



# The Ten Commandments

## (20) The Meaning of the Fourth Commandment

### (4) Rest for Everyone

Exodus 20:8-11

Deuteronomy 15:1-18

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This evening we will resume our study of the Ten Commandments. We took a break during the summer and my summer series was a little longer than normal, but we've finished the quick survey of Romans and so it is time to get back to the Ten Commandments. When we paused for the summer-break, I was not quite finished with the Fourth Commandment. The Sabbath command is incredibly rich in its significance and there are a couple of subjects that I still want to cover. So, we will do this in this sermon and one of the sermons next week.

Let me remind you of what we have covered so far in our study of the Fourth Commandment – which is “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” In the first three sermons on this command, we looked at why it is still binding upon New Testament Christians. We considered the fact that it is a creation ordinance which means that the pattern of six days of work and one day of holy rest is built into the structure of time as God created it. We considered the significance of the fact that the Sabbath command is one of the Ten Commandments which are a unit and there are indications in the New Testament that both Jesus the apostles considered the Ten Commandments as applicable in the new covenant situation. And we looked at the idea that Jesus fulfilled the law and how that applies to the Fourth Commandment and we saw that while the Sabbath theme is partially fulfilled in Jesus, it is not completely fulfilled and that means that we are still to keep it as an

anticipation of the fulfillment that remains. As we read in Hebrews 4:9, “So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God....”

In the next 3 sermons on the Fourth Commandment, we considered different aspects of its meaning. We looked at the idea of holy time, and then the significance of the rhythm of work and rest, and finally we considered the ideas of the Sabbath as a memorial and as a sign of the covenant. And for all that we have still not exhausted the meaning of this command. And so today we will consider the significance of the fact that God makes a special point of making sure that everyone in the community gets a day of holy rest – not only the rich and the powerful. “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.”

These words are so familiar to most of us that we hardly hear them anymore, but they warrant more attention from us than a vague familiarity in the background of our minds. These words are actually quite remarkable and tremendously significant for how we are to treat not only people who are working for us and the powerless in society, but even how we are to treat animals. In the Fourth Commandment, God is not only making sure that our servants get a break and that people with no power or status in society get a break, but even that our livestock get a break on the Sabbath.

The Fourth Commandment is a transition between the first table of the law which is focused on our duty toward God and the second table of the law which is focused on our duty towards our fellow human beings. It requires that we set a day apart for the worship of God, but it also requires that the people who work for us and the weaker members of society share in the blessings of the Sabbath. The concern is that those who have the money and the power to have other people working for them, do not require those people to work for them on the Sabbath day. So the Sabbath is both about our duty towards God and our duty towards other people.

You can easily imagine a rich land-owner or a rich merchant taking the day off, but still requiring his servants to work. But God here is showing his concern for the weak and the powerless in society by explicitly

requiring that those who have people working for them not require those people to work on the Sabbath. God here is showing his concern that also the weaker members of society get a day of worship and rest as well as the more powerful members of society.

In the version of the Fourth Commandment found in Deuteronomy 5, the Lord follows this part of the commandment by saying, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Recall what happened in the story of the Exodus when Moses requested that Pharaoh let the people have break from their slave labour so that they could have a time for worshipping God. That part of the story is told in Exodus 5. When God sent Moses to go to Pharaoh, at first, all he was to ask for was that the people might go into a wilderness for three days to present sacrifices to their God. The original request was simply to give the people a few days off for a spiritual retreat – a time of rest and worship. But what happened? Not only did Pharaoh refuse the request, he told the foremen to stop giving the people straw to make bricks and require them to gather their own straw and still maintain the same production quotas as before.

The people were given no time off to rest and worship. It was all work, work, work. There was no concern for their well-being. There was no concern for their quality of life. Their only significance for Pharaoh was their work and they were treated accordingly. This is part of the context for the Sabbath command. God delivered his people from slavery. Once they were free, God gave them the Sabbath which meant that their lives consisted of rest and worship as well as work. And in the Sabbath command God explicitly includes those in society who were vulnerable to being treated as nothing more than workers. Those who had the power were explicitly commanded to give the people who worked for them, the same day of rest and worship that God had provided for them.

This part of the Sabbath command reflects God’s concern for the poor and the weak and his requirement that those among his people who had power and influence over others treat them with dignity and with compassion and as human beings with value and significance beyond

their work. This part of the Sabbath command reflects God's concern that the poor and the vulnerable not be oppressed and exploited. Israel was to remember that they had been slaves in Egypt and they were not to treat the powerless among them as they had been treated in Egypt.

And that even included their animals. They were not to treat their animals as they had been treated in Egypt. God does not want to see people made in his image treated as nothing more than tools to do work, and he does not even want animals to be treated as nothing more than tools to do work. God even cares about the wellbeing of animals and he required his people to give them as day of rest along with their servants.

Now this principle of concern for the weak and powerless is extended further in the Old Testament teaching on the Sabbath because not only was there a Sabbath day each week, there were also Sabbath years. Every seventh year was a Sabbath year and every seven times seven years was a year of Jubilee. There is a relationship between the weekly Sabbath and the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee. And each of these institutions expressed God's concern for the poor and the weak. There is a connection between the Sabbath and God's concern for the weak and the powerless in society.

So, we have the Sabbath year. We read of it in a number of places in the Old Testament laws. In Leviticus 25:4, God says to his people, "<sup>3</sup>For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, <sup>4</sup>but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard."

Further in this chapter God uses similar language to the Fourth Commandment to instruct his people to allow the poor and the weak access to what the land produces on the Sabbath year. Leviticus 25:6, "<sup>6</sup>The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired worker and the sojourner who lives with you," Other verses specifically mention that the poor are to be allowed to gather what the land produced on the Sabbath year.

Furthermore, on the Sabbath year, some of the debt slaves were to go free and some of the debts were to be cancelled. We read of that in Deuteronomy 15. The first part of Deuteronomy 15 teaches that debts held by members of the covenant people were to be cancelled. This did not apply to foreigners living in the land; only the covenant people. Likewise, with debt-slaves. If a Hebrew found himself with a debt that he could not pay, he could become a debt slave in order to pay off that debt. But in the Sabbath year he was to be allowed to go free. Further in the context of explaining the requirements for the Sabbath year, God commands his people to be generous towards the poor in the land.

And then we have the year of Jubilee. Every 49 years was a year of Jubilee. This was also part of the Sabbath laws in Israel. The year of Jubilee was like a Sabbath year only in addition to not planting and allowing the poor to harvest what grew on the land, those who had had to sell their land because of financial hardship were to receive their land back again. There are three things about the year of Jubilee that become important as its significance is further developed in Scripture. Its beginning was marked by the sound of a trumpet. It began on the Day of Atonement and it was described as the proclamation of liberty. Leviticus 25:9–10, "Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan."

Now interpreters who are inclined towards socialism politically tend to see the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee as justification for the forced re-distribution of wealth. That, however, is reading into the text what is not there. The release from debts every seventh year and the return of the land to its original owners or their families every 50 years was part of the economic structure and was anticipated in the giving of loans and what amounted to the temporary rental of the land. Land that was sold 25 years before the Jubilee was worth more than land that was sold one year before the Jubilee. A person who sold himself into debt slavery was worth more if he had six years to work before the Sabbath

year than a person who sold himself into debt slavery with one year until the Sabbath year.

What the Sabbath year and Jubilee year did was put a cap on debt of various kinds. They meant that people did not have to sell themselves as debt slaves forever unless they voluntarily chose to do so. And the year of Jubilee meant that landowners could not sell off their land forever. In effect they could rent it out for a number of years. The intention of these laws was to resist the normal tendency of the wealth of the land to be concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Their purpose was to keep the poor Israelites from losing their land forever or from being debt slaves for the rest of their lives or from being in debt the rest of their lives. So, they were structures that God set in place to help the poor and to break the cycle of perpetual poverty.

Now, the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee were not creation-ordinances or part of the Ten Commandments, so they were never intended to be binding upon God's people for all time like the Fourth Commandment was and is. They were applications of one of God's concerns expressed in the Fourth Commandment in the situation of ancient Israel, namely his concern for the weak and the poor. They were intended to function in Israel until the time of Christ and were part of the ceremonial and civil laws that were abolished with the death and resurrection of Christ.

But that does not mean that they are meaningless for us. They help us to see the connection between the Fourth Commandment and God's concern that the poor and the weak be well treated. And they help us to see that poverty is a bondage that belongs to the fallen world order and that what God is working towards in the history of salvation is a comprehensive freedom for all of his people.

The legal and religious structure of life in ancient Israel served a typological purpose in the history of salvation. In all kinds of ways, it was preparation for Jesus Christ and his mission. So, besides the Ten Commandments, these laws are not literally binding upon us today, but they do reflect what God is working towards in the new heavens and the new earth. And those principles are still to be reflected in our lives today. The Sabbath laws express the principle that everyone should be

treated fairly and with dignity and that no-one should live in bondage whether that is the bondage of slavery or the bondage of poverty.

John R. Schneider expresses this idea in his book *The Good of Affluence*. "Scholars agree that the many laws of Israel express an "exodus vision" of society. The laws are repeatedly grounded in words which Israel recited in worship: 'For I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.' The implication is clear: Israel's national life was to reflect the character of the God who redeemed them from bondage. The God who liberated had molded a people of liberation.... These texts confirm that God wished his nation to be a decent society. In keeping with the narratives of blessing, the legal and moral texts breathe a spirit of mercy, giving the poor special upward movement. Israel, given its history as a slave nation, was never - never - to forget the poor." (Kindle Locations 999-1001 & 1023-1025)

So, the principle of the Sabbath laws whether, the weekly Sabbath or the Sabbath year or the year of Jubilee is that people should be free from slavery whether that is being treated as a slave who never gets a day off or like the slavery of hopeless poverty. There is slavery of various kinds because of sin, but that is not God's ideal and what God is working toward in the history of salvation is the end of slavery and the end of poverty. And as we proceed in the unfolding of God's plan in the Bible, we find the symbolism of the year of Jubilee used to describe and announce that God's plan for the salvation of the world involves liberty from all bondages and including the root of all slavery which is sin.

So, we find Isaiah using the imagery of the year of Jubilee to announce the coming Servant of the LORD and the conditions he would bring when he came. Isaiah 61:1-2, "<sup>1</sup>The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;"

Isaiah is prophesying of Jesus and the kingdom that he would bring. It would be a kingdom of good news to the poor. The Servant of the Lord would bind up the broken hearted and proclaim liberty to the captives

and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. And it is this text that Jesus quotes as being fulfilled in him and the kingdom that he came to bring.

Now there is no doubt that the ultimate fulfillment of this is release from the slavery of sin. There is no doubt that that is the heart of Jesus' mission. He was given the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. He was the servant of the Lord who would suffer in the place of his people and free them from the penalty and power of their sins. This is the core of the fulfillment of the year of Jubilee. This was at the heart of Jesus' mission. And it is reason for celebration and rejoicing. Jesus said in John 8:36, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

And the part of the Sabbath command that we are looking at points to this. One of the goals of the Sabbath command is that everyone in the community might have a day of rest. That rest was a physical rest and that rest was a spiritual rest in the worship of God and in order to rest in that way it is necessary to be free. In order to truly rest, it is necessary that we be free – free from the burden and slavery of sin, in the first place, but also free from the burden and slavery of oppression and poverty and care. And we see both the spiritual freedom and the physical freedom from endless work and hopeless poverty reflected in the Sabbath theme as it is developed in the Scriptures.

Patrick Miller puts it like this in his treatment of the Fourth Commandment. "The primary trajectory set loose in and by the Sabbath Commandment is the principle of regular release from the things that enslave, oppress, and bind human life." (p.133) And you see this is all included when Jesus, on that day in the synagogue in Nazareth said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering the sight to the blind, to set a liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus came to bring to fulfillment what the year of Jubilee foreshadowed and the year of Jubilee is part of the Sabbath theme of Scripture. The deepest fulfillment of this theme is release from the slavery to sin, but we may not stop with the deepest fulfillment. To see

the fulness of this theme we need to think of its comprehensive fulfillment. There is a reason that Isaiah and Jesus quoting him refer to the poor and the captives and the blind and the oppressed. What Jesus came to do is deal with the root of every slavery and bondage which is sin, but he also came to deal with all the slavery and bondage which is there because of sin. And so, the picture that we get is one of a comprehensive “release from the things that enslave, oppress, and bind human life”, to use Millers words.

And that is what we see Jesus doing in his earthly ministry. He forgave sins. But he also gave sight to the blind and healed the sick. And he released people from various afflictions that bound them in lives of poverty and hardship. Jesus cared for the spiritual bondage that people suffered from, but he also cared for the physical bondages that people experienced as well. And all of this Jesus was anticipating the fulness of the kingdom of God where there will be freedom experienced by all in every way – spiritual as well as physical.

And the people of God are to reflect that in their lives. We are to live lives that give evidence of the freedom that Jesus gives in salvation by living out of the freedom from sin and freedom to obedience that comes with salvation. And as part of that we are to reflect God’s compassion and live in step with God’s purpose to extend freedom to all people everywhere.

The logic for us is the same as it was for the people of Israel. They were to remember that they had been slaves in Egypt and the fact that God had given them freedom and they were to express their freedom by helping others to participate in it by living justly and righteously, but also by helping the poor and needy to be delivered from the slavery of poverty and want.

Israel was to be a sign among the nations of what living under God’s rule looked like. We are to be the same. By the way that we treat those who are weak and powerless we are to witness to what God is working towards when the final trumpet call announces the ultimate fulfillment of the Sabbath and of the year of Jubilee.

And on the Sabbath, we do that in part by not having other people working for us. The fact that so many businesses and stores are open on Sunday is a violation of the Fourth Commandment from a number of perspectives. Those who work are violating the Fourth Commandment because they are not keeping it as a holy day of worship. But those who employ those who work are violating the Fourth Commandment by having other people working for them – but so by extension are the consumers who go to the stores and the restaurants and other businesses on the Lord's Day. Without the demand there would be no reason for the stores to be open. And meeting that demand imposes a kind of slavery on the people who feel they are forced to work.

Anyway, keeping the Sabbath for us means not having other people working for us and so that rules out being involved in anything that requires others to work other than the kind of work that falls under the category of necessary work. But the deeper keeping of the Sabbath is participating in God's plan that is working towards the spiritual and the physical freedom of people from all the nations. That involves witnessing in word and deed to the kingdom of God and seeking to implement in our lives the vision of that kingdom which is ultimately freedom for all.