

The Fourth Commandment – the Sabbath Day

If you want to start an argument, discuss the Sabbath with a group of Christians. The Sabbath question very quickly reveals a lot about how a person relates the New Testament to the Old, how they relate Law and Grace, Israel and the Church. But it is more than a question of theology. It becomes very practical. If we are supposed to keep the seventh day sabbath, and we don't, then of course we're sinning. If Sunday has become the Sabbath, and we do not observe it the way Israel was to observe the Sabbath, then we are sinning.

And part of the reason for the controversy is that the Sabbath commandment occurs within the Ten Commandments. Christians are quick to assume whatever is in the Ten Commandments is for all people of all times, and so go about finding out how we are supposed to keep the Sabbath.

How are we to understand this fourth of the Ten Commandments?

Here is where I have to repeat what we studied in the Sunday School hour. The Ten Commandments do not bind us as the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, considered as one document, were from God to Israel. The new covenant people of God are no longer under the Law of Moses; it is not the agreement between God and us.

However, to the degree that we see the Ten Commandments repeated in the New Testament, we know that they form part of God's eternal Law for His people.

Consider: Does the New Testament tell us to have no other gods before Him? Yes – Mark 12:28-29.

Does the New Testament tell us to make no carved images? Yes – 1 John 5:21, Hebrews 12:28-29.

Does the New Testament tell us to avoid taking His name in vain? Yes – Matthew 5:33-37, 1 Timothy 6:1.

Does the New Testament tell children to honour their father and mother? Yes, Ephesians 6:1.

Does the New Testament forbid murder? 1 John 3:15

Does the New Testament forbid adultery? Matthew 5:27-28

Does the New Testament forbid stealing? Ephesians 4:28

Does the New Testament forbid lying? Ephesians 4:25.

Does the New Testament forbid coveting? Hebrews 13:5.

Nine out of ten of the Ten Commandments are repeated very explicitly in the New Covenant.

Striking by its silence is no repetition of the Sabbath commandment. None of the letters of Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, or the writer of Hebrews ever once commands Sabbath observance.

Why? Two reasons.

1) The Sabbath was a sign between God and Israel. The Sabbath was a weekly symbol to Israel that they were under the Law, under the Mosaic Covenant.

'You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. 15 'Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. 16 'Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. 17 'It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.'" 18 And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exo 31:14-18)

As the church, we are no longer under the Mosaic Covenant. We are under the New Covenant. The signs we use to show we are under the New Covenant are different – they are baptism and the

Lord's Supper, not the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a very particular sign for the nation of Israel. Interestingly, nowhere in the Old Testament are any of the Gentile nations ever commanded to keep the Sabbath. And before the time of Moses, there are no commands given to Adam, Cain & Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or Joseph to keep the Sabbath day. Nowhere outside of Israel did God command people to observe it as a Sabbath. The Sabbath was a symbol of a relationship between God and Israel, and just as you don't wear other people's wedding rings, so we don't have to keep the sign between Jehovah and Israel.

J. Vernon McGee was a well-known radio preacher, and his commentaries are still used by many. One day a man wanted to argue with him about the Sabbath. The man said, "I'll give you \$100 if you will show me where the Sabbath day has been changed." McGee answered the man, "I don't think it has been changed. Saturday is Saturday, it is the seventh day of the week, and it is the Sabbath day...The seventh day is still Saturday, and it is still the Sabbath day." The man thought he had cornered McGee: "Then why don't you keep the Sabbath day if it hasn't been changed?" McGee answered, "the DAY hasn't changed, but I have been changed. I've been given a new nature now, I am joined to Christ; I am a part of the new creation. We celebrate the first day because that is the day He rose from the grave."

2) The Sabbath was a shadow that was fulfilled in Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17 ¹⁶ *So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,* ¹⁷ *which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*

Paul tells the Colossians that no one can bind their consciences, tell them something is required or forbidden with respect to Jewish dietary laws, Jewish festivals, and the Jewish weekly sabbath. And what does he say such things were? They were a shadow of things to come, but the substance is Christ. In other words, just like your shadow on the ground gives a general outline of your shape, but you are the substance, so all those festivals gave a general outline or shape of Messiah. But when He came, the substance had come.

So much so, that Paul frowned upon Christians who turned back to Sabbath observance.

Galatians 4:9-11 ⁹ *But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?* ¹⁰ *You observe days and months and seasons and years.* ¹¹ *I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.*

Christians in the province of Galatia had been affected by some false teachers who had arrived and told them that they needed to not only believe in Christ, but essentially join the nation of Israel through circumcision, keeping of the days and feasts, and coming under the law – the covenant God made with Israel. For Paul, this is not progression, it is regression. This is not maturity, it is falling away from the gospel of grace into a system of works.

The church in Rome was a very mixed church, made up of Jews and Gentiles. For them, the issues of Sabbath and diet were going to potentially be matters of great conflict. So what did Paul do? He wrote chapter 14.

Paul commands Jewish believers in Rome, who still kept the Sabbath, not to condemn Gentile believers, who did not.

Romans 14:4-6 ⁴ *Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.* ⁵ *One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.* ⁶ *He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it.*

Romans 14:10 ¹⁰ *But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*

If we are to still keep Sabbath, it is strange for Paul to say this. But if the Sabbath is something

which some Jewish believers still kept, but was not binding on all Christians, then this makes perfect sense.

And in the book of Acts, we have an incident which proved that the apostles did not require Sabbath observance. In Acts 15, the apostles met at the church at Jerusalem to decide what they would recommend for Gentile believers to observe so as not to offend their Jewish brothers. Sabbath keeping was not one of those things. The New Testament never commands believers to observe the Sabbath.

But given the fact that God placed the Sabbath within the Ten Commandments, given that He knew there would controversy about this, God clearly wants us to do more than just shrug, and say, "Well, I guess for us it is the Nine Commandments." The New Covenant is not just about abolition, it is about fulfillment. It is not just about dispensing with things, it is about coming to full maturity. So what we need to understand is how New Testament believers, both Jew and Gentile are to fulfill what God intended by this.

I. We Must Experience the True Sabbath Rest

And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? 19 So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. 2 For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. 3 For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,'" although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all His works"; 5 and again in this place: "They shall not enter My rest." 6 Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, 7 again He designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today," after such a long time, as it has been said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts." 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. 9 There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. 10 For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. 11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (Heb 3:18-4:11)

The writer is telling Hebrew Christians that those under the Old Covenant did not enter the rest of Canaan because of their unbelief. Even though, there was the seventh day rest, the Israelites failed to experience rest because of rejecting God's Word.

But there was a greater rest, an ultimate rest beyond the land of Canaan, and beyond the seventh day. What is that rest? That rest is Jesus Christ Himself, and the salvation He gives.

Look again at verse 10. He who enters God's rest, ceases from his own works. He stops working in his strength, and trusts in Christ. This is the good news of the Gospel, that man can and must stop working to earn salvation, he must stop labouring to gain favour with God, he must stop trying to earn his way into Heaven, and come to rest in Jesus Christ and His merits.

What allows you to enter this rest? Faith. Trusting that Jesus has completed the work on the Cross, and that it is finished, and that you desire it.

What keeps you from entering this rest? Unbelief. Rejecting the truth that God has completed the work, insisting that you do it on your own, striving to measure up. The result is a life of turmoil, of restless, unhappy striving.

The Jewish Sabbath was actually three things: no work, no burden to be borne, no fires to be kindled. That's it. But from those three commandments, the Jewish people developed a huge burden

of what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. Their observance of the Sabbath became their greatest work, their most intense labour, and there is no heavier burden than the modern Sabbath observance.

What could be more symbolic of man striving, labouring toiling to be pleasing to God than what has become of Jewish Sabbath observance? It is ironic and yet fitting that what religion has done to the day of rest is a picture of the opposite: toiling for salvation. To understand the Gospel is to cease from your own works, enter His rest.

All man-made religion is striving. All man-made religion is works. Man labours to free himself from guilt, from a sense of obligation, from the feeling of condemnation. And when he doesn't succeed using religious acts and rituals, then he uses drugs and alcohol, and extreme sports, and entertainment to drown out the guilt, and the restlessness, and the inner turmoil.

When Peter spoke to the Jews who wanted to get the Gentiles to observe the Law, he said *"Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" (Act 15:10)*

On the other hand, Jesus, the author of the New Covenant, says

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Mat 11:28-30)

When you think of the true Sabbath rest, do not think of whether you walk or type or do something vigorous with your body. Think of your conscience – that part of you that sounds the alarm when there is sin. Is your conscience at rest? Are you at peace, knowing that your whole sin debt is taken by Christ?

I meet many Christians who though they understand the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross, they have not experienced rest. They are still tortured, striving, struggling, hoping there will be some work they can do that will calm their hearts. *Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (Joh 6:29)*

II. We Must Experience the Lord's Day

When we read about early church worship in the New Testament, the church had begun to meet on the first day of the week.

Acts 20:7 ⁷ *Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.*

1 Corinthians 16:2 ² *On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.*

The Christians who lived right after the apostles taught that the Old Testament Sabbath was gone, and that Christians now met on the first day of the week.

Ignatius, pastor of Antioch, writing to the Magnesians in the year 105, "We have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day." (*Epistle to the Magnesians 9, Ante-Nicene Fathers 1.62*)

Justin Martyr, writing in the year 160, "But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God ... made the world. And Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead on that same day. - *First Apology, Ante-Nicene Fathers 1.186*

"We gather together on the first rather than the seventh day of the week because redemption is even a greater work than creation and more worthy of commemoration and because the rest which followed creation is far outdone by the rest which ensues upon the completion of redemption. Like the Apostles, we meet on the first day of the week and hope that Jesus may stand in our midst and say, "Peace be unto you." Our Lord has lifted the Sabbath from the old and rusty hinges where on the law had placed it long before and set it on the new golden hinges which His love has fashioned. He has placed our rest day not at the end of a week of toil but at the beginning of the rest which remains for the people of God. Every first day of the week we should meditate on the rising of our Lord and seek to enter into the fellowship with Him in His risen life." – Charles Spurgeon

In the book of Revelation, John refers to this as 'the Lord's Day'. The particular form of the word *Lord* used here in Revelation 1:10 only occurs twice in all the New Testament. The one occurrence is here. The only other place where this special use of Lord is used is in 1 Corinthians 11:20, it is the Lord's Supper. Now this begins to open some things up for us, because we do know many things about the Lord's Supper. When we eat the Lord's Supper, are there some things we should not do? Yes. Because it's not my supper, it's His. This unique construction in the Greek means belonging to the Lord. Of all suppers, this particular Supper is His, dedicated to Him, coming from Him. So even though all foods are clean in Christ, even though we are not bound to dietary laws, there is one Supper we must treat differently from all other Suppers.

And Paul tells us in that passage it is possible to profane the Lord's body in that Supper. The assumption must be that we can do something similar to the Lord's Day. How would you profane the Lord's Day? If you treat it like any other day. It's the idea of consecration again. To set something apart as holy, as unique, as different.

Now, in one sense, I am here preaching to the choir. You are here. You are not at work. You are not checking emails and working on projects. You are here doing the most important thing we can do on the Lord's Day – worship.

Now Scripture gives us no rulebook for how we should spend the rest of the Lord's Day, so I say these things to you not by command, but by what I think is the better part of wisdom.

As a pastor, one of the things I hear very frequently from Christians is this: "I am so busy during the week, I don't have a moment to think about the Lord. I feel guilty for how completely occupied I am with work and appointments and the frantic pace of the day. When the day is over, I sometimes look back over the day, and ask, 'Did I even pray once? Did I even spare a thought for the Lord?'. I feel so distracted, so consumed by work and the pace of life.

So here you have one day in seven to do what the rest of the week does not allow you to do. The Lord's Day is uniquely a day to be able to stop and reflect. You get to think, to enjoy, to admire God's goodness to you. You get to enjoy your loved ones. You get to reflect on the Word of God. You get to rejoice in the good food on your table. You get to be with God's people and serve them and enjoy them. You get to read what you don't usually have time to do.

Here's a test for you. One day, you may be in a hospital bed, and you know your last hours have come. The pastor is called to your side. You begin to express some regret. You say something like,

“Looking back I wish I had done more of ____” What will you wish you had done more of? You are about to meet your Creator and Saviour, who will consider your whole life. You are about to enter eternity. What will you wish you had done that you left undone, or had done little of? Will you really say, “I wish I had spent more time at the office?” “I wish I had gotten straight A's on my final report.” “I wish I had gone on that trip to Peru.” “I wish I had finished the bathroom renovation.” The chances are, you will say something like “I wish I had known Him better, whom I am about to see face to face.” “I wish I had prayed and read His Word a little more.” “I wish I had told my loved ones how much I loved them, and showed them, and pointed them to Christ.” “I wish I had enjoyed the moments God gave me, and revelled in His gifts, instead of always looking to tomorrow, or always regretting the past.”

I would say to you, the Lord's Day is for all those “I wish I had done more of.” Worship. Love Him and His gifts. Love Him and your family. Love Him and His people. Love Him and His Word. Love Him and His Gospel.

God deliberately made the created universe in six days, but made the week seven days. Had he made the world in six days and made the work-week six days, we'd have to agree that we should do the same thing every day. But if God worked six out of seven days, who am I to insist that I should work seven out of seven? God has gifted us a principle: take out a day. Use that day to do all the first works: the things you know are most important, eternal, and permanent, but that you don't get to like you wish during the week.

First, enter His rest. If you are still working to earn salvation, come to the Sabbath that is Jesus Christ.

Second, remember the Lord's Day. Worship, love, enjoy God and His gifts.