



The Ten Commandments

(14) Why We are Still Required to Keep the Fourth Commandment

(1) A Creation Ordinance

Genesis 2:1-3

Exodus 20:8-11

Colossians 2:16-17

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This morning we are going to start a study of the Fourth Commandment – “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” God has set apart one day in seven as a holy day. Everyone is expected to keep this day as a day set apart for rest and worship. One of the Ten Commandments that summarize the will of God for human life is that we are to observe a weekly day set apart for him. I’m going to be preaching a number of sermons on this commandment because there is lots to talk about. It deals with rest and work and time and worship and it is a controversial command, so we will have to deal with that as well. In fact, that is where we will begin.

I want to begin with the whole issue of whether the Fourth Commandment still applies today. We already know that it does. We know that because we are a confessional church and our Confessions say that it does. We are a church that is based on the Bible as interpreted by the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. That means that our confession as a church is that the Fourth Commandment applies as much to us as it did to ancient Israel. To quote the Westminster Shorter Catechism in answer 59, “From the beginning of the world until the resurrection of Christ, God established the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath. From that time until the end of the world the first day of the week is the Christian Sabbath.” That is what we confess to believe as a church.

We will approach the question of whether the Fourth Commandment still applies today from that perspective. This is what it means to be a confessional church. As confessional Christians, we do not approach a subject like this from a neutral position and see where our investigations take us. That work has already been done. We do not approach the Bible as if we are the first people to do so. We approach the Bible thankfully acknowledging that the Church has studied it for two thousand years and we take that study into account.

But not only that, we stand in the Reformation tradition and the forefathers in our tradition have studied the matter in great detail and have come to a consensus on what the Bible teaches on this question and have included a summary of their agreement in these documents which since that time have functioned as Confessions in our churches. These Confessions have been studied and reaffirmed in every generation of our tradition since, including our own. This is who we are. We are people who belong to a church which affirms an historic interpretation of the biblical teaching on the question of whether or not the Fourth Commandment still applies today.

So, we do not approach this question from a neutral position, seeing where our studies lead us. We already have the conclusion. We know the answer before we begin. It is there in our Confessions. Our task is to understand more completely why the confessional position is the correct position. The ultimate authority is the Bible itself. But we do not approach the Bible from a neutral perspective. We approach it consciously and thankfully as a church that affirms the Westminster Standards as accurate and faithful summaries of the teaching of God's word.

Now the reason I want to start with the issue of whether the Fourth Command still applies to us today is that I want this to be clear in our minds as we go back and explore what the Fourth Commandment is all about. When we look at aspects of the Old Testament teaching, we will do so having been reminded that the Lord's Day today stands in continuity with the Fourth Commandment as it is given in the Old Testament.

Another reason that I do this is because our confessional position on the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath is a minority position among evangelicals today. There are many good and solid theologians who take a different position, namely that the Fourth Commandment is no longer binding on the Church today. Many of us read their books or listen to their lectures or sermons with great appreciation and benefit.

But that also means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the teaching of our Confessions on this matter. Many Reformed people no longer have strong convictions about the binding nature of the Fourth Commandment for New Testament Christians. Too many good Christian people around us think differently. That has had and is having an influence on many Reformed Christians. But the confessional position is important and valuable and as we will see the correct interpretation of Scripture. It is clearly not the only way to interpret the biblical evidence, but there are good and solid reasons to believe that God intended to teach that the Sabbath was not just a temporary ceremonial part of the worship of ancient Israel, but rather a part of the moral law of God, binding upon all people, from the beginning to the end of the world.

Now as is the case with all positions on controversial issues there are certain texts that are challenging for our position. If there were no texts like that there would be no controversy. These texts are the reason that the other side takes the view that it does. Today we are going to begin with a text that is most challenging for the position that the Lord's Day is the Christian Sabbath. Colossians 2:16-17: "¹⁶Therefore 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. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

This verse teaches that a Sabbath is a shadow of the things to come. This verse is often interpreted to teach that the Fourth Commandment is a shadow of the things to come which is not what it says.

The phrase, "shadow of the things to come" is New Testament language to refer to aspects of Old Testament teaching that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ and are therefore no longer binding on the New Testament church. In many areas, this is not controversial. The Old Testament had

laws concerning clean and unclean animals. Israel was allowed to eat certain animals. Others she was not. That is why orthodox Jews today do not eat pork. Christians do eat pork without a qualm because we believe that, with the inauguration of the New Covenant in Christ, those Old Testament food laws are no longer binding upon us. They served a purpose in the period between the giving of the law and the coming of Christ, but that purpose has been fulfilled and so we freely enjoy our pork chops confident that we are not breaking any laws, unless, of course, we eat too many of them, but that is another matter.

So, Paul, in Colossians 2:16-17, includes “a Sabbath” in his list of things that “are a shadow of things to come” and he says that no one is allowed to pass judgment on you as far as a Sabbath is concerned. It is because of this text and a few others like it that most Christians today feel that the Old Testament law commanding Israel to keep the Sabbath day holy, has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and that therefore, in Christ, we are free from Sabbath keeping. Most people who hold to this position think that Sunday is a good day to worship and most non-Sabbatarian churches hold worship services on Sunday, but they do not think that that has anything to do with the Fourth Commandment. They do it because Sunday is the Lord’s Day, that is, the day that our Lord Jesus rose from the dead and not because they see any connection between the Lord’s Day and the Fourth Commandment. They don’t.

But we do. And the question is why. Why do we think that we must keep the Sabbath day holy when Paul in Colossians 2:16-17 tells us that we are not to pass judgment on people “in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath”? We do pass judgment on people who do not keep the Lord’s Day as a holy day. We say that they are sinning against God. We say that they are breaking the Fourth Commandment. That is what we are required to do as Christians and as office bearers in the Church. We apply the law of God to people’s lives. We make judgments about what is sin on the basis of the law of God. And so, the question is, are we ignoring Paul’s teaching here by making judgements concerning people’s lives on the basis of the Fourth Commandment? Are we ignoring what Paul is teaching when he says, “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”?

Well neither we, nor the tradition of which we are thankful recipients, are in the habit of ignoring any passage of Scripture. The same Confession that tells us that the Fourth Commandment still applies to us today, tells us that “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. Therefore, when there is a question about the true and full meaning of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), that meaning must be searched out and ascertained by other places that speak more clearly.”

So, we do not ignore what Paul says in Colossians 2:16-17, but we do interpret it differently than many other Christians do because of this principle of interpreting Scripture with Scripture. You see, when we look at what the whole Bible says about the Fourth Commandment and its application, we approach this verse with all of that in mind, and we think that probably those who use this verse to teach that the Fourth Commandment is no longer binding upon us today are wrong in their interpretation of it. It is the conviction of those who uphold the Westminster Confession and Catechisms that Colossians 2:16-17 does not teach that the Fourth Commandment does not apply today. It teaches something else.

Why do we say that? We will look at three reasons. This morning we will look at one of them. I want to take my time with this issue because it is very important, in our context, that we understand thoroughly why the Westminster Standards take the position that they do on the continuing application of the Fourth Commandment. The first reason we believe that Colossians 2:16-17 does not teach the cancellation of the Fourth Commandment is the biblical teaching that the law of the seventh day of the week as a holy day was built into the creation by God at the beginning of the world. In the language of theology, we say that the idea that the seventh day is a holy day is a creation ordinance.

Now we believe that with the resurrection of Christ, the holy day has been changed to the first day of the week rather than the seventh day, but we will get to that later.

The point here is that the idea that one day of the seven is a holy day is built into the structure of creation and that therefore it was not intended to be a temporary command applying just to the nation of

Israel between the giving of the law until the time of Christ, but that from the beginning God, intended it to be a permanent part of the structure of time.

In the Genesis account of creation, we are told that God created the world in six days and that he rested on the seventh day and declared that day holy. This is what we read in Genesis 2:1-3, "¹Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ²And 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. ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."

We believe that when God rested on the seventh day and blessed the seventh day and made it holy, he intended that the cycle of six work days and one holy day of rest should last as long as the world would last. We believe that this passage in Genesis teaches that the pattern of six work days and one holy day of rest is a permanent part of the structure of time as God created it. It is part of the nature of things in God's creation. That is what we mean by the term "creation ordinance." A "creation ordinance" is a law or a principle that God set in place at the time of creation as part of the creation order. It is a fundamental creational structure. This is how God has structured time from the very beginning: six days of work and one holy day of rest. This structure is a creational reality.

There are a few other creation ordinances. John Murray in his book *Principles of Conduction* lists them: "The procreation of offspring, the replenishing of the earth, subduing of the same, dominion over the creatures, labor, the weekly Sabbath, and marriage." These are all part of the structure of the world as God created it, the cultural mandate, which includes such things as work and mankind having dominion over the creation and filling the earth with people through being fruitful and multiplying, as well as marriage. These belong to the nature of things in God's creation and the weekly Sabbath is part of that. We are designed to be fruitful and multiply. We are designed to work. We are designed to follow the pattern of six days of work and one holy day of rest.

We see this idea reflected in the way that the Fourth Commandment is worded in Exodus 20:8-11: ⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰but 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. **¹¹For 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, when God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, commandment number 4 was the command to “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” And the reason given for this command was that it is a creation ordinance. The Fourth Commandment is based on the created order. “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, God was saying to Israel when he gave the Ten Commandments, you must keep the Sabbath day as a holy day **because** I have built this pattern of six days of work and one holy day of rest into the structure of creation by the very way that I created. I created everything in six days and rested on the seventh day and declared it holy. Therefore, you are to follow that pattern in the way that you structure your lives.

This does not sound like something that is designed to be temporary. It is the same with the other creation ordinances. Marriage is not something that is designed to be temporary. Being fruitful and multiplying is not something that is designed to be temporary. Working and having dominion over the creation is not designed to be temporary. These are all part of the nature of things that God created. And the Sabbath as a holy day is in the same category of things that belong to the fundamental structure of the created order. This pattern of six days of work and one holy day of rest is the way that God has structured time for all time.

It is not like the kind of commands that God gave to Israel that were intended to be only for Israel in the period between her organization into a nation and the time of Jesus Christ and the inclusion of the

Gentiles into the people of God. Colossians 2:16-17 refers to issues of food and drink and festivals and a new moon. As we have already seen, Israel had many restrictions as far as the foods it was and was not allowed to eat. God had appointed a number of festivals that Israel was required to celebrate at different times of the year. The new moon was one of these festivals. All of these were important for the nation of Israel during the period before Christ came. They pointed to Christ in various ways or they served the purpose of keeping Israel separate from the pagan nations around her until the Christ would be born. But these were not part of the nature of things. These were not creation ordinances and so they could be abolished once their purpose was fulfilled and Christ had come. But the weekly Sabbath is not like that. The weekly Sabbath goes all the way back to the creation of the world and is patterned on God's pattern during the creation week – six days of creating, one holy day of rest.

And so, when we approach Colossians 16-17 which says that we are not to pass judgment on matters of food and drink, or festivals or a new moon or a Sabbath, we will be thinking that Paul could not have been referring to the Fourth Commandment when he referred to a sabbath here. There are other options, you see. The capitalization of the word Sabbath in the ESV is a translation, actually an interpretation. There is no capitalization in the original Greek. It just says "a sabbath" without any capitalization to suggest that Paul intended to refer to the weekly Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment. There were other sabbaths besides the weekly sabbath. The ESV Study Bible says on this verse, "It is debated whether the Sabbaths in question included the regular seventh-day rest of the Fourth Commandment or were only the special Sabbaths of the Jewish festival calendar." There were sabbaths that were not instituted at creation which were part of the ceremonial life of Israel that were fulfilled and abolished with the coming of Christ. That Paul was referring to those fits with the rest of the list and is consistent with the idea that the weekly Sabbath is a creation ordinance and therefore never to be abolished.

The very clear teaching of Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:8-11 that the pattern of six days of work and one holy day of rest is a creation ordinance **means** that when we interpret Colossians 2:16-17, we

conclude that Paul must be referring to the other sabbaths besides the Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment.

This is all that we will be able to cover for today on this subject. We will pick it up again next week. But this is enough to show that Colossians 2:16-17 does not refer to the Fourth Commandment. There is another way of interpreting that verse which makes perfect sense, and which is consistent with the fact that the pattern of six days of work and one holy day of rest is part of the creation order for all time. The fact that the words of the Fourth Commandment as we find them in Exodus 20:8-11, root the command in God making the seventh day a holy day at the time of creation is strong support for the conviction that keeping the Fourth Commandment is still part of God's will for us as his people.

And that is a blessing because a day of rest and worship is a blessing and generations of God's people have found it to be so. Now, as we will see in more detail later in our study, the rest of the Sabbath day is both physical rest and spiritual rest. There is only one way that we can truly keep the Sabbath and that is if we rest in Christ. We are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper now and as we do so I will reflect with you on the connection between true Sabbath keeping and the death of Christ which we remember at the Lord's Table.

Table meditation

The word of God to us this morning is about the Sabbath, a holy day, a day of rest. And now we are about to celebrate the Lord's Supper one of the purposes of which is to remember the Lord's death and its significance for us. What then is the connection between this holy day of rest and the Lord's death? There are a number of them.

For one we are Sabbath-breakers. We do not keep the Sabbath holy as we ought. Something that is holy is set apart for God. We do not consistently use the Sabbath as God intends. We continue to dwell on the burdens of life. We are often mentally engaged in our weekly responsibilities. When we do worship we are often half there. And when we are enjoying legitimate refreshment with food and fellowship

and naps, we are often taking them for granted rather than receiving them with thanksgiving as gifts of God. When we remember Jesus' death, we remember that through that death we receive forgiveness so that we are not condemned for our Sabbath breaking.

Furthermore, we cannot really rest as God would have us rest on his day. We are unable to keep any part of God's law. We are born dead in sin and our default attitude to God's law is hostility and rebellion. Through Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, we are given life in Christ by which we are changed at a very deep level so that we begin to love God's law and begin to see the Sabbath as God intends it to be as a delightful day.

And then there is the whole idea of rest in the Bible. There is physical rest, but more fundamentally we need spiritual rest. And that is what the rest of the Sabbath is ultimately about. Physical rest is not really restful if we are not resting in Christ. Isaiah tells us that there is no peace for the wicked. One of the blessings that Christ has obtained for believers is peace with God which should also result in peace in our hearts and satisfaction in God himself. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are enabled to truly and deeply enter into the rest of the Sabbath.

So, we remember Jesus' death. A gruesome, bloody event. The bread is a symbol of Jesus' broken body. And the wine is a symbol of Jesus' shed blood. Jesus' death on the cross was a truly ugly and appalling event. But through that painful and degrading death, Jesus obtained for us forgiveness and renewal and ultimately glory. Through Jesus being abandoned by God, we are reconciled to God so that we live as children of a loving Father. And through the renewal that Jesus obtained for us, we wish to keep the Sabbath as a holy day unto the Lord – a day of worship and a day of deep and profound refreshment for us.