

The Fourth Commandment (Part One) (1997)

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Is the Sabbath commandment done away? Has it been tossed into the dustbin as a relic of theological debate? Is it no longer part of the great spiritual law of God because men have the power to declare it null and void by saying it is merely ceremonial? Is man free to choose another day on which he will worship God, declaring it is not immoral to break the fourth commandment?

None of the Ten Commandments has been so argued over and suffered such scorn and abuse as the fourth. Surely it is considered the least of the commandments. When considering the other nine, theologians have little to argue over except variations on what they might consider as breaking their spirit. Nearly all "churchianity" claims that we should obey the other nine, but they almost universally ignore the fourth as irrelevant, having been replaced by Sunday.

This article will not explore much of the "whys" of this, but rather will show what the Bible says about the Sabbath. Doing this will show why the Sabbath commandment fits perfectly with the other commandments and God's purpose.

The Sabbath in Context

In examining the central issue in each of the first several commandments, we find that the first concerns *what we worship*. Romans 1:24-25 summarizes this well: "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 worshiped and served the creature [creation] rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen"

Worship is the devoted service one gives to what he regards most highly. As these verses show, we can give devoted service to created things as well as the Creator. Additionally, the tenth commandment says covetousness is idolatry too (Colossians 3:5), clearly amplifying that we can give our devotion to things other than the true God.

It is popular to think that "all religions are good," but that is simply not true. Paul argues that God gave them up or abandoned such idolaters to uncleanness. Therefore any religion other than the true one—the one that gives its undivided loyalty to the Creator—is a creation of man, a curse and merits punishment.

How good can it be to exchange the truth for the lie? In this context "the lie" is that one can profitably worship someone or something other than the true God. Worshiping things other than the Creator turns the thrust and direction of our lives off the true path of God's purpose. Though those objects may be otherwise harmless in themselves, it is sin to give them the devotion that rightly belongs to the Creator.

John 4:24 proclaims that those who worship God *must* worship Him in spirit and truth. The worship of God involves the totality of our life, and therefore it cannot be confined to a particular location or

a mere hour or two on a given day. Our worship must be guided, motivated and empowered by His Spirit. Further, it cannot merely be sincere, but it must also be true. Attitude is extremely important, but it alone does not replace truth.

Our focus must be on imitating God. He commands us not to use any material aids in this because no one can capture what God is in a work of art. Besides, God wants us to concentrate on what He is, not what He looks like. Thus, the second commandment covers *the way we worship God*, in spirit and in truth.

It is not easy for human nature to surrender its dominance over a person's life. It first tries to regain its dominance by only grudgingly sharing time and energy with God. But when Jesus was asked what the first and great commandment of the law is, He said, "To love God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul." Anything less will affect the quality of our worship.

The third commandment involves the *quality* of our personal witness of everything God's name implies. His name represents His position as Creator, Lifegiver, Provider, Ruler and Sustainer, as well as His character, power and promises. As Matthew 28:19-20 shows, "God" became our spiritual Family name upon regeneration by His Spirit, and thus we have a responsibility to grow and uphold that name's reputation by bringing honor upon it by our words, deeds and attitudes.

The church is not a great nation, military power or cultural institution organized to change this world. It exists solely to prepare its members for the Kingdom of God and to glorify Him by our witness. The primary witness is with our lives. Each believer witnesses before the world of the worth of his Lord, Jesus Christ. This third commandment thus covers hypocrisy. Even though men may not discern the hypocrisy, God does, and He will not hold such a person guiltless for abuses done to His name.

Purposes of the Sabbath

In making our witness, we carry God's purpose to the world through personal conduct and preaching. But how can we witness well unless we know what to do? How can we know what to do unless we are taught? This is a major purpose of the fourth commandment. It provides a means of unified instruction and is therefore a major factor in the conversion process.

Mark 2:27-28 notes a number of things critical to Sabbath keeping: "And He said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.'"

1. Jesus refers to the Sabbath as a specific day; it is *the* Sabbath, not *a* Sabbath.
2. The Sabbath was not made for its own sake as were the other six days, but as a service to mankind. An alternate translation would be that it "was made on account of man." Jesus presents it as the Creator's specific and thoughtful gift to man.
3. It was not made just for the Jews, but for *mankind*. When God created the Sabbath, He intended it from the beginning as a UNIVERSAL blessing to benefit mankind. He made it to help ensure man's physical and spiritual well-being.
4. The broader context reveals a disagreement over how to keep it. Jesus claims to be its Lord, its Owner or Master, and He thus lays claim to His right to show by His example and verbal instruction how to keep it, not whether to keep it. Since He expresses no disagreement with keeping it, He implies that He expects man—not just Jews—to keep

it. He has a perfect opportunity here to reply that it does not matter if men keep it, but He gives no such indication.

A Memorial of the Creator

We honor men and women who have made significant contributions to mankind by setting apart a day as a memorial to them so others will remember their deeds and strive to emulate them. Hence, men celebrate the birthdays of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. The Sabbath memorializes God. Compared to any man, God's contributions are beyond compare, but one stands out above all: He is Creator.

What an awesome contribution to consider! Everything in this fantastic floating greenhouse we call Earth is a tribute to His genius, power and love. Mankind has yet to develop his first flea! Men can impart life only within the narrow parameters God has created. Yet if a man did develop even one flea, how much publicity would he seek? What would he demand as remuneration?

Genesis 2:1-3 is a series of verses that lays the foundation for keeping the Sabbath:

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. 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.

Because the Sabbath is from creation—and the Creator Himself set the pattern for man by resting on it—it has universal validity. It is not from one of the patriarchs or Moses or from the Jews because none of these existed when it was created. The Bible shows three times in two verses that God very clearly inspired *the* seventh day, not *a* seventh day.

God could have ended His creative work at the end of the sixth day because it seemed at that point as though He had provided everything man needed for life. But He did not complete it then because all man needed was *not* yet created! The Sabbath is, in fact, THE VERY CROWN of the creation week. It is vital to man's well-being. So God created a period of rest and holy time—a very specific period, as the context shows.

God draws our attention to four things He did on that first Sabbath. He 1) ended His work, 2) rested, 3) blessed the seventh day and 4) sanctified it. He created something just as surely as He created physical things on the other six days. He is instructing us that, on the Sabbath, creation continued but in a different form, one not outwardly visible. To those with understanding, the Sabbath symbolizes that God is *still* creating. Jesus confirms this in John 5:17, when a dispute arises over how to keep the Sabbath. He replies, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."

The Sabbath is an integral part of the process of creation. God finished the physical part at the end of the sixth day. The spiritual aspect began with the creation of the Sabbath and continues to this day. Through the sequence of events on the first six days, God created an environment for man and life. But God shows through the creation of the Sabbath that the life-producing process is not complete with just the physical environment.

A Holy Day

The Sabbath provides an important part in producing spiritual life—life with a dimension the physical cannot supply. The Sabbath is not an afterthought of a tremendous creation, but a deliberate memorializing of the most enduring thing man knows: time. Time plays a key role in God's spiritual creation. 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."

The fourth commandment, as stated in Exodus 20:8-11, again links the Sabbath to creation:

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 manservant, nor your maidservant, 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.

God did not rest as a result of tiredness because He does not get weary (Isaiah 40:28). In this, man is unlike God. We need to rest this physical body on the Sabbath. This ties the rhythm of our bodies to the rhythm in which God made the world. God rested from the achievement of the physical creation, but that does not indicate His rest means inactivity because God nurtures what He creates. This is why Jesus said that His Father is working. The Sabbath is especially a time of *spiritual* activity that the Father spends preparing His children for His Kingdom.

The Bible says He blessed the Sabbath day. To bless is to favor. According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the Hebrew word means "to endue with power for success, prosperity, fecundity, longevity, etc." Does God point out the fact that the proper observance of the Sabbath will go a long way toward promoting success in those who keep it? Yes, because He also sanctified it, consecrated it, hallowed it. He made it HOLY TIME!

It takes a holy God to make holy time, and this holy God made no time holy other than His Sabbaths. God can make man holy, but man cannot make anything holy. All of this is seen within the context of *the* seventh day, a specific day following the first six days of creation. Using any day other than *the* seventh day, the Sabbath, for the normal weekly worship of God is man-directed, and is neither blessed nor holy.

That the Sabbath is holy means it is worthy of respect, deference, even devotion not given other periods of time. It is set apart for sacred use because it is derived from God's own acts of creation and command. The overall idea of the word *holy* is "different." Its root word means "cut," indicating "cut out," "separate," or in more modern terms, "a cut above." When it applies to God or those persons or objects He declares holy, a thing that is holy is different from the common. It is thus separate from others, cut out from the ordinary, or a cut above, indicating transcendence.

Exodus 3:2-5 shows a principle regarding the making of something holy:

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 burned 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."

Because God was present, the ground itself was holy and could not be approached in the ordinary fashion. God commanded Moses to treat it with a respect, a deference, that he would not give to something common. Interestingly, even though Moses knew there was something unusual about what he was observing, God had to tell him that he was on holy ground. Its holiness was something spiritual; it was not physically discernable.

The same presence of God makes the Sabbath holy, a cut above, transcendent, as compared to the other days not declared holy by God. God puts His presence into the Sabbath day for the sake of His people and His spiritual creation. The other six days are common and given to the pursuit of the mundane activities of life. Since God commands us to keep the Sabbath holy, we must strive to avoid those mundane things that make the Sabbath—or promote making it—into an ordinary day.

A Weekly Appointment

Amos 3:3, "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" is a scripture familiar to us all. Applying this principle to the Sabbath, if we want to be in God's presence in this special way, no other day will do. God has set a weekly appointment with His people to meet with Him for purposes pertaining to His spiritual creation. It is largely on this day that we are blessed, empowered by Him with His Spirit to promote our success in His way. The keeping of the Sabbath also functions to identify the two parties involved in the covenant.

In addition, the placement of God's instruction regarding His special Sabbath covenant also shows how important keeping it is in the eyes of God. In Exodus 31:17 God says, "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."

This special covenant—strategically placed by Moses between information on the building of the Tabernacle (a type of the church) and the Golden Calf incident (brazen idolatry)—creates a special sign of the Sabbath between God and His people. Generally, a sign identifies. It communicates the purpose of or gives directions to a person or place. Signs bring people together with shared interests and common goals. A sign can function as a pledge of mutual fidelity and commitment. Organizations use signs to designate membership, allowing members to recognize each other.

The Sabbath serves as an external and visible bond that unites God's people, and at the same time it sanctifies them from almost everyone else. Almost everyone in the Western world keeps Sunday or nothing. By the Sabbath, the true covenant keeper knows that God is sanctifying him. Anybody who has kept both Sunday and Sabbath knows this: Sunday sets no one apart from this world.

If He created the Sabbath only because we need to rest physically, any old time would do, but ultimately, how and why we keep the Sabbath is what becomes the real sign. God is working out a purpose. He has invested a tremendous amount in us in the creation and in the death of His Son. The Sabbath serves as a major means by which He protects that investment. He made a specific period of time special so He can meet with His people and take major steps to make them different.

On the Sabbath He educates us in His way. The Sabbath plays an integral part in preparing His people to witness for Him. Suppose a basketball coach told His players, "Come to the gym at noon," but some of the players decided to go to a different gym at a different time with a different coach. The coach would have a difficult time training his players in his style of basketball.

Even though players on a team will retain their own distinctive personalities, they also absorb some of the qualities and the philosophy of their coach. People deeply involved in athletics say they can always tell whether a player has been trained by a certain coach. They say the player has the "John Wooden" or "John Thompson" way about him. The athlete has unconsciously taken on some of the attributes of his coach, and doing so has sanctified him from other players who were not coached by that particular person.

This same process accounts for passing on speech dialects to children. When born, we begin to absorb the dominant local dialect while making no conscious effort to do so. In some cases, the dialect is so obvious people can immediately tell where we grew up. God, His Spirit, the Sabbath and our fellowship with Him go together in much the same manner.

A Celebration of Life and Freedom

God does not specifically identify Himself with any other day of the week, and He commands His people to meet with Him on no other day. These truths are so strong that God includes the Sabbath in the ten foundational laws governing morality. How much plainer can it get? In addition, the apostle Paul says this body of laws is spiritual (Romans 7:14). This has universal and eternal ramifications, further enhanced by the fact that Jesus kept it (and we are to follow His example, I John 2:4-6), as did the apostles.

God created the Sabbath because it enhances and protects our relationship with Him. It provides a witness to God, to ourselves and to the world. It keeps us in a proper frame of mind and furnishes us with the right knowledge of our part of the pilgrimage to God's Kingdom.

We live in a grubby, grasping, materially oriented world, where a built-in bias exists toward materialism and the exercise of carnality. If we follow it, we can find it is not hard at all to avoid spiritual things. But keeping the Sabbath almost forces us to think about God, the spiritual side of life and His creation. It presents us with opportunities to consider the **WHYS** of life, to get ourselves correctly oriented to use our time properly the other six days. Keeping the Sabbath correctly is the kernel, the nucleus, from which grows appropriate worship (our response to God).

Existentialist philosophers tell us that life is absurd. They say that all life is but a prelude to death. The Sabbath celebrates just the opposite! It reminds us that God's creative process is continuing. God is creating us in His image so that physical life is not absurd but a prelude to life on an infinitely higher, spiritual level. As we grow more like Him, we become more sanctified from this world. In experiencing, refreshing and elevating the mind in the realm of the spirit, we get a foretaste of what is to come.

In preparation for Israel to enter the Promised Land, Moses repeats the commandments in Deuteronomy 5:15. The Sabbath command has a significant change from its wording in Exodus 20:

"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".

The emphasis here is to remember our slavery and, by implication, being free. "Remember that you were once a slave. Observe this day to remain free." The Sabbath draws us to remember the past and consider where we are headed. We do this by remembering that the Sabbath is a memorial of creation and a type of the Millennium. The ministry enhances this through the messages they preach about the world today and the world tomorrow. In some way, most sermons involve sin, which can bring us into slavery. James, though, calls the Ten Commandments "the law of liberty" (James 2:12). By keeping them, we remain free of enslavement to Satan and this world. On the Sabbath, God instructs His people through His Word about how to keep His commandments and thus remain free.

The chronological context of Exodus 16 helps us to see how Moses understood this idea of remaining free through the Sabbath. Chapter 12 instructs about keeping the Passover, the Israelites observing the first Passover and taking the first steps out of Egypt. Chapter 13 instructs about the firstborn and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and God leading Israel into the wilderness toward the Promised Land. In chapter 14, Israel is at the Red Sea, and Pharaoh is chasing them. God parts the waters, and Israel is baptized into Moses as the people cross. In chapter 15 Israel celebrates its liberty, and God gives His promise of healing. Chapter 16 opens with God providing manna for the Israelites, and within this context He reveals the Sabbath to them.

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 to them, "This is what the LORD has said: 'Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.'" So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. 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." . . . So the people rested on the seventh day. (Exodus 16:4, 23-26, 30)

The first of the Ten Commandments revealed after God freed Israel from slavery is the one intended to keep them free—the Sabbath. It is a wonderful gift.

The Sabbath and Idolatry

Perhaps no other chapter in the Bible shows as clearly as Ezekiel 20 the critical importance for the people of God to keep the Sabbath. Verses 3-8 set the stage:

Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel, and say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Have you come to inquire of Me? As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I will not be inquired of by you.' Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Then make known to them the abominations of their fathers. Say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'On the day when I chose Israel and lifted My hand in an oath to the descendants of the house of Jacob, and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, I lifted My hand in an oath

to them saying, "I am the LORD your God." On that day I lifted My hand in an oath to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands. Then I said to them, "Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God." But they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me. They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said, "I will pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt." (Ezekiel 20: 3-8)

Ezekiel does not record the question or questions the elders asked of God, but we can ascertain them from God's reply. They seem to have been something like, "Why are we having all this trouble? Why are we in captivity? When can we expect to return to Jerusalem?" God specifically names part of the problem when He says that He commanded them to get rid of "the abominations which were before their eyes." These things, obviously abominations to God, were a delight to the Israelites because they did not cast them away.

God clearly shows that part of the answer is that they were committing idolatry. In verses 12-13, He involves the Sabbath in their problems:

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.

Six times in this one chapter, God links idolatry and breaking the Sabbath as causes of their captivity. It is accurate to understand Sabbath breaking as just another form of idolatry. God gave the Sabbath to Israel and to us that we might know the true God, be sanctified, fulfill our purpose in witnessing of Him before the world and be changed and inherit His Kingdom. Israel failed utterly. God cut them off, and they went back into slavery and captivity.

Hebrews 10:25-31 gives a New Covenant version of the same scenario:

. . . not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Considering Ezekiel 20 and what happened with Israel, that God's rest is introduced earlier in Hebrews 4 and that assembling is mentioned here make an inference of the Sabbath in these sobering verses seem inescapable. The Sabbath commandment is just as important as any of the other nine.

Why have the Sabbath? Because we are human; because we need physical rest; because without it we are so bound up in the physical world; because we need a frequently recurring reminder of God's spiritual creation; because God is working out a specific purpose. We need time to fellowship with God—time to be taught God's way of life, to contemplate its meaning and application, to evaluate our progress, to fellowship with those of like mind and to escape the social inequities of this world.

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