

Sabbath

By David Feddes

The fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” How should we understand that? The command speaks of the seventh day, Saturday, yet we’re here in church on a Sunday. What do we make of the requirement to rest, to take one day every week where you must not do any work whatsoever? What does it mean to keep the Sabbath day holy?

In order to answer questions about the fourth commandment, we can't just jump directly to what it means for us and how we should live it out. We first need to understand it in its original setting. So, we’re going to look first at the ***Old Testament Sabbath*** and how this commandment applied to the old covenant people of Israel. Then, we’re going to look at some events in Jesus’ life and His declaration that He is the ***Lord of the Sabbath***. And finally, we’ll explore the meaning of the ***Sabbath for today***.

Old Testament Sabbath

The fourth commandment was the first time that God commanded any people to rest on a given day:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

That was the fourth of the Ten Commandments that God gave on Mount Sinai to Moses as part of His covenant with the people of Israel. The command involved resting from all work and having time to really focus on God—a day set apart with God and for God. But why did God give this command to his people under the old covenant?

Reasons to Rest

- Fruits of creation
- Freedom of salvation
- Reality of equality
- Renewal of creation

Fruits of creation

First of all, the commandment itself gives us one of the reasons: God himself made all of creation in six days and then rested on the Sabbath day and blessed it. When God did that, he set a pattern that he told the people of Israel to follow. According to Genesis, God didn’t just work during the first creative week. At the end of each day of creating, says Genesis, “God saw what

he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1). He took a moment to evaluate and enjoy it. Six times, he says it was good or very good. Then, at the end of that period of creating, God rested on the seventh day. He enjoyed the fruits of his own creation. He enjoyed what he had made. And God wants us to enjoy what he’s made. When God commanded this to the people of Israel, he was telling them that he made the earth and the heavens in those six days, and he wanted them to pause and enjoy what he had made, just as God himself paused and enjoyed what He had made.

So, a major reason to rest for the Israelites was to enjoy the fruits of what God had created and made. They had not always had the opportunity to do that. They had been slaves for 400 years in the land of Egypt, and during that time, they never had a day off. They didn’t get nearly as much of an opportunity to enjoy the good things that God had made. Now that God had set them free and made them his people, he wanted them to enjoy the many good things he had made.

Freedom of salvation

And, of course, that also meant enjoying the freedom of salvation. In fact, if you read the Ten Commandments in the alternate version in Deuteronomy 5, you find that a different reason is given for resting on the Sabbath: "So that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

Deuteronomy 5 gives the same Sabbath command but a different reason: "Remember, you were slaves, and you were rescued." It's as if God was saying, "Why would I rescue you if, instead of being slaves to the Egyptians, you become slaves to your schedule? Why would I rescue you from the slave-holding Egyptians if you're going to go around enslaving each other? I wouldn't!" A major reason to keep the Sabbath was simply to enjoy freedom, because God had saved them from brutal slavery.

Reality of equality

In addition, the Sabbath was a day when everyone was equal. On the Sabbath, there were no bosses. You didn't work for the boss on that day; you didn't work for anybody. There may have been different levels of importance on other days, but on the Sabbath, everyone was the same. Bosses, employees, rich, poor, foreigners living in Israel--everyone got that day to rest, relax, and be refreshed.

There was that wonderful reality of equality. It was still only a taste of it, one day a week, but God didn’t want people to think that some were important and others weren’t, that some had the right to hold slaves while others didn’t.

Renewal of creation

Another reason for Sabbath was the renewal of creation. God said, “I want your animals to rest as you do.” You don’t get to take those oxen that have been working all week, or the donkeys

that have been bearing loads, and say, “They’re just critters; they must do whatever I want them to do.” God says, “I want my animals to rest too.”

In fact, as part of God’s Sabbath commands, he wanted the land itself to rest. Every seven years, God said, the land gets a break. The land lies fallow. You don’t plant crops; you don’t prune your orchards and vineyards. You let the land be the land. (See Leviticus 25:1-7.)

So, in God’s commands related to the Sabbath, he wanted to give a sign of the renewal of all creation. Creation had come under a curse, but for one day a week, the animals were out from under that curse of exhausting human ownership. And for one year of every seven, the land was out from the curse of overuse that humanity brought on it, or at least the land had a foretaste of that renewal.

Those were four reasons that God gave for resting one day a week: to enjoy the fruits of creation, the freedom of salvation, to experience the reality of equality that God meant for people to have, and to give a foretaste of the renewal of all creation.

Main reason to rest

But we haven’t yet gotten to the main reason. The main reason was that they were commanded to enter God’s rest. God had rested, and they were to enter into God's eternal rest.

Now, God does not need rest in the same way we do. The Bible says that God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). The Lord never grows tired or weary (Isaiah 40:28) In one sense, he’s always active. He’s always working; the whole universe would fall apart if he weren’t. But his special creative acts were complete after the original six days of creation, and God gave a sign that he was entering into his rest on the seventh day. He blessed the seventh day as a sign that other people could enter into his rest as well. So, all along, even when giving the Sabbath command, God was hinting at something much greater than just taking a day to do nothing. He was saying, “Something greater than this Sabbath is being promised—my own rest.” Adam and Eve would have entered into that perfect, eternal state of bliss and rest had they continued to obey God, but they didn’t. Even so, God's Sabbath command hinted that his people still had an opportunity to enter his rest.

There was a penalty attached to the Sabbath commandment: death (Exodus 31:14-15; 35:2). Think about that. There’s a story of a man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath, and the Lord ordered that he be executed (Numbers 15:32-36). That’s how seriously the Sabbath was taken under the old covenant. Now, was that just God having a fit of bad temper or being extreme? No, here's why the penalty was so severe. God was inviting the Israelites—indeed, commanding them—to enter his own rest by faith. And those who insisted on doing whatever they wanted on the Sabbath were showing that they were not accepting and receiving God’s rest by faith. So, refusing God's rest led to death.

Refusing God's rest still leads to death—eternal death. The Bible says that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works (Ephesians 2:8). If you think that you can work your way into God's rest, that is a fatal thought, a way of missing out on salvation. So, the main reason for the

Sabbath command, among its many other excellent reasons, is that God has an eternal rest, an eternal joy, an eternal fullness and satisfaction that he is in, and that he wants us to enter into. We can't enter it by our own efforts. The Sabbath was a sign of that fact, even under the old covenant, and that's why there was such a strong penalty attached to it under the old covenant.

Various Sabbaths

Under the old covenant, there were various sabbaths:

- Every seventh day
- Annual Day of Atonement
- Every seventh year
- Every fiftieth year

The main, weekly Sabbath was commanded here in the Ten Commandments and written on stone by the very finger of God. Every seventh day, you took a special day, a holy day, to rest—not do your usual work—and to focus on God.

Another Sabbath was the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Once a year, there was a special day to focus on the sins of the people, to lay those sins on sacrificial animals, and to receive God's atonement for those sins.

Every seventh year was the year for the land to rest. As we've seen, nothing was to be planted or harvested in that seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-7).

The penalties for breaking these commands were very severe. I mentioned the man who picked up sticks and was executed for it on the Sabbath. The penalty for not keeping the Sabbath year was also severe. What happened when the Israelites said, "Oh, that seventh year of letting the land rest, that's not a good idea, that's not going to be very profitable"? Well, from the time they entered the promised land, they didn't follow that command. God warned that if they didn't let the land rest, he would make sure it got rest. Eventually God sent them into exile from their land, as much as to say, "You went 490 years without giving my land the Sabbaths I commanded. There should have been 70 Sabbath years during that time. Guess what—you've got 70 years to think about that. You're going to be in exile for 70 years while my land rests from you." (See Leviticus 26:34-35; 2 Chronicles 36:21.) It was a very serious matter to violate any Sabbath commandment in the Old Testament.

Here's another Sabbath commanded in the Old Testament: every 50th year, there was a Sabbath year, and the special point of that 50th year was to declare freedom for the captives, to tell the people who had to work for someone else in order to pay back their debts that the debts were finished. Everybody got a do-over, a fresh start. Every 50th year was called the Year of Jubilee. The inscription on America's Liberty Bell borrowed from that: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Leviticus 25:10). That was the 50th-year Sabbath—the Jubilee.

A day to rejoice

These Sabbaths were not meant to be toilsome, miserable days. Obviously, it's not toilsome when you rest. But sometimes, being told to rest when you don't want to rest can be quite hard. The Bible tells of merchants who were just waiting and itching for the Sabbath to end so they could get back to business as usual (Amos 8:5). God did not like that. But a different problem could also arise. Some people could become so serious and sober about Sabbath that they didn't realize the day of rest was supposed to be a day to celebrate, to delight, and to rejoice.

Sometimes when we think of a holy day, we might think it must be a really somber, sour day. But just because something is serious doesn't mean it isn't joyful. In the book of Nehemiah, we read about a time when the people were repenting and crying out for their sins, and they were so sad. Then Nehemiah and other leaders came and told them,

"This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord." [Notice the reasoning: this day is sacred, so eat up and have fun!] "This day is sacred, do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food, and to celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. (Nehemiah 8:9-12)

Those are some aspects of what the Sabbath meant in the Old Testament.

Lord of the Sabbath

By the time Jesus came, a lot of detailed regulations had been added to the Sabbath. Religious leaders had figured out exactly how far you were allowed to walk on the Sabbath, whether it was okay to light a fire or not, and how much of a fire was allowed. Those leaders offered a lot of teaching, claiming that they were helping explain the Sabbath to people. But the result was that the Sabbath became burdensome for many people. By Jesus' time, the Pharisees had turned the Sabbath into something it was not meant to be. It was no longer "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," or "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Instead, there was much more of an emphasis on grim duty: make sure you don't do anything on the Sabbath that could be understood as work by our special books of knowledge about the Sabbath.

Jesus' disciples were feeling hungry one day while they were walking along. So they grabbed some heads of grain in the field, rubbed off the chaff, and started eating the grain. The Pharisees were furious. The disciples were harvesting on the Sabbath! The Pharisees confronted Jesus about it. Jesus reminded them of a story about David, when he was in desperate straits and ate some of the holy bread that only the priests were supposed to eat. Then Jesus said, "Now go and find out what it means: I desire mercy rather than sacrifice" (see Matthew 12:1-8). Jesus was saying, "You seem to be missing the main point of the law because you're bogged down only in the dos and don'ts."

Jesus healed people again and again on the Sabbath. He made an especially strong point of healing people on the Sabbath if he knew the Sabbath sticklers were looking. He went out of His way to drive them out of their minds. You might say, “No, come on, you’re speaking too harshly of Jesus.” But Jesus was deliberately confronting their view of the Sabbath, of God, and of everything.

One story is of a man at the pool of Bethesda. This man had been unable to walk for 38 years. Jesus came to him and said, “Take up your mat and walk,” and the man did! Jesus healed him and gave him his legs back, working perfectly. How did the religious leaders react? They rebuked the man: “Naughty, naughty, naughty—you are bearing a burden on the Sabbath. Don’t you know the commandment? You are supposed to refrain from bearing any burden on the Sabbath.” (See John 5:1-17). There you get the confrontation between religious experts on what you can and cannot do, and the one who can actually put you on your feet again after you’ve been crippled for years and years.

Another story involves a woman who had been bent over for 18 years. She had suffered with that condition, and Jesus came to her, made her well again, and her back was straightened. She was rejoicing, but the synagogue ruler was furious because Jesus did it on the Sabbath. He was mad at Jesus, and guess what? Jesus was mad at him and the other critics. He said, “If you had an animal that needed help, you’d rescue it. Here’s this woman who’s been tormented by Satan for 18 years, and you’re objecting?” (See Luke 13:10-17)

Another time, there was a man who had been born blind. He had been blind his entire life. Jesus spat in the dirt, made mud out of it, put it on his eyes, and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man went, washed, and he could see! As a result, the man found himself the object of interrogation because he was healed on the Sabbath. (See John 9.)

Sometimes the religious leaders would say, “There are six days to do healings—give it a break one day a week!” (Luke 13:14) Jesus would say, “My Father’s been working, and I’m working too” (John 5:17). It’s not the same kind of work that’s prohibited by the Sabbath commandment. He’s making people whole again. What is he actually doing? He’s bringing them into God’s rest, into God’s Sabbath, into God’s shalom, peace, and well-being—and he’s getting criticized very harshly for it.

During one of those discussions, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). Jesus was telling them, “God gave the Sabbath for people’s good. If it has become a burden or is being treated in a way that harms people, then the point of the Sabbath has been missed. Oh, by the way, I am the Lord who gave the Sabbath in the first place, and you’re telling Me what’s right and wrong on the Sabbath?”

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). We sometimes hear that as, “We’re exhausted or beaten down by the difficulties and trials of life.” That’s true, but in the context, Jesus is talking about those who are beaten down by the religious requirements of the experts. That’s what they’re weary and burdened from. As Jesus himself said of the religious leaders, “They lay heavy burdens on

people, and don't lift a finger to help them" (Matthew 23:4). Jesus removes burdens. Jesus helps people up again. These experts just make life heavier for them. Jesus declares himself Lord of the Sabbath and gives the invitation: "If you're tired, if you're weary, if you're burdened, just come to me. I'll give you rest. My yoke is easy, my burden is light." He doesn't keep piling on the regulations and restrictions.

Sabbath for today

Thus far, we've seen the Old Testament Sabbath, and we've seen how Jesus acted and spoke as Lord of the Sabbath. Now, let's ask ourselves, What does the Sabbath command mean for us today? How do we live in response to the fourth commandment as people who belong to Jesus Christ under the new covenant that Jesus brought?"

Here are three views about how to apply the Sabbath commandment.

- Same demands, same day
- Same demands, new day
- New covenant, new day

The first view is that the Sabbath commandment has the same demands that it's always had, and those demands are still binding on all of God's people today. Those demands to worship and not to work on that day apply to the same day—the seventh day. Follow identical requirements on the seventh day as under the old covenant, with the exception, possibly, of the death penalty.

The second approach insists on the same demands—no work and a special day set apart for worship—but designates a new day, Sunday instead of Saturday.

The third view says there's a new covenant, and the demands of the fourth commandment are no longer binding in the same way. Rest on a particular day is not a strict requirement, and worship with other Christians is on a new day, Sunday, more for practical reasons than for required reasons legislated by the law of God.

Same demands?

Those who say that the demands are the same appear to have a very strong case. It goes something like this: "It's in the Ten Commandments! How could it change? Do you want to change the other nine, too? Do you think you should worship other gods now? Do you think you get to make idols? Is it okay to misuse God's name? If not, then why would you think it's okay to break the Sabbath? Do you think that God now likes it when you disobey father and mother? Are you now free to kill, commit adultery, steal, give false testimony, or covet? Come on! The demands of the other nine commandments remain unchanged and continue to be binding on all God's people and guide us in how to live, so why change the fourth commandment? Not only that, the fourth commandment appeals to the fact that God made the earth and the heavens in six days. The commandment is rooted in the original creation itself. You can't take something rooted

in creation, written in stone by the finger of God himself, and think it can be changed!" That sounds fairly compelling, doesn't it?

But let's dig a little deeper. The other nine commandments are repeated again and again, exactly as they are, in the New Testament. The Sabbath command is never repeated in the New Testament as binding on believers. In fact, there are several places in the New Testament that say Sabbaths are not to be a ground for judging others or to be used as a measure of whether someone is saved or how good a Christian they are. So, if somebody says the fourth commandment or something about its application is different, it's not because they think the other nine commandments can be changed. It's because the New Testament itself deals somewhat differently with the fourth commandment than it deals with the other nine.

The reason is that many of the laws of the Old Testament were ceremonial laws, which were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Their ceremonial aspect is no longer commanded, and the same demands aren't there anymore. So let's not be too quick to say, "It's obvious that Sabbath demands remain the same for us as in Old Testament times because Sabbath is in the Ten Commandments and therefore it's always binding." We must face the fact that this is one commandment in the Ten that's different from the others. It involves a ceremonial requirement about special days; it doesn't just give moral instruction on how to live every day.

Christ the end

"Christ is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4). That's a statement the Apostle Paul makes. What does it mean? It can have two different meanings. One is that Christ is the *goal* of the law. He is the one at whom the whole Old Testament law is pointing. But in another sense, he is the end of the law in terms of its ceremonial regulations *ceasing*, no longer being required because Jesus fulfilled them. We don't kill animals anymore as sacrifices because Jesus fulfilled those things. We don't have to follow food laws anymore because Jesus is the fulfillment of those and declared all foods clean. And we don't have to follow Sabbath requirements anymore because Jesus fulfilled what Sabbath was pointing toward.

"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17). Remember when I was giving reasons for keeping the Sabbath under the old covenant? The biggest reason was entering God's eternal rest. When Christ came, all who are connected to Christ began to enter God's eternal rest. We're not all the way there yet, but in Christ we are already tasting something of God's eternal rest. The substance belongs to Christ. The Sabbath and these other things were a shadow of the eternal rest that Christ came to bring.

In the same vein, the apostle warns new covenant believers not to go back to old covenant ceremonial laws. Paul says to some people intent on keep all the demands of Old Testament law, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son... God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" ...You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you" (Galatians 4:4-11). Now that God has sent his Son to save us and his Spirit to live in us, we are living in the fullness of time, the fulfillment of time. All the

things that were pointing ahead to the Son and the Spirit have become obsolete. All the symbols, rituals, ceremonies, food requirements, and special days—all of these are no longer binding on God's people because the shadow has given way to the substance.

Before a baby is born, it's fun to look at the baby in utero, to have an ultrasound picture. That ultrasound helps us to be excited about the developing baby who is eventually going to be out here in the world with us. But there would be something wrong if, after the baby was born, you kept going back and gazing at the ultrasound and not at the person. When your child is two or twelve or 24, would you keep staring at the old ultrasound and ignore your son or daughter? Would you say, "I love this ultrasound so much. This ultrasound is fantastic. Look at that beautiful picture"? Your son or daughter might say, "What's the matter with you? Don't you like me? Do you like that old ultrasound picture of me better than the real me?" Likewise, before Jesus came, the Old Testament ceremonial laws gave shadowy hints of what was coming, but now Jesus has come. Once he's come, don't focus on the shadows that foretold and foreshadowed him. Embrace the real Jesus. Don't go back.

The New Testament connects Sabbath with eternal rest. The key is faith in Jesus: "For we who have believed enter that rest... So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Hebrews 4:3-10). The New Testament doesn't ignore the Sabbath or say the Sabbath doesn't matter anymore. Instead, the New Testament shows that the deepest meaning of Sabbath, what matters most, is eternal rest in Christ. And that rest comes not by any work of ours but by faith, by resting totally on Jesus and not on our own works. Faith rests.

Freedom, not requirement

When it comes to the matter of salvation, there were people in New Testament times who said, "You must keep laws about foods and special days, or you will not be saved." The New Testament reply to that was, "Don't put faith in foods and special days, or you will not be saved." Faith must be in Christ alone. That's why Paul speaks so strongly in Galatians and elsewhere about not going back.

Others would grant that you could be saved even if you weren't committed to strict Sabbath-keeping. But to be a truly elite and superior Christian—to hit that level—you did need Sabbath-keeping. Their message was, "You must keep laws about foods and special days to be an elite Christian, though you can be saved without them." The New Testament declared, "Foods and special days are matters of Christian freedom, so long as you focus on Jesus."

There's room to differ on these matters as long as we don't claim that they contribute to salvation or superiority. After hearing some of the things I just said, you might think, "Anybody who observes special days or feasts—they must be lost; they must really be messed up." That's not the point. It's actually okay for people to still observe some of the food laws and special days **IF** they're doing it to serve the Lord and are not pressing that requirement on others as though it would either save them or lift them to a higher level. If some of these practices are part of your heritage--let's say you came from a Jewish background--or you found that celebrating certain feast days helped jog your memory to focus on Jesus, go ahead and observe them.

Romans 14:4-5 says, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord.” Here, the apostle Paul is not blasting people who still honor those days. In other writings, he was just saying that the moment you start making special days a requirement for others, or the moment you start thinking it’s adding to your salvation, you’re in very dangerous territory. But as long as we’re all serving the Lord and trusting the Lord Jesus Christ, one person can observe days one way and another in a different way. Christian freedom gives us room to differ about whether or not we will observe special days. So let’s just all follow Jesus together. Once you realize that the requirements are off, the pressure is off.

New covenant

Let's consider some realities of God's new covenant in Christ, revealed in the New Testament.

- Salvation brings new creation
- Ceremonial laws are obsolete
- Rest in Christ, not your works
- Rest is a sign of break with sin
- Rest is a taste of eternal rest

Under the new covenant, salvation in Jesus through His death and resurrection is a whole new creation. In fact, it’s greater than the creation of the world. It was a lot easier for God to create the world than to save it. He only had to speak his Word to create it, but He had to sacrifice the Word—Jesus Christ—to save it and make it a new creation.

Under the new covenant, as we’ve seen, the ceremonial dimensions of the law are obsolete. But that doesn’t mean the ceremonial laws were all just useless and a waste of time. Even now, learning about them can teach us a lot about Jesus Christ and God’s will and wise living. Just because, for instance, you're not required to rest every seventh day as an absolute requirement, does that mean now you’re going to go out and work yourself to the bone? Just because something’s no longer an absolute legal requirement doesn’t mean there’s not a huge amount of wisdom in why it was given in the first place.

At the heart of it is rest in Christ, not your works. The gospel is a gospel of being saved by grace in Christ, and not by anything you do. You can’t pick up one stick to get yourself saved. No pitiful little stick of ours can add to the cross of Christ. If you think you can contribute to your salvation, and you pick up that one stick, you’ve already got yourself condemned. You have to rely on Jesus completely for salvation and eternal life, not your sticks, not your works.

Rest for the believer is not just taking a break from things that tire us out, but also a sign of breaking with sin. It’s a sign of entering God’s eternal rest. These are some of the facts under the new covenant.

New day

We're here worshipping on Sunday. Why is that? We don't have the same demands as the old covenant Sabbath day, and we also don't have the same day. How did that come about? When the early church thought through these things, they realized that the Sabbath commands were no longer binding in the same way. But they knew it was still important for Christians to gather together for fellowship and worship. And to gather together, you need to have agreed-upon times. What should that time be? The New Testament church settled on the first day, Sunday. How did Sunday come to be the Christian day of worship?

- Jesus arose on first day
- Spirit came on first day
- Early church met on first day
- First day is "the Lord's Day"

Jesus Christ arose from the dead on the first day of the week and launched the new creation. The Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost on the first day of the week. The early church met on the first day of the week. In John 20:19 and again in verse 26, the disciples were meeting together on the first day of the week. Acts 20:7 speaks of worship and communion: "On the first day of the week, we came together to break bread." 1 Corinthians 16:2 talks about gathering offerings and says, "On the first day of the week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." Even in situations where Christians couldn't gather due to persecution, the first day of the week was called "the Lord's Day" and was a time for worship. The apostle John, alone in exile, wrote, "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit" (Revelation 1:10).

As the centuries went by, that pattern continued. Ignatius, who lived in the century after Jesus, wrote, "Christians have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in observance of the Lord's Day, on which our life has sprung up again by him and by his death." Justin Martyr, who also lived in that first century after Jesus, wrote about Christian worship and its patterns in some detail. He said that it happened "on the day called Sunday."

If you were taught a stricter view of Sabbath observance than the one I'm presenting here, you might wonder if my view is a deviation from mainstream biblical Christianity. However, I'm far from alone in this view. I've quoted the New Testament, and I've mentioned Ignatius and Justin Martyr, major leaders in the century after Jesus and the apostles. I could quote many others. Augustine, a great church father in the 400s, held a similar view. John Calvin, a prominent Reformer of the 1500s, also held a similar view. So, even if this view is not one you were taught, don't assume it's just wrong and weird and that nobody besides me ever thought of it before. I take it to be the view of the New Testament and of many great Christian leaders since then who have studied Scripture very carefully.

Among Reformation confessions of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism says,

Q. What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I diligently attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath. (Lord's Day 39, Q & A 103)

Unlike the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster standards affirm strict obedience to some Old Testament Sabbath demands but with a new day, Sunday. I agree with most teachings in the Westminster Standards, and I grew up with a fairly strict view of Sabbath observance. But I just can't avoid what I think the New Testament teaches about fulfillment and freedom under the new covenant. Whatever your exact view, remember what Paul said in Romans. If one person treats one day as special and another person doesn't, let each be convinced in his own mind and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reasons to rest

Now that we're free in Christ from old covenant ceremonial regulations about sacrifices, special diets, and special days, we're not required to refrain from all work on any particular day of the week. Does that mean you should say, "Yahoo! Now I get to slave away 24/7, drive myself to exhaustion, be mean to everybody around me, skip church, and whip my animals?" Not exactly! The New Testament doesn't command us exactly when and how long to rest from work, but do you really think God wants you to have no days off, no vacations, no celebrations? New covenant living should be more free and joyful and worshipful than living under the old covenant, not less. Also, the New Testament doesn't strictly require that we go to church on a particular day or a set schedule, but it does say plainly that Christians must regularly gather together for worship, fellowship, and mutual encouragement and not neglect such gatherings (Hebrews 10:24-25). If you go to church only once in awhile and rarely interact with fellow believers, something is wrong.

What reasons are there to still apply the spirit of this commandment, maybe with some freedom, but still take it seriously and live in the spirit of the commandment? Well, consider the reasons to rest that lay behind the original Sabbath commandment:

- Enter God's rest
- Fruits of creation
- Freedom of salvation
- Reality of equality
- Renewal of creation

We still want to enter God's rest, so supremely, we rest in Jesus. We still live in a beautiful creation, though it has its flaws because of our sin and brokenness. But there's a lot of good in this creation. Take some time to enjoy it—to eat good food, to feast, and to enjoy special times of celebration. Whether you cram your rest and feasting all into one particular day or spread out your celebrations a bit differently, that's up to you. But it would be very foolish not to enjoy the fruits of creation, not to live in the freedom that comes in Christ, and not to recognize the

equality that's there. One of the great things about the old Sabbath was that it was a leveler. On this day, you didn't get to be the boss, and you didn't get bossed around. When we live in the spirit of the Sabbath, we'll never take the position that we have the right to step on anybody else. We'll also realize that nobody has the right to step on us. There may be some who try. There may be some who succeed for a season, but it's not because they have the right to.

It's part of New Testament teaching that God is renewing all of creation. Creation itself groans in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19-23). The Sabbath command said that animals get a break from being worked too hard. The land gets a break. In God's great fulfillment in the new creation, we sometimes think of it as just heavenly clouds, but the Bible speaks of the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the baby, and the cobra all being together in harmony in God's renewed creation (Isaiah 11:6-9). Animals and all parts of creation will be renewed. The trees and the land and the mountains and the oceans will leap for joy. The renewal of creation through Christ is foreshadowed in that Sabbath command.

In the new covenant, we are not required to live by the ceremonial letter of the fourth commandment in strict observance of any particular day, but here are some ways to live in the spirit of the commandment:

- Rest fully in Christ's salvation
- Celebrations, not regulations
- Support and receive ministry
- Faithfully meet as church
- Make time to rest, relax, rejoice

I've found it valuable, just as a personal discipline, to take a day each week where I don't work on sermons, where I don't work on anything, and focus mainly on God. Now, because that helps me, I could tell everyone, "You have to do that too, because that's what you need to do in order to grow." I will only tell you that when I do that, it helps me grow. It makes special time for God that otherwise I might neglect.

I tell people, "It's important and valuable to read your Bible every day and pray." However, the Bible never says you have to do that. I believe so much in Bible reading and prayer that I want to tell you, "Now get out there and read your Bible and pray every day! What are you doing, not reading your Bible and praying every day?" But the New Testament doesn't give a strict command for set times of daily Bible reading and prayer. Daily Bible reading and prayer have proven, over time, to be helpful in many people's growth and flourishing. There are many things that are matters of Christian freedom, and when you experience them as a great blessing to you, let those things help you flourish. But don't turn into the new Pharisees, saying, "I've been watching you—did you get your seven checkmarks for the week?" Some of us might need checkmarks to help keep us on track, but that doesn't mean everybody does. If we get into a checkmark mentality and force it on others, it can be fatal.

When we think about the whole law of God, what did God say about the new covenant? "I will put my Spirit in them, and I will write my law on their hearts" (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27). It's not that this fourth commandment has no value or application anymore. It's not

that we don't think it matters that it was written on stone. But God says, "Now, I'm doing something even better than writing on stone. I'm writing it on your heart. Enter my rest."

Prayer

We pray, Father, that you will help us discern the fullness of your promise and of your good news for us in Jesus, as well as the wonderful things you intend for us in this commandment. We thank you, Lord, for what this commandment has meant to so many throughout history, bringing such blessing and flourishing. We pray that we, too, can continue to flourish with your law written on our hearts, with wisdom to discern the ways we need to rest in you, refresh ourselves in your creation, and bring refreshment and joy to others. Help us always, Lord, to live in the true freedom of your salvation. We praise you and thank you. If we still have questions or uncertainties, we pray that you will guide us by your Spirit and through our interactions with your Word and with each other. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Sabbath
Slide Contents
By David Feddes

Sabbath

- Old Testament Sabbath
- Lord of Sabbath
- Sabbath for today

⁸ Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Reasons to Rest

- Fruits of creation
- Freedom of salvation
- Reality of equality
- Renewal of creation

Main reason: Enter God's rest

- Something greater than Sabbath was promised
- Refusing to rest led to eternal death

Sabbaths

- Every seventh day
- Day of Atonement
- Every seventh year
- Every fiftieth year

Sabbath

- Old Testament Sabbath
- **Lord of Sabbath**
- Sabbath for today

Lord of Sabbath

Disciples pick grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus healed on the Sabbath. This aroused opposition.

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27-28). Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Sabbath

- Old Testament Sabbath
- Lord of Sabbath
- **Sabbath for today**

Three views

- Same demands, same day
- Same demands, new day
- New covenant, new day

Christ the end

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

Don't go back!

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son... God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ... You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you. (Galatians 4:4-11)

Faith rests

For we who have believed enter that rest... So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. (Hebrews 4:3-10)

Salvation?

? You must keep laws about foods and special days, or you will not be saved.

- **Don't put faith in foods and special days, or you will not be saved.**

Superiority?

? You must keep laws about foods and special days to be an elite Christian, though you can be saved without them.

- **Foods and special days are matters of Christian freedom, so long as you focus on Jesus.**

Room to differ

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. (Romans 14:4-5).

New covenant

- Salvation brings new creation
- Ceremonial laws are obsolete
- Rest in Christ, not your works
- Rest is a sign of break with sin
- Rest is a taste of eternal rest

New day

- Jesus arose on first day
- Spirit came on first day
- Early church met on first day
- First day is “the Lord’s Day”

Reasons to Rest

- Enter God’s rest
- Fruits of creation
- Freedom of salvation
- Reality of equality
- Renewal of creation

Delight!

- Rest fully in Christ’s salvation
- Celebrations, not regulations
- Support and receive ministry
- Faithfully meet as church
- Make time to rest, relax, rejoice

Heidelberg^[1]_{SEP}Catechism, Lord's Day 39
Q & A 103

Q. What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I diligently attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor.

Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.