

There is an old story where a young man challenged a village elder to an all-day wood chopping contest, and so they went at it. The young challenger worked very hard, grunting and sweating, his muscles aching as he swung his axe relentlessly. The elder, on the other hand, seemed to be working about half as fast, in fact, he even took breaks during the day and sat off to the side.

*At the end of the day, the young challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the elder had chopped a lot more wood than he had. "I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you seemed to be taking a break, yet you chopped more wood than I did. **How did you outwork me?"** The elder smiled and replied, **"Didn't notice that when I sat down to rest, I was sharpening my axe?"***

We all need to make the most of our time, and sometimes that means we stop to sharpen our axe, so to speak, and that's what we are going to explore this morning.

We are continuing our walk through the Ten Commandments, and as a reminder, the Ten Commandments represent God's moral standards – basic moral standards of right and wrong that had been placed in the conscience of man, but now at the base of Mount Sinai, these standards are being formally declared by God for all of the Israelites to hear. It was here that God gave His people the Ten Commandments, these ten essentials for their Law as a new nation, and this morning we have reached the fourth Commandment – a commandment that is about honoring God with our time. It says, and I am reading from **Exodus 20**, beginning with **verse 8**,

⁸ "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

God tells the Israelites, that for one out of every seven days – rest in honor of God. That seems simple enough. Rest in honor of God. **How could someone mess that up?** Well unfortunately, this is a Commandment that has been completely distorted and twisted throughout history, it's a Commandment that has led to more debate and bitter controversy than any other of the Ten Commandments, and it's a Commandment that has been applied with such absurdity and judgmental legalism, that it sucks God's intent of a blessing right out of it.

Erwin Lutzer tells of a pastor during the time of the Puritans who lived in an area with a lot of ice and snow, and on one Sunday, the pastor decided it would be faster to skate to church. Well, after the service, the deacons called an emergency meeting to decide whether it was right for a pastor to skate to church on a Sunday. After several hours, they told him, “Yes, you can skate to church on Sundays, just as long as you don’t enjoy it.”

That’s crazy, but what’s even crazier is that this kind of absurd thinking still persists in the church – even today.

So, let’s move ahead with this fourth Commandment, and I think the best way to move ahead is to first go backwards – all the way back to where it all began. So, turn to **Genesis 2**, and we will read the first three verses. We are told,

¹Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. ²By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

I felt it was necessary to begin here because it was here at the end of creation where we are first introduced to this idea of rest. We are told that God completed His work in the first six days, He was satisfied with it – it was good, and then on the seventh day He **rested**. In this passage, the word **rested** is translated in Hebrew as “*shabbat*” and it’s where we get the word “*sabbath*” and it simply means to cease or to stop. That’s it. That’s what it means. It wasn’t that God got tired and needed a nap time – it wasn’t that He grew weary from all His work – simply put, God was finished with creation, so He stopped.

We are also told in this passage that God **blessed this seventh day and sanctified it**, meaning He made it holy – He set this day apart, He elevated the seventh day because His creative work was fully completed and He was pleased with what He had done. God, the Creator, stopped and took delight in His creation. It was a special day for God, and it also seems isolated to God, for at this point, there was no command given to anyone.

Hundreds of years go by through **Genesis** where we are told about Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and as far as I can tell there is no reference to this sabbath day – this day of rest. It wasn’t commanded by God until we get to **Exodus 16** – before the Ten Commandments were given.

If you recall, the Israelites had been delivered from the Egyptians through the Red Sea. Then, after that, God had provided them with fresh water from an undrinkable water source, but now, they are grumbling because they are hungry – suggesting that God brought them all the way out there from Egypt just to let them starve to death. They did not trust God, so, beginning with **verse 22 of Exodus 16**, we are told,

²² Now on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ then he said to them, “This is what the Lord meant: Tomorrow is a sabbath observance, a holy sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.” ²⁴ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses had ordered, and it did not become foul nor was there any worm in it. ²⁵ Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶ Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none.”

God wanted His people to trust Him, to depend upon Him on a daily basis, and to satisfy their hunger, God gave the Israelites manna from heaven. They were told that each day, they can gather and cook the manna to sustain them for that day, but on the sixth day, they were to collect and cook twice as much to cover the sixth and the seventh day – for here, the seventh day was commanded to be a sabbath day for the Israelites – a day that pointed to the holiness of God – a day of demonstrating their trust in God – a day of rest and delight and devotion to God.

And keep in mind, this idea of rest had been largely foreign to the Israelites, for if you remember, they had been in bondage in Egypt for 400 years where there was no rest given to them. As mistreated slaves, they did not get a day off from their labor – so this command by God to enter into a rhythm of work and rest, a rhythm first established by God at creation, should have been seen as a gift from God – for that’s what it is. This rest was to be blessing not a burden.

Soon after this experience with manna, they make it to Mount Sinai where God formally gives the Israelites His moral standards – the Ten Commandments. So, let’s get to **Exodus 20**, beginning with **verse 8**.

⁸ “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.

¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

I want to quickly point something out that is often overlooked. Although, the main emphasis in this commandment is about the sabbath rest, if you notice, God also speaks about **work**. God commanded the Israelites to work for **six days**. Both work and rest are part of this weekly rhythm – the exact same weekly rhythm that God established at creation.

We are made to work, and if able, we should be working or at least engaged in something productive on a normal basis; otherwise, we are out of rhythm. We are to work hard, but we also need to rest well. Both work and rest are good for us.

Now, there's something else I want to say about this fourth Commandment and this is very significant. It's not repeated in the New Testament. Nine out of the Ten Commandments are mentioned in the New Testament – this one is the only exception. This Commandment is not quoted; however, the Sabbath is referenced multiple times in the New Testament typically because Jesus was often accused by the Jewish religious leaders of violating it. The religious leaders had really distorted and twisted this Commandment with their own man-made rules and regulations, and they abused God's people with it. According to them, there were over 1,500 activities that were not allowed on the Sabbath. For example,

- You could not rescue a drowning person on the Sabbath.
- Untying knots that needed only one hand was allowed, but if two hands were required, it was forbidden.
- If a man's ox fell into the ditch, he could pull it out, but if the man fell in, he had to stay there.
- If a man was bitten by a flea on the Sabbath, he had to allow the flea to keep on biting. If he tried to stop the flea from biting or killed it, he was guilty of hunting on the Sabbath.

Can you see why Jesus butted heads with these religious leaders? They turned something that was meant to be a blessing from God *for* man into something that became an unbearable burden *imposed upon* man, and Jesus wasn't having any of it. That's why He said to them, in **Mark 2:27**,

“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”

In other words, the Sabbath was not to be seen as a burden which people had to conform to, instead the Sabbath was intended to be a gift, a blessing of time for rest and delight and devotion.

There is something else I need to point out. The Sabbath day is the seventh day of the week. That is Saturday – not Sunday. In the Bible, the Sabbath day is never attached to a Sunday as some may assume – it is always on Saturday – and actually for a Jew, it starts at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday; therefore, to say that Sunday is our Sabbath would be incorrect. So, that prompts an obvious question for us – **Why are we here this Sunday morning?**

I want to say at the onset, that nowhere in the New Testament are Gentile believers commanded to worship on the Sabbath. There are no rules and there are no instructions given to Gentile believers about the Sabbath – and there were many opportunities to give them.

For example, in **Acts 15**, the Jewish Council convened in Jerusalem because it became clearly obvious to the Jewish Christians that Gentiles were also becoming believers by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It brought great joy to them, but unfortunately, there were some in the church with strong Jewish legalistic roots who falsely taught that if these Gentile believers wanted to be true followers of God, they would need to follow the Law of Moses – their rules of Judaism.

We are told that the Apostles and the church leaders were all there at this council meeting. Peter attended this meeting, James, the half-brother of Jesus was there, and so was Paul and Barnabas, and the question was raised: **What instruction do we give these new Gentile believers?** Well, here it is beginning with **verse 28**,

28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

That’s it. That’s what the Jewish Christian leaders passed on to the Gentile believers. This would have been the perfect time to give direction about observing the Sabbath day – but no command, no reminder, no instruction was given to the Gentiles as to what they are to do on the seventh day.

To take this a little further, the Apostle Paul – a Jew, who ministered to the Gentile churches and addressed many different sins in his letters to them, never mentioned

that failure to keep the Sabbath was a sin. Now, with that said, Paul did give some important insight to the churches on this topic because it had apparently come up.

Turn in your Bible to **Romans 14**. In this chapter, Paul is talking about judging one another over legalistic matters, and he says in **verses 5-6**,

“One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord,”

In this passage, Paul lets us know that he is talking more about the principle of honoring God with our time rather than a specific day, and he opened up the idea that depending on one’s personal conviction, any day can be devoted to the Lord. For Paul, it was a matter of the heart and devotion to God rather than the day of the week, and that was the direction he gave to the early church. Follow your heart, consider the issue, and come to your own conclusion, and that’s exactly what they did.

The early church eventually met on Sunday – the first day of the week, because Sunday was the day that Jesus rose from the grave, it was on Sunday that Jesus first met with His disciples after His resurrection, and it was on Sunday that Pentecost occurred. So, historically, Sunday – the first day of the week, became the day that the church gathered together, and this was referenced in **Acts 20:7**, in **1 Corinthians 16:2**, and also in **Revelation 1:10** where it is not called the Sabbath, because it is not the Sabbath – it’s called the “*Lord’s Day*.”

Now, if you have any doubts, I have one more passage to share with you from Paul in **Colossians 2**. Paul is writing to the church at Colossae, and he is dealing with the problem of Gentile believers being intimidated into legalistic practices by false teachers who claimed to have the inside track with God. So, in his letter, Paul explains to his readers that Christ is all you need, He has to be your everything, and in regards to the religious intimidation, Paul says in **verses 16-17**,

¹⁶Therefore 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 – ¹⁷things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Paul tells these believers not to be intimidated by these false teachers nor accept their legalistic judgments against them regarding food and drink, various religious observances, and if you notice, he specifically calls out a **Sabbath day**.

Paul wasn't condemning food and drink, or these religious observances, or even the Sabbath day for that matter, but what he was saying was they were not binding on Christians, and he explains why. Paul says, these things, these rules – to include the Sabbath, are only a **shadow**, not the **substance**, and I need to explain this.

*I was at the doctor's office on Friday morning. I was sitting in the waiting room, a little impatient, waiting for someone to come through the door to call my name. At the bottom of the door, there was gap between the door and the floor, and I could see there was light on other side of the door. As I waited, there came a moment where I noticed that the light was partially blocked and I could now see a shadow under the door. That told me that someone was blocking the light and casting a shadow – someone was standing behind that door, and I anticipated that someone would open the door, and call my name. **Was I there to see the shadow?** No, I wanted to see the person casting the shadow. The shadow was not the substance, it only pointed out the substance and created anticipation in me.*

What Paul is telling us is to stop chasing shadows. The Sabbath day, which represents rest, is merely the shadow of the real rest that is only found in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the reality casting the shadow, He is our rest, in fact, He tells us in **Matthew 11:28**,

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

In six days, God created the heavens and the earth – man did not do a thing, and after God finished all the work of creation – He rested. On the cross and through His resurrection, Jesus did all the work necessary for our salvation – for our re-creation if you will, and in Christ, for those who believe, we get to enter His rest. Jesus did all the work, it is finished, and we get to rest.

I want to wrap this up, and I thought it might be helpful, for the sake of context, to consider the first four Commandments together as a whole. The first four commandments focus on our relationship with God, and when Jesus linked them all together into one commandment, He said,

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

This is about our relationship with God, and in this relationship, God wants time with us – He wants us to set aside some time to stop what we are doing, to stop

advancing our own agenda, to stop building our own kingdom, and to spend time with Him – devoted to Him. In some respects, when considering our relationship, this fourth Commandant is God’s way of saying He just wants to spend time with you and me. Yes, He knows we are busy, too busy, but He gave us six days for that. He just asks that we make a date and spend time with Him. Don’t turn it into a legalistic, guilt-ridden burden – instead enjoy the blessing as it was intended.

Source Material:

Holman Old Testament Commentary, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers – Glen S. Martin

The Bible Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe

Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). Faithlife Study Bible (Ex 20:1–21). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament – Walvoord & Zuck

1 Outta 7 – The Veracity Project

Enduring Word – David Guzik