

The Christian Life (9): The Fourth Commandment

Having addressed the object of worship (1st), the matter of worship (2nd), and the manner of worship (3rd), the fourth commandment addresses the timing of worship. "This command respects the time of worship, and is the last of the first table, set to join both together, the Sabbath being the bond of all religion" (Boston).¹

I. The Fourth Commandment

1. *The perpetuity of the Sabbath.* "It is sufficiently clear, that it is the mind of God, that one day of the week should be devoted to rest, and to religious exercise, throughout all ages and nations; and not only among the ancient Israelites, till Christ came, but even in these gospel times, and among all nations professing Christianity" (Edwards).² "The fourth commandment stands first of all as a declaration of God's sovereignty over time and over our use of God's time" (Ray).³ As years, months, and days can be discerned from various rotations, there remains "no historical evidence for the origin of the week" (Ray).⁴ "The cycle of days that we call a 'week' exists solely because of the pattern of God's behavior at creation" (Martin).⁵ Thus, it was here in the beginning that God established His authority over our first parents. They were to structure their lives around a seven-day week. Six days were for labor and one for rest.

(1) The witness of creation. "Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made" (Gen.2:1-3). "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work...for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Ex.20:8-11). "And He said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of man is also Lord of the Sabbath'" (Mk.2:27-28). Similar to labor (Gen.2:15), marriage (Gen.2:14-15), and procreation (Gen.1:28), the weekly Sabbath is a creational ordinance. This refers to things ordained of God prior to the fall, that are to be continued after the fall. They are imbedded into the fabric of creation and are not the product of the fall or redeeming grace. Thus, had there been no fall, labor, marriage, procreation, and Sabbath-keeping would have continued in paradise. "If Adam and his posterity had continued in their first righteous estate, they should have kept that day holy above the rest, seeing the Lord sanctified it for their sakes" (Bownd).⁶

The Sabbath is a creation ordinance and does not derive its validity or its necessity or its sanction, in the first instance, from any need arising from sin, nor from any of the provisions of redemptive grace. When sin entered, the circumstances under which the Sabbath rest was to be observed were altered just as in the case of these other institutions. The forces of redemptive grace were now indispensable to their proper

¹ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:186

² Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:94

³ Bruce Ray, *Celebrating the Sabbath*, 13

⁴ Bruce Ray, *Celebrating the Sabbath*, 14

⁵ Robert Martin, *The Christian Sabbath*, 41

⁶ Nicholas Bownd, *The True Doctrine of the Sabbath*, 40

discharge. But the entrance of sin did not abrogate the Sabbath institution any more than it abrogated the institutions of labor, marriage, and fruitfulness. In a word, sin does not abrogate creation ordinances and redemption does not make unnecessary their obligation and fulfillment.⁷

Before there was an Israel or a Moses or tablets of stone at Sinai, God established the Sabbath at creation. He did the same with the ordinances of marriage and procreation and labor. We rightly assume the perpetuity of these ordinances. Should we not assume the perpetuity of the Sabbath since it rests on the same creation foundation? Marriage and procreation, labor and Sabbath are creation ordinances, meant to continue as long as the earth remains. These institutions, established in the time of man's innocency, are the undergirders laid into the foundation of all orderly human life.⁸

Having created all things in six days, God "rested on the seventh day." The word rendered "rested" is the verbal form of the Hebrew word for Sabbath (which means 'a rest'). "He rested (sabbathed) on the seventh day." Exodus 20:11, refers to the seventh day as "the Sabbath." God rested on the seventh-day Sabbath as an example for Adam (as the rest of mankind). "Man is to labor and sabbath because God labored and sabbathed" (Martin).⁹ Thus our Savior said: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." By "the man" is meant Adam. The Sabbath was made for Adam (or man) and not merely Israel. "The Sabbath came into being for the sake of man."¹⁰ The Sabbath was made for man's good or benefit. This is why God "blessed and sanctified" the first Sabbath. It uniquely belongs to God and has been given for the blessing of mankind. Furthermore, the Sabbath served as a sign to Adam of a future and more blessed state (a state he would have been confirmed in had he obeyed). "God out of His infinite goodness, by His own eternal wisdom and power, when He had made all things good, gave unto men a day of *rest*, as to express unto them His own rest, satisfaction, and complacency in the works of His hands, so to be a day of rest and composure to themselves, and a means of their entrance into and enjoyment of that rest with Himself, here and forever, which He had ordained for them" (Owen).¹¹

(2) The witness of the moral law. By "moral law" is meant the law that was in Adam in creation (as God's image), remains partially in men by nature (called natural law), codified in ten at Mount Siani, rewritten upon the heart in regeneration, and summarized by Jesus into two (love God and your neighbor). The fourth commandment is moral law as much as the other nine. God Himself spoke the TC and gave them on tablets of stone. Thus, moral law, in contrast to positive law, is never-changing and ever-binding upon all men. It's for this reason, Sabbath-keeping predated the giving of the law on Mount Siani, "For the LORD has given you the Sabbath (Ex.16:23, 25, 26, 29)." Thus, while the keeping of one day holy to God is moral, knowledge of the precise day is positive. "The fourth commandment is moral-positive as the precise day of the Sabbath be positive (seventh or first day) and the reason of the law is moral (to rest from labor and worship God corporately)" (Fisher).¹² "The law of nature teaches that men ought to worship God in an external and social manner; but does not

⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 1:206

⁸ Robert Martin, *The Christian Sabbath*, 53-54

⁹ Robert Martin, *The Christian Sabbath*, 47

¹⁰ Footnote to NASB translation.

¹¹ John Owen, *Hebrews*, 2:266

¹² James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 288-289

determine what precise part of time ought to be observed in that stated and solemn worship" (Brown).¹³ This needs to be revealed by God. "It is often objected that if the Sabbath were a moral, perpetual law, it could not be altered. Since it is altered, it cannot be moral. The reply to this is simply that the Sabbath law is both positive and natural. If the Sabbath were completely natural law, the objection would be valid, Since, however, the Sabbath is partly positive its form may be altered while its essence remains the same" (Waldron).¹⁴

That the commandment is moral and perpetual is evident from the end and causes of the commandment, which are perpetual in their character. The end or design of the commandment is the maintenance of the public worship of God in the church, or the perpetual preservation, and use of the ecclesiastical ministry. Inasmuch now as these reasons do not have respect to any particular time, but to all times and conditions of the church and world, it follows that God will always have the ministry of the church preserved and the use thereof respected, so that the moral part of this commandment binds all men from the beginning to the end of the world, to observe some Sabbath, or to devote a certain portion of their time to public worship. That the commandment has a ceremonial aspect is evident from the fact that the Sabbath, in as far as it has respect to the seventh day, was, together with other ceremonies and types, fulfilled and abolished by the coming of the Messiah.¹⁵

It's for this reason the NT expressly refers to the seventh-day Sabbath as ceremonial and thus abolished. "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Col.2:16-17). The phrase "a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" refer to the yearly, monthly, and weekly Sabbaths of the Old Covenant (2Chron.2:4; 8:12-13; 31:3; Neh.10:33; Ezek.45:17; Isa.1:13-14). These were only a shadow. New Covenant Christians are no longer obligated to keep these days (which include the seventh-day sabbath). They have all been fulfilled in Christ. Colossians 2:16-17 refers to those things that were a shadow of what was to come. That the seventh-day Sabbath had a typological aspect to it is evident from God's appeal to creation (Ex.20:8-11) and the Exodus (Deut.5:12-15). The seventh-day Sabbath pointed to a new creation and covenant. This means it pointed forward to Christ. "The seventh-day Sabbath and the Lord's Day are two similar institutions in that they embody a common moral principle. Yet, they are also two different institutions. The great difference between them is that the one was a shadow pointing forward to Christ. The other is not" (Waldron).¹⁶ Thus the seventh-day Sabbath (along with the monthly and yearly Sabbaths of the OC) was "a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb.10:1).

(3) The witness of our Savior. Our Savior constantly defended the Sabbath from the perversions of the Pharisees (Matt.12:1-12; Mk.2:23-28; Mk.3:1-6; Lk.6:1-9; Lk.13:10-17; Lk.14:1-6; Jn.5:1-15; Jn.7:10-24; Jn.9:13-16). In fact, He often healed on the Sabbath to underscore the principle, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matt.12:12). This He never did for any purely positive or ceremonial law. Only that which would last. "We often find His opinion expressed about the Jewish errors on the subject of the Sabbath. But we do not find a word to teach us that His disciples were not

¹³ John Brown, *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington*, 472

¹⁴ Sam Waldon, *The LORD'S Day*, 33

¹⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 557-558

¹⁶ Sam Waldon, *The LORD'S Day*, 103-104

to keep a Sabbath at all. Our Savior did not tear out of the decalogue the fourth commandment. He only stripped off the miserable traditions with which the Pharisees had incrustated the day, and by which they made it, not a blessing, but a burden" (Ryle).¹⁷ In short He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath (Mk.2:27-28)." Thus, our Savior used His authority to clarify the Sabbath from all Pharisaical additions and abuses. He returned it to its previous glory.

How then did Jesus use His authority as Lord of the Sabbath? The answer is simple. He denounced the rigid, heartless Sabbath doctrine of the scribes and set His disciples forever free from any letter of the law, nevertheless misses the spirit of the law. He used His authority, in other words, to restore the Sabbath to the purity that it possessed before it was buried under the rubble of man's traditions. He takes us back to the Sabbath that God established at creation, i.e., to an institution made for man to be a blessing and not a burden, a delight and joy and not dreariness and drudgery. Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, came not to abolish the Sabbath but to free it from the corruptions and traditions of men, so that all the sanctity and blessing invested in the day at creation remains for the New Covenant people of God.¹⁸

2. *The change of the Sabbath.* "From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ (the weekly Sabbath) 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 Lord's 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."¹⁹ "The words of the fourth command do not determine which day of the week we should keep as a sabbath; they merely determine that we should rest and keep as a sabbath every seventh day, or one day after every six. It says, 'Six days you shall labor and the seventh you shall rest;' which implies no more than that after six days of labor, we shall, upon the next to the sixth, rest and keep it holy" (Edwards).²⁰ The OT prepared the people of God for the day change. Next to the seventh day, the eighth day, or the first day of the week, received the most focus in the Old Covenant (Lev.12:3; 14:10, 23; 15:14, 29; 22:27; 23:36, 39; Num.6:10; 7:54; 29:35; 1Ki.8:66; Ezek.43:27). Having raised from the dead on the first day, Christ continued to meet with His disciples on the first (or eighth) day. "The same day at evening, being the first day of the week...Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (Jn.20:19). "And after eight days ('a week later' NIV) His disciples were again inside... Jesus came...and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you'" (Jn.20:26). Our Savior pronounced "peace" upon His assembly (Num.6:24).

(1) The resurrection of Christ. Christ rose again on the first day of the week, the start of a new creation. With a new creation, comes a new Sabbath. "The change to the first day is the sign that the new creation has come" (Waldron).²¹ Nowhere in the NT do we read about the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh day of the week, but eight times we read of the "first day of the week" (Matt.28:1; Mk.16:2, 9; Lk.24:1; Jn.10:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1Cor.16:2). It was at His resurrection that Christ was "declared Lord with power" (Rom.1:4). This is why John referred to this day as the Lord's Day (Rev.1:10). The first day of the week is "the Lord's Day" just as the supper is "the Lord's Supper"

¹⁷ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, 1:121-122

¹⁸ Robert Martin, *The Christian Sabbath*, 199

¹⁹ 2LBC, 22:7

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:96

²¹ Sam Waldon, *The LORD'S Day*, 27

(1Cor.11:20). These uniquely belong to Him. The first commemorates His resurrection and the second His crucifixion. "The Lord's Day is a day belonging to Jesus Christ as Lord" (Barcellos).²² Thus in the early Christian document called *The Didache*, we read, "On the Lord's own Day gather together and break bread and give thanks."²³ "The two pivotal events in the accomplishment of redemption are the death and resurrection of Christ and the two memorial ordinances of the NT institution are the Lord's supper and the Lord's day, the one memorializing Jesus' death and the other His resurrection" (Murray).²⁴

The OC had a memorial day and a memorial meal. The memorial day was the OC weekly Sabbath. It commemorated both creation (Ex.20:11) and redemption (Deut.5:15). The weekly Sabbath was God's because He instituted it by His example of resting after the work of creation and He regulated it (Gen.2:2-3; Ex.20:8-11; 31:13; Isa.58:13, 'My Sabbath...the Sabbath...My holy day...the holy day of the LORD'). So the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, is Christ's day. It is His because He instituted it at least by the act of His resurrection, which was the day He 'entered His rest' and 'also rested from His works as God did from His' (Heb.4:10). This is why the Lord's Day is termed by many as the Christian Sabbath. It is a Sabbath because it is a day of sacred rest. It is Christian because it was instituted by Christ and regulated by Him through the apostles. The Lord's Day bears the marks of Christ's lordship, reflecting His redemptive work and the inauguration of the new creation by His resurrection.²⁵

(2) The gift of the Holy Spirit. According to Leviticus 23:16, the Day of Pentecost was on the first day of the week. The OT also refers to the Day of Pentecost as the Feast of Weeks (Lev.23:15; Deut.16:9). This commemorated the end of harvest. Christ gave His Spirit on this day (Acts 2:1), to underscore the ingathering of a great harvest of sinners. A new covenant, with a new Sabbath day, will have a new people (Jew and Gentile).

(3) The example of the apostles. From the beginning the apostles gathered together on the first day of the week for worship. "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight" (Acts 20:7). "On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come" (1Cor.16:2). "The apostolic churches did see a special religious significance in the first day. It was their chosen day for corporate worship. This practice by apostolic churches implies and infers apostolic authority for the religious observance of the first day" (Waldron).²⁶

3. *The practice of the Sabbath.* The fourth commandment contains a positive command, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" and a prohibition "in it you shall do not work." Thus, there are two primary purposes of the Sabbath: rest and worship. To keep holy or sanctify means to treat something unique or as intended. "Men are said to sanctify the Sabbath when they devote it to the purpose for which God instituted it" (Ursinus).²⁷

²² Richard Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 263

²³ The Didache, 14:1

²⁴ John Murray, *Romans*, 258

²⁵ Richard Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 267

²⁶ Sam Waldon, *The LORD'S Day*, 89

²⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 558

(1) Rest. The word Sabbath literally means "to cease or rest." The Sabbath is a day of rest. This rest is physical (we are to cease from all vocational labor) and spiritual (we are to rest in Christ as our righteousness). Thus, while forbidding vocation labor, both Scripture and our confession provide three lawful exceptions: works of necessity, piety, and mercy.²⁸

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. 2 And when the Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" 3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 4 "how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? 5 "Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? 6 "Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple. 7 "But if you had known what *this* means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." 9 Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. 10 And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" – that they might accuse Him. 11 Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift *it* out? 12 "Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."²⁹

Here our Savior is clarifying the true meaning of the Sabbath from that of the scribes and Pharisees. He appeals to the OT Scripture to prove His disciples were not breaking the Sabbath. In doing so, He provides three lawful works for the Sabbath: (a) works of necessity (David and his men ate the showbread); (b) works of piety (the priest labor in the temple); (c) works of mercy (He healed on the Sabbath and expressly said it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath).

A detailed examination of all the passages in the Gospels where Christ discusses the issue of the Sabbath will show that He never predicted its absolute abolition, nor did He ever profane it. If Christ violated the Sabbath, then He sinned and would not be a suitable Savior for others. Instead, He advocated works of necessity (Matt.12:1-8; Mk.2:23-28; Lk.6:1-5), mercy (Matt.12:9-14; Mk.3:1-6; :1.4:31-41; 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn.5:8-10; 7:23; 9:13-16), and piety (Matt.12:9; Mk.6:2; Lk.4:16; 6:6; Jn.7:22-23) on the Sabbath by His teaching and example. Also, by His use of the OT, Jesus proved His treatment of the Sabbath was consistent with lawful Sabbath-keeping.³⁰

(2) Worship. Mathew Henry said, "Religion is the business of this day." As NC priests, Christians are to serve or worship God throughout this day. While this includes private and domestic worship, it primarily refers to public worship. I say this because public or corporate worship can only take place on the Sabbath whereas all other forms of worship (private and domestic) can take place on the other six days.

²⁸ 2LBC, 22:8

²⁹ Matthew 12:1-12

³⁰ Richard Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 205