

The Fourth Commandment

Q: What does God require in the fourth and fifth commandments?

A: Fourth, that on the Sabbath day we spend time in public and private worship of God, rest from routine employment, serve the Lord and others, and so anticipate the eternal Sabbath. Fifth, that we love and honor our father and our mother, submitting to their godly discipline and direction.

Text: **Exodus 20:8-11** (LSB)

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of Yahweh your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female slave or your cattle or your sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

When it comes to thinking through and applying the Sabbath command, many Christians unfortunately jump past its original meaning in the OT, thus robbing themselves of a wonderful revelation of the gracious character of Yahweh in giving it to Israel.

- The same could be said about other OT practices that are built upon deeper principles that show us the glorious nature of our Triune God and His wonderful work of salvation.
- E.g., the sacrificial system, circumcision, the priesthood

However, when one reads the OT, they cannot escape just how prevalent and important this commandment is to Yahweh.

Victor Hamilton notes the following:¹

1. The Fourth Commandment is mentioned more in the Pentateuch, from the time of Sinai and beyond, than any other commandment, eleven times in

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 337-38.

all,² not to mention all the other numerous passing references to the Sabbath.

2. The Sabbath commandment is the only one of the ten that the Lord clearly sets forth even before the Israelites reach Sinai.³
3. The Sabbath shares with the Day of Atonement and the Sabbatical Year the designation *shabbat shabbatōn* (LSB, NET, CSB = “a Sabbath of complete rest”).⁴
4. The Sabbath shares with the Day of Atonement as the only two days on which all and every kind of work is prohibited.
5. The Sabbath and the Jubilee Year are the only two units of time that Israel is to “sanctify/hallow.”⁵
6. Whenever the Sabbath appears in a sacred calendar, it *always* comes first.⁶

To this list, we would add that the fourth commandment is the longest and most detailed commandment in the Decalogue.⁷

Besides this, when Yahweh indicts Israel for her covenant unfaithfulness to Him, it is always in the context of their Sabbath-breaking:

- **Ezekiel 20:9-14, 19-24, 27⁸** (LSB) – “But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they *lived*, in whose sight I made Myself known to them by bringing them out of the land of Egypt. So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. I gave them My statutes and made them know My judgments, which, if a man does them, he will live by them. And I also gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am Yahweh who sanctifies them. But the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness. They did not walk in My statutes, and they

² Exo. 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:13-17; 34:21; 35:2-3; Lev. 19:3, 30; 23:3; 26:2; Num. 28:9-10; Deut. 5:12-15. DeYoung writes, “Sabbath observance is mentioned more often than any other of the Ten Commandments – eleven times in the Pentateuch and over one hundred times in the Old Testament.” In Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 65.

³ See esp. Exo. 16:23, 27-30.

⁴ Exo. 31:15; 35:2; Lev. 16:31; 23:3, 32; 25:4; cf. Exo. 16:23.

⁵ Exo. 20:8; Lev. 25:10

⁶ Exo. 23:12 and 14-19; Lev. 23:3 and 4-44; Num. 28:9-10 and 28:11-29:40.

⁷ DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 65.

⁸ Cf. Jer. 17:21-27.

rejected My judgments, which, if a man does them, he will live by them; and My sabbaths they greatly profaned. **Then** I said *I would* pour out My wrath on them in the wilderness, to completely destroy them. But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, before whose sight I had brought them out... 'I am Yahweh your God; walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them. Keep My sabbaths holy; and they shall be **a sign between Me and you**, that you may know that I am Yahweh your God.' But the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, nor were they careful to do My judgments, which, *if* a man does them, he will live by them; they profaned My sabbaths. **So** I said *I would* pour out My wrath on them, to spend My anger against them in the wilderness. But I turned My hand and acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. Also I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them among the lands because they had not done My judgments, but had rejected My statutes and had profaned My sabbaths, and their eyes were *going* after the idols of their fathers... Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel and say to them, 'Thus says Lord Yahweh, "Yet in this your fathers have blasphemed Me by acting unfaithfully against Me."

- **Nehemiah 13:15-18** (LSB) – "In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading *them* on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought *them* into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I testified against *them* on the day they sold food. Also men of Tyre were living there *who* brought in fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold *them* to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, even profaning the sabbath day? Did not your fathers do the same, so our God brought on us and on this city all this calamity? Yet you are adding to *His* anger on Israel by profaning the sabbath."

According to Ezra 1:1, the reason for Israel's exile is summed up as Sabbath breaking: because Israel had failed to keep her Sabbaths in the land, Yahweh was going to force a seventy year "sabbath rest" upon them.

- **Ezra 1:1** (LSB) – “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia – in order to complete the word of Yahweh from the mouth of Jeremiah⁹ – Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.”

In fact, according to Isaiah 58, a return to faithful Sabbath-keeping is connected with Israel’s end-time restoration and blessing:

- **Isaiah 58:13-14** (LSB) – “If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your *own* desire on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of Yahweh honorable, and honor it, by not doing your *own* ways, by not finding your *own* desire, and speaking *your own* word, then you will take delight in Yahweh, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you *with* the inheritance of Jacob your father, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.”

It is also worth noting that the severity of Sabbath-breaking in the OT was tied up in the fact that it functioned as the covenant sign of the Mosaic covenant¹⁰, which is why there was such severe consequences for breaking it.¹¹

- **Exodus 31:12-18**¹² (LSB) – “Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, “But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely¹³ keep My sabbaths; for **this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am Yahweh who makes you holy.** Therefore you shall keep the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to Yahweh; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as an

⁹ See Jeremiah 29:10; cf. 25:11-14; Daniel 9:2.

¹⁰ Just as the rainbow is the sign of the Noahic covenant and circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant.

¹¹ Cf. Exo. 4:24-26, where Moses is almost executed for failing to circumcise his sons; cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-34, where many of the Corinthians became sick, and some even died for disregarding the NT covenant sign (the Lord’s Table). Regarding this, Stuart writes, “Many ancient covenants had some sort of sign – something visible that would remind people of the covenant, lest they forget it. [The Sabbath] provided a regular weekly reminder for everyone: as people keep the Sabbath, stopping their work and devoting themselves to worship, they demonstrate openly that they are keeping the covenant.” In Douglas K. Stuart, “Exodus,” *The New American Commentary*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 457.

¹² Cf. Eze. 20:12, 20 (quoted above).

¹³ The Hebrew word for “surely” (אַיִן) is translated as “must” by the NET, CSB, NIV, and “above all” by the ESV.

everlasting covenant.’ **It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever;** for in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.” When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.”

- **Numbers 15:32-26** (LSB) – “Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, “But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely keep My sabbaths; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am Yahweh who makes you holy. Therefore you shall keep the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to Yahweh; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant.’ It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.” When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.”

Lastly, we need to remember that one of the most important features of the Sabbath – like the other nine commandments in the Decalogue – is that it is given to a redeemed people, and thus the Sabbath has a redemptive aspect to it.¹⁴

Therefore, DeYoung is certainly right when he says, “Even if we conclude that there are significant points of discontinuity between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord’s Day, we would be unwise to suggest that God is indifferent to the principles of rest and worship.”¹⁵ That is, regardless of where one falls on its NT usage, the Sabbath played a central role in the identity and life of God’s covenant people, Israel.

¹⁴ See Tony Costa, <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/sbjt-201-spring-2016/sabbath-relation-christ-church-new-covenant/>

¹⁵ DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 66.

Arguments Against Christian “Sabbath-Keeping”¹⁶

1. The argument of “Sabbath silence”

a. Nowhere are “post-Pentecost” believers commanded in the New Testament epistles to observe the Sabbath.

- Though He is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), Jesus nowhere commands His followers to continue to observe it.
 - His rebuke of the Pharisees with regards to the Sabbath was their misreading and misapplication of it themselves (Mark 2:23-27).
- The reason Jesus and His disciples “observed” the OT Sabbath during His earthly ministry is because at that time they were still “under the Law,” whereas new-covenant believers (that is, those who are “in Christ”) are no longer “under the Law.”
 - **Galatians 4:4** (LSB) – “But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who are under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons.”
 - **Romans 6:14, 7:1, 4, 6** (LSB) – “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace...Or do you not know, brothers – for I am speaking to those who know the law – that the law is master over a person as long as he lives?...So, my brothers, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ...But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were constrained, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”
 - **1 Corinthians 9:19-21** (LSB) – “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews. To those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law. To those who are without law, as without law, though

¹⁶ There is indeed a spectrum with regards to ‘evangelical non-sabbatarianism,’ and so what follows is a general summary of the various positions within this ‘camp.’

not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those without the law.”

- Whereas believers are commanded in the NT to keep the other nine commandments.
 - **Romans 13:8-10** (LSB) – “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. For this, ‘YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ Love does not work evil against a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”
 - **1 John 5:21** (LSB) – “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”
- b. Nowhere in the NT do we see evidence of the OT Jewish Sabbath (i.e., Saturday) being ‘transferred’ or ‘changed’ to the Lord’s Day (i.e., Sunday).
 - Though believers regularly gathered together for worship and fellowship on the Lord’s Day, nowhere are they commanded to do so because this is how the fourth commandment (i.e., “remember the Sabbath”) is to be carried out in the new covenant.
- 2. Paul seems to strongly warn against the enforcing and requirement of Sabbath-keeping for believers under the new covenant, for it has served its purpose under the old era, and is no longer in force in the new era.
 - **Colossians 2:16-17, 20** (LSB) – “Therefore, no one is to judge you in food and drink, or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are *only* a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ...If you have died to the elementary principles [*stoicheia*] of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees?”
 - **Galatians 4:8-11** (LSB) – “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now, having known God, or rather having been known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things [*stoicheia*], to which you want to be enslaved all

over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you for nothing.”

3. For those who are convinced that Sabbath-keeping is an enduring moral command of God for Christians, Paul nevertheless appeals to the higher law of “love”¹⁷ for one another.

- **Romans 14:5-6a, 7** (LSB) – “One person judges one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards the day, regards it for the Lord...For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself.”

4. Since Jesus Christ is the “end/goal of the Law” (cf. Romans 10:4) and has fulfilled it (cf. Matthew 5:17), new covenant believers now enter into and enjoy God’s “rest” (i.e., “keep God’s Sabbath”) by resting in Him by faith.

- **Hebrews 4:1-11** (LSB) – “Therefore, let us fear, lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have fallen short of it. For indeed we have had good news proclaimed to us, just as they also; but the word that was heard did not profit those who were not united with faith among those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said,

“AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH,
THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST,”

although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has spoken somewhere in this way concerning the seventh day:

“AND GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY FROM ALL HIS WORKS”;

and again in this *passage*,

“THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.”

Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news proclaimed to them failed to enter because of disobedience, He again determines a certain day, “TODAY,” saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before,

“TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,

¹⁷ That is, “the law of Christ” (cf. Gal. 5:1)

DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall into the same example of disobedience.”

5. Since the “sign” of the Mosaic covenant is the Sabbath,¹⁸ Christians are no longer required to keep the Sabbath, since those who are now “in Christ” are under the new covenant (to which the Sabbath pointed).
 - Just as Christians are never commanded to receive the “sign”¹⁹ of physical circumcision (as OT Israel was), neither are they commanded in the NT to observe the Sabbath (whether Saturday or Sunday), as it would indicate that they are still under the Mosaic covenant, something Paul takes great pains to refute in many of his letters.
 - Rather, the sign of belonging to the people of God in the new covenant is remembrance of the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23-26).
 - Just as Sabbath observance encouraged Israel to regularly remember their deliverance out of slavery from Egypt, so the observance of the Lord’s Table by the church is to be a weekly reminder of her deliverance out of their slavery from sin.²⁰

Conclusion

The Sabbath points to Christ and is fulfilled in Him. Just as the OT sacrifices were a “shadow (*skia*) of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities” (Heb. 10:1, ESV), so also is the Sabbath a shadow (*skia*) of the true substance of God’s full and final rest (Col. 2:17). Both find their “end” or “fulfillment” in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. No where in the NT

¹⁸ Recall from above Exo. 31:12-17 and Eze. 20:12-17.

¹⁹ See Genesis 17:9-14, especially verses 11 and 13.

²⁰ Or, as Schreiner says, “Thus, the Sabbath, is tied to Israel’s covenant with the Lord, for it celebrates her liberation from slavery. The Sabbath, then, is the sign of the covenant between the Lord and Israel.” In his *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 209.

is the Sabbath denigrated, for it – as a part of the Law – was a wonderful and worthy “tutor and guardian and steward” (Gal. 3:23-24; 4:2) to prepare Israel and the world for the coming fulfiller of the Law in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4). Those who are in Christ are “no longer under [the] tutor” of the law (3:25), but now are guided (*stoicheo*) by the promised Holy Spirit, who enables us by His power to fulfill the law (5:14-6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37-40).

Application

Is there ‘room,’ theologically, for a “non-Sabbatarian” to “look” like a Sabbatarian in practice? That is, out of love for Christ, is it possible to “walk in wisdom” and “make the best use of time” on the Lord’s Day for things like:

1. Obeying the NT command of gathering together (Heb. 10:25; cf. 3:12-15) to hear the Word read, taught, and preached (1 Tim. 4:13); to sing the Word (Eph. 5:19), pray the Word (1 Tim. 2:1), eat the Word (1 Cor 11:26).
2. Carry out works of charity and love to others.
3. Intentionally resting physically – as the “1 in 7” principle seems to pre-date the giving of the Mosaic law (Gen. 2:1-3).
4. Using the Lord’s Day as a gift to do things to strengthen your faith and love, which are harder to do during the week.

We must remember that “rest” is not the same as inactivity, especially now that we are in Christ.

Arguments for NT Sabbatarianism