

Sermon 68, What Is Required in the Fourth Commandment, Exodus 20:8-11

Proposition: The fourth commandment requires remembering and guarding one out of every seven days as a holy time made holy by God and kept holy by our resting from our daily work.

- I. What the Sabbath Is: Pause Day, v. 10
 - A. A Day of Rest, vv. 9-10
 - B. A Day of Making Holy, vv. 8, 11
 - C. A Day Made Holy by Resting, v. 10
 - D. A Day Made Holy by Blessing, v. 11
- II. How to Pause on the Sabbath, v. 8 with Deut. 5:12
 - A. Remember, v. 8
 1. Remember Creation, v. 8
 2. Remember Redemption, Deut. 5:15
 - B. Guard, Deut. 5:12
 1. From the Encroachments of Work, Ex. 20:10
 2. From the Encroachments of Unholiness, Ex. 20:8
- III. When to Keep the Sabbath, vv. 9-10
 - A. This Commandment Does Not Specify a Particular Day of the week
 - B. This Commandment Demands One of Every Seven Days
 - C. The NT Church Kept Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, John 19, Acts 20, Rev. 1

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this fourth commandment is the subject of many misconceptions and downright absurd practices and beliefs. As we will talk about next week, probably none of the commandments has been so troubled by errors in both directions, errors of excess and errors of defect. Most of the commandments are broken primarily in defect, as people serve other gods or fail to do enough to preserve life, chastity, and property. But this commandment, though it is indeed frequently broken by defect, is also often broken by excessive, exaggerated attempts to keep it. The solution to both excess and defect is to understand what the commandment is saying, and what it's not saying. The solution, in other words, is to go back to the text and understand it rightly. In brief, we will see that this commandment requires us to give one full day out of every seven to God, and that it tells us to do that by resting from work and making the day holy. Again, people get all stuck on the question of what exactly that looks like, far more than they do with any of the other commandments. I honestly don't know why, though. If the Covid pandemic has taught us anything, it is that there are a multitude of opinions out there on how best to preserve life. If the great communist vs. capitalist battle called the Cold War taught us anything, it is that there are

various opinions on how to preserve property. But somehow, when it comes to the Sabbath day, instead of the civil government picking a particular line on how best to keep this moral imperative and fighting with other countries about it, particular Christians take a particular line and fight with other Christians about it. The fact is that the commandment tells us to give God one whole day out of seven, and to hallow that day by resting. It does not specify further details. And in this, it is just like the sixth commandment, that tells us to preserve life but does not tell us any more about how exactly to do that. It does not contain instructions on diet and exercise, on pollution control and bike path design. Nor does the fourth commandment tell us every detail of resting on the Sabbath. So Christian, stop looking for that in these words; instead, get busy with holy resting!

I. What the Sabbath Is: Pause Day, v. 10

The first thing to recognize is the meaning of the word “sabbath.” In my English courses, I often ask the students what they think “sabbath” means, and the most common response is “seventh.” That is not the case at all, my friends. “Sabbath” means “pause,” or “stop,” or “cease.” Instead of being transliterated into English as “Sabbath,” it should have been translated as “pause day.” As I have told you all many times, for God to make a day that He calls “Sabbath day” is for Him to say to us all, “Stop! Stop running around like chickens with your heads cut off. End the frenetic busyness. Just stop. Pause, for a whole day, and let all of the events go.”

That, my friends, is the meaning of the word “Sabbath.” It is a day to put all of our worldly business, including both employment and recreation, on pause. We cease from our daily work on this day of ceasing.

A. A Day of Rest, vv. 9-10

So the first thing to see about the Sabbath is that it is a day of rest. To say that, of course, can be misleading, because the phrase “day of rest” never actually appears in the Bible, in the King James or NIV. Indeed, I much prefer the translation “pause day,” because to say “day of rest” implies that our highest duty on this day is resting. But that is not quite accurate.

B. A Day of Making Holy, vv. 8, 11

In reality, the Sabbath day is a day of two different but complementary goals. The first goal is not rest, but holiness. It is a holy day, a day which God made holy. And the first portion of the commandment charges us to remember the sabbath day with the goal of keeping it holy. In other words, though God blessed and hallowed pause day, we in our sin have the ability to damage its holiness, to profane it.

What is holiness? Holiness is existing for God. Holiness is a statement of purpose. To call Pause Day a holy day is to say that it is a day whose purpose is to exist for God. As a holy day, it is a day set apart by God for God. The time is God’s, in a special way that other days are not, just as the Christian is holy in a special way that other human beings are not.

Thus, it is at least as accurate to call the Sabbath a day of holiness as to call it a day of rest. But neither phrase is exactly biblical.

C. A Day Made Holy by Resting, v. 10

Instead, I think, we capture the biblical emphasis best by describing the Sabbath as a day made holy by resting. Theologians and ordinary Christians have erred in two directions with this commandment by prioritizing one facet or the other. I've talked to Christians who have said that they don't need to go to church on Sundays because it's a day of rest and God requires them to stay home and rest. These people have made the day all about resting to such an extent that they have entirely omitted to keep it holy. At best, they would call the holiness part of the command a means to the greater end of resting. Meanwhile, on the other side are those who make the resting merely a means to the end of holiness. The only reason you have to rest on this day, they claim, is so that you have additional time to worship God. These folks too are in error, for the text of the commandment subordinates neither one nor the other. It does not say to rest so that you can be holy, nor to be holy so that you can rest. Instead, it says to keep the day holy and to rest. But though one of these cannot be used to trump the other, they can legitimately be collapsed together into the single statement that we keep the day holy by resting. Resting is not something opposed to holiness, nor even something merely compatible with holiness, but rather something that is itself holy.

Now, brothers and sisters, I think that you may find that a little bit mind-blowing. You keep the command to be holy by resting. Now, there is more to holiness than simply taking a day off from your daily work, but there is not less to holiness than that. If you would be holy, if you want to show that you exist for God, then suspend your everyday work on the sabbath day. Pause. Stop. Take a break. And then do it again next Sunday, and the Sunday after that, and so on. God says that is holiness. Notice, if you would, that the commandment says "Keep the day holy" and then spells it out entirely in terms of cessation, pausing, stopping one's work and the work of all those under one's charge. Indeed, this command is the most household- and city-oriented of them all, even surpassing the tenth commandment in this regard.

Notice that the fourth commandment speaks of the members of your household, including your children and your servants and animals. But it then goes on to speak of the stranger in your gates. It's not homes that have gates, except for the very largest and richest estates. It's cities that have gates, and this command is addressed not only to householders but to magistrates. And what does God say? You can sanctify yourself, your household, your whole city, by shutting down everyday work for a whole day out of every seven days.

Did you know that holiness is related to doing your work, and to stopping your work? The command explicitly says to do both. Holiness looks like a pattern of six on, one off. It doesn't look like a pattern of five on, four off. It doesn't look like a pattern of three on, two off. It looks like a pattern of six on, one off.

D. A Day Made Holy by Blessing, v. 11

Why? Well, there are three major reasons given. As we'll see in a moment, Deuteronomy speaks of redemption, Exodus of creation. But the third reason, also given here in Exodus, is that God made Pause Day holy. He did not make a particular day of the week holy, as we'll talk about in a moment. He made Pause Day holy. He blessed it, and the thing He blessed it with was holiness. Sometimes God blesses us with money. Sometimes He blesses with some other skill or talent.

Sometimes He blesses us with rain, or peace, or other goods. But the Sabbath Day He blessed with holiness, by transforming it into a day set apart for Himself. The New Testament captures this nuance of the day by referring to it “The Day Belonging to the Lord” rather than “Pause Day.” But again, the reason we pause is because the day belongs to the Lord. Because it’s His day, it doesn’t belong to our daily work. It belongs to Him, for it is holy. And we keep it holy by not doing our everyday work on it.

II. How to Pause on the Sabbath, v. 8 with Deut. 5:12

Let me press that a little more. It’s a day that God has blessed with holiness. Surely we can all agree on that; the text says it explicitly, both here and in Genesis 2. How, though, do we learn to pause on pause day so that we can keep it holy to the Lord? Moses boils it down to two key words that sum up our duties with respect to this commandment.

A. Remember, v. 8

The word that he uses here in Exodus is “remember.” This commandment, more than all the rest, is the one most likely to be forgotten. The others are written in our hearts, baked into the structure of the world. This one is a positive law, something enacted by God at His pleasure. And thus we are more likely to forget it than to remember it.

1. Remember Creation, v. 8

Here in Exodus, we are called to remember creation. Moses brings forward the six-days’ work in which God made the heavens and the earth, and all that in them is, and uses that six-days’ work to motivate us to remember the holiness of the sabbath day. Creation is the first major work of God; in it, as Augustine said, He gave us ourselves.

2. Remember Redemption, Deut. 5:15

But the motivation assigned the commandment in Moses’ retelling of the law in Deuteronomy is that we need to remember redemption. Slaves are not allowed a day off; their master determines when, indeed if, they will get any time away from their daily work. But because God has crushed the tyranny of Pharaoh and become our Master, He sovereignly decrees that we get every seventh day off. And don’t let any earthly tyrant tell you otherwise! If Pharaoh is drowned in the Red Sea, why should some human boss today be allowed to tell you “Your schedule will not be six on, one off, but something entirely different, something determined by me rather than by Yahweh. Who is Yahweh, that I should obey His voice? I do not know Yahweh, neither will I let you have one day out of every seven entirely off so you can serve Him”? Brothers and sisters, if your boss speaks to you the way Pharaoh spoke to Moses, it is not the part of a free Christian man to say “Oh, I guess I will submit to this tyranny because I really need this job.” It is the part of a free Christian to say “I really don’t care whether you know Yahweh or not. He’s my master, and He says I get one full day off out of every seven, and if you say otherwise you can take it up with Him.”

Do you remember redemption? Or do you forget it? Do you remember that God is now your master, and He now tells you whether you get a day off? Or do you forget that and say “My boss gets to decide whether I get a day off”?

Remember. Remember creation, when God blessed the Sabbath day by making it holy. Remember redemption, when God said that the tyrants and bosses of this earth no longer get to set your schedule; instead, He does and He has permanently set it to be like His — six on, one off.

B. Guard, Deut. 5:12

But you don't just have to remember that God made Pause Day holy. You have to guard the day, protect it. As you all know, Satan works harder against this commandment than against any of the rest. There are events, activities, and opportunities galore that violate this command, that take you away from rest and away from holiness. And you have to be on guard against them and prevent them from taking over the day.

Now, that said, I want to emphasize that God draws an exact parallel between the days of work and this day of rest. If you go to the office and spend a solid eight hours doing what your boss requires of you, then you can fairly say that you spent the day at work. That doesn't mean you worked for twenty-four solid hours. It means that the primary activity to which the day was given over was the activity of work. In the same way, the requirement of this command is to make rest and holiness the primary activity to which Pause Day is given over. You don't have to quibble about whether you spent every waking hour, much less every waking moment; the point is rather whether you devoted the day to rest and holiness in such a way that you could fairly say that they were what you spent the day on.

Now, here's the thing: Rest and holiness won't just happen. A lot of things will crowd in every single week to try to prevent them from happening. The commandment tells you to make it your mission to prevent those things, however good in themselves, from crowding out rest and holiness.

1. From the Encroachments of Work, Ex. 20:10

So be sure, in the first place, that you guard the day from the encroachments of work. Don't plan to drop by the office on this day. Don't plan to just spend a few minutes over your email. Don't make time to go out and get the work truck ready for Monday morning. Rather, push all of that out of your mind.

What about mothers and those who work primarily in the home? The command is clear for you too. As much as possible, you are called to suspend your daily work. In our house, that means we don't do laundry on pause day. We just take a break from laundry. With more preparation, you can even take a break from most cooking and cleaning. You can definitely take a break from grocery shopping, window cleaning, and other larger projects that only come up occasionally rather than being daily things that simply happen whenever you try to keep a home going. Now, obviously you can't take a day with no child care if you have little ones. But you can make it a day where they don't have appointments, where they don't have projects, and where they don't have school.

Brothers and sisters, you are required to guard this day. Your day job may be the thing that calls you. Or it may be home improvement or yard improvement or car improvement. But though the commandment does not give us specifics, it most certainly tells us that we keep the

day holy by resting from our everyday business. I believe that includes the tasks of keeping and running the household as well as the tasks for which you get paid money. But other theologians disagree with me. I know a lot of single people who take Sunday afternoon and evening to cook all their food for the coming week. In my opinion, that is a major failure to guard this day from the encroachments of daily work.

2. From the Encroachments of Unholiness, Ex. 20:8

But even worse, of course, is to fail to guard the day from the encroachments of unholiness. Any activity that is not done for the sake of God, anything that does not contribute to living for God, is an activity that is unholy. Again, in other words, holiness is a statement of purpose. It's not so much about what you're doing, so long as you are keeping these Ten Commandments, as it is about why. What is the point? What is the purpose? An activity that is not directed toward holiness is an activity that is not appropriate for Pause Day. Many perfectly legitimate activities, such as organized sports and concerts, are not about holiness. They may be about other goods, perfectly good goods like fun, entertainment, relaxation, and art. But Pause Day is a day separated from those goods for the greatest good of all — the day of communion with God. The Christian who does not have time for evangelism, for prayer with his family, for teaching his children the Bible, and more, is a Christian who is not guarding the Sabbath day from encroachment.

Those of us who, like me, set our own work schedule are quite familiar with the need to guard. If I say "Well, none of my work actually has to be done today," and I proceed to spend the morning taking the kids to the park, then the afternoon cleaning the house and the evening going to Spearfish to do a little shopping, soon the day is gone and I haven't done a single minute of the work the church is paying me to do.

As a somewhat self-directed employee, it is my job to guard my time so that it is not encroached on during the six days by all kinds of goods. No one would say that it's evil to take the kids to the park, that it's evil to go to Spearfish, that it's evil to clean the house. The error arises from the reality that I am supposed to be doing the work that you are paying me to do.

And in the same way, God treats you, Christian, as an adult, with children, servants, and animals in your household. He is not saying that sports are evil, or that concerts are evil, or that your day job is evil. But when they keep you from remembering creation and redemption, and from guarding the rest and holiness of Pause Day, they become errors. They become activities that are unfitting whenever they are done on the Sabbath.

III. When to Keep the Sabbath, vv. 9-10

Well, this sermon would not be complete without addressing the question that is doubtless in everyone's mind: When, exactly, are we required to keep the Sabbath?

A. This Commandment Does Not Specify a Particular Day of the week

The first thing I want to pound into your head is something that, if you're like me, you never noticed before. I owe this insight to James Durham, a Scottish Puritan whose sermons on the Ten Commandments are excellent. I had simply assumed my whole life that the fourth commandment clearly states that Saturday, the seventh day of the week, is the Sabbath day on which we are

required to pause, to be holy by resting. But the commandment never says that! I want you to read it with me like this.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

10 But the seventh day **of the week** is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

11 For in six days **of the week** the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the **seventh day of the week**, and hallowed it. (Exo 20:8-11 KJV)

Now, this should have been obvious to me all these years, but it wasn't. The command doesn't actually say that the sabbath is the seventh day of the week, just that it is the seventh day after six days of work. Now, we know that Israel kept the seventh day of the week as the sabbath day. But the commandment does not address days of the week. It is not a clear statement in favor of the holiness of Saturday. Yes, admittedly God blessed the day we call Saturday and hallowed it after the creation of the world.

B. This Commandment Demands One of Every Seven Days

But this commandment no more says to work Sunday-Friday than it says to keep Saturday holy. It doesn't say God blessed the seventh day of the week as such, as the seventh day of the week. In the OT, yes, the Sabbath Day was on the seventh day, but not out of any necessity. God rested the seventh day, therefore He blessed, not the seventh day as such, but the Sabbath day as such. To read the phrase "day of the week" into the passage is to read into it something that's not there.

The commandment, then, is not a command to observe Saturday. It is a command to observe the Sabbath. I'm not saying that there was a difference between those two things in Moses' mind; but there was certainly a difference in God's mind. The pattern of six on, one off could have started on any day. The important thing is the pattern.

C. The NT Church Kept Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, John 19, Acts 20, Rev. 1

So what about us? Where does that leave us? The moral part of the fourth commandment, indeed, all that is in the explicit text of the fourth commandment, is that God demands one out of every seven days for Himself. Which day of the seven does He demand, if any? The answer lies in the New Testament repeatedly bringing up the first day of the week. Why does the NT do that over and over and over if it is not actually important? And finally, at the end of the NT, why does John actually call the first day of the week "The Day belonging to the Lord", using an adjective elsewhere used only to designate "the Supper belonging to the Lord"? The answer is not "Well, they just randomly happened to meet on the first day, and the NT writers, who tell us so few details, just always randomly mentioned it for no reason." No. The reason they met on the first day, and the reason the NT writers mention it, is to show by the example of the apostles and of Christ Himself that the day we are now called to sanctify by resting, in the six on, one off

pattern, is the first day of the week. The pattern endures. The commandment endures. The NT day is the first day of the week, the day we call Sunday.

How is the fourth commandment related to Sunday? It tells us about the cosmic six on, one off pattern. It demands that we remember and guard this pattern, and that we implement it in our daily lives. The apostles' practice shows us that the pattern is now to be implemented with Sunday as the day off and the other six as the workdays.

Brothers and sisters, remember to pause. Guard that whole day of pausing. And you will be holy. That's what God announced from the top of Sinai. Amen.