

The Fourth Commandment

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. What are the more popular methods employed in this endeavor?

Methods

Quiet times have become a virtual non-negotiable for the growing Christian. Is personal alone time with God important? It would be hard to argue against it. Small groups also seem to have surfaced as a valuable tool in personal spiritual growth. Should we not 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, pilgrimages, etc. There seems to be a never-ending list of disciplines, some good, some not so good, designed to boost us to new levels to spiritual maturity. But let us ask ourselves, "In all our efforts, are we missing the obvious?" Ezekiel writes,

"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 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 that will secure the surety 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, not so much a quiet time or a conference or seminar, but 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. But should not our thoughts continuously be heavenward?

Holy and Unholy

“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 that 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

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; ²² 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. ²³ 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).

The Hardest to Preach

Of the Ten Commandments, this is the hardest to preach, and to accept, as a twentieth 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. I feel like Ezra reading from the books of the Law. The Israelites were in slavery and wept at its reading because they finally realized why they were in their present condition. They sought to repent. It is my prayer that 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."¹

In support of this 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 they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the

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

wilderness" (Ezekiel 20:21). **"You have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths"** (Ezekiel 22:8).

It is also 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).

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 that 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. Bahnsen asked, “Is Jesus Lord of something that is dead?” Although the Sabbath had both ceremonial and civil ramifications (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 –
17 things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16,17).**

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 that were in debate, and no others. We must understand that there were other sabbath days. 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 that foreshadowed the work of, and rest in, Christ. These types of sabbath days are no longer in force.

But do we really think Paul is eliminating one of the Ten Commandments? Can you think of any other commandment that Paul eliminates altogether? Does it make sense that one and only one of the ten would be removed? Are there only nine commandments? This seems senseless.

No Sabbath?

Should we so 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, this blessed institution is taken away? It seems unreasonable to accept such an exposition of the apostle's meaning.

Not Abrogated but Neglected

The Sabbath is not so much an abrogated commandment as it is a neglected commandment. Similar to the eating of a piece of fruit, there doesn't appear to be anything immoral (in a utilitarian sense) about violating it. There isn't the resulting death of violating the sixth commandment, or the immediate and consequential distrust and damage of violating the ninth commandment. It requires more faith on our parts to believe that obedience or disobedience to this commandment contains both blessings and curses since we don't see the immediate consequence of its violation. But consequences there are.

III. Sabbath Keeping

Assuming there is a Sabbath and that obeying the Sabbath yields great blessings, 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?

1. What Day is the Sabbath?

In the old covenant the Sabbath was the seventh day of the week, which was Saturday. **"Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb" (Matthew 28:1).** Saturday was the Sabbath and Sunday was considered the first day of the week. This is verified in Mark. **"Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen" (Mark 16:2).**

With this before us, why does the church meet on Sunday rather than Saturday? One reason is because the New Testament church gathered on Sunday. **"And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight" (Acts 20:7).** The early, new covenant, church met on the first day opposed to the seventh day, which was the Old Testament Sabbath (on the seventh day the Lord rested). Again we see in 1 Corinthians:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. ²On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:1,2).

Sunday was the day our Lord rose from the dead. From that day forth, the church recognized the Sabbath to be the day of Christ's resurrection – the Lord's Day.

Multiple Sabbaths?

There is a problem that arises from the rugged individualism of Western Christianity. Christians may embrace the principle, or spirit, of the Sabbath, but merely apply it personally and in a solitary fashion. But the commandment is to the covenant *people* of God, and was to be applied universally. The problem with the Sabbath being on multiple days is one of corporate recognition within God's covenant people of a day that is His.

One might say that Thursday works best for me but that falls short of the people of God recognizing one 24 hour day that is holy unto the Lord. It's the Lord's day, not the Lord's two hours; not to mention that we are to recognize the Sabbath as a body, not merely as individuals.

My father-in-law really enjoys his family. He has four children and looks forward to seeing them. Although he enjoys them individually, there is an increased sense of joy when they all come together for special occasions. It is a glory to God for the church universal to recognize this commandment in harmony.

2. Reasons for the Sabbath

Jesus speaking in Mark 2:27 states, "**The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.**" It is the ultimate discipline and is designed for our benefit. There are some 200 allusions to the Sabbath and what it is for. Among these reasons are: 1) to commemorate the work of Creation (Exodus 20:11). 2) To preserve the knowledge of the only living and true God (Exodus 20:12). There was a time when Sunday was quite different than all other days of the week. As a child I remember Sunday being a day when all the stores were closed. Unfortunately I was never told why. The reason was the effect the Sabbath had in preserving within our culture an understanding and respect for God. You probably have relatives you never visit. In failing to do so you are making an indelible mark upon your children that these relatives are not important to you. When we ignore the Sabbath, we give the same message regarding Christ.

3) It is a day when we turn our thoughts toward that which is unseen and spiritual (Luke 4:16). 4) It is a day that is set aside for instruction and worship of God Luke (4:16). 5) It is a day of rest and cessation from normal daily activity (Nehemiah 13:15-19). 6) It foreshadows our ultimate rest in God (Hebrews 4:9).

A Humane Reason

All of these things are in the best interests of man and the glory of God. God's design in instituting the Sabbath was purely a humane one. God intends it, not as a burdensome ceremony to gall the necks of men to no benevolent

purpose, but as a means of promoting the true welfare of the human race. From a purely practical and pragmatic standpoint the question must be asked: "Would the human race, would the church, be richer or poorer by observing one day in seven to the Lord?" How could any Christian answer "no" to this question?

3. Allowed, and Not Allowed, on the Sabbath

Reading from the Gospel of Mark we see a New Testament record of Sabbath activity.

At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath." But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." And departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they questioned Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" – in order that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, "What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. But the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him (Matthew 12:1-14).

Biblical Versus Legalistic Sabbath Keeping

The whole drift of Jesus' argument is to show that when properly understood, His disciples had not broken the Sabbath at all. They had complied with it and there was no need of lowering its sense in order to escape its condemnation. In this passage Jesus is not repealing the Sabbath, He is giving

instruction on what the Sabbath truly is. If He were repealing the Sabbath, all He had to do was tell the Pharisees that the Sabbath is no longer.

Allowed on the Sabbath

The keeping of the Sabbath allows for acts of necessity and mercy. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. He indicated that it is proper to retrieve your sheep from a pit on the Sabbath. Firemen, policemen, the man who keeps the electricity and gas flowing to your homes and to hospitals, etc. are all in compliance with the Sabbath.

Not Allowed on the Sabbath

The keeping of the Sabbath means cessation from our normal workaday week. Our behavior should be markedly different than the rest of the week. Question 117 of the Larger Westminster Catechism states that Christians are to rest from worldly employments and recreations (Exodus 16:25-28; Nehemiah 13:15-22).

Whether this forbids a walk in the park or tossing a ball back in forth to your three-year-old I can't say. But it certainly means avoiding all unnecessary commerce and missing church twenty-two times a year because of soccer and little league.

4. The Sabbath Focus

The Sabbath is a day we are to set aside for the corporate worship of God. The Gospel of Luke records that Jesus, **"as His custom was...went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day..." (Luke 4:16)**. The keeping of the Sabbath means that as a covenant people, and as individuals, we have one full 24-hour day that is set apart from all other days, to fix our thoughts uniquely upon Christ. Fulfilling this call on our lives would be impossible if we were engaged in our normal duties.

5. Where Will Ignoring the Sabbath Lead?

So what are the consequences for neglecting the Sabbath? To a society that neglects the Sabbath it is written,

"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 they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on

**them and fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness”
(Ezekiel 20:21).**

Basic observations show us: 1) The family will suffer for lack of unity and worship together. 2) Work will increase because the standard will require working an extra day. In order to ‘keep up’ working on the Sabbath will become a necessity. 3) Time for solace and reflection will decrease and people will quit thinking about why they’re doing what they’re doing altogether.

I was a youth pastor for many years. During this time I used to run weeklong camps, let’s call them sabbath camps for this purpose. These weeks were a great time of soul-searching by both teenagers and counselors. We were plucked out of our routine and were required to think about life and God and deeper things. Honoring the Sabbath would make this a regular thing in the life of the Christian.

4) As a society, like that family member we used to visit on a regular basis but now seldom visit, we will cease acknowledging God altogether and find that we have burgeoned a generation that has little regard for God. This will inevitably lead to evil thoughts, deeds and judgment.

Some of the greatest enemies of the Sabbath are things that seem so innocent in nature – soccer leagues, little league, professional football on television, etc. If the Sabbath is repeatedly violated in order to cater to Sunday afternoon football or children’s little league and soccer schedules, an indelible message will be sent to the next generation – a message indicating what is genuinely important.

6. Where Will Keeping The Sabbath Lead?

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD’S holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 58:13,14).

The Difficulty of Resting

So isn’t this an interesting commandment? God is commanding us to rest. Seems like it should be so easy. All that stuff you’re so busy with all week – don’t be busy with it today! Go to church, have a time of prayer, reflection, fellowship and enjoyment of your faith. We often times speak of surrendering to Jesus, as if it’s an easy thing to do. But it’s much easier to be the victor than the

one who surrenders. Surrendering to Jesus (which is ultimately obeying His commands and resting in the results) may be the most difficult thing in the world to do. Keeping the Sabbath may fall into the same category. We fail miserably.

Resting in the Sabbath Keeper

Of course, more important than resting on the Sabbath, is resting in the Sabbath keeper. Jesus kept the Sabbath perfectly. He gives the free gift of His perfect law keeping to all, who in sincerity, call upon His name. He has fulfilled all righteousness. When we call upon His name we become, in the eyes of the Father, the righteousness of God. This should cause us to love Him all the more.

If we are a people who seek to ride on the heights of the land and feast on the inheritance of God's provision, we must find the purity of our Sabbath-keeping in something or someone wholly detached from our own efforts. This is found by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ the Righteous.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some more popular methods of personal spiritual growth? Evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.
2. How is the Sabbath a method of growth for the Christian?
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?
4. Why do you suppose the Sabbath is such a neglected commandment?
5. Discuss Calvin's comment and how it relates to the passage from Ezekiel.
6. When did the Sabbath begin? Is there still a Sabbath? What are different aspects of the Sabbath?
7. What day is the Sabbath?
8. What is wrong with the idea of multiple Sabbaths?
9. Discuss the reasons for the Sabbath.
10. What are things allowed, or not allowed, on the Sabbath? What is the focus?
11. Where will ignoring the Sabbath lead? Have you seen any of this in your lifetime?
12. Where will keeping the Sabbath lead? Why do you suppose?
13. What does it mean to rest in the Sabbath Keeper?