

# Sabbath living together (Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30)

**It's hard to do alone.**

by [Chad Martin](#)

July 7, 2023

*To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).*

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Biblical scholars make clear that verses 28–30 of Matthew 11—the heart of this pericope and one of the most tender, soothing passages in Scripture—is about sabbath. When Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are weary,” he is framing the sabbath as less a set of rules and more a way of living that honors rest and good work.

In our day, we need the opposite corrective when it comes to sabbath living. With the decline of organized religion and the rise of an always plugged-in technology culture, it seems we no longer have any rules about rest or any shared understanding about how to stop working. We’ve cast off any communal expectation for boundaries around our work and availability, and we have relegated anything sabbath-related to personal lifestyle choices.

In this context, Jewish writer and cultural critic Judith Schulevitz offers welcome perspective on how the sabbath can be a fitting counterweight to the American fixation on overwork, too much screen time, and conventional wisdom about “work-life balance.”

In a January 3 interview on Ezra Klein’s podcast, Schulevitz made a compelling case for reinstating several key rules about the sabbath. Not that she was advocating a legalistic approach. But without shared commitments, she argued, sabbath living

becomes impossible to keep. She talked about the sabbath as “a four-step program for creating community and social cohesion,” with all four steps needing to be taken together:

“Right laws to limit work time”

“Make sure the schedules are coordinated”

“Make it a regular habit so that it becomes a regular norm”

“Make it festive. Make it fun.”

Religious communities can help with these steps. But embedded here are also secular expectations to create work cultures and norms that are humane and not simply designed to maximize productivity and profits.

Underscoring the need for workplace norms that line up with sabbath practices, Klein opened the episode by quoting Abraham Joshua Heschel’s book *The Sabbath*: “Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work.”

Jesus’ call in Matthew 11, “Come to me, all you who are weary,” is a balm for the overworked and the ever plugged in. Yet the call must be heard communally, the *you* must sound plural, if we are truly to find an easier yoke and a lighter burden. As Schulevitz and Klein perceive, the pressures of modern productivity and the ubiquity of online access make it nearly impossible to practice sabbath on one’s own.

Paradoxically, sabbath is most truly freeing when shared rules exist, both sacred and secular, to keep work and its digital tentacles in their place. Then we can find rest together.