



The Ten Commandments

(17) The Meaning of the Fourth Commandment

(1) Holy Time, Blessing and Rest

Genesis 2:1-3

Exodus 20:8-11

Mark 2:27-28

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This evening we will continue to listen to the word of the Lord about the Fourth Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” So far, we have mostly focused on why the Fourth Commandment is still binding upon us as New Testament Christians. I say mostly because, you can’t really speak about why the Fourth Commandment still applies to us today without saying something about its meaning. But now our focus is going to shift. We will be looking at the meaning of the Fourth Commandment, but we will find at a number of points that thinking about the meaning of the Fourth Commandment will sometimes give us more insight into why it still applies to us today. It’s hard to keep these things totally separate.

Let me first review where we have been. In the first sermon on the Fourth Commandment we saw that it still applies to us today because it is a creation ordinance – that this God has built the structure of six days of work and one day of rest into the very fabric of the creation. This means that he intended this structure to continue as long as the world lasts. It is built into the creation. In the second sermon we saw that since the Ten Commandments are given as a unit, it is very unlikely that God would at some point take one of the ten and say that it no longer applies. We saw how Jesus’ summary of the law is a summary of the Ten Commandments: first four commandments relating to loving God with all our hearts and the last six commandments relating to loving our

neighbor as ourselves. We believe that Jesus was thinking of the Ten Commandments as a unit when he gave his summary of the law. And in the last sermon we considered the whole idea of how Jesus fulfilled the Fourth Commandments and we saw that Jesus' fulfillment does not require the abrogation of the Fourth Commandment and that since the Fourth Commandment is not completely fulfilled, keeping the Sabbath continues to be a sign that we are still looking forward to the time when we will enter into the rest of the new heavens and the new earth.

So today we begin looking more closely at the meaning of the Fourth Commandment. In this sermon we will focus on the ideas of holy time and blessing. First the idea of holy time. What this means is that the Sabbath idea in Scripture is about how we use our time. And it is about the idea of holy time because God tells us to keep the Sabbath day as a holy day. This goes right back to the creation week where God rested on the seventh day and declared it to be a holy day.

Now the idea of holy in the Bible means "set apart for God." There were holy objects that were part of the temple worship. There were holy people, which meant that they were set apart for God in a special way. The whole people of Israel was a holy people because they were set apart for God. There were also holy places. The temple was a holy place and the inner sanctum of the temple was the most holy place. It was God's dwelling place. So lots of things were holy – set apart for God. But it is very interesting that the first thing that God declares to be holy in the Bible is a day. Nothing else in the creation story is declared holy except the seventh day. The same thing with the Ten Commandments. The only thing that is declared to be holy in the Ten Commandments is the Sabbath day.

It turns out that God is very interested in time. For the world time is a secular concept. The world thinks of time in various ways depending on the worldview. In our secular society time moves along and the future is what human beings will make of it. The idea of progress is important for the way in which many people think of time. In the Bible, time is not just there. Time is created by God. God himself is above time – he is eternal, but he is involved in time and he has many things to say about time and what his people do with it. Time is God's time. And he has a lot to say

about what human beings do with his time. One of the key ideas about time in the Bible is that in the unfolding of time, God is working out his purposes. In the fulness of time God sent forth Jesus to accomplish salvation and at the end of time Jesus will return and bring God's kingdom to its consummation. Time is the medium through which God is working out his purposes and we live within the time that God is directing to his promised end.

In the Fourth Commandment, God tells us how to use time the time that he gives us. He tells us how to structure our time. He says that we are to work six days and that we are to rest on the seventh day – actually for us who live after Christ it is the first day of the week that God has set aside as a holy day of rest.

What this means is that God is the Lord of our time. This is very interesting and very important. God gives us a lot of freedom. God does not tell us what to do every second. He does tell us that we are to obey him every second, of course, but he gives us a lot of freedom about how we will do that. As human beings we are not robots. We have a lot of freedom. We make lots of choices and decisions. And that is an important part of what it means to be human and it is an important part of the richness of human existence. It is an important part of the reason that human life is meaningful.

But that freedom is not unlimited. God gives us a lot of freedom, but he also has a lot to say about how we must live our lives. And one of the areas where God tells us how to live our lives is the overall structure of how we use our time. He tells us to work for six days and to rest every seventh day. This is not an option. We do not have freedom when it comes to this structure. This is a decision that God makes for us. This is God asserting his authority as far as the use of time is concerned. And by submitting to God's authority over time we are confessing that God is the Lord of our time. He is our creator. He owns us. He gives us time. He has the right to tell us what to do with the time that he gives us. By keeping the Fourth Commandment we are submitting to the lordship of God over our time. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the ways that we glorify God because, among other things, we are witnessing to his lordship over our lives.

Now it is interesting to compare this perspective with the way that the people of the world look at this whole idea of the relationship between freedom and submission to God. The people of the world don't believe in submission to God. They believe in freedom without any limitations from God. In the worldly understanding of what it means to be human, unrestrained freedom is at the heart of it. There must be some limitations, so we can live together, so we all must restrain ourselves from killing people who irritate us, but other than that sort of thing, to be human is to express your inner desires. It is to do what you want to do with your life. And when Christians say that God has something to say about what we do with our inner desires, the world accuses us of violating their humanity. So, when Christians say, ever so politely, that your biological sex is God's calling as far as your sexuality and your gender are concerned, the world considers that to be an attack on their humanity. And so, they will say that their humanity is not up for discussion.

But the Bible says that God gives humans freedom to make choices within certain parameters and that realizing the fullness of our humanity means living within those parameters. The Fourth Commandment applies this principle to our use of time. We are free to choose whether we will be a school teacher or an airplane pilot, but we are not free to work on the day that God has designated as a day of holy rest. There is the whole area of necessary work, of course, like milking cows or taking care of patients in a hospital, but those are exceptions. The rule is that God tells us the days when we may work and the day when we must rest. And following that pattern is necessary to be fully human. The way that God tells us to live is the way to experience the fullness of our humanity and not living that way diminishes our humanity. So, God is the Lord of our time, and human life as God designed it requires that we do what God tells us to do with our time. We are to work when he tells us to work and we are to rest when he tells us to rest – at least when it comes to the pattern of six days of work and one day of holy rest.

Following this pattern is part of what it means to be human. This does not mean that people who do not follow this pattern are not human, but it does mean that they are not experiencing the fullness of their

humanity. They are not being all that God intended humans to be. God intended that living out the fullness of what it means to be human requires that we live according to his law and one of those laws is that that we are to work six days and rest on the day that he has designated as a holy day of rest. So rather than experiencing the fullness of our humanity by doing whatever we please, we experience the fullness of our humanity by conforming our will to the will of God.

Now the idea that God declared the seventh day to be a holy day means that this day is set apart for God in a way that the other days are not. Of course, one of the great principles of the Bible is that we are to live all of life for the glory of God, but that does not take away from the fact that God calls us to set apart the Sabbath day for him in a way that he does not call us to set apart the other days of the week. The Fourth Commandment is “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” God does not say that about the other six days. So, the Sabbath day is set apart for God in a way that the other days are not.

That means that we are to focus on God on the Sabbath in a way that we cannot on the other days of the week. We are to do everything to the glory of God but doing that requires that we work six days of the week and the work of the six days requires that much of the time we are not thinking directly about God. The overall context of our thinking and living is to be serving the Lord, but when we work, we must be thinking about our work and our responsibilities. It’s hard to be thinking directly about God when we are solving a difficult math problem or serving a customer or buying the groceries. We can think about him from time to time between tasks but fulfilling God’s calling to work requires that we focus intently on the task at hand.

But God tells us to set all that aside on the Sabbath day so that we can give ourselves to focusing more directly on him. That is the significance of the fact that the day is a holy day. It is a day set apart for God in a way that the other days are not.

This is how Patrick Miller makes this point in his excellent treatment of the Fourth Commandment in his book on the Ten Commandments: “The Sabbath Commandment leads to more occasions and opportunities for the community to set time apart for the Lord, for

worship and remembrance, for quiet and celebration—aspects of the holy in the midst of the ordinary. As the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy make clear, the Sabbath is the paradigm for various festivals and activities that belong to sanctifying a time for the Lord” (p. 149). The Fourth Commandment itself makes it clear that that is what it means to keep the day as a holy day when it says in 20:10, “[T]he seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.”

Other passages also make this point in various ways. In Exodus 31:14, Moses writes, “You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death.” The idea of profaning something is to treat it as a common thing. To profane the Sabbath is to treat it like another day. That would mean focusing on things that are legitimate concerns on the six days that God has given us for those things. The focus of the Sabbath is to be God himself which means it is a day that is to be focused on worship and communion with God.

In Exodus 35:2, Moses refers to the Sabbath as “a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD.” The rest of the Sabbath is solemn rest. Serious. Sober. That also suggests a focus on God because, while focusing on God brings joy and refreshment for God’s people, it is always a solemn matter to be in the presence of God. And so again the idea of holy is associated with worship.

One more text on this point. In Leviticus 23:3, Moses refers to the Sabbath as “a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation.” According to the ESV Study Bible on this verse, the term “holy convocation,” refers to “a public assembly for worship.” So, it is very clear from the Scriptures that the command to keep the Sabbath as a holy day means that it is a day that God has set apart so that we can focus on worshipping the LORD.

It is because of this biblical understanding of what it means to keep the Sabbath holy that the framers of the WCF wrote as they did about how we are to focus on worshipping God on the Sabbath. In chapter 21:8 we read, “This Sabbath is then kept holy to the Lord when men, after due preparation of their hearts and arranging of their common affairs beforehand, not only observe a holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and

recreations, but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”

Now it is generally agreed by even by most who take the Sabbath command seriously, that the wording of this statement is somewhat extreme, but that the principle that it expresses is faithful to the word of God. It is rather difficult to think how you would literally take up the whole time in public and private exercises of worship. You can interpret this in a literal way or you can understand it the way that we understand Paul’s command that we pray without ceasing in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Paul does not mean there that we should never ever do anything but pray. He means that we should pray regularly and frequently – that we should be people characterized by prayer. So, keeping the Sabbath day holy means that it a day set apart for the worship of God. We are set free from our work in order to worship God. We rest physically and mentally and spiritually by not working and by worshipping God who is the fountain of joy and satisfaction and spiritual rest.

It is consistent with keeping the day as a day of worship if we take a break from direct worship by resting between services and by enjoying a meal together with family and friends and especially fellow members of the congregation. Jesus did not spend the whole day in the synagogue. Part of the day he took a walk with his disciples while they munched on some grain. The Pharisees accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking the Sabbath command, but Jesus told them that he is the Lord of the Sabbath which means it is his prerogative to interpret what it means to keep it as a holy day. And clearly, he saw no inconsistency between the Sabbath as a holy day of worship and spending part of the time going for a walk with his disciples.

It seems to me that the traditional way of applying the Fourth Commandment is a good one – worship services in the morning and the evening and time in between for a meal and some rest and fellowship with other believers as well as time for nurturing our relationship with God through reading and prayer. The Bible nowhere expressly commands us to have two worship services, but the church for

centuries has applied the Fourth Commandment in that way and it is a very good way to keep the day as a holy day of rest – a day that God has commanded us to keep holy – a day in which we are, especially, to focus on the worship of God.

One more point that is important for understanding and appreciating the goodness of the Fourth Commandment is that God associates the idea of blessing, especially with this command. Of course, keeping all of God's commands brings blessings. In salvation we are not only forgiven all our law breaking, we are changed in our inner being so that we are able to begin to keep the commands. There is no better way to live than to live according to God's commands. But God makes this clear in a special way in connection with the Sabbath. In Genesis 2:3 we are told that on the day seven of world history, "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." This idea is repeated in the giving of the law in Exodus 20.

So, God made the seventh day holy at the beginning of time by resting himself on that day and by declaring it holy. But part of the setting-apart of the seventh day was that God blessed that day. The meaning of that is that God set aside the seventh day as a holy day of rest to be a blessing for mankind. On this idea of God blessing the seventh day, John Goldingay writes, "Blessing the day implies it has the same capacity to be fruitful that the living world possesses, "the power to stimulate, animate, enrich, and give fullness to life."

This is an incredibly rich idea. God's blessing is about comprehensive wellbeing which includes fruitfulness and fullness of life in relationship with him. The blessed man according to Psalm 1 is the one who meditates on the law of God day and night and who because of that "is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers." God blessed the seventh day and made it holy so that it would have this kind of result in the lives of those who keep it. The purpose of the day is to bring blessing to mankind. It is an integral part of a rich and satisfying and God-honoring life. It is a day for refreshment and celebration of God and of life with God and a day to enjoy and celebrate what it means to be people of God.

This is related to the idea that the day is holy – set apart for God – because God himself is the greatest good and our relationship with him is the greatest blessing. So, when God says, “this day is for me” he is also saying “this day is for you” because focusing on God is the greatest blessing. As the psalmist of Psalm 84 wrote in verse 4 of that Psalm, “Blessed are those who dwell in your house ever singing your praise!” Or Psalm 16:11 which says, “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forever more.”

So, let us seek to experience the profound blessings of the Sabbath more and more. It is a day that God has set apart for himself. It is a day that God has blessed. Those two things work together because the more we are focused on God the more blessed we are.

Now I have been speaking about the Fourth Commandment as it was and is addressed to God’s people. God delivered his people from the slavery of Egypt and then gave them his law as the way to serve him and experience the fullness of life as his chosen people. God has delivered us from the slavery of sin and has given us his law as the way to serve him and experience the fullness of life. We are now going to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in which we focus on how Jesus and his sacrifice for us is the key to experiencing the blessing of the relationship with God that is the heart of the blessed life.

Table Meditation

I have been speaking about how the Fourth Command is a blessing because it requires us to focus on God and knowing and worshipping God is the fount of all blessedness in this life. In the Ten Commandments there is a relationship between Israel’s salvation and the blessing of law-keeping. We see that in a special way in the Fourth Commandment. In the story of the Exodus we are told that God, through Moses, told Pharaoh to let his people go in order that they might worship him in the wilderness. A number of times in the exodus story God demands that Pharaoh let his people go that they might serve him in the wilderness. That basic idea is one of the ways that the Bible

speaks of the relationship between salvation and keeping God's law. We are saved to serve God. We are saved to worship God.

The exodus is a foreshadowing and an anticipation of the salvation that Jesus accomplished for us. Jesus came to set us free from our slavery to sin and Satan. In Romans 6:17-18, Paul writes, "¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we remember Jesus' death and what it means for us. Jesus died that we might be set free from the slavery of sin. Jesus died and rose again that we might "become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which [we are] committed." Jesus died so that we might know the blessedness of keeping the Sabbath day as a holy day. Jesus died so that we might be reconciled to God and in that way experience the beginning of fullness of life which is rooted in fellowship with God. The Fourth Commandment is about giving God the time and the honor that he is due. It is required of us. But like everything else that is required of us it is the way of life and the way of blessing. The Fourth Commandment can only be a day of delight if our hearts have been changed so that the worship of God is our chief delight.

We need forgiveness because at best we have only a small beginning of that. We need the ongoing renewal of our hearts because we can only delight in God through the power of the resurrection. I've been trying to show what a blessing the Fourth Commandment is. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that it is only in Christ that we can experience those blessings. If we are believing in Jesus we will know something of that, but we will also long for more. May God use our celebration of the Lord Supper to that end – to strengthen our faith and our love so that we might grow in our delight in keeping the Fourth Commandment as well as all the others.