

1. The Fourth Commandment

Reading: Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:8-11.

For these few weeks, I want to discuss the fourth commandment. This is a much-misunderstood commandment. On the surface this seems to be a simple matter as we all acknowledge the commandment and go to church on Sunday. This is about all that most people understand of this commandment. The meaning of the seventh day in the scriptures has been lost and reduced to a Sunday rest. The rest of God has been reduced to a weekend holiday. The blessing of the Sabbath has been reduced to materialism. The holiness of the Sabbath has been reduced to personal piety.

Themes: (5 Sundays)

The themes that I want to take on for these few weeks are taken from these verses in Genesis which form the basis of the fourth commandment.

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. (Gen. 2:1-3)

1. The 'Fourth Commandment'
2. The 'Seventh Day'
3. God rested on the 'Seventh Day'
4. God blessed the 'Seventh Day'
5. God made the 'Seventh Day' holy

The fourth commandment

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. 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. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8-11)

This is the fourth commandment and the only commandment with an explanation. We are commanded to cease from doing the self-thing and not to trust in our own work. Christians observe the first day of the week as the Lord's Day or rather the Easter Day following the resurrection of Jesus. The early church observed this day as the day of their assembling.

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. (Acts 20:7)

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. (1 Cor. 16:2)

For our friends in the essential services, they would have difficulty in keeping this commandment. Sunday is a working day for them if they are rostered. How would they interpret this commandment?

However, our friends in the Seventh Day Adventist Church continue to observe the Sabbath, i.e. on Saturday in keeping with the literal sense of the fourth commandment. We may have our differing opinions on that practice, but before we do that, we need to look further into the nature of this fourth commandment. In commanding us to observe the Sabbath, we are given an insight into the reason for this. It is God's rest on the seventh day of creation. We will come back to the Sabbath observance later, but we need first of all to consider the reasons given for this commandment. These are,

- The creation in six days
- God rested on the seventh day
- God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy

There is much to be said regarding this and we will do this in the following weeks. Before we do that, we need to note the curious verse in Hebrews alluding to a future Sabbath rest for the people of God.

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. (Heb. 4:9)

What is this remaining Sabbath rest for the people of God? We will come back to this later. We see that the Sabbath rest is not simply a matter of not working and going to church on a Sunday.

So far, I have only made a quick survey of the issues surrounding this commandment. We need to work through some of these meanings in the next few weeks. We want to see what has been given to us in the Genesis account regarding creation and the seventh day.

A command to obey or grace to be received?

Much has been said and written about the observance of the fourth commandment. We know of the pharisaical legalism in the days of Christ. That was very much the result of the reform by Nehemiah. He was very aware that the captivity in Babylon was the result of the unfaithfulness of Israel in not keeping the Sabbath and that had been denounced by the prophets. In order to prevent Israel from doing that again, he legislated the keeping of the fourth commandment. In doing this, it only highlighted the faithfulness of the people and totally missed the point of the fourth commandment, i.e. God's faithfulness to Israel.

¹⁵In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. ¹⁶Tyrrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! ¹⁷Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

¹⁹As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹But I warned them and said to them, "Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. ²²Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. (Neh. 13:15-22)

That was not bad legislation. However, it was an external reform. It did not come from a new heart which is what God promised He will do for His people. Even in our days, the discussion rages on. Some of us in the essential services are well aware of the conflict. We also know that Jesus healed on a Sabbath day (Mk. 3:1-6), and so the Westminster Confession allowed such acts of mercy on the Sabbath.

VIII. This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an 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. (Westminster Confession, Ch. 21.VIII)

However, Jesus said,

²⁷And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28)

We will work through the meaning of what Jesus said in our subsequent studies.

We need to resolve the question of law and grace before we go further. We refer to this as the fourth commandment, but is this law or is this the grace of God to be received? It is both. If so, then does obedience to the commandment lead to grace being given? Or is it because of the grace given and received that one obeys the

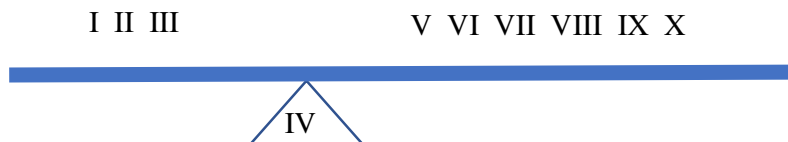
commandment? Of course, we know that it is the latter. To obey this command is to have received the grace of God in the first place. To disobey this command is to look down on this grace, to take it lightly. We need to work all that out.

Before we look specifically at the fourth commandment, we need to see the commandments as a whole. The commandments show to us the image of God, i.e. what God is like. The commandments are given to us because of the grace of God. As we are created in the image of God and as the commandments show to us the image of God, then these commandments map out for us the lives we live in conformity to the image of God.

In his Church Dogmatics, Karl Barth says that the fourth commandment should be at the head of the commandments.

The Sabbath commandment explains all the other commandments, ... It is thus to be placed at their head. (K Barth, *C.D.* III.4, 53)

Of course, he does not imply that we should re-arrange the Ten Words with the fourth commandment as the first. What he means is that the Ten Words are anchored on the fourth. I will explain that fuller in the later studies. Another way of interpreting what he says is that the commandments have their fulcrum on the fourth like this.



As humanity has been plunged into sin, the commandments, and the fourth in particular, spell out for us our lives the image of God. What the fourth commandment brings to us is the necessity and the priority of grace in obedience. What we will do in these few weeks is to look at creation and the seventh day in particular in order to explain the stance that we take in understanding this commandment.

The priority of the Sabbath

We need to take note of what Jesus said here.

⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." (Matt. 12:6-8)

The temple is the symbol of God's presence with His people and is the place for the people to bring their sacrifices to the Lord. However, Jesus pointed out that it is not just the sacrifices that the people bring along. They need to express their love for the other in their community, the community of God's people. The Sabbath is a creational ordinance as we shall see in a little while. The command for the response from the people comes after that. Grace precedes the commandment. The command was given because of sin. In the state of innocence, the response of the Sabbath is like breathing in and breathing out.

The Sabbath is not ordained by humanity to honour God. It is ordained by God for the sake of humanity to express their life in God.

The Creational Covenant

This commandment is set in covenant form. Humanity was created on the sixth day and the seventh day is to be set aside in acknowledgment of the Creator and to be with Him resting in His blessing. This is the one eternal covenant of creation, a covenant of love initiated by the creator God. Humanity has no part in the setting up of this covenant. It is entirely the expression of the love of God.

As Barth has put it so eloquently, 'Creation as the External Basis of the Covenant', 'The Covenant as the Internal Basis of Creation'. (K Barth, *CD III.1*). Put simply, the covenant of love is expressed in the creation. Thus, the creational relationship is set up and humanity is the respond to the love of God. We need to see that the creation is not merely the material creation but also the creation of the relationship with the Creator.

The creational relationships

The material creation was established before the creation of humanity. A relationship between the material creation and humanity was established. Thus, we see that the creation consisted not merely the creation of the material, but also the creation of relationships which above all is the relationship between humanity and the creator God.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." ²⁹ And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Gen. 1:26-31)

This set up the relationships in creation. Firstly, humanity created in the image of God is enabled to relate and respond to God in a way that none else in creation is able to do. That special relationship with God demands a response to the creator God with His enabling, i.e. with all that the creator has created and blessed the creature with.

Secondly, humanity has been given the material creation to support him. However as co-regent with the creator, humanity also has the duty to 'work and keep it'.

⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. ... ¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Gen. 2:8-9, 15)

In His love, God provided for humanity's existence in the garden. Man's response was 'to work and keep it'. Without going into details, this is to be interpreted as man's response to grace, the priority of grace in all human responses. Humanity was given dominion over the material creation.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:28)

Human disobedience reversed these relationships. Instead of obeying the voice of God, Adam and Eve disobeyed and took from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the fruit that 'was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes' (Gen. 3:6).

What was meant as support for humanity is now taken for human greed. Over the ages, Christians have used this verse to justify their actions. They claimed that God has given creation over to them to subdue and have dominion, now interpreted as exploitation. That is a misinterpretation. What it says is that we look after the creation that God has given to us. You might wonder what has this to do with the Sabbath. Heaps, as the Sabbath requires us to rest from our work.

The fourth commandment sets what our relationship with God should be. We have seen that it has its basis in creation. It also moves from the creation to the eschaton as we shall see later. This has to be so as this is the covenantal relationship for all eternity.

Commandments as expression of relationships

We have commonly regarded the commandments as what we need to do. If we rightly see them as showing to us the image of God, then we need to see them as expression of our relationship with God and His creation. Of course, all relationships must arise from the heart and that is where the work of God begins as the prophets told us. Relationships must not merely be external. The external expressions need to come from within. Then that must be what is expected of us in all relationship. The first three commandments give to us the nature of God and our response in the worship of God. The fourth commandment undergirds the first three and gives the reason for doing so. It is the grace of God to us in enabling us to fulfil our role in that relationship. The remaining six commandment follows from the fourth. I will explain that next week.

The fourth commandment and social justice

Isaiah has much to say about Israel's derelict practice in his days. They sought the Lord and kept the fast, but there was a total disregard for the disadvantaged and the workers were oppressed (Is. 58:1-12). Isaiah linked the practice of keeping the festival with the care of the disadvantaged. The two greatest commandments put forward by Jesus were already there in the writings of the prophet Isaiah. Writing in relation to the Sabbath, he said,

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Is. 58:7)

In taking them back to their roots, Isaiah raised the observance of the Sabbath.

¹³ “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;	¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isa. 58:13-14)
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What is raised here about the Sabbath is not legalism, the things that they should do, but to delight in the gift of the Sabbath and thus delight in the Lord. It is coming back to the relationship in the Lord. Notice that holiness and blessings are mentioned here, as was in the fourth commandment. We will be looking at those issues in later studies.

Social issues are important expressions in the Ten Words given by God. As shown in the diagram above, our worship of God and the concern for others are pivoted upon the fourth commandment. Thus, the fourth commandment is not restricted to the seventh day. The command is extended to include the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee. It is not merely personal morality, but includes public morality as well. It speaks of the stewardship of property and wealth, and the restoration of what God had initially given to the people of the tribes of Israel. In that way, no one continues to live in abject poverty forever. We will say more of this next week when we look more closely on the meaning of the seventh day. Whatever had befallen inadvertently on an individual or a family, there will be a day of restitution when what was given originally will be restored. This is seen in the eschatological perspective of Isaiah.

The fourth commandment – an eschatological perspective

Isaiah had much to say about Sabbath. His concern was not about the practice of the Sabbath, but the social and the eschatological aspect of it. While the Jews regarded the Sabbath as a festival belonging to them, Isaiah had

a broader perspective. He saw the Sabbath as part of the creational order encompassing all of humanity created in the image of God.

<p>¹ Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. ² Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.” ³ Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” ⁴ For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, ⁵ I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.</p>	<p>⁶ “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— ⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” ⁸ The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.” (Isa. 56:1-8)</p>
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After addressing the Jews on the Sabbath, Isaiah included the foreigners and those who had been mutilated, the eunuchs. The fourth commandment is not the exclusive domain of the Jews, but the whole of humanity. So, finally, Isaiah included ‘everyone who keeps the Sabbath’. In seeing the Sabbath this way, Isaiah was looking towards the end-time when all will be gathered before the Lord, ‘for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’ (Isa. 56:7).

What this says to us is the faithfulness of God to His creation, faithfulness to the end when the new heaven and the new earth will appear. The Sabbath marks the completion of the creation acts. Again, it will mark the completion of the New Heaven and the New Earth as Isaiah says.

²² “For as the new heavens and the new earth
that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord,
so shall your offspring and your name remain.
²³ From new moon to new moon,
and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
declares the Lord. (Isa. 66:22-23)

‘From Sabbath to Sabbath’ or as Calvin puts it ‘from a Sabbath to his Sabbath’, is a reference to the perpetual Sabbath rest in God, i.e. our worship. Thus, the Sabbath is God’s gift to us to enable us to respond to Him appropriately. As the Sabbath is rooted in creation, we need to see that the Sabbath is primarily God’s grace to us before it is a command. It goes beyond the Sunday church service. It is God’s gift to us for all eternity. In this way we can understand what Jesus said regarding the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27-28)

The Sabbath is a reflection of the rest of God and we are asked to live in that rest.

¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”
¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Ps. 46:10-11)

This leads us to the seventh day in our next discussion. I have given a survey of the issues involved in the fourth commandment. We will look at the specific issues in the fourth commandment from next week.