



The Ten Commandments

(21) The Meaning of the Fourth Commandment

(5) Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-14

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We're going to finish our study of the Fourth Commandment by considering two Sabbath matters that we find in the New Testament. First, we will consider Jesus and the Sabbath and then we will consider the transition of the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week. There is more in the New Testament about the Sabbath, but we have covered most of that in earlier sermons. So, after this sermon we will carry on in our study of the Ten Commandments by turning to commandment #5.

It is significant that there is so much about the Sabbath in the gospels. Most of what is written in the gospels regarding the Sabbath has to do with conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders concerning the behaviour of Jesus or his disciples on the Sabbath. According to the Jewish religious leaders at the time, Jesus and disciples were not very good about keeping the Sabbath. These leaders were wrong, of course. And in telling them why there were wrong, Jesus gives us a number of important insights about the Sabbath and what it means to keep it.

Most of the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees had to do with what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. There was no disagreement about the fact that the Fourth Commandment belonged to the law of God and was binding upon the people. Both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed that God commanded keeping the Sabbath as a holy day.

It is also important to note that Jesus kept the Sabbath as a day of worship. Jesus attended the synagogue services on the Sabbath day. Listen to how Luke 4:16 describes Jesus' usual practice on the Sabbath. "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day...." There are other passages as well that show Jesus taking part in the worship of the synagogue on the Sabbath. There is no doubt that Jesus saw the Sabbath as a law of God to be kept.

And actually, one of his sayings confirms our conviction that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance and not simply a law that only applied in Israel under the Mosaic covenant. In Mark 2:27 Jesus says to the Pharisees, who were accusing him of Sabbath breaking, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

Jesus there is alluding to the fact that God instituted the Sabbath at the time of creation. "The Sabbath was made for man...." This applies the Sabbath much more broadly than just to the people of Israel. Jesus is saying that the Sabbath was given by God to the whole human race at the time of creation. This is one of the passages in Scripture that leads to the conclusion that the Sabbath is something that God intended to operate for all time, and not just for the period between Moses and Jesus.

But most of the references to the Sabbath in the gospels have to do with Jesus or his disciples, doing things on the Sabbath that the Pharisees considered to be unlawful. There are two types of activity that Jesus or his disciples did of which the Pharisees did not approve. The disciples plucked and ate some grain as they were walking through the fields and quite a number of times Jesus healed people on the Sabbath day.

We will look at examples of Jesus' responses to the accusations of the Jewish leaders on both of these issues and we find them described in the first 14 verses of Matthew 12. In verses 1-8 we have the incident in which the disciples pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath as they are walking with Jesus through a grain field. When the Pharisees accuse the disciples of doing what was not lawful on the Sabbath, Jesus says first, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who

were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor these who were with him, but only for the priests.”

Now Jesus here does not agree that the disciples were breaking God’s laws. The Sabbath laws in the Old Testament do not prohibit walking through a grain field and plucking some grain and eating it. But Jesus does not respond to the Pharisees by saying that his disciples were not breaking the law of God. They were breaking the tradition of the Pharisees, but they were not breaking God’s law. But Jesus says nothing about that here.

Jesus answers in a more indirect way and in so doing he exposes the spiritual problem that was behind the objections of the Pharisees. In the example that Jesus gives from the Old Testament, David did break a ceremonial law. The bread that David was given was bread that was to be only eaten by the priests. And yet, in his time of need, David was given what was normally off-limits to him and nothing in Scripture says that it was wrong for him to do so or that it was wrong for the priests to give it to him in that situation.

It is significant that Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 12:7, “And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” By saying that, Jesus was pointing out that the Pharisees were more motivated by a legalistic attitude towards their man-made traditions than by compassion for human beings and he is affirming that God is looking for compassion from his people including in the way that they interpret and apply his laws. In the case of David receiving bread that actually was meant only for the priests, that was the actual breaking of a law, but because it was an expression of mercy it was the proper thing to do in that situation.

Let’s look at the other example that Jesus gives before we try to understand the relevance of all of this for our attitude towards keeping the Sabbath. Matthew 12:5 “Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” Jesus is saying that the priests in the temple work on the Sabbath day. The Fourth Commandment says that we are not to work on the Sabbath day,

but the priests do work on the Sabbath day because they are busy offering sacrifices and other things in the temple. But Jesus says, they are not guilty for doing that.

So, what is Jesus saying about the Sabbath and Sabbath keeping in these verses? One thing he is not saying is that the Sabbath is not important and can just be ignored. Jesus is in no way abolishing the authority and the importance of the Fourth Commandment. Rather he is interpreting it over against the mistaken interpretation and application of the Pharisees. At the end of this section Jesus says, "For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." Jesus here is making an incredible claim about his own authority. This is a claim to be equal with God. But it is not in any way a minimizing of the authority and importance of the Fourth Commandment. Jesus is claiming the authority to explain what the Sabbath means and how it must be applied.

He is critical of the way that the Pharisees were interpreting and applying it. Let's consider what we can learn from that. Jesus critique of the Pharisees seems to be focused on their lack of compassion in interpreting the Sabbath law. It is interesting that Jesus does not defend his disciples here by explaining that they are not in fact breaking the Sabbath law as it is expressed in the Old Testament. Jesus here does not deal with the fact that the laws that the disciples were breaking were man-made laws and not binding upon the disciples or anyone else. It is well known that the Pharisees had all kinds of rules that went beyond what was taught in the Bible and Jesus does criticize them for that in other places. But here he focuses on something else.

And here he focuses on their lack of mercy in applying the law to other people. He says that they did not understand the Old Testament principle "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." That principle is found in Hosea 6:6 and what it means is that God is not pleased with law-keeping if there is no mercy and compassion in applying it. In the story that Jesus uses to illustrate this principle, it was right to break the letter of the law when David needed the bread that the law said was only to be eaten by the priests. In that situation mercy required the breaking of a law.

Now we obviously need to be very careful in how we apply this principle. Jesus certainly did not intend to promote a lax attitude towards the law of God. But this is Jesus' teaching and we need to understand it and live by it. The first thing that we must understand is that the examples that Jesus gives from the Old Testament are laws having to do with religious rituals. The law that David broke was a law having to do with the functioning of the temple and the principle that Jesus quotes from Hosea said that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. The Sabbath is like these examples because it also has to do with the ordering of the worship of God.

So, the principle that Jesus is teaching here is that there are situations in which laws governing the worship of God can be broken if the reason for breaking them is mercy or compassion. So, it is wrong to interpret and apply the Fourth Commandment in such a way that is uncaring about human needs. The Pharisees were very rigorous in their application of the Sabbath law, but in the process, they were making it into a burden rather than the delight that it was intended to be. It is significant that the disciples were not actually breaking the Sabbath law here, but Jesus addresses the heartless attitude of the Pharisees in their way of looking at the Sabbath law.

So, what does that say to us? It does not make the Sabbath law null and void. We are still to keep the Sabbath as a whole day of rest and worship. We are still not allowed to work on the Sabbath. Jesus' interpretation of the Sabbath does not deny its continuing authority in our lives. After all it is intended to be a blessing as all God's laws are. It does mean, however, that we should not be so rigorous in our application of it that it becomes a burden. We must apply the law with a compassionate spirit.

So, the man-made laws that forbade what the disciples were doing and calling it work were lacking in mercy. We need to eat on the Sabbath and that requires some work. That kind of work is not breaking the Fourth Command. The Sabbath is to be kept as a holy day. But that does not mean that we should so rigorously define work that it becomes a burden. We are to be focused on the worship of God and we are

explicitly told not to work on that day. But how we apply that is to reflect Jesus' teaching in this passage.

Clearly, Jesus did not approve of the way that the Pharisee's did it. They were rigorous, but they were lacking in compassion. And we are being taught here to avoid treating the Sabbath as the Pharisees did while still keeping it as God intended it to be kept. Jesus here calls himself the lord of the Sabbath. That means that he has the authority to tell us how to keep the Sabbath. It also means that the Sabbath must be kept.

Clearly there is a subjective element here. Exactly, how Jesus' teaching will be applied will be different from person to person or from family to family. That is a clear implication of Jesus' teaching here. Applying the principle of "mercy and not sacrifice" will result in different decisions about what is and is not done on the Sabbath. The problem with the Pharisees' approach is that they tried to take away the subjective element by being close to exhaustive in legislating what could and could not be done. That did not give room for differences and it did not give room for compassion either.

So, we do have a helpful and practical principle for how to apply the Fourth Commandment in our lives and in our homes. Jesus' principle will not tell you exactly what you may and may not do in the Sabbath. Jesus' principle requires that we take the Fourth Command seriously. It is a holy day of rest and worship. It is not a day for working. But it also requires that we apply it with mercy and compassion. That allows for differences as to the details of what is actually done and not done on the Sabbath. And clearly the Pharisees are not good examples for us.

There are a couple of other principles in Jesus' teaching that are more straight forward and so will take less time to cover. The requirement of public worship on the Sabbath means that some people will have to work to make that happen. That is Jesus' point about the priests in the temple. Keeping the day as a holy day requires public worship. In Leviticus 23:3, God said to his people, "Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation." A convocation was an assembly – a worship service. In order for that to happen the priests had to work. If you would apply the command not to work in a wooden and absolute way, you could not have worship

services. But that is not the way the Sabbath law is to be applied according to Jesus. In order for the Sabbath to be kept as a day of worship, as God intended, some people have to work on that day and they are not breaking the fourth commandment when they do so.

And then there is the matter of healing on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees were critical of Jesus because he healed people on the Sabbath day. We see this in the story that is told in verses 9-14 of Matthew 12. Verse 10 says, "And they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' – so that they might accuse him." Obviously, they did not consider it to be lawful to heal on the Sabbath day. And this is Jesus' response, verses 11-12, "He said to them, 'Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'" And then Jesus healed the man.

So, while the Sabbath law prohibits work on the Sabbath, according to Jesus who is the lord of the Sabbath some kinds of work are allowed. The rules about what may not be done may not be so rigorous that the Sabbath becomes a hardship rather than a delight. Jesus clearly does not approve of approaches to the Sabbath that resemble that of the Pharisees that focus on rules and regulations rather than on love and compassion for people. Jesus' guidance in applying the Sabbath law also allows for work to be done to facilitate the corporate worship of God and acts of mercy following his example. The traditional interpretation of Jesus teaching has also included acts of necessity so that animals are fed and cared for, people in hospitals are looked after, law and order is maintained, and we continue to receive the services that we rely on such as electricity and water. People are required to work to make those things happen, but Jesus' teaching here clearly allow for such exceptions to be made.

Jesus' intention is wonderfully expressed in Mark's version of this story, where Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." What a wonderful sentiment is expressed in those words! The Sabbath is a gift. It is intended to be a day of joy and rest focused on the worship of God. It was never intended to be a burden. The Pharisees

had made it such, but Jesus condemned that approach and as the Lord of the Sabbath gave us his authoritative interpretation.

Now one thing that we must understand is that in the nature of the case, the Sabbath properly spent can only be a delight and a joy for those who have been born again and have been given hearts that love God. It is clear from biblical teaching that those who still have hearts of stone are not going to delight in the worship of God. For them the Sabbath will be a burden if they are required to keep it according to the law of God. So, thinking about the Sabbath reminds us that because it is a day focused on God, we must have hearts that love God and delight in him in order to gain the blessings that it is intended to give.

One more subject and then we are finished our consideration of the Fourth Commandment. We worship on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day of the week. We do that because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week and he appeared to his disciples on the first day of the week and the disciples began to meet for worship on the first day of the week and we have the example of the apostle John worshipping on the first day of the week and calling it the Lord's Day. In Revelation 1:10 John writes, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day..." What we see in the New Testament is all of these things happening on the first day of the week and an inspired apostle calling that the Lord's Day.

The early church did "Sabbath things" on the first day of the week and they called it the Lord's Day. That term is very significant for the idea that it was Jesus' intention that the day for Sabbath-keeping be changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week. It is an echo of the way that the Old Testament referred to the Sabbath as a day belonging to God. In Exodus 20:10 says that "the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God." Isaiah 58:13 refers to it as "my holy day" and "the holy day of the LORD." So the Old Testament refers to the Sabbath as the Lord's Day. As John Frame puts it in his treatment of this subject, "It is hard for me to imagine that people in the first century with a background in Judaism would not see the parallel between the Lord's Day in Old Testament and the New Testament's Lord's Day. As the

supper is a meal that belongs uniquely to the Lord, so the Lord's Day is a day that belongs uniquely to the Lord."

The theological case is also compelling. Think of the motivation that Deuteronomy 5 gives for keeping the Sabbath as a holy day.

Deuteronomy 5:15, "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. Therefore, the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath." The fulfillment of our exodus from the slavery of Satan and sin culminates in Jesus' resurrection from the dead and so theologically it fits with the way that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament Scriptures that the day set aside for remembering our salvation be moved to the day that Jesus actually rose from the dead, the first day of the week.

Here is Patrick Miller on this point: "Celebration of the first day, the Lord's Day, as a holy time is, therefore, a natural move for those who have rejoiced in the redemptive work of God, begun in the deliverance from Egyptian slavery and continued in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Sunday carries forward Jesus' word that the Sabbath is a time for "good news" begun and fulfilled in his ministry. The confirmation of that good news is God's raising Jesus from the dead on the first day of the week." (Ten Commandments, pp. 163-164)

Clearly these considerations do not convince everyone, but they are powerful and compelling arguments that it is the will of God that the Sabbath be observed on the day that Jesus rose from the dead as a memorial of that great event.

And that gives an even richer meaning to the Fourth Commandment. I have noted a number of times in this study how rich and multifaceted the biblical teaching on the Fourth Commandment is. A significant part of that richness is how it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the salvation that he came to bring.

You see the resurrection of Christ is the beginning of the new creation. The life that brought Jesus from the dead is eternal life – which is the life of the age to come. Jesus is the new Adam. Those who are in Christ are new creations. And so just as God, when the original creation was

complete, instituted a day of holy rest, so when Jesus completed the work of inaugurating the new creation, he changed the day of holy rest to the day of resurrection so that his people could remember that the life that they now live is the life of the new creation, the life of the world to come.

It is a day of rest which is also a day of remembering what God has done for our salvation. It is a day of rest in which the deepest rest is not physical but spiritual – a resting in sins forgiven – a resting in the refreshment of fellowship with God – a resting in the hope that means that no matter how much we have to struggle and suffering in this life, the future is bright and a time will come when all will be well with us, body and soul, in the presence of God and of his people forever.

It is important to notice how much the Bible emphasizes the Sabbath. There is a lot about it in the Old Testament laws. There is a lot about it in the Old Testament prophets. There is a lot about it in the teaching of Jesus. And while it is not as prominent in the rest of the New Testament, it is there in significant ways especially in the book of Hebrews which teaches us so much about the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant situation. God in his word has given us a lot about the Sabbath. Clearly, he considered it to be very important.

It is significant too that the weakening of the church has gone hand in hand with the weakening of its convictions about the Fourth Commandment. There are, no doubt many reasons for the weakness of the church, at least in the west today. But it whether it is a cause or a result of the weakness, it is striking that the decline of the Sabbath has gone hand in hand with the decline in the church.

This would not have surprised J.C. Ryle. He was writing in the late 1800s. This is some of what he wrote on the Sabbath. “The tendency of the age is not to exaggerate the fourth commandment, but to cut it out of the Decalogue and to throw it aside altogether. Against this tendency it becomes us all to be on our guard. The experience of eighteen centuries applies abundant proof that vital religion never flourishes where the Sabbath is not well kept.” (Quoted in McGraw, Ryan. *The Day of Worship: Reassessing the Christian Life in Light of the Sabbath* (Kindle Locations 2404-2408). Reformation Heritage Books. Kindle Edition)

We see plenty of evidence of that in our time. Let us resist the tendency to abandon the Sabbath or simply not to take it seriously that we see in our time even in many Reformed churches and let us receive it as the gift that it is and the blessing that it is when we, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”