

The Fourth Commandment

Exodus 20:8-11

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This past summer during the July series I was given the assignment to teach on Seventh-Day Adventism, and that message was recorded and widely distributed on the Internet. In the process I mentioned a message I did almost fifteen years ago on the Fourth Commandment. (It was part of a series I did on the Decalogue.) And ever since, I've been getting Tweets and e-mails from people looking for that sermon on the Sabbath, so I thought it might be good to revisit that passage and get a fresh look at the fourth Commandment.

So Turn to Exodus 20. This is the first of two places in the Pentateuch where the Ten Commandments are listed (the other being Deuteronomy 5), and in both places, the fourth is the longest and most detailed of all the commandments. The shortest commandment is the eighth, just four short words in English: "**You shall not steal.**" The sixth commandment is likewise four words in English: "**You shall not murder,**" but it takes more letters to spell. In the Hebrew text, the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments are all just two words.

The Second Commandment (against making graven images) is three verses long and 91 words in the ESV. But the Fourth Commandment covers four verses and takes 98

words in the ESV. In Deuteronomy, it's 136 words over the span of four verses, but the second commandment in Deuteronomy is only 90 words spanning three verses. In the Hebrew, you have roughly the same proportional length. More words are devoted to the Fourth Commandment than to any other. So the sheer amount of space given to this commandment suggests we should pay close attention to it.

There is no end of opinion on this passage, and it remains a point of fierce controversy even among the theologians whom I most respect. At least one Baptist fellowship I am aware of split into three separate groups because they had differences of opinion about how the Fourth Commandment was to be interpreted and applied. This is a controversial passage, and let's just acknowledge that at the outset.

Here is the Commandment itself, from Exodus 20:8-11:

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 to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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.

Now, the commandment itself is not all that hard to understand. **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"** (v. 8). That sets aside a special day, a particular day, as a holy day unto the Lord. The precise day is then specified. It's the seventh day of the week (v. 10): **"The seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God."** And then a reason is given *why* it's the seventh day, rather than the first or the third or the sixth: because **"For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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."** That verse (v. 11), is a reference to Genesis 2:2-3, which says, **"On the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."**

So one day in seven was set aside as holy, and it was the *seventh* day—Saturday on our calendars—because that is when God rested from His creative work. The Israelites were to observe that day each week, setting it aside for the Lord. The rest of the Mosaic law then includes numerous specific laws that severely restricted what the Israelites were allowed to do on the Sabbath.

But the commandment itself is simple and straightforward, establishing a fixed day of rest and worship each week for all of Israel to observe.

Now, why is this commandment such a source of controversy? Because there is widespread disagreement in the church about whether it applies at all to Christians, and if so, how it is to be applied.

Opinion ranges from those who think it calls for strict observance of a seventh-day Sabbath forever, to those who don't think it applies to the church at all.

At one end of the spectrum you have the Seventh-Day Adventists, and their predecessors—a small group that arose in the 1700s, known as the Seventh-Day Baptists. In their view, this commandment sets up an eternal moral principle that imposes a strict Saturday-Sabbath observance on all people of all time. We'll call them the strict seventh-day sabbatarians.

At the other end of the spectrum, you have Christians who believe that not only the Fourth Commandment, but the entire decalogue, is irrelevant to Christians anyway, because it belongs to the Mosaic Covenant and has nothing to do with us. So they wouldn't trouble themselves about how to apply this commandment today, because they believe every aspect of the law has been abolished under the New Covenant and therefore the Ten Commandments simply don't apply to Christians. They would oppose the application of any legal principles for believers today, and therefore they are properly called antinomians. In this category are many hyper-Calvinists, most old-line Scofield-style dispensational-

ists, and some who hold to a more recent view known as New Covenant Theology.

(Now, let me say something here as a footnote, because many of these people would reject the label of antinomianism. They think it has the sound of libertinism to it, as if it signified that they promoted immorality. But I do not use that term in order to be derogatory. *Antinomianism* is the proper theological term for the view that the Ten Commandments are not binding on Christians. Look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary or any theological dictionary if you don't believe me. I'm using the term in its technical sense. If you believe the Ten Commandments have no application whatsoever to the Christian, you are against the law in a theological sense, and the name for that kind of theology is antinomianism.)

Now, between those two extremes, there is still quite a wide variety of opinions. The typical Reformed view, spelled out in most of the classic Protestant creeds of the 17th century, is that the Christian Sabbath has been changed from the seventh day of the week to the first. Here's what the Baptist Confession of 1689 says about the question:

[God] hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy unto him, which from the beginning of the World to the Resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week which is

called the Lords day; and is to be continued to the end of the World, as the Christian Sabbath; the observation of the last day of the week being abolished.

And many of those who hold to that view want to impose most of the Old Testament restrictions against work and travel on Christians, merely moving the Sabbath to Sunday. That was the classic Puritan view, and it is still the view of most who would call themselves "Reformed" today. We'll call that view Christian sabbatarianism.

In recent years, as more and more people have returned to confessional Reformed theology, this type of Puritan Sabbatarianism has been growing in popularity. There is a revival of the kind of sabbatarianism that was enforced by the Puritans. Some people think if you hold to Calvinism at all, you *must* embrace this kind of sabbatarianism. So this has become a hotly-debated issue in the very theological circles some of us travel in.

There is one other classic Reformed view on the Sabbath, and it happens to be where my own sympathies lie. So for those of you who have been eager to hear what position I would take, this is it. This was the view of Calvin and most of the early continental Reformers: There is an eternal moral principle contained in the Fourth Commandment, and that is why it is part of the decalogue. But there is also a ceremonial aspect of this law that was abolished under the New Covenant. And the specific Old Testament Sabbath

restrictions pertain to the ceremonial ordinances that were abrogated by Christ.

Here's what Calvin had to say about the Fourth Commandment: He wrote, "with the seventh day of rest the Lord wished to give to the people of Israel an *image* of *spiritual* rest." And, "As to [this] reason, there is no doubt that it ceased in Christ; because he is the truth by the presence of which all images vanish."

"Hence," Calvin said, "superstitious observance of days must remain far from Christians. . . . As the truth therefore was given to the Jews under a figure, so to us on the contrary truth is shown without shadows in order, first of all, that we meditate all our life on a perpetual Sabbath from our works so that the Lord may operate in us by his spirit."

So, Calvin said, the weekly Sabbath observance was ceremonial. The Sabbath day pictures a reality that prefigured Christ and was fulfilled by Him. He offers the perfect Sabbath rest. The Old Testament Sabbath observances merely foreshadowed something that was made clear in Christ. And when you have the substance of the real thing, there's no need to hang onto mere shadows and symbols of that thing.

Let me illustrate: When I went to Asia for a couple of weeks last year, I took a picture of Darlene with me. It was something I could take out and look at to remind me of her.

And I took out that picture every day and counted down the days until I could see her for real.

But when I came home and saw her after two weeks of being away, I didn't pull out that picture and kiss it. I kissed *her*. On the way home in the car, I didn't pull out that picture and look at it; I looked at *her*. It would be folly, and an insult to her, if I gave my attention to a mere symbol of her, when I had the real thing right there beside me.

The apostle Paul said that's how we should regard all the ceremonial elements of the Old Testament law. The priesthood, the sacrifices, the ceremonies, and the rituals—all these were symbols that prefigured Christ in various ways. And when you have the real thing, it is a sin to go back to observing something that was merely symbolic.

The animal sacrifices, for example, were object lessons that pictured the atoning work of Christ. Now that His atoning work is finished, it would be wrong to observe the symbols. The passover, and all the other Jewish holidays, also pictured various aspects of the work of Christ. Now that the full light of divine revelation has shown us the realities that were only symbolized by those things, we do not need to maintain the symbols.

And the apostle Paul expressly includes the weekly Sabbaths among those types and symbols that have passed away. Turn for a moment to Colossians 2. In verses 13-14, Paul talks about the finished work of Christ and how it has

liberated us from our sin and from the condemnation of the law. Verses 14-15 say, "**by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.**" In other words, He freed us from all the ordinances that condemned us and utterly defeated the forces of evil. All of that is done. His redemptive work is finished. There's nothing left to be foreshadowed by any kind of types or symbols. And therefore in verse 16, he says,

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.

17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Now, the typical sabbatarian will look at that passage and say, "But that has nothing to do with the *weekly* Sabbaths. That refers to certain feast days, and perhaps the sabbatical years, and the year of jubilee."

But, no, Paul uses a clear progression here in order to make his meaning absolutely clear: "**Let no man therefore judge you . . . in respect of an holyday.**" That refers to the annual feasts of the Jewish Calendar. "**Or of the new moon.**" Those were *monthly* celebrations. "**Or of the Sabbath days.**" That can be none other than the *weekly* Sabbaths. We are under no more obligation to observe the ceremonial

requirements of the weekly Sabbaths than we are to follow the dietary laws of Old Testament Judaism, circumcision, the priestly ceremonies, or any other ceremonial aspect of the law. Those things were merely pictures that illustrated Christ and His redemptive work. And now that we have the real thing, we don't need to be fixated on the pictures.

Now, let me say this: all Reformed theologians—even the ones who argue for strict observance of Sunday as the Sabbath—must ultimately acknowledge that there is a ceremonial aspect to the Old Testament Sabbath.

You'll remember from our study of the Ten Commandments several years ago that the decalogue is a simple summary of the *moral* law. But even though this commandment falls here in the middle of this outline of the law's moral precepts, it nonetheless deals with a ceremonial and symbolic observance. And even the strictest Reformed Sabbatarian ultimately must concede that point, because the commandment itself spells out *which* day is to be regarded as the Sabbath, and it's Saturday. But not one Reformed creed or theologian of any stature has ever argued that this commandment should be observed without any change in form from how Moses delivered it on Sinai. (The only ones who argue that way are the Seventh-day Adventists and a few Seventh-day Baptists. And they are in clear violation of the principle set forth in Colossians 2:16.)

So ultimately, Protestant theologians have never disagreed on whether this commandment has a ceremonial aspect.

Where they disagree is on the question of whether Sunday is given to us as a Christian Sabbath, and if so, how is that Sabbath to be observed? Those questions have prompted no end of debate, and to cover every aspect of that debate would take several weeks.

So what I want to do this morning is give you five principles to keep in mind about the Sabbath, to help you think through the question of how we as Christians should regard the Sabbath—apart from the ceremonial ordinances that governed how the Old Testament Israelites were commanded to observe it.

And at the end, I will show you that there is an eternally-binding moral lesson in this law. In fact, there are *several* moral principles we ought to draw from this commandment. And the moral aspects of this commandment are applicable to us as Christians today. I hope this will help you see how this law fits in the decalogue and why it is there as part of God's eternal moral law.

Principle number 1:

1. THE SABBATH LOOKED BACK TO CREATION.

The first inkling of the Sabbath appears in Genesis 2, where we read this description of the seventh day of the week of creation (Genesis 2:2-3):

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.

3 So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

There is no mention of the word *Sabbath* anywhere in Scripture until Exodus 16, when manna began to come down to feed the Israelites in the wilderness. There's no suggestion here in Genesis that God imposed Sabbath observance on Adam. In fact, he didn't, and he couldn't have, because Adam was less than a day old and had no works to rest from.

Furthermore, if Adam had obeyed God in the garden and abstained from eating the forbidden fruit, his life was designed to be a perpetual Sabbath rest, living in the garden and enjoying the presence of God, with a daily existence that was free from any kind of exhausting labor.

But the Sabbath was instituted after the fall, after the flood, and after the Israelites left Egypt. It was a gracious gift to the Old Testament Israelites that enabled them to experience one day each week a small taste of what life in Eden was supposed to be. So keep this in mind: The Sabbath was supposed to be a sample of what humanity forfeited in Eden—but it was not instituted as an ordinance until the time of Moses.

Around the time of Christ, legalistic Pharisees made the Sabbath law the focus of rigid enforcement, and they turned the Sabbath into a drudgery, but it was originally intended to be a nothing more than a day of rest and pure refreshment for God's people—a gracious gift from God. In Isaiah 58:13, God pleads with Israel to "**call the Sabbath a delight,**" and to seek pleasure in what pleases God, to honor the Lord's rest, and enter into that rest, instead of seeking pleasures of their own.

So the Sabbath day was a commemoration of day 7 of creation week, when God rested, and hallowed the day. Now again, there is nothing anywhere in the Old Testament that suggests God demanded His people to observe the Sabbath before the time of Moses. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that Abraham or any of the patriarchs ever observed the Sabbath.

This is one of the questions about the Sabbath that is hotly debated: Was the Sabbath a creation ordinance, or was this a commandment that was initiated at Sinai? And you will find that most theologians have inferred from Scripture that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance, because the reason for observing the Sabbath was to commemorate God's own rest at creation.

(Two notable exceptions are John Bunyan and John Gill, both of whom pointed out that nothing anywhere in Scripture suggests that anyone prior to Moses' time was ever commanded to observe the Sabbath, and no one prior to

Moses' time is ever said to have rested on the Sabbath. Bunyan pointed out, "In all the Scriptures we do not read that the breach of a [weekly] Sabbath was charged upon [any man from Adam to Moses]." John Gill said, "None but the Jews were ever charged with the breach of the [weekly] Sabbath.")

And this goes to the question of whether the Sabbath commandment is moral or merely ceremonial. If it wasn't given as a commandment to humans until Moses' time, it *must* be mainly ceremonial, because if the commands and restrictions associated with Old Testament Sabbath observance were purely moral principles, they would have been eternally binding on all people at all times, like the commandments against murder and adultery.

Again, I think the proper biblical view is that there are both moral and ceremonial aspects to the fourth commandment. The ceremonial aspect, which calls for observance of the seventh-day in particular, could not have been a creation ordinance, because if it were, it would never have been subject to change. Saturday Sabbaths would be eternally binding.

But at the same time, it is important to see that whatever eternal moral principle is found in this law *is* eternally binding, and therefore must have been engraved on the heart of Adam from creation. So that aspect of this law was indeed a binding ordinance from the time of creation. My own

conviction is that in its broadest form, there is a moral aspect to this law that *was indeed* a creation ordinance, binding on all men of all time. But the specifics regarding the seventh day, and all the rules about traveling and building fires on the Sabbath—the external features of Old Testament Sabbath observance—those things are purely ceremonial and not eternally binding on believers. (Precisely which aspects of this commandment pertain to the eternal moral law, we will take up in my final point, but for now, let me just say that it mainly involves the necessity of resting from our works, and the necessity of seeking our rest in the Lord.)

But as far as worshiping on the *seventh day* is concerned, no such ordinance is either given or implied in Scripture, and there is no example of a seventh-day Sabbath anywhere in the Old Testament until the time of Moses.

Nevertheless, this commandment, when given to Moses at Sinai, looked back at creation, and its whole rationale was drawn from the example of God Himself, who rested from His works on the seventh day. That's precisely what Exodus 20:11 says, "**For in six days the LORD made heaven and 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.**"

So that is principle number 1: The Sabbath looked back to creation. Now, here is principle number 2:

2. THE SABBATH LOOKED FORWARD TO REDEMPTION.

This is a major point according to the writer of Hebrews. Turn for a moment to Hebrews 4. Notice verses 4-5:

For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works."

5 And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest."

Notice the point he is making. The Sabbath pointed backward to creation and the example of God's rest. But it also looked forward toward a future rest, which the people had not yet entered into. And they could not enter that rest if they remained in rebellion against God. Disobedience would keep them out—and the Bible uses a word for *disobedience* that speaks of obstinate disbelief—defiance against God. Verse 6: **"Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, 'Today.'"**

Now what kind of rest do people not enter into because they harden their hearts against God? This is talking about the rest that comes with redemption. And what is the appointed day? **"Today."** The day of grace. That's *every* day until the Lord returns.

The writer of Hebrews is relying on some familiar typology here. He is quoting Psalm 95:11, which recounts

how God forbid an entire rebellious generation of Israelites from entering into the promised land. And Canaan itself was a picture of paradise and redemption for God's people. So the writer of Hebrews applies Psalm 95:11 this way: he sees it as a graphic lesson about ultimate redemption. He says it's talking about something more than the Israelites entering literal Canaan. He says there is *another* rest, a greater rest—an *eternal* heavenly rest—yet to come. And that is what the Sabbath pictures.

Look at verse 7: **"Again he appoints a certain day, 'Today,' saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'" Now, that is also a quotation from Psalm 95 (vv. 7-9): "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work." And the writer of Hebrews points out that David wrote that psalm many years *after* Joshua's time, when the people finally did enter Canaan, and yet David was speaking of a still-future rest. Hebrews 4, verses 8-9: **"For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God."****

And here is his point: The Sabbath points forward to a yet-future rest. It is the rest of redemption. It is the rest of

salvation by grace through faith. Verses 10-11: **"for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."**

So the typology of the Sabbath was a lesson about redemption and how we enters into it. Redemption is not obtained by working, but by entering into the Lord's rest through repentant faith.

This, by the way, is why Jesus was so incensed at the corruption of the Sabbath by the Pharisees. They had made the Sabbath into a drudgery that was all about rigid laws and stern punishments. It was never supposed to be that. It was supposed to be a refreshing rest from labor, signifying the way of salvation. That is why Jesus said in Mark 2:27-28, **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."** He is Lord of the Sabbath because He is the Lord of our redemption.

So the Sabbath wasn't just a backward-looking ordinance. It was a forward-looking object lesson about the way of redemption. And that brings us to principle number 3:

3. THE SABBATH HAS REFERENCE TO GOD'S REST.

The Sabbath was a reminder that God rested, and it graciously invited the people of God to enter into His rest.

Now, the nature of this rest is extremely significant. Remember, it signified *God's* rest. That means it wasn't the

rest of exhaustion. It wasn't a rest that signified weariness. God didn't rest because He needed the refreshment. He rested because His work was finished. Therefore, the rest pictured by the Sabbath is not a rest made necessary by fatigue; it is a rest that celebrates a finished work.

In other words, the Sabbath signified entering into *God's* rest with Him. He was graciously sharing with His people the rest of His finished work. And that is why the forward-looking aspect of the Sabbath is so central to the meaning of the Sabbath. The eschatological rest of redemption, like the historic rest of creation, signifies the finished work of God Himself. The Israelites were not to think that they were earning their own rest by working the other six days of the week. *Their* earthly work was never complete. And yet God graciously gave them one day each week to rest and celebrate His finished work.

This is absolutely central to the meaning of the Sabbath. It was a token of divine grace. It pictured the rest we obtain through salvation—it is not a rest we earn by our own works; it is a rest that is graciously given to us through Christ, who has done *all* the saving work on our behalf.

In other words, the purpose of this law was theological, not utilitarian. It was given because it teaches us something about God, not because it is useful to us. It reminds us of the eternal Sabbath rest that is entered into by those who cease from their labors and find their salvation in Christ alone.

That is what it prefigured, and that is why as Christians we regard the *form* of Israel's Sabbath observance as predominantly ceremonial. We who have entered into the true rest purchased for us by Christ don't need to retreat to the shadows of holy days, or new moons, or Sabbath days. Those things **"are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."**

Principle number 4:

4. THE SABBATH OBSERVANCES HAD A UNIQUE SIGNIFICANCE TO NATIONAL ISRAEL.

The Sabbath commandment is found here in the Ten Commandments for a particular reason. It was the formal sign of the Mosaic covenant.

Every divine covenant came with a sign that sealed the covenant. When God made a covenant with Noah, he gave the sign of the rainbow. Genesis 9:12-13: **"And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'"**

When God made a covenant with Abraham, circumcision was the sign. Genesis 17:11: **"You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."**

And in precisely the same way, when God made a covenant with the people of Israel through Moses, the Sabbath was the sign of that covenant. Look at Exodus 31.

And the LORD said to Moses,

13 "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.

14 You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

15 Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.

16 Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever.

17 It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."

Notice, now, that this sign had special significance for the Israelite nation. Nothing in Scripture ever suggests that God demanded seventh-day Sabbath observance from any other nation.

So, someone might ask again, why does this commandment appear in the decalogue, which is a compendium of moral laws that God requires of all people of all times?

The reason is found in the form of the covenant itself. When covenants were made between kings in the time of Moses, it was common to incorporate a sign into the treaty that would seal the covenant. The *sign* had special significance. If you made a covenant with a king and broke any other part of the covenant, you could find forgiveness, and the covenant remained intact. But if you abandoned the *sign* of the covenant, it signified that you had forsaken the covenant altogether, and the covenant as a whole was deemed irreparably broken.

The structure of the decalogue is exactly like those kingly treaties. In fact, Exodus 34:28 refers to the Ten Commandments as "**the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.**" If you are still in Exodus 31, look at verse 18, the verse immediately after I stopped reading: "**And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.**"

What was on those stone tablets? the Ten Commandments. And those two tablets of stone were the formal covenant document. And therefore they had to include the sign of the covenant. They represented the whole

covenant in shorthand form. And as a written form of the covenant, they had particular significance to national Israel, with whom the covenant was made. Yes, they summarized God's moral law for all people of all time, but as a written record of the covenant, they had special significance for Israel. And the covenant sign was therefore prominently featured in this document that represented the whole covenant. The Fourth Commandment was the sign of the covenant.

Now, other, more specific laws pertaining to the Sabbath spelled out precisely how Israel was to observe the covenant sign. And virtually all of these commandments were ceremonial in nature. For example, the Jewish Sabbath observance required a special offering. Numbers 28:9-10: **"On the Sabbath day, two male lambs a year old without blemish, and two tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, and its drink offering: this is the burnt offering of every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering."** That is clearly ceremonial in nature and is not observed even by the most rigid sabbatarian today.

Other specific laws forbid the Israelites to travel, kindle fires, or bake bread or boil water. They couldn't gather sticks, do their housework, or do any work of any kind. And those were all symbolic ordinances that signified their utter separation unto the Lord and their seclusion from the rest of the nations.

But those restrictions pertained to covenant Israel only, and they were never enforced by God on any other people either before Moses or after the appearance of Christ. They were ceremonial in nature, and the proof that they were ceremonial is found in God's own words through the prophet Isaiah, when God tells Israel that He despises their Sabbath-keeping. Isaiah 1:13: **"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly."** And in Hosea 2:11, God says, **"I will put an end to all her mirth, her feasts, her new moons, her Sabbaths, and all her appointed feasts."** Those Sabbath restrictions were merely ceremonies, and the hypocrisy of the Israelites had made the Sabbath observance itself an abomination to God.

So the Old Testament Sabbath restrictions were very clearly part of the ceremonial law. And as such, they were abolished when Christ fulfilled the ceremonial meaning of Moses' law.

That is why nothing in the New Testament ever commands Christians to observe the Sabbath or obey any of the Old Testament restrictions related to the Sabbath. When the Jerusalem Council met in Acts 15 to consider which aspects of the law pertained to the Gentiles, no mention was made of the Sabbath. That would be remarkable if any ceremonial observance of the Sabbath was supposed to be required of Christians. Furthermore, nowhere in the New

Testament are we ever warned that any breach of the Sabbath was a sin, and nowhere are we ever commanded to observe a certain day.

As a matter of fact, in Romans 14 the apostle Paul portrayed the weaker brother as the person who observes holy days, and the stronger brother is the one who esteems every day alike (Romans 14:5). Paul regarded it is a matter of utter indifference whether we observed any holidays or not. And as I have already pointed out, in Colossians 2, he taught that we should let no man judge us in the matter of Sabbath observance. So there are no ceremonial restrictions against Sabbath activities for Christians like those that were binding on an Old Testament Israelite.

And that brings us to our final principle:

5. THE SABBATH IS FULL OF MORAL SIGNIFICANCE.

Please don't get the idea that I am saying the Sabbath is utterly devoid of any moral principle that is still binding on us today. I'm not suggesting that the Ten Commandments have been reduced to nine. But I am suggesting that we as Christians need to understand this law apart from the ceremonial trappings of the Mosaic covenant. To reinstate the ceremonial Sabbath laws is as wrong as going back under any of the priestly, dietary, or ritualistic principles of the Old Covenant.

But there *is* a moral aspect to the Fourth Commandment. To quote Turretin, it is a mixed commandment, moral as to its *substance*, ceremonial as to its *circumstance*.

So what are the moral principles that underlie this commandment?

This is a unique commandment. To quote Calvin once more, "Since this commandment has a particular consideration distinct from the others, it requires a slightly different order of exposition." We must take care to separate that which is moral from that which is ceremonial. Without reconstituting the ceremonial aspects of this law, we must be careful to affirm that which is still morally binding in it.

Let me suggest several moral principles that we need to draw from the Fourth Commandment. Calvin himself named three. This is from Calvin's catechism, the Genevan Catechism:

What then? Is there anything in [the Fourth Commandment] beyond ceremony? [Answer:] It was given for three reasons. . . . 1) To figure [or give us a picture of] spiritual rest; 2) for the preservation of ecclesiastical polity [in other words, to give the people of God a day each week on which to come together]; and 3) for the relief of slaves [or as Calvin wrote elsewhere, ["to give a day of rest to servants and those who are under the authority of others, in order that they might have some respite from their toil"]].

As I said at the beginning, many Christians believe that Sunday—or the Lord's day, as it is commonly referred to in Scripture and in the early church's writings—is the "Christian Sabbath." They believe when Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week, God thereby changed the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first.

I won't spend a great deal of time answering that, except to say that the whole idea is sheer conjecture. Nothing in Scripture ever refers to Sunday as the Sabbath. In fact, throughout the book of Acts, the seventh day was still referred to as the Sabbath. I don't see any biblical warrant for treating Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. Neither did Calvin, by the way. Nowhere did he ever refer to the Lord's day as the Sabbath or suggest that it should be regarded as such. That was an innovation by the later Reformers. And the Puritans, especially, wrote it into most of their creeds. But it was not the view of the earlier Reformers. I love the Puritans and I don't often voice disagreement with them, but they did sometimes have some legalistic tendencies, and their tendency to multiply Sabbath restrictions was one of them.

Still, I think there is a moral principle in the Fourth Commandment that warrants setting aside a day each week for ceasing from our labors and worshiping the Lord. And we accomplish this when we devote the Lord's day to Him.

There may also be a moral principle in the six-to-one/work-to rest ratio. God has made us so that we function best with a day off work each week.

And conversely, one of the moral principles underlying the fourth commandment is the principle of *work*: "**Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work.**" Christians ought to work hard when it is time to work, and rest in the Lord when it is time to rest.

So the *reason* for the Sabbath is a moral principle—a full day each week devoted to the Lord. The *ratio* is a moral principle—one day of rest for every six days of work. And above all, I believe the *rest* commanded by the Sabbath contains a moral principle.

Now listen closely, because I believe this is the most important principle of all. Here's the rest-principle that lies at the heart of the Sabbath law: It is in worship that we are to find our primary refreshment.

What do you do when you seek refreshment for your soul? Do you turn first of all to television and worldly entertainments? Do you seek your rest principally in recreational activities and spiritually empty amusements? Those things have their rightful place, but it is certainly not the prominent place our society has given them. If you can do them as unto the Lord and glorify the Lord in them, that is fine. I'm not suggesting that you should never watch football—or even *play* football—on the Lord's day.

But that is not the first thing you should turn to in order to refresh your soul from the toil and labor of the work week. The Lord should have that priority—and not just on Sunday, but every day of your life. You need the *spiritual* refreshment of communion and fellowship with Him more than you need the carnal refreshment of exercise and recreation. You need the rest of worship and fellowship with the people of God more than you need the mindless entertainments this world has to offer.

It always troubles me when someone tells me he skipped church because he felt he just needed some time off. Time off from *what*? If you don't see worship and devotion to the Lord as more restful than any earthly form of entertainment, then you have the wrong idea of worship. If you're not coming to church with the idea of refreshing your soul and invigorating your spirit, then you're coming with the wrong thing in mind.

Psalm 37:7 says, "**Rest in the LORD.**" In Matthew 11:28-29, Jesus said, "**Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.**"

That is the best rest of all. That is what the Sabbath speaks of. And I would urge you to seek your ultimate rest right there, in the finished work of Christ. It is a complete rest

from all your labors, from the weariness of sin, and from all the trials of this life.

That is the true Sabbath.