



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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103 **Q.** *What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?*

**A.** First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath.

The fourth commandment is very tricky. It seems like most Christians are either oblivious of the Sabbath and treat it like Saturday interrupted by church, or they advocate a strict Sabbatarianism that tries hard to apply to Sunday the details of the law of Moses (minus the death penalty of course). Personally, I prefer the simple approach laid out in the Heidelberg Catechism: go to church on the "festive day of rest" and cease from our evil ways every day of the week. My view is somewhere between "the fourth commandment doesn't apply anymore" and "Sunday is the new Sabbath day." This position has the advantage of being middle of the road, which, of course, has the disadvantage of upsetting people on both sides of the road. But, in 2000 words or fewer, here's my take on the Sabbath.

Genesis 2:3 says that "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his works that he had done in creation." While it is true that there is no mention here of a Sabbath day of rest and worship for man (only God's rest is mentioned), I think there are still good reasons for seeing the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. (1) God *made* the day holy, implying that it is set apart from some special use. (2) The fourth commandment says "*Remember* the Sabbath" (Ex. 20:8), suggesting that Moses' injunction is rooted in an earlier prescription. (3) Jesus argued that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). His language seems to harken back to creation and the original design for the Sabbath, not just to the establishment of the Sabbath at a later date at Sinai.

Under Moses, the Sabbath principle was central to Israel's identity as God's chosen people. The last command given to Moses before he came down from Mt. Sinai instructed the people to "keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you" (Ex. 31:14). Resting on Saturday was a clear sign of the national covenant with Israel. Under the Mosaic dispensation, the Sabbath was not viewed as a creation ordinance for all humanity, but as a sign of the covenant between God and his people. The Sabbath was a holy day, set apart. To profane or desecrate the Sabbath was to treat it like every other day (cf. Numbers 15:32-36). As a sign of the covenant, Sabbath-keeping brought blessing for God's people and Sabbath-breaking brought cursing. The Mosaic Sabbath, then, is not identical to the creation Sabbath, but was added to it much as the law was added to the promise but did not annul it (Gal. 3:17).

Although the day involved numerous regulations and punishments, at the heart of Sabbath-keeping was worship and rest. The Sabbath was "a day of sacred assembly" (Lev. 23:3) where God's people were set free from their normal labors that they might be free to worship God. The issue was one of trust. The Sabbath reminded Israel of God's sufficiency and supply. The first command given to Israel as a nation prescribed Sabbath keeping. God prohibited the people from gathering manna on the seventh day because God promised to provide twice as much on the day before (Exodus 16). The Sabbath forced God's people to stop their labors, so that they could rest in God's work. Resting one day in seven brought God glory because then he could prove that he was the one responsible for their sanctification, their sustenance, and their salvation (Ezekiel 20:11-12). In short, Sabbath-keeping was a weekly reminder that the Lord was God and they were not.

In the Gospels we see Jesus emphasizing the spiritual significance of the Sabbath. While Jesus certainly kept all of the Mosaic Sabbath commands, he did not hesitate to break the traditions and customs (*Halakah*) of the Jews. He was less concerned about strict Sabbatarianism and more concerned to get to the heart of the Sabbath. For Jesus, the Sabbath was a day of freedom (see Luke 13:10-17 where Jesus "freed" a woman from her disability) and a day for healing (see Luke 14:1-6 where Jesus healed the man suffering from dropsy). The Sabbath was a day for doing good (see Mark 3:1-6 where Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand). Jesus reminded the people of the two principles at the very heart of the Sabbath: the Sabbath was made for man and Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28).

So where does this quick trip through the Bible from creation to Moses to Jesus leave us? There's no simple answer to this question. On the one hand, as we move through the rest of the New Testament, there seems to be increasing discontinuity between the fourth commandment and what God requires of new covenant Christians. Romans 14:5 says each person should be fully convinced in his own mind whether one day is better than another. This hardly sounds like the kind of Sabbath-keeping enjoined upon the Israelites under Moses. More to the point, Colossians 2:17 argues that the Sabbath, along

with questions of food and drink and festivals, is “a shadow of the things to come”, whose substance is found in Christ. With texts like these, I don’t think there is any escaping the conclusion that we are no longer bound to observe the Jewish Sabbath. Even Martin Luther once quipped, “If anywhere the day is made holy for the mere day’s sake—if anywhere anyone sets up its observance on a Jewish foundation, then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to dance on it, to feast on it, to do anything that shall remove this encroachment on Christian liberty.”

On the other hand (you knew there was going to be another hand), there also appears to be continuity between certain principles of the Sabbath and early Christian practice. Most importantly, the first day of the week seems to have quickly taken on special significance as a memorial of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2). Before the close of the first century John is already using the unique term “Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10, *kuriakh hmera*), which, judging by later writers, was almost certainly a reference to Sunday. Furthermore, Jesus’ resurrection is said to have taken place on the first day of the week, or literally, “on the one of the Sabbath” (John 20:1; Luke 24:1; Mark 16:2, *th de mia tw n sabbatwn*). The Gospel writers use “one” instead of the grammatically appropriate “first.” The implication seems to be that there is a conscience reckoning of resurrection Sunday as the Sabbath plus one (rather than just the first day of the week). We have a new creation on the first day of Easter week. The old Sabbath is gone. A new Lord’s Day has arrived.

Clear as mud, right? Well, here’s where I come down. By my reckoning, the ceremonial aspect of the Sabbath has been abolished. It has been fulfilled in Christ. The Mosaic covenant was meant to reinforce the creation principle that we must rest from our labors and trust in God. That principle is what we find fulfilled in Christ. Jesus showed us the true meaning of the Sabbath; namely, that we should not rely on ourselves, but trust in God as our provider, sustainer, deliverer, and savior. Therefore, I conclude that the binding nature of Sabbath observance has been eliminated.

Having said that, I believe certain principles of Sabbath rest remain and seem to have been quickly appropriated on the Lord’s Day. Surprisingly, Calvin and his heirs were not strict Sabbatarians like the Westminster divines and the Puritans later would be. In commenting on the fourth commandment, Calvin writes, “But, since this commandment has a particular consideration distinct from the others, it requires a slightly different order of exposition. The early fathers customarily called this commandment a foreshadowing because it contains the outward keeping of a day which, upon Christ’s coming, was abolished with the other figures. This they say truly, but they touch upon only half the matter. Hence, we must go deeper in our exposition, and ponder three conditions in which, it seems to me, the keeping of this commandment consists.” I agree with Calvin (shocking I know), in both his assessment of the Sabbath’s abrogation and his explanation of its abiding principles. Calvin argued that the Lord’s Day was (1) still a day to gather from worship, and (2) a day to rest from our labors and give rest to others. (3) Most importantly, he argued, Christians obey the fourth commandment by finding their spiritual rest in Christ.

In summary then: *The first Sabbath principle is that it is fitting for one day in seven to be appointed a day set aside for worship.* The Sabbath was the Jewish day for worship (Lev. 23:3). In the New Testament, we see that synagogue worship was a regular part of the Jewish Sabbath (Luke 4:16; Acts 13:42-44; 15:21; 17:2; 18:4). After the resurrection, the day for corporate worship for Christians slides from Saturday to Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2). Although the Mosaic Sabbath had been abolished in Christ’s fulfillment of it, the first Christians did not hesitate to see a new day as being, if not a holy day, then a first among equals. This day was called the Lord’s Day (Rev. 1:10) because it was the day our Lord Jesus Christ triumphed over death and the devil. So they began, where possible, to set aside Sunday as a day specifically for acts of worship.

*The second principle is that we trust in Christ enough to rest one day in seven.* I don’t think we can be very exact about what this means for every Christian everywhere. But I think we see in creation an abiding principle that God made us with the need for rest. Keeping a “Sabbath” not only expresses our trust in God’s care, it is also good for us. We all need a day of “get to” not “have to.” After all, the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. So while I believe the legal requirements of the Sabbath have been fulfilled in Christ, I see it as wise that we would set aside a day to cease from our labors - if possible, making the Lord’s Day a day of worship and rest.

Resting one day out of seven is a weekly bulletin declaring that God can meet all our needs. It tells to others and ourselves: “God is in control. We depend on him”. I like what Ben Patterson says, “What do we lose when we lose the Sabbath? We lose grace.” We should be careful not to judge each other on the observance of days (Rom. 14:5-6). And yet, if God has wired his creatures to rest, we are only hurting ourselves by working like beavers 24/7.

*Of the three Sabbath principles that remain, the most explicit and most important is this: cease from your works and rest in Christ.* We see in Hebrew 4 that God has always offered his people rest - at creation, in the wilderness, in Joshua’s day, under David, and still today. There “remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God from his” (Heb. 4:9-10). Our chief rest is not to turn off the lawnmower on Sunday (though I always do) but to cease from our flawed, sinful works and rest in Christ (Matt. 11:28). So yes, we still need to obey the fourth commandment (Matt. 5:17). But we need to see how Jesus transforms it. He gives us the substance instead of the shadow. The point of the Mosaic Sabbath shadows was to manifest trust. Now the substance is here as we trust solely in Christ for our salvation. Sabbath rest is about making Jesus Christ the center of who we are. It means ceasing to find approval and righteousness in our deeds. It means we stop doubting God’s promises and start trusting that spiritual vitality is found only by resting in him. Keeping the Sabbath means we give up on ourselves and give ourselves over to God, letting the Lord work in us through his Spirit, “and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath” (Q/A 103).

~ written by Kevin DeYoung