

The Sanctity of the Sabbath
A Follow-up for Meditation from the Sermon, [*Sticks and Stones*](#)

The law of the Sabbath is unique among the Ten Commandments in certain respects. While all of the commandments are a reflection of God's own character and are therefore a permanent statement of unchanging moral principles, the Fourth Commandment is:

1. A Creation ordinance in a more particular way than the other commandments, and so it is part of the structure of the world—the very rhythm of life, if you will (Genesis 2:2, 3). It was structured into reality for the welfare of humankind: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

2. Not only is it part of the structure of Creation, but also it is given to reflect God's pattern of activity, a cycle of six and one, of work and rest (Genesis 2:2, 3 and Exodus 20:8-11).

3. It is also given as a sign of redemption: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15). This really makes it unique among the Ten Words, because the wording and rationale for the Sabbath commandment undergoes change as a result of God's redeeming his people out of Egypt. This amending to the foundational reason for the Sabbath is unique among the Ten Commandments and sets a precedent for the future changes that took place at the time of the inauguration of the New Testament.

Thus:

4. It is the only one of the Ten Commandments that has both unchanging and changing aspects. As such:

4.1. Our Lord is said to have “broken” it: “For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he not only was breaking [luw (pronounced, LOO oh), “break, set free, loose, untie”] the Sabbath, but also was calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

4.2. In Christ we are given freedom regarding how we observe it. As a result of the Lord Jesus' nailing the Old Covenant with its ceremonies, sanctions and curses to the cross—thereby dealing the death blow to the world, the flesh and the devil—we are a free people (Colossians 2:8-15) — free, not that we should continue in sin (i.e. what is contrary to God's own moral nature or not in keeping with his revealed will), but free to reflect the restored image of God in our daily lives. How we do that is with an enormous emphasis on liberty and grace, particularly with regard to the interpretations and homespun religion of our fellows: “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:16, 17). In that light we should read Romans 14:5, 6: “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord,

for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.”

4.3. While the creation pattern of six and one seems to remain, the weight of evidence from the New Testament is that the day of worship and rest was shifted from the seventh to the first day.

4.3.1. When used of a specific day of the week, as over against referring to the non-weekly holy days, the Sabbath always refers to the period of time from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. Early Christians did go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, but they did so for evangelistic purposes, and that was the day of the week when Jewish people were there (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 18:4). But we find that the Church as a distinct entity did not worship then but appears to have worshiped on the next day, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

4.3.2. Sunday is not identical to the Sabbath. We may refer to it as the Christian Sabbath only in the way that we might refer to the Lord’s Supper as the Christian Passover, or to Baptism as the Christian Circumcision. They are typologically and figuratively so, just as Christ is the Passover Lamb. These Old Testament ordinances are fulfilled in their New Testament counterparts.

4.3.3. The Sabbath is fulfilled in the New Covenant:

4.3.3.1. In the not yet of the world to come, all of life, all of the time, will fulfill the Sabbath: “. . . there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest . . .” (Hebrews 4:9-11).

4.3.3.2. In the now of the present era, between the two advents of Christ:

4.3.3.2.1. Whenever we stop working to please God by our own righteousness and rest instead by faith on the finished work of Christ alone, we are fulfilling the Sabbath (Hebrews 3:1-4:16).

4.3.3.2.2. Whenever we take time to gather with the Lord’s people to adore our gracious God, we are fulfilling the Sabbath. At such times our ambition should be to be “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10).

4.3.3.2.3. Whenever we work hard at our calling and take a break for renewal of our inner and outer man, we are fulfilling the Sabbath.

4.3.3.2.4. According to our station and calling, whenever we seek to bring about working conditions so that people have time for rest and worship, especially with their families together, we are fulfilling the Sabbath.

The emphasis under the New Covenant is on liberty under the Holy Spirit. We should never fail to understand that the older covenant was marked by literal legislation down to such minutia as the kind of underwear that should be worn during worship (Exodus 28:42). It emphasized the barrier between a Holy God and sinful humanity (Hebrews 12:18-21; Ephesians 2:14 *ff.*). Its strong suit was condemnation and death (Leviticus 10:1, 2; 2 Samuel 6:7). While the New

Testament is not without such things, its emphasis is radically different. As Saint Paul informs us, the Old Covenant was “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone” and “the ministry that condemns men” Whereas his description of the New Covenant is of the ministry “written . . . with the Holy Spirit . . . on tablets of human hearts” and “the ministry that brings righteousness” As glorious as the Old Testament was, says Paul, “it has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory (of the New Testament).” (2 Corinthians 3:3-11).

If people are not “forsaking the assembling” of themselves with the Lord’s people on the Lord’s Day, and if they are making sure that they follow the creational pattern of labor and rest, seeing to it that those under their care enjoy the same privileges they do, they are quite free to glorify the Lord and serve their neighbors with great freedom on the New Testament fulfillment of the Sabbath.

Bob Vincent