

The Fourth Commandment (Part Two): Christ's Attitude Toward The Sabbath

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Nowhere in the Bible is the Sabbath annulled by a command or example of Jesus Christ or the apostles. If we carefully and honestly study the most controversial and difficult of Paul's statements, we will see that he never used his authority to abrogate the keeping of the Sabbath either.

In the gospels the controversy is always *how*, not whether, to keep the Sabbath. Jesus never says it no longer matters, and that we therefore no longer need to observe it. He very obviously kept it, or the Jews' attacks against Him would have specifically addressed why He was not. Instead, they attacked His manner of observing it.

Some argue that the only reason Jesus kept it was for the sake of tradition, because He was a Jew. He answers this Himself when He observes that the Sabbath was made for man, not just for Jews, and that He is Lord of it (Mark 2:27-28). Also, He is our example, and we are to walk as He walked (I John 2:4-6). If we wish to follow Him closely, then we will keep the same days He did.

Last month's article showed that God gave us the fourth commandment to enable us to worship Him, the One True God, better. It provides us with the time to fellowship with Him and understand Him, ourselves and our place in His purpose. How to use this time, then, becomes of paramount importance.

Some believe that Christ did not annul the Sabbath. Others feel that He annulled it, but they will keep it because of tradition. However, many in both of these camps have so liberalized their teaching on it that their observance of it turns out to be little different from how the world keeps Sunday.

Since it is obvious in the Bible that Christ kept it, this article will focus on His attitude toward the Sabbath. We will see that, far from annulling it, He magnified it! In so doing, He gives us the foundation for judging the value of our own Sabbath activity. He restores it to its original God-given intent and liberalizes it *only in relation to the perverted, bondage-producing approach of the Pharisees*.

Society's Attitudes

Ezekiel 20:21 appears in the midst of God's charge that He was sending Israel into captivity because of idolatry and Sabbath breaking:

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.

There are three possibilities regarding Israel's Sabbath breaking:

1. They rejected God's Sabbath for another day entirely;
2. They polluted what they did have of God's true Sabbath by careless, self-centered observance; or
3. Most likely, it was a combination of both. Some completely rejected it, others treated it carelessly.

Whichever it was, it resulted in their captivity. Keeping the Sabbath day properly is a serious issue to God.

If we look to society and history about how to keep the day, we are faced with a mixed bag. On the surface, the New Testament describes rigorous legalism in the Pharisees or asceticism in the Gentiles. Today, we might call it extreme rightism or reactionary conservatism.

However, now the other side of the coin, liberalism, confronts us. We do not have even the foggiest notion about how to keep it! The commonly observed cycle of six work days and one day of rest and worship is a legacy of the Bible. But from our earliest days, the emphasis has been on a day—Sunday—that no one can keep holy because *the holy God never made it holy*.

Because of scientific, industrial and technological advancements in fairly recent history, society has undergone a radical transformation. Shorter work weeks give almost everybody more leisure time. Yet business institutions make every effort to utilize time and maximize production by programming work shifts so that the weekly cycle is just a blur.

We have also come to think that time belongs totally to us, so we can use it as we good and well please. This makes us very cognizant of what free time we have. So we use it as businesses do—all of it. Thus Sunday has come to contain the "hour" of worship. People, in good conscience, spend the rest of their time on that day either making money or seeking their pleasure in entertainment, home maintenance or hobbies. Meanwhile, they ignore or even ridicule the true Sabbath. This is the situation that confronts us when we attempt or continue to keep the Sabbath.

Applying Principles

God gives us few *specifics* in the Bible about how to keep the Sabbath. Instead, He presents broad principles and expects us to consider how to apply them. Where do we look for these principles? Almost automatically, most of us associate the Sabbath with the Old Testament. Surprisingly, though, we find much of the instruction regarding Sabbath keeping in the New Testament.

Isaiah 42:21 contains an important principle for understanding Christ's ministry: "The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; He will magnify the law and make it honorable." *Magnify* means "to enlarge." We often focus on Jesus magnifying the law in the Sermon on the Mount, where He taught that anger and hate are the spirit of murder, and lust, the spirit of adultery. However, throughout His ministry Jesus deliberately and frequently focused attention on the Sabbath to magnify its intent.

Jesus did things right. So we must look to Him and how He kept the Sabbath for examples of these principles. To keep the Sabbath properly, we must first understand its purpose, and the very beginning of Jesus' ministry provides ample information on this vital subject.

The Sabbath is so significant that Jesus' ministry formally began on a Sabbath and ended on a preparation day just before another Sabbath (John 19:31)! We see Him open His ministry in Luke 4: 16-19, where He gives His mission statement:

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD."

By quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 in His inaugural sermon, Jesus identifies His mission as setting people free from bondage. He specifically mentions freeing the poor (weak, without power), brokenhearted, captive, blind and oppressed.

"The acceptable year of the LORD" is not when God is acceptable to us, but when God, in His sovereign mercy, moves to make us acceptable to Him. It is a time when He chooses to deliver people. More specifically, it refers to two Old Testament institutions, either the seventh year land Sabbath or the Jubilee year. Israelites considered these years liberators of the oppressed. During them, the land lay fallow and what food it produced on its own went to the poor, dispossessed and animals. Slaves were freed and debts remitted. During Jubilee years, debtors received back their land lost due to mismanagement.

Jesus says in verse 21, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." It was a Sabbath, and through the typology, Christ is clearly showing that His redemptive mission included the liberating intent of the Sabbaths, weekly and annual. In Mark 2:27, Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man." God made it to equip us to come out of spiritual slavery—and even more so, to help us in staying out.

Genesis 2:3 says that God blessed the Sabbath day, something He did to no other day. This blessing falls on the heels of the obviously physical blessings God pronounced on animals (Genesis 1:22) and man (Genesis 1:28). The Bible shows a blessing to be something given or conferred to produce a fuller, more abundant life. The Sabbath blessing, conferred upon the whole creation, acts as the capstone of Creation week.

By blessing a recurring period of time, God promises to be man's benefactor through the whole course of human history! The blessing invokes God's favor, and its primary intent is that God will be our *spiritual* benefactor. It does, however, include the physical as well. Thus, Jesus clearly ties His ministry to the Sabbath concepts of blessing, deliverance, liberty and redemption.

The Sabbath Memorial

Comparing the Sabbath commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 reveals a significant alteration in the wording about what God wants us to remember on it. Exodus 20 ties remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy to *God's acts of creation*. Deuteronomy 5 tells us that the Sabbath reminds us *we were slaves in Egypt*. Each Sabbath should remind us that God is Creator. However, that does not always answer immediate concerns because Creation happened in the remote past. But

each Sabbath should also remind us that God is Liberator. We keep the Sabbath because we are—and want to remain—free.

Throughout His dealings with Israel, God has used His Sabbaths to perform acts of liberation. Israel left Egypt on a Sabbath and crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness one week later on a Sabbath. He gave His Ten Commandment laws, led Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land and broke down the walls of Jericho on Sabbaths. God requires His people to keep the Sabbath to sustain their liberty. When Israel rejected the Sabbath, they lost their freedom and went into captivity.

Nations establish memorials like Independence Day because the leaders want the people to have a periodic reminder of their heritage. They want them to review why they have what they do. They want to instill admiration for the ideas that undergird their way of life and inspire the people to hold dear and strengthen those principles.

God's Sabbath memorial—His Independence Day—is so important to His purpose that He has it recur every week, not merely once a year. It serves as a constant renewal of our spiritual heritage from Him and of our original release from sin. It reorients us in any area where we may have turned aside. In addition, Hebrews 4 reveals that the Sabbath points to the Millennial reign of Christ, when He will remove Satan's liberty and restore mankind's.

Restoring Original Intent

Jesus' healing of the man with the withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6) reveals a fundamental difference between Jesus and the Pharisees in their approach to the Sabbath. The Pharisees had not entered the synagogue to worship, nor did they ask Jesus their question—"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—out of loving concern. No, they were an accusing authority attempting to judge Christ by their regulations.

It helps to remember the historical context. The Jews were developing specific regulations to cover any and every possible circumstance to keep them from sinning. Eventually, they compiled 1,521 regulations covering Sabbath conduct alone. By Jesus' time, they had already turned their observance of the law into a legalistic ritual rather than a loving service to God and man. They did this sincerely in a vain effort to become holy, not understanding that this is not how a man becomes spiritually holy.

In this vignette, does Christ do away with the Sabbath or restore it to its original divine value and function, as He did with marriage and divorce in Matthew 19:8? He gives no indication that He intended doing away with it. He merely broke their misguided perception of how to observe the Sabbath.

We also need to recognize that the liberating healing He performed was not done to a man whose life was in immediate danger, but to one who was chronically ill. So are we spiritually; as Jeremiah 17:9 says, our heart is "incurably sick" (margin). God gives us the Sabbath day to help free us from the chronic problems of human nature.

Mark 3:3-4 reinforces Jesus' attitude toward Sabbath activity. "Then He said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Step forward.' And He said to them, 'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they kept silent." By Jesus' example, His reaction (anger, verse 5) and His words, God very clearly not only intends us to do good on the Sabbath, but also to fail to do good when the opportunity arises implies evil and killing!

Jesus does not appear to have gone out of His way to find people to heal on the Sabbath, but these were incidental occurrences as He went along His way. If a sick person came to His attention, He healed him. But someone unconcerned for the physical and spiritual salvation of others on the Sabbath is automatically involved to some degree in destructive efforts and attitudes, for failing to do good when we have opportunity is sin (Proverbs 3:27-28; James 4:17). God is preparing us to assist in the salvation of others, and it behooves us to begin thinking along these lines.

A Day for Doing Good

As it reads in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the commandment explains that God ordained the Sabbath that we might show compassion toward the needy and defenseless. Exodus 23:12 reinforces this idea: "Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your maidservant and the stranger may be refreshed." The idea of doing good on the Sabbath arises from principles like these.

The New Testament shows two types of Sabbath keepers: Christ, who looked for ways to lighten burdens and save lives; and the Pharisees, who used it to look for faults and think of ways to trap Him. Like Christ, we must be concerned for people's potential. He freed them from burdens, no matter what day it was, that they might produce more. Such work honors God. Redemption, the spiritual creation and love of neighbor are the essence of Sabbath keeping.

In Luke 13:10-17, Christ heals another chronically ill person on the Sabbath. This time, though, He did not wait for anyone to ask Him questions. The episode plainly discloses the redeeming and liberating intention of God's Sabbath. When Jesus says, "You are loosed," the ruler of the synagogue reacts immediately because to him the Sabbath meant rules to obey rather than people to love.

Jesus replies in verses 15-16 by emphasizing the Sabbath principle:

The Lord then answered him and said, "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?"

Christ makes a play on words here. He uses the same verb, "loose," to describe the ox and donkey as He does the woman being "loosed" from Satan through healing.

So Jesus acts against their tradition but nowhere challenges the binding obligation of keeping the Sabbath. Rather, His example shows that we should make merciful evaluations to help others cast off their heavy burdens. He argues for living the true values.

Working for Salvation

We can consider John 5:1-18 and John 9:1-41 together because their common themes show the relationship between the Sabbath and the work of salvation. Both people Jesus heals are chronically ill: one for 38 years, the other blind from birth. He tells both to do something: "Rise, take up your bed and walk" (John 5:8), and "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (John 9:7).

In both cases, the Pharisees accuse Him of Sabbath breaking (John 5:16, 18; 9:16, 24). Christ repudiates the charges against Him by arguing that His works of healing are contemplated by the

Sabbath command and are equivalent to the works of God (John 5:16-18; 9:4, 14). His argument is that, unlike men, God does not break the Sabbath. Therefore the work God does on the Sabbath does not break it; His works, types of His salvation, free people from burdens.

"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working," Jesus says (John 5:17). What work is the Father doing? He is "working salvation in the midst of the earth" (Psalm 74:12). God is always working toward the completion of His purpose—the salvation of mankind. Jesus works within the same process and pointedly makes an issue of this on the Sabbath days. God's work is creating sons in His image. Thus, healing, forgiving sin and doing good are part of Christ's work as Savior and High Priest that He might be "firstborn among many brethren."

John 7:22-24, an echo of chapter 5, shows how far out of proportion the Jews' judgment was, relative to the value of circumstances. In their judgment, not carrying a pallet and making clay on the Sabbath were more important than healing someone. Jesus, therefore, tries to correct them:

Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it was from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.

The Jews considered circumcision a lawful Sabbath activity. The Bible never directly says why because everyone understood. They considered circumcision a redemptive act, even as we consider baptism a redemptive act and baptize on the Sabbath. The Jews judged it proper to excise one of the 248 body parts to save the whole man.

Christ reasons that the works of salvation are accomplished, not only by the Father, but also by His servants (for example, the priests who performed circumcisions). To Christ, God's true Servant, the Sabbath is the day to work for the salvation of the whole man, physically and spiritually. If it is legal to cut off part of a boy's body on the Sabbath to satisfy the Old Covenant, they have no reason to be angry with Him for mercifully restoring a person to wholeness on the Sabbath.

A Day of Mercy

Matthew 12:1-8 adds yet another example of Sabbath encounters Jesus had with the Pharisees:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" Then He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? But I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

According to the Pharisees, the disciples reaped, threshed and winnowed the grain; they were guilty of preparing a meal. What was the disciples' motivation? They were traveling, hungry and had no place to prepare a meal. They were young and strong and could have fasted without harm, but because it was a Sabbath, Jesus drew attention to one of the Sabbath's main purposes. It is a day of mercy.

Christ draws His justification from I Samuel 21:1-6. He reasons that, if David under unusual circumstances could allay his hunger by eating bread consecrated for holy use, then the disciples could also legitimately provide for their needs in unusual circumstances. The emphasis here is on "unusual." How many times did David flee for his life and find himself hungry near the Tabernacle? It happened at least once, but even for a man of war like David, such situations occurred only rarely.

The overall lesson is that God does not intend His law to deprive but to ensure life. If the need arises, we should not feel conscience-stricken to use the Sabbath in a way that would not *normally* be lawful. Christ admits David's actions were not normally lawful, and neither were the disciples'—except for the circumstances. In this case, they were blameless **BECAUSE A LARGER OBLIGATION OVERRULED THE LETTER OF THE LAW**. In this circumstance, mercy is more important than sacrificing a meal. Holy bread or holy time can be used exceptionally to sustain life and serve God.

Christ takes advantage of the situation to teach another connected lesson. He draws attention to the extent of the priests' Sabbath labors in the Temple. Their work actually doubled on the Sabbath because of the number of sacrifices God required, yet they were guiltless. Why? They were involved in God's creative, redemptive work, as Christ explains in John 5, 7 and 9. They fulfilled a purpose of the Sabbath that someone had to do.

As the Head of God's spiritual Temple, the church, Jesus Christ is greater than the physical Temple. He is its High Priest and the twelve disciples were His servants, so their Sabbath ministry intensified along with His. The same holds true for God's ministry today. Our Sabbath labors equal or exceed those of the common days.

Because of the disciple's involvement in the work of God, circumstances dictated a profaning of the Sabbath. From this, we can understand that **LOVING SERVICE IS GREATER THAN RITUAL FULFILLMENT**. What is mercy? It is a helpful act where and when it is needed. It is an act of loving encouragement, comfort, pity and sympathy for the distressed. It is the relieving of a burden.

Made for Man

Mark 2:27-28 says the Sabbath was made for or on account of man. God made it after man's creation, not to make him a slave of rules, but to ensure his physical and spiritual well being. Though we must rest from the labors of earning a living, it is still a day of intensive work that leads to salvation, of becoming prepared for the Kingdom of God. It is not intended to be a day of passive idleness, but of active, loving service, as circumstances arise, to help others.

The Scriptures show that Jesus kept the Sabbath by attending services, fellowshiping, teaching God's truth and doing acts of kindness that brought liberty, joy and peace to others. These establish very clear patterns. What does ordinary entertainment have to do with them? Resting from these expresses our complete commitment to God's way. It shows where our interests lie.

Situations will arise that require a measure of knowledge of the Scriptures for guidance and discernment to determine whether an activity lies within the framework of obedience. With the guidance of Jesus' attitude and acts, though, we should have a good foundation for making righteous judgments.

The Sabbath is a wonderful gift of God, given to help us produce an abundant life. Let's all thank Him for it and strive to glorify Him in using it.