

The Fourth Commandment

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Frank Sheedy, a Catholic priest, made the following statement in *Our Sunday Visitor*, August 12, 1984, p. 11:

First, there is no commandment that Saturday should be the Sabbath. The six days when we labor and the seventh when we rest (Dt 5:13) is the commandment. The Jews chose what we now call Saturday to be their Sabbath.

Is this statement correct? According to this priest, God was not involved in this commandment; it was entirely the work of the Jews. His answer represents a clever deviation from truth that he can get away with only because his audience had little or no respect for God and the Scriptures in the first place.

In Romans 3:18, the apostle Paul gives us a snapshot confirmation of what has led to this world's tumultuous condition. "There is no fear of God before their eyes." His statement concludes a vivid and fairly detailed overview of human attitudes and conduct toward God. It captures and concisely summarizes why this dangerously violent, war-filled world exists as it is. A person's conduct about or toward something captures the essence of its perceived value to him. If he does not believe the Sabbath has value to him, or that it is of no particular importance in God's eyes, that person will not observe it.

The Negative Force of Idolatry

Over the past few issues, I have stressed the impact of idolatry as a negative force that draws us away from the one true God, the Source of truth, beauty, goodness, and the way of life that produces right relationships by means of a relationship with Him.

Beginning with the fact that mankind generally shows no fear of God, Romans 1:24-25 illuminates how this lack of respect for Him has produced what we now observe in the world every day:

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

In examining the central issue of the first few commandments, we find that the first concerns *what* we worship. These verses in Romans 1 recap what the first commandment forbids, the worship of someone or something other than the Creator. Worship is the devoted service that an individual gives to what he regards above all. It is most assuredly not restricted to activity done on only one day of the week. As verse 25 shows, a person can give devoted service to created things as well as to the Creator. In addition, Paul observes in Colossians 3:5 that covetousness is also idolatry, amplifying the fact that a person can give unlawful respect and thus devotion to things other than the Creator God.

We have all heard the argument that "all religions are good," but this is simply not true. Based on what it produces as a way of life in countries where it dominates, is militant Islam good? Are this world's many variations of what is called Christianity good? This world's religions can be evaluated as good or bad only in relation to each other. Not one of them is good when evaluated against Jesus' religion, the one He passed on to the apostles.

Paul's argument in Romans 1 is that God abandoned to uncleanness those addressed as idolaters. The term "uncleanness" indicates immorality and strongly implies sexual immorality. Based on these few verses, the conclusion is that any religion other than the true one is in reality a curse—actually, in some ways a punishment—even though it may occasionally produce some good effects!

The context pinpoints their sin in verse 25: "They exchanged *the* truth for *the* lie." Notice the definite articles. Here, God and His way is "*the* truth," and the people's idolatry is "*the* lie." How can that be good? Paul is showing that only the Creator God can be worshipped profitably. Worshipping someone or some thing other than the Creator subtly turns the thrust and direction of a person's life off the true path of God's purpose because the source of the authority permitting or guiding his conduct is not the true God. Even though the object of devotion may be otherwise harmless, it is sin to give it that level of respect because it absolutely cannot produce anything good toward God's purpose.

Recall that idolatry is a sin whose fruit is almost never immediately seen. It is like a cancer that destroys by slow increments. Life's direction and any course corrections must come from within one's relationship with the Creator God. The wrong source will lead one astray. Clearly, properly keeping the first commandment requires a great deal of soul-searching evaluation of the true value of what we hold dear.

"You Are My Witnesses"

In John 4:24, Jesus adds more definition to the proper worship of God: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The second commandment deals with *how* we worship. The worship of God involves the totality of life, and thus it cannot be confined to a particular location or concentrated in a mere hour or two on a given day.

Our focus in worship is to be on imitating Him in the totality of life. We are to use no material aids in doing this because no one can capture in a work of art what God is. God wants us to concentrate on what He is, not on what He looks like. However, given human nature's strong attraction to the physical, it is not easy for a person to surrender the dominance of the physical over his life. A person's first step backward from conversion is usually to become grudgingly willing to share time and energy that should go to God with someone or something else.

When asked what the first and great commandment of the law is, Jesus replied, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Anything less will affect the quality of our worship. This is a high pinnacle to reach for, requiring a lifetime of growth in wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and character built by overcoming the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

These are included in the third commandment, which involves the *quality* of our personal witness of everything that the name of God implies. His names stand for His position as Creator, Giver of life, His character, His power, and His offices as the great Ruler, Sustainer, and Provider of this universe.

In addition, He is our spiritual Father, as He has placed us into His Family. Jesus says in Matthew 28: 19-20:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

At baptism, His name becomes our spiritual family name through regeneration by His Spirit, or adoption. Paul writes in Romans 8:14, 16: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. . . . The Spirit [it]self bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." By God's adoption of us, it becomes our responsibility to grow in godly character, upholding His name and bringing honor upon it by our words, attitudes, and deeds.

Isaiah 43:10-12 instructs us in our responsibility before God:

"You are My witnesses," says the Lord, "and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and besides Me there is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign god among you; therefore you are My witnesses," says the Lord, "that I am God."

The church is not a great nation, military power, or cultural institution organized to change this world. We exist solely to grow, overcome, and glorify God primarily through the witness of our lives lived in preparing for God's Kingdom.

The illustration Isaiah uses portrays us on trial and standing before a court of law. The primary witness is one's life. Even so, some of God's children are specifically chosen to witness through their words as well as through their lives. Each believer is a witness before the world of the worth of His Lord, Jesus Christ, and His purpose. Those living by faith make the witness.

How can one witness well unless he knows what to do? How can he know what to do unless he is taught? This is a major purpose of the fourth commandment. God established it to provide a means of unified instruction, and it is therefore a major player in the process of conversion and witnessing for Him.

Should We Keep the Sabbath?

However, most do not even believe that a Christian is required to keep the Sabbath. If interested in religion at all, such people are taught that the Sabbath has been done away. Are any of the other of the Ten Commandments done away? Is it now permissible for a Christian to murder, steal, and lie?

Jesus Himself says in Mark 2:27-28: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." A number of important aspects are of note here. The first is that the Sabbath was not made for its own sake, as with the other days of the week, but with the specific purpose of being a service to mankind. An alternate translation is that it was made "on account of man."

The Sabbath, then, is a specific, thoughtful gift of the Creator to serve His creation. If it were to be used by mankind merely for physical rest, any one of the seven days of the week would be

acceptable. Yet, God set apart the seventh day specifically and linked it to creation (Genesis 2:1-3). Therefore, God's purpose in establishing the Sabbath is primarily to support man's part in God's spiritual creation. Such use goes far beyond mere bodily rest.

A second item is that God made the Sabbath for humanity, not just for the Jews. As God created it, its intention is universal. He made it to ensure mankind's physical and spiritual well-being.

A third point is that Jesus claims the authority as its Lord to teach us *how* to keep it, not whether to keep it. Both the immediate context and the gospels as a whole show that Jesus expected it to be kept and offered no alternatives.

Nations routinely honor citizens they believe have made significant contributions to the well-being of their people, and they often do this by setting apart a day as a memorial to them so that others will remember their contributions. For example, in this nation George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King have been so honored. God says in Exodus 31:13: "Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you."

By God's own words, He is memorialized and therefore honored by our observance of the Sabbath. Compared to any man, God's contributions to the well-being of every living thing are beyond counting, but one stands out as witness to all: He is Creator. What an awesome statement to consider. Everything in and on this fantastic, floating greenhouse we call Earth is a tribute to and witnesses of His genius, power, and loving providence.

Mankind, on the other hand, has yet to create its first flea! Yet, if a man did create one, how much publicity would he want? What might he demand?

The Sabbath is a Specific Day

Genesis 2:2-3 sets the tone and establishes the first reason for Sabbath-keeping:

And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

The first reason is that we are to follow His example. Because He specifically rested on the seventh day of creation, the Sabbath has universal validity. It is an example from creation, not from one of the Patriarchs, nor from Moses, nor from any Jews—because there were no Jews then.

The Scripture clearly states that this was *the* seventh day, not *a* seventh day. Though Genesis 2 is not the theological beginning of the Sabbath, yet without doubt, Exodus 20:11 shows that the keeping of it as a religious day of worship has its foundation firmly anchored in Genesis 1 and 2.

Sabbath does not literally mean "to rest." Instead, it means "to stop" or "to cease." Resting is the result of stopping what one does on the other six days. God could have rested at any time, or He need not have rested at all. He could have ended the creative cycle at the end of the sixth day, but He did not. The Sabbath is, in fact, His final creative act of that week. He created by resting.

The writer draws attention to what God did on that day even as it is drawn to what He did on the other six days. In reality, the Sabbath is the very crown of the creation week. He topped His creative activities off by creating a specific period of time sanctified for rest. It was as specifically created as what He did on the other six days. On the Sabbath, the creating continued, but took on a different form than it had on the other days, a form not outwardly visible.

As a believer gradually learns, the Sabbath symbolizes to God's children the fact that God is still creating (John 5:16-17). The Sabbath is an integral part of the process of creation. The physical part was finished at the end of the sixth day, but the spiritual aspect began with the creation of the Sabbath and continues to this day, even as the effects of creation on the other six days continue to this day.

At the end of the creation sequence, God created and sanctified an environment to play a major role in producing eternal and everlasting life. Through the creation of the Sabbath, God shows that the life-producing process is not complete with just the physical environment. The Sabbath plays an important role in producing spiritual life, a quality of life having a dimension that the physical alone cannot supply. Toward this end, no other day can be employed with the Sabbath's quality of effectiveness.

There is a valid reason for this. The Sabbath is not a mere afterthought of a tremendous creation, but a deliberate memorializing of the most enduring thing man knows: time. Sabbath time plays an especially important role in God's spiritual creation. Through the Sabbath, it is as if God says, "Look at what I have made, and consider that I am not yet finished creating. I am reproducing Myself, and you can be a part of My spiritual creation."

A Sanctified Day

God created the Sabbath by ceasing from His physical exertion, setting the example for man also to cease from the normal activities of the other six workdays. He also specifically blessed and sanctified it. He did this to no other day, yet men argue against keeping it—even though Jesus, like His Father, kept it. It is truly the least of the commandments to men.

"Sanctified" in Genesis 2:3 and "holy" in Exodus 20:8 are the same word in Hebrew though in different tenses. In Genesis 2, God makes the seventh day holy; in Exodus 20, He commands us to keep holy what He has already made holy. A holy God is required to make holy time, and He made no time holy other than His Sabbaths. God can make man holy, but man cannot confer holiness to the degree God does. Any other day of worship has a mere manmade holiness and is not holy as God's Sabbaths are holy. The Sabbath, then, is worthy of respect, deference, even devotion not given to other periods of time. It is set apart for sacred use because it derives from God.

The underlying implication of the usage of "holy" is *difference*. The verbal root literally means "to cut," "to cut out," "to separate from," or it can imply "to make a cut above," thus "to make special." A holy thing is an object that is different from that to which it is compared. In this case, the other six days are common and are given to the use and pursuit of the common, ordinary activities of life. Practically, it means that when the Sabbath arrives, we should stop doing and avoid the mundane things that make or promote turning the Sabbath into an ordinary day.

Exodus 3:1-5 provides a clear illustration of what the word "holy" implies:

Now Moses . . . came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn." So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground."

The principle shown here is what makes the Sabbath holy, different. Because God was present, Moses had to treat the ground differently, with a respect or a deference that he would not give to ordinary ground. For the called of God, this difference, this holiness, is a spiritual thing; it is not physically discerned.

Notice that, even though Moses was aware that there was something unusual about what He was observing, God had to tell him that he stood on holy ground. It is a spiritual state that cannot be physically discerned. As for the Sabbath, God puts His presence into the day for the sake of His people and His spiritual creation.

Consider the scenario Amos 3:3 presents: "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" If we want to be in God's presence in this special way and in agreement with Him, no other day will do. God has an appointment with us to meet with Him on a specific day, on Sabbath time. It is time, different from other time, just as an appointment time with a dentist is different from other time in one's life, as well as from another person's scheduled time.

A Sign

Exodus 35:1-3, which appears at the beginning of God's instructions on building the Tabernacle in the wilderness, intensifies the significance of the Sabbath's holiness:

Then Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together, and said to them, "These are the words which the Lord has commanded you to do: Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day."

Even though the Israelites were constructing an important edifice devoted to the worship of God, they were not to desecrate this holy time by working on it.

Exodus 31:13, 17 adds further weight to the importance of the Sabbath:

Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: "Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. . . . 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."

An interesting and significant term is used in both of these verses: The Sabbath is a *sign*, not a mark. Bible usage shows that a sign is something voluntarily accepted, whereas a mark is placed on a person against his will. The Sabbath is a special sign of a special covenant between God and His

people. In the wilderness, His people were the Israelites; today, it is the Israel of God, the church of God (Galatians 6:16).

A sign can identify a person's occupation or an individual's or group's purpose. Signs can give directions (like traffic signs), or they can bring people together with shared interests and a common purpose (like flags). A sign can be the pledge of mutual fidelity and commitment (as in putting a hand over one's heart). Organizations use signs to designate membership so that members can recognize each other (as with secret handshakes).

In the church's case, the Sabbath serves as an external and visible bond that simultaneously unites and sanctifies us from everyone else. Almost everybody else keeps Sunday or nothing. Through the Sabbath, the Christian knows that God is sanctifying him. Everyone who has kept both Sabbath and Sunday knows this. Sunday sets no one apart from this world because so many in this world observe it.

God has a purpose He is working out. He has made a tremendous investment in us, in His creation, and in the death of His Son. The Sabbath is a major means by which He identifies and protects His investment.

Why Keep It?

If the only reason He created the Sabbath were because we need physical rest, any old time would do. Ultimately, however, the real sign appears in how and why one keeps the Sabbath. Thus, God made a specific period of time special so that He could meet with His people during that sanctified period to help them become even more different for their benefit.

What is His major goal in doing this? He educates His people in His way of life. In part, He prepares His people to witness for Him by this means. As an analogy, suppose a basketball coach told his players, "Come to the gym at 8 am Monday, and I will teach you how my team plays ball." Yet, what if some players went to a different gym at a different time with a different coach?

Players on a team who take the game seriously begin to take on the qualities and philosophy of their coach. People who involve themselves deeply in athletics say they can often tell by a player's characteristics that he has trained under a certain coach. They remark that he has the John Wooden or John Thompson "way" about him. What has happened is that the player has taken on the "sign" of his coach, and it has "sanctified" him from other players who were not trained by that particular coach.

The Sabbath was created because it both enhances and protects a Christian's relationship with God. It also provides a witness to God, to the person keeping it, and to the world. It exists to help keep a Christian pointed in the right direction and in a proper frame of mind, and it provides him with the right knowledge and understanding to negotiate the way to God's Kingdom.

We live in a grubby, grasping, material world. Every day challenges us with its built-in bias toward material things. With human nature ever-present within us, it is not hard to overlook spiritual things in the pressured rush to accomplish each day's work.

The Sabbath, though, almost forces us to think about the spiritual—about God and His ongoing spiritual creation in us. It presents us with the opportunity to consider the *whys* of life, to orient ourselves properly so that we can best use our time during the other six days. The Sabbath is the kernel, the nucleus, from which proper worship—our response to God—grows.

Existentialist philosophers say that life is absurd, that it is but a prelude to death. All of life, they proclaim, is virtually empty of value because it has no ultimate goal better than what one already has. Life is going nowhere. Yet, keeping the Sabbath is in fact a celebration of just the opposite: It is all about life and its great goal as planned by the very Creator! It concerns His ongoing creative process toward our being made into the spiritual image of His Son.

Life may indeed be stressful, tiring, and sometimes even frightening, but life is not absurd. It is a prelude to life on an infinitely greater and higher level. As we proceed through the time given to us, the more we become like Him, the more sanctified we become from the world. In this mentally refreshing and elevating experience, we have a tiny foretaste of what is to come.

A Day of Freedom

In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the fourth commandment charges:

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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 ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Notice *how* we are commanded to sanctify the day. The emphasis here is on being free. God says, "Remember [on this day] that you were a slave." The implication is obvious. When the Israelites were slaves, they had no freedom to make choices. Therefore, if we keep this day properly, we can remain free. If properly used, the Sabbath compels us to remember the past as well as to look forward to where our lives are headed.

We do this through Bible study and hearing sound, inspired messages combined with meditation and conversation in fellowship. In church services we hear a great deal about the World Tomorrow and the world today. Most messages involve sin in some way. Sin is the transgression of the law (I John 3:4), but the Ten Commandments are the law of liberty (James 1:25). By keeping them, we remain free of enslavement by Satan, this world, and death. On the Sabbath, God instructs His people through His Word on how to keep His commandments and thus remain free. Exodus 16:4, 25-30 explains further:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not." . . . Then Moses said, "Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none." Now it happened that some of

the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day.

The first commandment God specifically revealed after He freed Israel from slavery was the one intended to keep them free, the Sabbath. God gave them this witness of a double portion of manna on the sixth day and none on the seventh for forty years! Contrary to what the Catholic priest quoted at the beginning of this article said, the Sabbath is a wonderful gift of God.

Idolatry and Sabbath-Breaking

Ezekiel 20:1 reveals that while the Jews were in their captivity, the elders came to seek answers from God. What were their questions? They can be ascertained only by God's reply. Overall, the questions seem to have been something similar to, "Why are we having all this trouble?" "What is the problem?" "When can we expect to return to Jerusalem?"

God's answer begins to take shape in verse 7, "Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes." The last phrase literally means "the delight of the eyes." "His eyes" must refer to the typical Israelite's eyes. Recall that the Israelites did what seemed right or pleasurable to them but not necessarily what was delightful to God. Since God commanded them to throw away what was a delight to them, we must understand, then, that "the delight of their eyes" was to God idolatry and rebellion.

That brief phrase contains two contrasting perspectives. It identifies what God had against them: their idolatry. The delight of their eyes was the idol that they looked at and gave their devotion to. There is yet more contained within this chapter because God continues with His answer:

Therefore I made them go out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them. 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. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them; and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them in the wilderness, to consume them. But I acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned before the Gentiles, in whose sight I had brought them out. (Ezekiel 20:10-14)

To God, idolatry and Sabbath-breaking go hand in hand. Sabbath-breaking is shown to be idolatry because the Israelites were either using it in idolatrous devotion to a false god or not keeping it at all.

The Sabbath was given so that Israel would know the true God, so that they could fulfill their purpose, which was to witness for God before the world, learn more of His purpose, and work to build character so that they could inherit God's Kingdom. They failed miserably and totally.

God accomplished His goal of bringing them into their own land only to uphold the reputation of His name. But what was the overall result? The Israelites in the wilderness died there (Hebrews 3:16—4:2). Their descendants failed in the same manner, so God cut them off and sent them into captivity and slavery.

Israel's history reveals that the Creator God is the Source of the Sabbath, and God's children have the responsibility to honor Him by keeping it. In summary, why does God command the Sabbath?

1. Because He has a specific purpose that He is working out.
2. Because we need a reminder of God's spiritual creation.
3. Because we need the time to fellowship with God.
4. Because we need the time to be taught about God's way of life.
5. Because we need the time to contemplate its application and meaning.
6. Because we need the time to evaluate our progress or lack thereof.
7. Because without it we are completely bound up in the physical world.
8. Because we need the time to fellowship with those of like mind.
9. Because we need the time to escape the social inequities of this world.
10. Because we are human and we need the physical rest.

No other commandment so directly and clearly identifies with God's purpose. What a blessing it is! Let us celebrate this memorial to our Creator and His purpose so that we might also share in the glory of its honor.