



The Ten Commandments

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

(3) The Meaning of Jesus’ Fulfillment of the Fourth Commandment

Exodus 20:8-11

Matthew 5:17-20

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This evening we continue our study in the Fourth Commandment, which is “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” We believe that the day that is to be kept holy has been changed from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week – that is from Saturday to Sunday. We also believe that the requirements of the Fourth Commandment are still binding upon us today. Jesus’ coming and his fulfillment of his mission on earth changed many things. Jesus inaugurated a new era in the history of salvation and that resulted in many and profound changes for the people of God. But we believe that all ten of the Ten Commandments still apply to us as New Testament Christians. We have been taking a detailed look at why we believe that the Fourth Commandment is still binding upon us because most other Christians today no longer believe that it is. And I want to make the best case that I can that the confessional Reformed position on this matter is based on solid biblical arguments. We believe that the Bible teaches that Christians in the era between the first and the second comings of Jesus Christ are still required to keep the Fourth Commandment as they are required to keep all of the Ten Commandments.

One of the key reasons for this is the fact that the creation story, as it is told in the book of Genesis, teaches that God built the pattern of six

days of work and one holy day of rest into the fabric of the creation. God did all his work of creating in six days and on the seventh day, we are told, he rested. And we are told further that “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” This teaches us that God set aside the seventh day as a holy day of rest right at the beginning of the creation which indicates to us that a weekly day of holy rest is an ordinance which God intended to continue as long as this creation endured.

The second reason that we Reformed people believe that the Fourth Commandment is still binding upon us today is that the Ten Commandments were given as a unit summarizing the moral law of God and it is not likely that God would ever take one of the ten and say, “This one no longer applies, but the other nine still do.” This is confirmed by Jesus when he summarizes the law as loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves. We believe that he was summarizing the Ten Commandments here because the first four commandments deal with loving God and the last six commandments deal with loving our neighbor. As well, there are other passages in the New Testament which use the term law to refer to the Ten Commandments. None of these references is unambiguous, but all of them together make a powerful case for the conviction that all ten of the Ten Commandments are still binding upon us today.

This evening I want to deal with the idea that Jesus fulfilled the law including the Fourth Commandment. The main argument of those who teach that the Fourth Commandment is no longer binding on New Testament Christians is that it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and is therefore no longer literally binding upon us. This is true of many of the Old Testament laws, for instance, those having to do with sacrifices and temple worship. There are laws in the Old Testament commanding the people to make animal sacrifices. We no longer have to make animal sacrifices because Jesus fulfilled the meaning of those sacrifices and so they are no longer necessary. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. The Old Testament sacrifices were an anticipation of what Jesus would do. After he gave his life as a sacrifice for our sins, those Old Testament sacrifices were no longer required.

Those who believe that we are no longer required to keep the Fourth Commandment believe that since Jesus also fulfilled the Fourth Commandment, it also is no longer required of us. So, we will look at this idea that Jesus fulfilled the Fourth Commandment and we will see that Jesus' fulfillment of this command does not mean that it no longer is binding upon us in the age of fulfillment.

Now in order to understand what it means that Jesus fulfilled the Fourth Commandment we must understand something about the idea of fulfillment in the Bible and the idea that Jesus fulfilled various things from the Old Testament. This is actually a wonderful and delightful part of the message of the Bible. It is at the heart of the good news of salvation. What it means in general terms is that Jesus fulfills the promise of the whole Old Testament. The Old Testament is about the unfolding of God's plan to rescue a people from the curse and misery of sin to a life that features a loving relationship with God and the wholesome and satisfying life of living for God. The plan of God has to do with the renewal of the creation, with the rescue of a people from the life-destroying guilt and power of sin, and with the renewal of community in which human beings live together in unity and love as they together find their greatest joy and satisfaction in loving and worshipping and pleasing God.

This is what the idea of fulfillment in Scripture is all about. And Jesus is at the center of this because he is the key to the fulfillment of God's glorious purpose of the renewal of his creation. So, when we are speaking about fulfillment we are not speaking about some dull theological abstraction. This is not about discussing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. That phrase is used to poke fun at some of the abstract and irrelevant questions that theologians have sometimes occupied themselves with. The idea of fulfillment is not like that. It is about the plan of God to bring salvation through Jesus. It is about the good news. One way of stating the good news is to say that Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament. And one way of getting insights into different facets of what Jesus accomplished for us is to think about the things that he fulfilled.

So, we read in Matthew 5:17 Jesus saying, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” All of what I have been saying so far is really an explanation of these words of Jesus. What Jesus is saying here is that he came to fulfill the Old Testament Scriptures. That is the meaning of the term “Law and the Prophets.” The phrase “Law and the Prophets” is a way of referring to the whole Old Testament. Jesus says that he did not come to abolish anything in the Old Testament. He came to fulfill it. The Old Testament as a whole can be seen as a promise. Jesus came to fulfill what the Old Testament is all about.

Now part of what he is speaking about is fulfilling the law. The whole Old Testament is more than law, but it also contains many laws. Jesus did not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. And what we want to reflect on now is how Jesus fulfilled the Fourth Commandment. How did Jesus fulfill the commandment that tells us to “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”?

One way that he fulfilled the law was by keeping it. When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist one of the things that he said was that it was part of his mission to “fulfill all righteousness.” And what is more, by being baptized Jesus identified himself with sinners. Here is a very good explanation of what this means from an article in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*: “Theologically, the baptism of Jesus identifies Jesus as the messianic servant who stands in solidarity with his people. As their representative he came “to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt 3:15). *Righteousness* in Matthew’s Gospel refers to those who are upright and law-abiding, obedient and faithful to God’s commandments. Matthew has portrayed Jesus fulfilling specific prophecies as well as more general biblical themes. Now he fulfills the moral demands of God’s will.”

So, when Jesus says that he came to fulfill the law, one of the things that he means is that he came to keep the law perfectly as the representative of his people. No one had ever kept the law perfectly before. In that sense, the law of God had never been fulfilled. The purpose of the law is to show people how to live a life to the glory of God. The purpose of the law is to show people how to experience the life of blessedness that God intends for his people. Those purposes had

never been fulfilled perfectly because no one had ever keep the law perfectly before Jesus.

This is also true of the command to keep the Sabbath day as a holy day. No one had ever perfectly fulfilled the Fourth Commandment. This is part of what Jesus came to do. This is part of what Jesus did. The gospels show considerable interest in how Jesus kept the Sabbath. His opponents did not think that Jesus kept the day as a holy day because he did things on that day that they did not approve of. But Jesus claims the authority of the proper understanding of the Sabbath. He claims to be lord of the Sabbath. By word and by deed he claims that his way of keeping the Sabbath is the way that God intended it to be kept.

Now this is important for our keeping the Lord's Day as a holy day; because we don't. At least, we don't do it perfectly and to be honest, the most holy of us have only a small beginning of obedience of keeping our Sunday as a holy day of rest. We can get a sense of this by combining commandment number one and commandment number four. Commandment number one says that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Commandment number four says that the Lord's Day is a day especially set apart for the worship of God. There are times on Sundays when we are not loving the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. We do not give the whole of our being to keeping the day as a day of worship. And so, there is a lot of sin that we commit by our failures to keep the Sabbath as a holy day.

But thankfully Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath in our place if we are believers. Not only did he pay the penalty for our Sabbath sins on the cross, he took our place by fulfilling the law of the Sabbath on our behalf. He fulfilled the Sabbath for us. And so, we can keep the Sabbath without being weighed down by guilt and shame because God accepts our imperfect Sabbath-keeping on the basis of Jesus' perfect Sabbath-keeping.

But there is another way that Jesus fulfills the Fourth Commandment. One of the results of his work of salvation is that he enables his people to begin to keep the law themselves. We can say that Jesus fulfills the Fourth Commandment by enabling his people to fulfill the Fourth Commandment. Listen to how Paul in Romans 8 speaks of this. In the

first part of that chapter Paul says that “the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death ... in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us....” The Bible is saying here that Jesus fulfills the law by giving the Spirit who makes it possible for believers to fulfill the law.

Jesus fulfills the law by enabling us to fulfill the law. And this too is a part of the gospel – a part of the good news. This too is a part of what it means to be saved. Law-keeping is the way of life and blessing. Law-breaking is the way of death and unlife – that is law-breaking is the way of the negation of life. But law-keeping is the way of the full and abundant life that Jesus came to bring his people.

And so, Jesus fulfills the Sabbath law by enabling us to fulfill the Sabbath law, not perfectly, but really. What that means is that we begin to reap the benefits of keeping the day as a holy day of rest. Keeping the law is always beneficial to us. And so, it is with keeping the day as a holy day of rest. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man. That means that it is for our good. It is a blessing to keep it. It is a day of spiritual and physical refreshment and joy in God and in his people. By keeping that law, we fulfill the law and to fulfill the law is to receive the blessings that the law was given to give. We could say that each of God’s laws contains a promise. That promise is expressed in Psalm 19:11 when David says of God’s laws, “in keeping them there is great reward.” The promise implied in each law is the great reward that comes from keeping it. And that purpose of the law is fulfilled when we receive that reward. So that also is one of the ways that Jesus fulfills the law. Jesus fulfills the law by enabling us to fulfill the law. And the law is fulfilled when we experience the blessings that are promised through law keeping.

So, Jesus fulfills the law by keeping it himself on our behalf and he fulfills the law by giving us his Spirit who enables us to keep the law and so receive the blessing that the law intends.

Now I must make a bit of a correction here. I must attempt to keep things in biblical perspective. I have been stressing how the way of law-keeping is the way of blessing and life and fullness and satisfaction. That might make it sound like it is all about us. But we must remember that

the Bible and salvation it itself is not all about us – it is not about us in the first place. It is about God and his glory.

The most important reason to keep the law is that it glorifies God. The law is fulfilled when people keep it to please and honor God. That is the most important thing because that is the reason for everything. It is the reason for creation. It is the reason for salvation. It is the reason for our existence. But thankfully, there is no disconnect between seeking first the glory of God and our own blessing and wellbeing. The two go together. It is exactly when we are seeking first the glory of God that we experience the fullness of life. I just wanted to make that clear. We experience the blessedness of keeping the Fourth Commandment when the focus of our heart is on worshipping and serving and pleasing God. Indeed, that is the blessing of keeping the Fourth Commandment and every other commandment. The blessing that is at the heart of all other blessings is the blessing of seeing and savoring the glory of God. That is at the heart of fullness of life and it is at the heart of all other blessings.

A third way that Jesus fulfills the Fourth Commandment is that he brings to reality the rest of which the Fourth Commandment is a symbol. The Sabbath is a day of holy rest. That involves physical rest. We are not to work on the Sundays. We are to rest. But it is more than physical rest. It is a holy day which means that it is a day set apart for the worship of God. And the worship of God is the ultimate rest because it is only in the worship of God that our hearts are truly at rest. The rest of the Sabbath points to the deeper spiritual rest that comes from the deep satisfaction and joy of knowing and worshipping God. The Old Testament Sabbath was a beginning of that rest for the people of God, but like everything else in the Old Testament, it pointed forward to the coming of Christ for the much greater and deeper experience of the spiritual rest that Christ would bring his people.

Here is how one scholar expresses this idea: “It is true to the New Testament to say that the Mosaic sabbath as a legal and weekly matter was a temporary symbol of a more fundamental and comprehensive salvation, epitomized by and grounded in God’s own creation sabbath, and brought to fulfillment (in already-not yet fashion) in Christ’s redemptive work.” The Sabbath rest is brought to fulfillment in “Christ’s

redemptive work. We see this in two ways in the New Testament. One is in the rest that Jesus promises to those who come to him.

Matthew 11:28–30, "²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'" The Fourth

Commandment which gave the blessing of a weekly day of holy rest was an anticipation of the deeper rest that Jesus would give to those who came to him. The Old Testament saints experienced something of this by way of anticipation, but with the coming of Jesus and his actual atonement for our sins, those who trust in Jesus may experience that rest at a deeper level.

The book of Hebrews shows the relationship between Jesus' sacrifice for our sins and the rest that those experience who are trusting in Jesus. In chapter 9, it speaks about the blood of goats and bulls in the Old Testament and then it goes on to say in verse 14, "how much more will the blood of Christ... purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God." The rest that Jesus gives is the rest of a purified conscience. Our conscience can be at rest because in Christ our sins are actually forgiven. They have been paid for. Justice has been done. We are free of them. That is at the heart of rest. When Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest," this is the fulfillment of the promise that is symbolized in the holy day of rest which is the Fourth Commandment. The Fourth Commandment is a symbol that is fulfilled in the rest that Jesus gives those who come to him in faith.

And so, the rest that we enjoy on the Sabbath is the rest that comes from worshipping God with a clear conscience because our sins have been atoned once for all by the blood of Christ. This is a wonderful part of the promise inherent in the Fourth Commandment. If we keep it as God intends, we experience something of the rest that Jesus gives to those who are trusting in him. A rest that comes from a pure conscience because of the blood of Christ and a rest that comes from delighting in the worship of God in the security of his love and favor. This satisfies the deepest longing of the human soul.

But we must remember that there is more to come. We never experience the fulness of this rest as long as we remain in this life. The great plan of God for our salvation involves a beginning in this life and a consummation in the world to come. What we receive and experience in the here and now, is precious indeed, but it is a first-fruit of the full harvest to come. It is real, and it is precious, but it is a taste that leaves us longing for the fullness that is to come.

And the Bible speaks of the Sabbath in these terms. Jesus fulfilled the promise of the Fourth Commandment, but he did not yet fulfill it completely. There is more to come. That is why the book of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:9, “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” and verse 11, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that on one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” We experience the beginning of that rest in the here and now, but the fullness of that rest is still before us in the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God.

Now one of the reasons that those who teach that the Fourth Commandment is no longer binding on the New Testament church hold that position, is this idea that Jesus has fulfilled the Fourth Commandment. They say that we keep the Fourth Commandment, not by keeping a day, but by resting in Christ. And they are right when they see the connection between the Fourth Commandment and the rest that Jesus gives. But they are wrong when they conclude that the fulfillment in Christ means that the Fourth Commandment is no longer binding upon us. We have looked at some of the reasons for that. Here is another.

You see one part of the reason for the Fourth Commandment was so that the Old Testament people of God could on that day especially look forward to the rest that God would eventually bring his people in Christ. One of the reasons for the Fourth Commandment was that the Old Testament people of God could on that day especially look forward to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. That reason still exists for us. We have the beginning of the fulfillment in Christ. But what we experience in Christ is not yet the fullness of its fulfillment and so we still look forward to Jesus to bring to its consummation the fullness of what is foreshadowed in the holy day of rest. And so, the weekly day of holy rest still speaks of a

promise that is not yet completely fulfilled. It is still a foretaste of what is to come. “[T]here [still] remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” And we still need the weekly anticipation of that rest in the keeping of the holy day of rest that is the gift of the Fourth Commandment.

So, we see again something of the richness of the Fourth Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets. He came to fulfill them. Some of the laws are no longer binding upon us because their purpose has been fulfilled. It would be a denial of the finality of Jesus’ sacrifice if we would still offer animal sacrifices. We keep those commands by looking to the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and offering ourselves and our lives as sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. But the Fourth Commandment is not like that. It has been fulfilled in Jesus, but to keep it now is not a denial of the finality of Jesus’ sacrifice. The Sabbath command still points ahead to what is yet to come and so it still serves a wonderful purpose of being a foretaste of the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God.

The Sabbath rest is often caricatured as a burden. It is only a burden if worshipping God is a burden. It is intended to be a day of delight – of the most profound refreshment – a day of rest which brings deep satisfaction to the human heart that has been renewed to find its deepest satisfaction in God himself. No one in this life experiences that in its fulness. At best we get a taste of the banquet that is to come. But that taste is the deepest joy we can know in this life and it is a foretaste of the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God.