

# The Commands of Christ The Fourth Commandment—A

*Exodus 20:8-11*  
Part Eleven

*With Study Questions*

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# The Fourth Commandment—A

*Exodus 20:8-11*

**Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it (Exodus 20:8-11).**

## **I. The Best Discipline**

### **Personal Spiritual Growth**

Personal growth is the rage. In the same way the Beatles hired gurus, today people hire personal analysts, personal trainers, personal dietitians, personal psychics, *etc.* to aid in personal discipline and development. It's very important to us to improve our personal lives; nestled within the boundaries of western Christendom lies this same emphasis. We call it personal spiritual growth. We seek to develop and augment our personal relationship with Jesus.

I will occasionally hear from Christians who are feeling distant from God or stale in their faith or some such description of the feel of their relationship with God. I empathize. I think Jesus empathizes. There are numerous methods we can employ to address this issue.

### **Methods**

Quiet times can be very valuable for the growing Christian. Personal alone time with God and meditation (thoughtful examination of His word) is critical. Small groups are also a valuable tool in personal spiritual growth. We need to have intimate relationships with those to whom we can confess our sins. Friends who will hold our feet to the fire! As the Proverbs so indicate, **"Faithful are the wounds of a friend"** (Proverbs 27:6).

Weekly Bible studies, prayer meetings, acts of mercy toward widows and orphans, seminars, conferences, even pilgrimages, can all be useful in boosting us in spiritual maturity. I don't say this for any kind of self-promotion, but I have in the past, and still do, engage in many of these types of activities on a regular basis. I certainly hope you all do as well. But I know for me, I missed the obvious for much of my Christian life. There was something else; something very significant that God tells us is a gift from Him designed for us (Mark 2:27). Ezekiel writes of it this way:

**Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I *am* the LORD who sanctifies them. (Ezekiel 20:12)**

### **The First Table**

As we conclude our study of the first table of the Ten Commandments (remembering that the first four are how we love God, the next six how we love men), let us consider the significance of the order.

The first commandment tells us that we are to have no other gods. The second commandment tells us we are not to alter or have improper images of the true God. The third commandment mandates that we are to highly esteem the name of the true God. In the fourth commandment we are instructed to dedicate ourselves to a practice designed to secure the purity of the first three.

### **The Ultimate Discipline**

The keeping of the Sabbath is the ultimate discipline. Over and above all other disciplines, God has determined something richer and more valuable than our quiet times conferences or seminars; He determined a day. On this day we are to take our minds off of the mundane and the routine, and place our thoughts and behaviors uniquely heavenward. It is in this respect that the Sabbath is to be kept holy or sacred (separate) from other days.

## Holy and Unholy

A fair question might be “Should not our thoughts continuously be heavenward?”

**Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known *the difference* between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them (Ezekiel 22:26).**

We have sadly lost the sense of what is holy or sacred or Sabbath. We assert that all our money belongs to God so a tithe is no longer necessary. But there is a prayer of consecration for the tithe, *i.e.*, a prayer that the tithe would be used for a sacred, separate use. The tithe actually belongs to God in such a way that He considers withholding it from Him as stealing (Malachi 3:8).

There is also a prayer of consecration for the elements of communion. They are sacred elements which the Apostle Paul describes as a cup of blessing. Certainly when we handle the communion elements we perceive them to be different than the hamburger we ordered at the drive-through.

God has determined that certain things are sacred unto Himself. I remember thinking that this concept only applied to the old covenant. But even in the old covenant (where God clearly marks things out as sacred) the earth was “**the Lord’s and all it contains**” (Psalm 24:1). When we say there are things that are uniquely holy or are to be considered as belonging to God, we are not implying that all things don’t belong to Him. Dad may have bought, and therefore owns, everything in the house. But the letters he has saved from his wife are not to be touched!

## II. The Neglected Commandment

### Associated with Rebelliousness

God associates Sabbath-breaking with pure rebelliousness.

**Thus says the LORD: ‘Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring *it* in by the gates of Jerusalem; <sup>22</sup> ‘nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. <sup>23</sup> But they did not obey nor incline**

**their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear nor receive instruction.” (Jeremiah 17:21-23)**

Not granting for one second that there are no pragmatic benefits from keeping the Sabbath, neglecting or disregarding the Sabbath appears to be man’s way of simply telling God we are not interested in being with Him unless He has something for us. Like the fruit in the Garden of Eden, the Sabbath appears morally neutral, so our neglect increases the rebellion all the more. Sinful man’s answer to this commandment tends to be a simple and unqualified, “No, I’m not interested; who can keep it anyway?”

### **The Hardest to Preach**

Of the Ten Commandments, this may be the hardest to preach, and to accept, as a twenty-first century Christian and pastor. Speculating as to the reason, I can only say that as a people we have largely become Sabbath=breakers. Furthermore, we have tailored our theology to accommodate Sabbath-breaking.

For some reason today’s church has concluded that there are only nine binding commandments. When Ezra read from the books of the Law, the Israelites, who were in slavery, wept at its reading because they finally realized why they were in their present condition. They sought to repent. It is my prayer that we, as modern, Christians will have the same heart. John Calvin states,

It is to be gathered without doubt from many passages, that the keeping of the Sabbath was a serious matter, since God inculcates no other commandment more frequently, nor more strictly requires obedience to any; and again, when He complains that He is despised, and that the Jews have fallen into extreme ungodliness, He simply says that His “Sabbaths are polluted,” as if religion principally consisted in their observance.<sup>1</sup>

In support of this Calvin’s statement we turn to Ezekiel.

**Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; but**

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. II, Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Baker Book House, reprinted 1993), p. 435.

**they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness (Ezek. 20:21).**

**You have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths (Exek. 22:8).**

It is worth noting that the fourth commandment is the longest and most detailed of all the commandments.

## **Sabbatical**

The idea behind the Sabbath is not merely kicking back one day in seven. There is an emphasis on both cessation of certain activities and pursuit of other activities. It is where we get the word 'sabbatical.' When I was in high school I had a world history teacher who used to take regular sabbaticals to Europe. She ceased from being a teacher and became a student for a period of months. As a result we, as her students, received back a teacher superior to the one who left. This is what the Sabbath should accomplish in Christians.

## **Is There Still A Sabbath?**

So, is there still a Sabbath? Was the Sabbath only for the age of law? Moses writes regarding the perpetuity of the Sabbath.

**Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant (Exodus 31:16 KJV).**

## **Before the Law**

A brief explanation supporting the continuance of the Sabbath might be helpful. First, the idea that the Sabbath was only for the age of the law (the Mosaic covenant) is inconsistent with the fact that the Sabbath was observed prior to the law.

Before the Law was given we see in the record of Exodus the observance of the Sabbath. **"Now it came about on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one"** (Exodus 16:22). The instruction here was to gather twice as much on the sixth day so it wouldn't

be necessary to violate the Sabbath.

The law was given in Exodus 20 so we clearly see the observance of the Sabbath wasn't merely in the Mosaic Law. The commandment also enjoins us to *remember* the Sabbath. This assumes a prior knowledge--a knowledge which dates back to creation itself when God rested.

### **In, And After, the Law**

Obviously we see the Sabbath in the Law, in the commandment we just read. The question remains, is there still to be the observance of the Sabbath in the new covenant?

Jesus said In Matthew 12:8, **“For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”** So, as Dr. Greg Bahnsen asked, “Is Jesus Lord of something that is dead?” Although the Sabbath had both ceremonial and civil significance (that is, it is part of the Levitical foreshadowing of Christ as well as having civil punishments) its inclusion in the Ten Commandments demonstrates that it is also moral in nature and should be perpetual in observance.

### **An Abrogated Commandment?**

Does the following verse abrogate (eliminate) the Sabbath?

**Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—<sup>17</sup> things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16,17 NASB).**

Paul asserts that regarding a day, or not regarding a certain day, is a matter of Christian liberty (similar to eating or not eating food sacrificed to idols). The natural and fair interpretation is, that he means those days which were in debate, and no others. We must understand that there were other sabbath days (Sabbath in the above passage (*sabbaton*) is plural). There were sabbath days that were unique to the nation of Israel that were not in force prior to the Mosaic administration. They were sabbath days which foreshadowed the work of, and rest in, Christ. These types of sabbath days are no longer in force. There were Sabbaths which separated Israel from the surrounding nations—they were abrogated in the New (and international) Covenant. But we should not read this to think Paul is eliminating one of the Ten Commandments!

## No Sabbath?

I think it is a mistake to interpret the apostle's words as to leave the New Testament church no Sabbath at all, in any shape. After the experience of all ages has shown that a Sabbath rest was the natural and necessary means essential to religious welfare, was the New Testament Church stripped more bare, left more poor than all preceding dispensations?

Paradise had enjoyed its Sabbath, though needing it less. The patriarchal saints enjoyed it. Abraham enjoyed it. Israel, under the burdensome tutelage of the law, enjoyed it. But now that the last, the fullest, the most gracious and blessed dispensation of all has come, is this blessed institution is taken away? It seems unreasonable to accept such an exposition of the apostle's meaning. The Sabbath is not so much an abrogated commandment as it is a neglected commandment.

In the same way that neglecting prayer, alone time with God, Bible study and other means that God has supplied for His glory and our benefit would have negative consequences, neglecting the Lord's Day has had dire consequences at every level of humanity.

Assuming there is a Sabbath and that obeying the Sabbath yields great blessings, the questions remain: how are we to approach Sabbath keeping? What day is the Sabbath? What are the reasons for the Sabbath? What is, and what is not, allowed on the Sabbath? What is our focus on the Sabbath? Where will ignoring the Sabbath lead? Where Will Keeping The Sabbath Lead? We will address these questions in our next meeting.

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some more popular methods of personal spiritual growth (pages 2, 3)?
2. How is the Sabbath a method of growth for the Christian (page 3)?
3. Discuss the concept of things being holy. Are there things that don't belong to God? Then why does He seem to indicate that certain things belong to Him (pages 3, 4)?
4. Why do you suppose the Sabbath is such a neglected commandment (pages 4, 5)?
5. Discuss Calvin's comment and how it relates to the passage from Ezekiel (pages 5, 6).
6. When did the Sabbath begin? Is there still a Sabbath? What are different aspects of the Sabbath (pages 6, 7)?