with both reliance on God and fairness toward neighbors.

In the context of Exodus 16, the very term *Sabbath* takes on a deeper meaning. Typically the word is associated with the Hebrew word for “stop” or “cease,” as in “stop working” and “cease labor.” Certainly, the Hebrews in Exodus 16 were commanded to stop working for the Sabbath day, but the manna story also points toward ceasing to hoard and gather anxiously, and ceasing to seek to acquire more than one’s hungry neighbors have. This is the Sabbath equity about which Paul addressed his audience.

### **The fourth commandment: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5**

The Sabbath commandment in the Decalogue, as it is recorded in both Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, instructs that on the seventh day of each week, everyone—including the lowest-ranking laborers, slaves, and migrants—is to have rest and relief from labor. This weekly rest also includes nonhuman creatures, the domesticated animals whose labor contributes to human economic well-being. Thus the Sabbath commandment includes worker protections and natural resource protections as holy priorities on a par with commandments dealing with care for family, truthfulness, marital faithfulness, and protecting life from violence. Economic and environmental protections go back to

Moses and are among the core patterns of moral life as shaped by divine law in the Ten Commandments.

Weekly Sabbath observance was to remind the community that in God's eyes, all of us have equal dignity and a value that exceeds the value of what we own, what we earn, or what our status is—whether that of owner or laborer. The Deuteronomist's version of the command connects Sabbath and liberation from slavery. It reminds us that God means to deliver people from economic oppression to a shared abundance, and it calls us to identify with those slaves in a way that would prevent gross inequities and oppression in our own communities.

Through the weekly practice of Sabbath, God calls his covenant people to renew their vision of one another and to relate to one another on the basis of God's care and provision for all the people together, not on the basis of who has accumulated enough wealth to have leisure and who has to labor to scrape together enough income to pay for this week's necessities. Informed by Paul's interpretive approach, we learn from the Sabbath commandment that our value in God's eyes and our value in one another's eyes have a base and a measure apart from what we produce or sell, own or owe. God initiated Sabbath practices so that we would cease our effort to maximize productivity, profit, consumption, and accumulation. Sabbath practices point to a greater purpose for human life. The Sabbath command is part of a divine effort to strictly limit the ways the market dictates the value of human life, with an impact that extends beyond the Sabbath day itself to reframe the purpose of economic exchange on the other days of the week.

### **The Sabbath years**

The theopolitical core and aim of Sabbath for economic life is clearly enunciated in the Pentateuch's commands given for Sabbath years and the Jubilee. In Exodus 23:10–11, every seventh year is to be a fallow year for the land; tilling, planting, pruning, and reaping are to stop. Leviticus 25:2–7 calls this year a Sabbath rest for the land. This sabbatical year amplifies the egalitarian protections for the poor and marginalized that we find distilled in the fourth commandment and the manna story (see Exod. 23:12). Exodus 23:11 instructs that while agricultural work is to cease

during the sabbatical year, the natural produce of the land, vines, and trees during that year is to be for the poor among the people to eat. What the poor do not eat is to be left for the wild animals. This text extends the fourth commandment's attention to protection of natural resources, taking it beyond care for domestic animals (see also Exod. 23:12) to provision for wild animals (see also Lev. 25:7) and rest for the land itself. Here we see the Sabbath equity principle going beyond the egalitarianism of the Sabbath day to the broader operation of the economy.

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the poor (immigrants, orphans, and widows) from the fields, groves, and vineyards (Deut. 24:19–22; Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22). In addition, this access to the fields was supplemented by a triennial tithe of produce (Deut. 14:28–29) for immigrants, orphans, and widows, and also for the Levites, who did not hold land.

Together, these systemic regulations gave the poor access to the economy's produce and established an egalitarian view of human life that limited and directed the rights of property ownership. Even amid recurrently emerg-

ing disparities, sabbatical year provisions would ensure that those who had much did not hold too much and those with little did not have too little. Leviticus 25:6 emphatically asserts this egalitarianism between poor and propertied; the sabbatical year provisions meant that people in poverty and people with property relied together on shared food; the natural growth from the land is food “for you, for your male and female servants, and for your hired laborers and foreign guests who live with you.” As in the Sabbath story of dependence on manna, in the sabbatical year all demonstrate their reliance on God's provision, and all are equally dependent materially on God's grace.

The word used in Exodus 23:11 for the land's “rest” (*shemit*) also means “release.” In Deuteronomy 15, then, the sabbatical year marks not only release for the land but also release from debt: “Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor” (Deut. 15:2, ESV). Unlike the food distribution laws, these

Deuteronomic releases are limited to Israelites, but through these laws the Sabbath principle of equity extends into another aspect of economic life, credit and debt. Loans were to be released every seven years, and any Israelites who had become debt slaves had to be offered release in the seventh year (Deut. 15:12–18). Their forced labor could not extend beyond six years.

Leviticus 25 not only reinforces the practice of the land Sabbath every seventh year (vv. 2–7), it also institutes a Jubilee Sabbath of Sabbaths every fifty years (vv. 8–34). This Jubilee redistributes the land back to tribal and familial assignments, a process that guards against concentration of land capital for the few and perpetual poverty for the many. And the Jubilee Sabbath, like Deuteronomy, provides for release of Israelite slaves (vv. 39–55). In our consideration of the nature and practice of Sabbath, the concept of *release* (with its concrete forms of economic equalization) should be given a significance like that of *rest*.

We have not explored other factors surrounding sabbatical year commandments in their ancient social context: the interrelationships of various sabbatical years, the theology of God's ownership of the land and God's rule over the people, the character and role of slavery in the ancient Near East, and the nature and role of loans in the agrarian economies of ancient Near Eastern society. But again and again these texts in the Pentateuch articulate this key element of Sabbath economics, connecting faith in God with social equity: "Fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. . . . You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God" (Lev. 25:36b, 43, ESV). "You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. . . . There will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land'" (Deut. 15:7b–8, 11, ESV; compare Lev. 25:36–43). Sabbath instructions did not create a social utopia in ancient Israel, but they enjoin—as a divine priority—systemic action for social equity and economic justice as a remedy to economic inequality.

### **Prophetic vision and Gospel proclamation**

Israel's prophets also offer instruction about Sabbath equity for

those without property to sustain them—the poor, the immigrant, the orphan, the widow, the slave. The Sabbath commands identify these categories of people as vulnerable because of social inequity. Attention to their need is to be a priority for kings and other authorities, and failure to protect and provide for them is

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cause for divine judgment and social disaster (Isa. 10:1–2; Jer. 22:15–17; Ezek. 22:6–8, 29–31; Amos 8:4–8; Zech. 7:8–11). The psalmists described God’s own identity as wrapped up with his sabbatical response to social inequity (Ps. 12:5; 34:6; 68:5; 113:7; 146:9).

In the New Testament, the nature and focus of the weekly Sabbath observance became a point of contention in the ministry of Jesus, but he did not call for Sabbath practice to cease (Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke

13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–18). Rather than observing what had become ritual avoidance of taboos for a day, Jesus put the focus back on the liberative intention of the Sabbath institutions.

The contrast is striking in the story of the hungry disciples who began to pluck heads of grain and to eat in the fields on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–8), partaking in just the sort of foraging activity (not reaping for storage or sale) that characterized shared living on the land during sabbatical years. And the use by Jesus in Luke 13:12, 16 of language of release to describe his healing ministry only reinforces his citation of Sabbath-Jubilee language from Isaiah 61:1–2 in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (ESV). The social equity dimension of Sabbath is also in focus elsewhere in his teaching (see Matt. 5:42; 6:12; 11:28).

Paul’s recourse to the sabbatical vision of the manna story was not an isolated instance of the living influence of Sabbath social equity on the apostolic church. We see in Acts 4:34 Luke’s echoing of the sabbatical text in Deuteronomy 15:4 to describe

the economic outcome of the Jerusalem church's mutual sharing: "There was not a needy person among them" (ESV). These references indicate that in their mission, Jesus and the apostolic church incorporated the social equity priorities of the Sabbath commandments. Other texts (see, for example, James 2:1–9 and 5:1–6) also evidence more indirect indebtedness to Sabbath provisions.

### **Sabbath equity for today's church and society**

When Mennonite Church USA initiated its Corinthian Plan for health insurance for church workers, it incorporated a component that enabled congregations "with much" to subsidize insurance for

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workers in congregations "with less."<sup>2</sup> This is an example of the way that Sabbath principles of economic equity have continuing relevance to our lives today in our churches.

And just as other commandments regarding murder, adultery, fraud, and false witness have moral relevance and value for the social order beyond the church, so do Sabbath instructions regarding social equity. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cam-

bridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014) makes a compelling argument about the market's persistent generation of extreme inequality globally during the past two centuries, a pattern borne out in the United States in recent decades. In the US since 1979, even as employee productivity was soaring (it increased by 85 percent), wages in middle and low-paying jobs remained stagnant. Meanwhile, the top 1 percent of wage earners received 53.9 percent of the total increase in income between 1979 and 2011. The federal minimum wage in the US in 2015 is \$7.25. If the minimum wage had been indexed to the consumer price index at the level of buying power it had in 1968, today it would be \$10.52. And if the minimum wage had kept pace with the average productivity growth of labor (the way the minimum wage did from 1945 to 1968), that wage would be \$21.72 per hour. Instead almost all those gains went to increased income and wealth for investors and top earners.<sup>3</sup>



The Sabbath principles of social equity and economic security for all are resources for Christians in our witness for the common good in our societies and in the global economy. Such witness from Sabbath principles could take the form of advocacy for a higher minimum wage, for workers' rights to organize in low-wage retail and food-service corporations, and for a financial transaction tax on high-risk speculative trading that doesn't contribute value to the real economy yet has a negative impact on the lowest-income households. Systemic protections for people vulnerable to poverty under natural market dynamics are an indispensable aspect of common good that Christian love compels us to seek for our neighbors. People led by the Spirit and teaching of Jesus, "who though rich, for your sake became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9), will want to put their love to work in economic practices and protections to seek a fair balance between the abundance of some and the need of others. Now, as much as at the time of the apostle Paul, Sabbath faithfulness toward God is a matter of equality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical texts are cited from the Common English Bible.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/stewardship/the-corinthian-plan/>.

<sup>3</sup> For more data, analysis, and Bible study applications, see Spencer Bradford and Josiah Daniels, "A Fair Balance: The Bible, Economics, and Justice for Workers in the 21st Century: A Four-Session Study and Discussion Curriculum from Durham Congregations in Action"; online at <http://www.dcia.org/wp-content/uploads/FairBalanceForWorkerJusticeDCIA-Full.pdf>.

## About the author

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