

# The 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Glorifying God with my Time, Work, and Worship

## Exodus 20:8-11

February 15 & 16, 2014  
Steve DeWitt

I hope you are enjoying our series in the Ten Commandments. I am. God uses the law to show us how far we have fallen short of the glory of God so that it might lead us to faith. After faith, God uses it to lead us to holiness and happiness.

Today we turn our attention to one of the most difficult of the Ten Commandments. It's not that it is harder to obey, but it is harder to understand. Most of us look at the list and we get it. No idols, *yep*. No murder, *agree*. No adultery, *uh-huh*. Keep the Sabbath holy. *Keep the what, what?* Keep the Sabbath holy.

As we come to the fourth commandment, we need to acknowledge on the front end that there is a wide range within the congregation regarding past experience of Sabbath keeping. If you are not from certain religious and Christian backgrounds, you don't have the foggiest idea of what the Sabbath is all about. If you are from those backgrounds, you have stories to tell about what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. My family heritage is in strict Sabbath keeping. My father helped his sister Marie, my aunt, write her memoirs before she died a few years ago. She reflected on her church experience as a child:

"Now I would like to tell what Sundays were like. Sundays were strictly "Sabbath" days. They were very important but more of an observance, I am afraid. We couldn't do anything on Sunday that could be done on Saturday or wait until Monday. We would peel our potatoes on Saturday night, had our shoes and everything all ready and laid out, and we couldn't cut anything so the scissors were hung up on a special Sunday nail, not to be used. I remember having a coat that had one button to fasten it—and that button came off. We could not sew it on Sunday—that was work and it could wait until Monday. And it did....Nor could we play ball on Sunday—or play catch or hold a bat....What one did on Sunday seemed to be a measure of his Christianity. Now it has gone the other way which is not good either."

So with such different backgrounds and even personal practice of Sabbath here, I am going to approach this like a blank sheet of paper. Can we all set aside our preconceived notions on this and give it a fresh look? What is the command? What does it mean? What does it mean for us today?

We are going to spend two weeks on this one. It has complexity so just explaining it will be today's message, but next week the application of the command has so much to say to stressed out, workaholic, spiritually frazzled people like us.

### What is the Fourth Command?

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8 ESV)

Remember the Sabbath? What is the Sabbath that they were to remember? God introduced Israel to the concept of Sabbath just prior in chapter 16. This is after the Red Sea Crossing and is part of God's provision for Israel in the wilderness:

*"This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.'"* (Exodus 16:23)

The Sabbath is called a day of solemn rest. In fact, "Sabbath" means *to cease or to rest*. Now in chapter 20, God establishes this command for Israel which he defines in verse 9: *"Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work."* (Exodus 20:9-10)

Before you envision that Sabbath means a day you don't do anything, it means to cease from the work of the other six days. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. We don't Sabbath from everything, we Sabbath from the normal labors of the other six days. It was a day for God, and worship, and service. It is a day of different labor. For a pious Jew, the work week was and is Sunday through Friday. They reckoned their days from sunset to sunset. So Sabbath begins on what we would call Friday night and goes until Saturday night at sundown.

The command was not simply for the breadwinner of the home. *"...you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates."* (Exodus 20:10)

Further commands on the Sabbath include Sabbaths for the land—every seven years no crops were planted. There were financial Sabbaths—debts were forgiven every seven years. There was even a year of Jubilee—on the seventh seventh-year Sabbath all debts were forgiven, all debtor slaves were forgiven, and all land was returned to its original family ownership. We see the Sabbath rest principle not just in days of the week, but in finances, agriculture, and real estate. There was a schedule; a rhythm—locally, individually, and nationally. *Why? Why this whole 'work six days, rest one'? I mean, that will cost us money we could have made in that one day. That represents a 14% cut in profits. Further, if my servants can't work that day either, who will take care of me? Even the animals get a day off? This seems unnecessary as I doubt they will ever unionize.* Sabbath didn't make good business sense. God answers this partially here in verse 11.

### **The Creation Rhythm of God**

*"For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."* (Exodus 20:11)

Many were likely thinking, *Work six, rest on the seventh, where have I heard that before?* Yes, the story of creation. God worked and created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Genesis 2:2). The command ends with this point: *Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.* (Exodus 20:11) Why did God create the world in six days and rest on the seventh? He clearly could have done it in one day, one hour, one second. In fact, God doesn't even dwell in time. Time and hours and days are part of God's construction of this world—a revolving earth; an orbiting sun. The sun will set tonight at the same time it has set on this date for thousands of years. Our sense of time is tied to revolving galactic planets and solar revolutions. It's amazing what we take for granted every time we look at a clock.

God could have done it in a day, but what he did was work, then rest. Our God is a working and resting God. He's a God of creation rhythm which he himself modeled. I suspect he did it to show us that we are not machines and our ultimate purpose is not production. A day of

rest reminds us that there is a greater purpose to our humanity. It's a day of refreshment; a day to truly live. But that's not all it is.

### **Covenant Sign Between God and Israel**

*"And the LORD said to Moses, 'You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.'" (Exodus 31:12-14)*

Our modern day would look at this with scorn. The punishment of death seems way out of proportion. But we fail to realize the seriousness of God's covenants and the signs that he establishes. God's covenant with Noah not to again destroy the world by flood had a sign—the rainbow. God's covenant with Abraham had a sign—circumcision. God's covenant through Moses with Israel had a sign—the Sabbath. Like circumcision, it set Israel apart as God's people. By making the Sabbath a sacred day, it was a sign that they as a nation and individuals were holy and set apart to God. It was about divine covenant which is why breaking it had such dire consequences.

This aspect of the Old Testament Sabbath must be understood in order to understand many passages in the gospels where Jesus confronts the Jewish practice and teaching of his day which took God's intent for the Sabbath to be rest and blessing and made it oppressive and legalistic.

*"The Mishnah (Shabbat vii.2) provides a list of thirty-nine "main tasks" prohibited on the Sabbath, including sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding, threshing, winnowing, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, sheering wool, bleaching or dyeing wool, spinning, weaving, tying or untying a knot, sewing or tearing two stitches, hunting, writing or erasing two letters, building, demolishing, kindling or extinguishing a fire, hammering, carrying objects from one place to another, and several more." (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 251.)*

So when Jesus heals the lame man on the Sabbath and tells him to carry his mat home, the Jewish leaders have a problem with it (John 5). Or when Jesus heals the man with a body deformity on the Sabbath, they come unglued (Luke 6:6-11). When he and his disciples pick grain in the field and eat it, they explode against him (Luke 6:1-5). In each case, Jesus is confronting and modeling a right approach to the Sabbath which isn't the cessation of everything or oppressive Sabbath rules or spiritualized Sabbath keeping. He says, *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."* (Mark 2:27) In other words, the Sabbath law was a covenantal gift from God but they had turned the gift into a curse.

### **The Sabbath and New Covenant Believers**

A quick reminder about the three aspects of the Old Testament Law:

- **The Civil Laws** govern Israel as a nation. No longer apply/Jesus creates new people of God.
- **The Ceremonial Laws** govern Israel's worship of God. No longer apply/Jesus fulfills with his once-for-all sacrifice.
- **The Moral Laws** are grounded in the nature of God. Eternally apply as God's nature never changes.

Here is where things get tricky because within the fourth command we have a mixture of all three. The Sabbath had national civil implications. The Sabbath was also ceremonial in its function as a day of worship and a sign of covenant between God and Israel. Few debate whether the civil and ceremonial aspects of the fourth command are still valid. They are not.

The question is whether there is a moral and unchanging aspect to this command which believers under the New Covenant established by Jesus are still bound to follow.

### **The New Testament Church worshiped on the first day of the week (Sunday)**

We have glimpses into the worship of the early church. Remember, Sunday was not a day off for them. They had to work as everyone did, Jew and Gentile. However, the significance of Jesus being resurrected on Sunday moved the Christian day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. There is no text that mandates this; it just was the practice.

### **Hebrews teaches that our "rest" is found in Christ and is eternal**

This is more complicated but it bears mentioning that the book of Hebrews deals extensively with "Sabbath," not as a day but as a realm or as a new era. Jesus is now our rest and all who believe in him rest eternally in him.

### **Paul writes of "Sabbath" as shadow and encourages loving acceptance of differing views and Sabbath practices (Colossians 2:16-17; Romans 14:5ff.)**

- *"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."* (Colossians 2:16-17)
- *"One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."* (Romans 14:5)

These are important because with one simple sentence he could have established Saturday or Sunday as a Sabbath for Christians. He does neither. Rather he says the Sabbath was a shadow of a reality found and fulfilled in Christ. And he commands tolerance within the Jewish/Gentile church for differences of conscience and practice.

### **The Spectrum of Positions on the Sabbath**

**Saturday Sabbatarians** – Saturday is Sabbath for Christians (Seventh Day Adventists)

**Sunday Sabbatarians** – Sunday is the New Covenant Sabbath

**Sunday sabbatarians** – Sunday is not Sabbath but a special day of rest and worship based on God's creation rhythm

**Some-day sabbatarians** – One day of rest and worship a week is important based on God's creation rhythm

**No sabbatarians** – Sabbath? Sunday is game day/Weekends were made for Michelob

There may be sub-positions among these, but these are the options. Remember what Paul said, some people practice a Sabbath and some people view every day the same. His appeal is for respecting peoples' consciences on this. Some of us think nothing of doing some

activities on Sunday and others purposefully don't. So we begin there. Our view on Sabbath is not a primary issue; it is secondary and not one to break fellowship over.

I'm going to tell you where I am on this and why. Paul's words about Sabbath as shadow and Sabbath as conscience are clear to me that the ceremonial aspect of the fourth commandment does not apply to the New Covenant Christian. It was a sign indicator like circumcision. This negates a required Saturday Sabbath and argues against a strict Sunday Sabbath position, while if you choose to do it for personal reasons, I think it's fine and may be beneficial as a good idea. I would fall somewhere between *Sunday sabbatarians* and *Some-day sabbatarians* because the concept of Sabbath and God's creation rhythm are meant as gifts and blessings to us. We are not machines and we are not made primarily as workers and producers. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Further, while the New Testament doesn't mandate a Sabbath, it does mandate regular and ongoing times together with God's people.

- *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."* (Acts 2:42, 46-47)
- *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."* (Hebrews 10:24-25)

If our motive for denying the Sabbath mandate is to exempt ourselves from corporate worship and service in order to find the bare minimum of participation in the local church, there are plenty of New Testament commands to condemn our attitude as sin and to call us to repent.

We don't need the fourth command to feel the need to give sacred time to God or to orient our lives and homes and families around a rhythm of weekly worship and service. We don't need that because our love for Christ compels it in us naturally—at least if we are healthy Christians.

Imagine if the fourth command was, *Remember Valentine's Day, keep it holy*. If the husband or boyfriend's attitude is, *Do I have to?* or if the wife's attitude is, *Can we miss a year?* Or if they both say, *How many years can we ignore this and be okay with each other?* is the issue Valentine's Day or is the attitude toward Valentine's Day a telling indicator of the health of the relationship?

Similarly, whatever your position on the Sabbath, your attitude toward time, work, play, and the priority of God in those categories—even weekly worship attendance—is a telling indicator of your real heart for God.

The Pharisees made the Sabbath about outward measures. Jesus obeyed the Sabbath himself but he loved and healed, provided and taught, served and worshiped on a day dedicated to God as the enduring example of a man living his life for the glory of God.

God cares about our time and how we use it. God cares about our work and our ethic in it. God cares about our schedules and life rhythms, even about our rest and refreshment. I hope you are getting the idea that the Ten Commandments are not about God limiting us

but rather freeing us to the life we were created to live; a life fully absorbed and lived under the ultimate purpose of glorifying God in everything.

What that means practically is next week's message.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

© 2014 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address ([www.bethelweb.org](http://www.bethelweb.org)) on the copied resource.