

# Sermon 69, What Is Forbidden in the Fourth Commandment, Exodus 20:8-11, Matthew 12:1-13

**Proposition:** The fourth commandment forbids the defective keeping of the Sabbath day and the excessive keeping of the Sabbath day.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we spoke last week about what the fourth commandment requires. We saw that it requires a six on, one off pattern of work and rest. It does not specify a particular day of the week as the one day off, but the church has observed Sunday as the day off in light of the example of Jesus and the apostles which is consistently reported in the Gospels, Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Revelation. But though guarding and remembering the day is indeed required, what is forbidden on this day? The answer is simple: failure to keep the day holy by resting is what is forbidden. Immediately that brings up questions: What counts as resting? What counts as holy? How much work is allowed? How much isn't? What kind of work? The Talmud addresses all of those questions in detail; the Bible doesn't. Rather, it simply shows us that the keeping of the Sabbath day is subject, more than any of the other commandments, to error in both directions. You will rarely find someone who errs on the side of being too chaste, or too careful about idolatry. It's a little easier to imagine someone too solicitous about property, or too careful about coveting (such a person would shut down his spirited part entirely and live without desire, thus quickly perishing). But by far, more than the other commandments, this one attracts the legalistic spirit that errs in excess. We are going to simply look at the Biblical data here. What I want to emphasize from the outset is that all hard-and-fast rules and definitions go beyond what Scripture says, just as they do for the other commandments. If I say that in order to keep the eighth commandment you must measure property boundaries to the nearest millionth of a meter, I am going beyond Scripture. I am erring in excess. If I say that to keep the sixth, you must adopt my exact diet and exercise regimen,

again I am erring in excess. So don't let me or anyone else tell you "The way I keep the Sabbath is the only way." Only one person can tell you that, and His name is Jesus Christ. The Bible is much simpler, and leaves far more room for your conscience and mine. All it says is to avoid daily work and keep the day holy. And further, it says that to take those statements as though they forbade works of necessity, piety, and mercy is to err in excess, to go beyond what the Almighty requires. So keep the Sabbath, and don't err in defect or in excess either.

### **I. Errors of Defect, Exodus 20:8-11**

The errors of defect lie in not doing enough to keep this commandment. The errors of defect are two major ones — profaning the sabbath by working on it, and neglecting your six-days work by failing to do it.

#### **A. Profaning the Sabbath Day by Working on It**

Let's start with the first. The commandment clearly says that you are to keep holy the Sabbath by refraining from your daily work.

##### **1. You**

First and foremost, this applies to you. And it applies to your work. Now, there are various callings in this world. If you are an adult, you are likely called as a student, a full-time employee, a homemaker, or some combination of the three. Of course, if you are a child you may be called primarily to be growing and learning, and your primary calling is the play, the relationships, and the studies that prepare you to be a successful and responsible adult. If you are retired from full-time work, your calling is to use your freedom well for the kingdom of God. That can include spending time developing relationships, whether with your siblings, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, etc.; or volunteering for various tasks and causes within the church and community; or engaging in artistic creativity. Investing in your marriage by taking trips together, etc. is also a major element of the Christian's calling in retirement.

And if you are too old for much activity, you are called to rest, to live, and to pray. Even when you can't speak, you can pray; even when you can't move, you can love. No matter your age and outward calling, Christian, you are called to exercise faith, hope, and love.

This commandment is primarily applicable to those who have a calling that could fairly be described as daily work. The daily work of the very young and the very old is simply to be, to love, to grow in relationships and learning. Those are themselves, I believe, restful and holy activities not to be shirked just because it's the Sabbath. Indeed, it looks to me like God has given a period of Sabbath rest to you at the beginning of your life and again at the end. It's in the middle, with the responsibilities of adulthood in their full flower, that this command is most relevant.

So if you are a child or a senior with minimal responsibilities, no need to worry about how to identify your daily work and how you're going to rest from it. Instead, this is a day on which to pursue holiness with redoubled vigor and joy. But for those of us who are responsible adults and younger seniors who still own homes and cars and go into town, etc., with all the cares and activities and work that that implies, this command clearly tells us first and foremost to

pause that daily round of work. Cease. Stop. Take the day off. That's not a suggestion; that's an order.

## **2. Your Household**

But the command explicitly applies not only to you, Christian, but to the members of your household as led by you. The other commandments do not specifically say to prevent your children from coveting, or to keep your animals from theft of your neighbor's forage. But this commandment applies not just to you, Joe Israelite, but also to your family. Also, it does not say to keep your wife from doing any work. Why not? Not because wives are supposed to keep working on the Sabbath day, but because the wife is every bit as much a householder as the husband. Though the tenth commandment is clearly addressed to men in the first instance, with its command not to covet your neighbor's wife, the fourth commandment is addressed to men and women alike. It doesn't matter your sex or marital status; you may not covet. Neither may you work on the Sabbath day, or allow your household to work on the Sabbath day.

Parents, this means that you need to instruct your children about doing homework on Sunday. If their ordinary calling is to be a student, then study is the work from which God calls them to rest on one day out of seven. If you, parents, have a broad schedule of chores for your kids, you need to slash that schedule to the bone on Sundays. Some household work will still have to be done. But the commandment is specifically telling you, as the parent, to release your children from as much of their daily work as possible on this day. In our home, for instance, the oldest children (six-year-olds) empty the dishwasher and set the table every morning — every morning but Sunday. Your children likely have other chores and responsibilities, and some things can't be postponed. You have to feed the dog every day. But the ordinary responsibilities you assign your children need, as much as possible, to be tamed on this day.

## **3. Your Employees**

I know we are diving deeper into controversial waters as I continue here, but my conscience forces me to speak. If you can show me from Scripture that this fourth commandment is irrelevant to Christians, I will cease to preach it. But until you do, I will keep preaching it. As Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley ask, if Christ was going to abolish the day in a few months, or a few years at most, why on earth did He spend so much time correcting the Pharisees' excessive observation of it? Why did He announce "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" as though it were important when actually, He could have just said "The Sabbath is going away. I won't be Lord of it much longer"? We'll see in a few moments how He addressed and corrected the errors of excess. But we are still talking about the errors of defect. And one of the major ones here lies in the terms "your manservant and your maidservant." The text is obviously referring to domestic laborers. Few of us employ domestic laborers, because machines are far cheaper than people's time in our very weird society. We have vacuum cleaners and washing machines instead of maids. But here's what the commandment is saying: Your domestic staff gets the day off on Sunday, period. They are on for six days. But the seventh they get off. Again, that's not a suggestion. It's an order from God Almighty.

Does this apply only to domestic help? Do outside workers, people who work for you outside the context of your home, also get this day off? Absolutely. That is the only fair way to read this commandment, and of course that is the way that nearly everyone serious about keeping it has read it throughout history.

What does this mean? It means that it is a sin to make restaurant employees work for you. Don't go out to dinner on Sunday. Don't take your car in for new tires. Don't do any shopping of any kind, because to do any of those things is to hire other people to work on God's Day. You are preventing them from hallowing the day by resting. And if you say "Well, they would be breaking the Sabbath anyway so what difference does it make?" the answer is this: You're paying them to break the Sabbath. Maybe they would do it anyway; that does not make it right for you to subsidize, pay for, and encourage that sin. If I say "Internet pornography is out there whether I look at it or not, so my looking at it makes no difference," I am committing the same kind of mental error. If there was no demand, there would be no supply. That's pretty simple. But even if there is always going to be demand and supply, you keep your rear end out of it. That is what this commandment says.

In saying this, I know that I am in a tiny minority in my own church. But as we saw last week, there is no reason to say that this command passed away. The Jewish ceremonial version of keeping it did indeed pass away along with all the other ceremonies, just as the Jewish ceremonial version of keeping the second commandment with all the Levitical ceremonies has passed away. But the permanent moral core of the commandment remains — and indeed, the text of the commandment itself does not mention anything ceremonial. The demand of God for one day out of seven on which you rest, don't work, don't let your household and employees work, stands today as it stood in 1446 B.C. when Moses and the Israelites heard these words from the voice of God Himself.

#### **4. Your City**

But of all the commandments, this one applies not just to people working for you (it never says "Don't hire someone who's cheating on his wife," or "Never pay money to a liar") — it applies to the whole city. It applies to the Israelite household and the stranger alike. Notice that God describes this stranger as being "within your gates." Now, yes, if you own a large enough estate, you may have a gate out front. The only member of this church who has a gated entrance to his property is my buddy in Texas; the rest of us are content with driveways that touch the street with no gate. In other words, generally it's not a private home that has a gate. It's a city; indeed, in the OT the word translated "gates" here never applies to a home, but always to a city.

The whole city is supposed to be keeping this command, right down to the immigrants within its walls. This is why the church has taught for many centuries that Christian magistrates ought to pass laws forbidding work on Sunday, and the first known such law was decreed by the Emperor Constantine in 321 A.D. Many Christian magistrates have followed him since. And of course, such laws persisted in the United States, which was definitely a sabbatarian republic, to a time within living memory. They linger still in a few states where it's illegal to sell liquor or cars on Sunday. But brothers and sisters, they should linger everywhere.

Have you ever noticed that the New York Stock Exchange is only open during quite reasonable hours? Trading goes on from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, and stock traders get all holidays off. Why do I mention this? Just to say that rich people have made darn sure to get their evenings and weekends free. They don't work just any day of the week, no matter what. Oh no. But does the state offer that same protection to poor people? If you're working poor, do you have confidence that you will always get a regular day off, the same day every week, no matter what? Of course you don't. Many jobs still only give the schedule a week in advance, making it almost impossible for you to plan anything social or family-related in advance. It's horrific. And it comes from neglecting the command of God requiring us to hallow a seventh day each week by resting.

So don't work on this day for yourself. Make your household stop working on this day too. Don't you dare hire someone else to work on this day. By the way, I'll just mention here that you can ask any server in any restaurant what the worst shift of the week is, and they will tell you Sunday lunch and that all the church people deluging the restaurant and leaving paltry tips really makes for a bad day. Why is that? I submit that it's because all of those Christians are disobeying the command of Jesus Christ and thus no wonder they leave a bad taste in the mouths of the people who serve them! Don't be that Christian. Don't.

### **B. Neglecting Your Six-Days' Work**

But the other error of defect lies not so much in how you act on the seventh day, the day off, as in how you comport yourself on the six days, the days on. God says to do in each week all the work that you have that week. Labor six days and do all your work. This doesn't just refer, as we have seen, to your paid work. It refers to the other things you have to do, like mowing the lawn, maintaining your home and cars and yard, processing your bills, keeping your house clean, food on the table, and so on. The idea is emphatically not to do paid work on six days and maintain the household on the seventh. Rather, God is saying to do all your weekly tasks in the six days so that you have the seventh free to sanctify by abstaining from work.

Now, honestly, who doesn't want a day off? The only way to responsibly get it is by taking days on, though. My brother has unlimited paid time off at his accounting firm. But he also has to bill a certain number of hours to clients per year, or he is fired. He can take time off, but he still has to get a certain amount of taxes filed. You are required by God to have a day off each week, and to take it and use it. Why are God's people so stubborn about this? It drives me bonkers, honestly it does. On this commandment, more than any of the others, the people of God that I know are so hard-hearted. You would think that God was trying to take away their meals, or their cars. But all He's trying to do is give them a day off! Is that so bad? What is it about you people that insists on working on Sunday, on hiring others to work on Sunday, and on telling me that you're just not convinced by the Biblical witness? Even if you're not convinced, you really want to work seven days per week and not have time to spend with God and one another? It blows my mind. I can understand the desire for visual images of God. I can see how they became so prominent in the church. But I honestly don't get why we have such a bad attitude about the Sabbath.

Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end,  
5 saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath,  
that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great  
and deal deceitfully with false balances,  
6 that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the  
chaff of the wheat?"  
7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their  
deeds. (Amo 8:4-7 ESV)

Brothers and sisters, those who are desperate for the Sabbath to end so they can get back to work are the same people who have no idea how to treat others fairly and no idea how to rest in God. Don't be those people. Don't err by defect in your keeping of the Sabbath day.

## **II. Errors of Excess, Matthew 12:1-13**

But at the same time, don't you dare err in excess either! The Pharisees of Jesus' day had created hundreds of absurdly detailed rules, defining work, travel, and leisure within an inch of their life. No, scratch that. They defined the life completely out of these things. They kept the Sabbath excessively, and in so doing broke it.

Now, hear this! The fact that keeping the Sabbath excessively is possible, is a great sin, and may be the most common sin against the Sabbath in certain Christian circles, is no argument that therefore the Sabbath no longer applies to us. That's the error of rushing to the opposite extreme, otherwise known as throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Yes, many people overdo the Sabbath. I have had a member of this church, one who prides himself on his reasoning, present that to me as though it were an argument against the validity of the Sabbath. It's not. The abuse does not take away the use. That man is probably an advocate of gun control, or would be if the Amish used them to murder people.

That said, don't abuse the Sabbath by erring in excess in your keeping of it. Historically, how did the Pharisees err in excessive Sabbath keeping?

### **A. Forbidding Works of Necessity, Matthew 12:1-5**

We see in this passage in Matthew a number of statements Jesus made to the Pharisees that together clear up the main trouble spots. The first thing the Pharisees reacted to was the disciples pulling some grain off the stalks while they were walking by, and then eating those heads of grain.

Now, as everyone knows, raw seeds straight out of the field are not particularly nutritious. That is better food for animals than for humans. Regardless, the Pharisees were mad not because they thought it would be unhealthy for the disciples' digestion, but because they thought it was contrary to the law of God. They specifically state that grabbing a little grain while you walk by is unlawful on the Sabbath.

Now, how does Jesus respond to this? He responds by citing the factor of human necessity. If people are hungry, they need to eat. That is true when it comes to holy food, like the showbread that sat in the presence of God in the tabernacle. And it's true when it comes to holy time, like the Sabbath day. As we have said, the Sabbath is a day for hallowing by not working.

The disciples were not making the day unholy by picking and eating the grain, any more than David was making the bread unholy by eating it and sharing it with his troops. As you'll recall, the priest in that instance said that the men needed to be holy. They at least had to not have lain with a woman the night before. David assures him that they are ritually clean and therefore able to eat the holy bread without danger.

God, in other words, says works of necessity are not violations of the Sabbath day. Of course, none of the disciples was a farmer, so far as we know. Harvesting grain was not their daily work. Nor were they approaching this in an organized way, as though it was their daily work. They were just eating when hungry, not actively setting out to harvest the field. Getting food on the Sabbath is a necessity, and something God does not now forbid and never has forbidden.

### **B. Forbidding Works of Piety, Matthew 12:5**

A second error of excess when it comes to keeping the Sabbath is next addressed by Jesus when He tells the Pharisees that the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and do not do any wrong when they do so. The priest had twice as many sacrifices to perform on the Sabbath as on an ordinary day. A priest not only has to do his daily work on God's day — he has to do *twice as much work* on God's day as he does on the other days of the week.

But that's not wrong. Why not? Because the sort of daily work covered by the commandment was never intended to include works of piety. The work required to worship God, such as driving to church, preaching a sermon, killing a sheep, may be your daily work. But it is not something that you are to abstain from on the Sabbath day. Indeed, to abstain from it would be a great sin. Why? Because Jesus said so — and also because the point of the day is just as much holiness as it is abstention from work. Works of holiness, therefore, properly belong in the day. Whatever you can do to be holy, even if it is hard work and your daily work that pays the bills, is still part of what you should be doing on Pause Day.

### **C. Forbidding Works of Mercy, Matthew 12:11-13**

Finally, Jesus addresses one more misinterpretation of the law by the Pharisees. They refused to allow healings on the Sabbath, claiming once more that healing was work and therefore improper for anyone wanting to keep the fourth commandment. Jesus slaughtered that idea by arguing that anyone with any compassion at all would remove a sheep from a pit on the Sabbath day. Yes, taking care of your animals is your daily work. But having mercy on an animal that's injured or stuck is clearly part of the calling of the human being at all times. Resting from works of mercy is as much a sin as refusing to perform the work necessary to worship God rightly. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Now, yes, presumably your daily work creates good in this world. Jesus is not saying "There is actually no such thing as the Sabbath." He is saying that works of mercy that are not properly part of your daily work, or that present themselves to you as an emergency-type situation, are still lawful. This is why occupations like law enforcement and medicine require Sunday work. Even if it is your daily work to pick up homeless people on the street, or to intubate those who can't breathe and remove the appendices of those who are in danger of having them explode, it's still a work of mercy to do it. Now, scheduling on Sunday

surgeries that could be done at another time? Opening court on Sunday to have a quick trial? Those things are not deeds of mercy that have to be done on the Lord's Day. You ought to pause from your daily work rather than creating extra work for yourself and others.

So don't err by keeping the Sabbath defectively and failing to stop your ordinary work. Nor should you err by keeping the Sabbath excessively and forbidding works of necessity, mercy, and piety as the Pharisees did. Both errors are wrong, and both are common in the church. But the true God-fearers, those who see Jesus as the one who perfectly showed us the Father's mind on this matter, keep the Sabbath rightly by pursuing holiness through abstention from work. May that be true of you, by the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, why keep the Sabbath? Because God rested in order to show you that you too can be holy and you too can take a day off, one day out of every seven. Do you want to be like him? Then keep His day. Amen.