

The 4th Commandment: Rest

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[0 : 00] So life is busy, isn't it? Jonathan has intimated as much in his prayer earlier. Life is busy, and life is frequently just rather exhausting. Why do we long for the weekend? Why do we spend time planning our holidays?

We are a busy, restless people in a busy, restless world, in need of rest and in need of an end to all the busyness, the stress, and the endless treadmill of work and responsibility.

Throughout the week, doesn't it often just feel like we're running to stand still? We're juggling multiple balls in the air, and perhaps we're spinning a few plates as well.

It's busy. And intrinsic to all of us is a desire, actually a need, a need for rest. I think George Washington's last song in the musical Hamilton captures this rather poetically.

On the verge of stepping into retirement after a long and busy run as a general and a president, he sings, I want to sit under my own vine and fig tree, a moment alone in the shade at home in this nation we've made.

[1 : 09] We haven't led nations and armies, but can't we all empathize with that desire to just sit for a moment in the shade? That need for a break, that hope of rest.

And this is why the fourth commandment is written to us. In it is the gift of rest, or Sabbath. So I'll read the whole commandment out again.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

On it you shall not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your male and female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them. But he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

[2 : 11] In our workaholic world, many of us will be working all day and then working a good chunk of the evening, whether it be our employers just bleeding us dry, or our work around the home and the various bits of life admin that we've just got to do, or our responsibilities as parents, or whatever it might be.

There is always more to do, isn't there? And in this world, well, the fourth commandment is a powerful tonic and a necessary gift.

So we're going to look at it from three temporal perspectives. They're on the screen there. So one, Sabbath past, which was a law for Israel. Two, Sabbath future, which is a hope for the redeemed.

And then three, applying it to today, Sabbath present, a principle for Christians. So those are our three points. We'll start with number one. Sabbath past, a law for Israel.

Of all the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath command is probably the one that Christians disagree about the most. There'll be some who will go as far as to say that it doesn't apply today at all.

[3 : 16] Then on the other hand, there'll be some who will say that actually it applies in pretty much exactly the same way as it did back in the Old Testament. Who's right? Well, I'll start by saying this.

The reason God gives for instituting a day of Sabbath rest suggests that at the very least, it still applies in some sense today. The reason given for the commandment is this.

For in six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

So the primary reason for the Sabbath has its roots all the way back in the creation of the world. We'll not get into a discussion about figurative or literal days just now, because that's to miss the point.

The point is that God created the world and then he rested on the seventh day. And so inbuilt, if you like, into the very fabric of creation is the need for rest after six days of work.

[4 : 19] So it's a law for Israel, but it stems from a principle that was in place way before Israel even existed. God rested and made the seventh day holy, i.e. a day that was separate from the others and had a different purpose to the others and was, in a sense, more glorious than the others.

This was the day when creation was finished and God enjoyed all that he had made, for it was very good. And God wants humanity, the pinnacle of his creation, made in his image to enjoy that rest with him.

So that's the first reason. There's also a second reason. The book of Deuteronomy, it's mostly comprised of Moses' last great speech to Israel before he dies and they go on to enter the promised land.

But in Deuteronomy, he reminds them of the law and he reminds them of the Ten Commandments. So Deuteronomy says this about the fourth commandment. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. So Israel used to be slaves in Egypt. Slaves obviously have no freedom and slaves have no opportunities for rest.

[5 : 39] In God's kingdom, therefore, a day of rest is legally instituted to ensure that everyone was able to rest.

That's why the command in Exodus reads, God gave his gift of rest to everyone, no matter who they were or where they came from.

Everyone was supposed to be able to enjoy a day of rest and recuperation. God knows that we need rest.

Rest was instituted before sin had even entered the world. And with sin, well, its need is just made even more apparent. How then were Israel to observe the Sabbath?

Well, they were to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. So the way they're supposed to do that, all work was to cease. The word Sabbath is related to the Hebrew word to cease, to stop.

[6 : 44] Indeed, so important was it that people took time to rest away from their work, that God actually instituted the death penalty for working on the Sabbath.

That might shock and surprise you. But this is how much God cares that his people rest. Because if one person stops observing Sabbath, pretty soon everyone will.

It's a slippery slope, and we can probably observe that in our own culture. When God's people came back from exile, Nehemiah was exasperated because people started treating the Sabbath like any other day, and the slippery slope started to slide.

Despite our need for rest, we naturally idolize our work, and we just don't take the rest we need.

And that's what Nehemiah was finding when everyone had come back from Babylon and Persia to Jerusalem.

And Nehemiah had worked really hard to make sure that people actually kept Sabbath. Because it's a command that is so easily rejected. In keeping it holy, it was also to be a day of worship.

[7 : 50] As God's people were to rest as God had rested, so they also spent time worshipping him together. To remember the Sabbath means more than just recollection. If, for example, you merely recollect a wedding anniversary rather than actually doing something about it, then you've not really remembered it in the way that you're supposed to.

That could land you in an awful lot of trouble. The Sabbath, if you like, is a weekly anniversary that Israel were to spend resting with God and resting in God.

The way in which Israel remembered it was to spend time worshipping God together. Leviticus says this, The seventh day is a day of Sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly.

So that is a day for rest and a day for worshipping God together. The two go hand in hand, physical rest and spiritual rest, if you like. And Jesus certainly endorsed that as he would go to the synagogue on the Sabbath to hear God's word read and taught.

And he would go to worship God with others. When we read the Old Testament, I think it's fascinating just to see how much God cares about his Sabbaths.

[9 : 06] In Ezekiel, for example, God is really deeply saddened, and I quote, that they had not obeyed my laws, but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths.

Of all the many laws that Israel had broken, and they've broken many, the one that seems to stand out here is Sabbath. For Israel to keep the Sabbath, it seems that that was a proof that they loved God.

And if they didn't keep Sabbath, that was in effect proof that they had rejected him. Isaiah 58 puts the same issue in slightly more positive terms. God says through Isaiah, if you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord.

And I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. So God, through Isaiah, was reminding Israel that keeping the Sabbath holy, using it for rest and for worship, brought blessing to his people and joy in the Lord.

And so if anything is clear about Sabbath in the Old Testament, it is that keeping the Sabbath really mattered. And so however we understand the application of the Sabbath command today, one thing is very clear from the way that it's understood in the Old Testament.

[10:48] God cares deeply about his Sabbath. And the implication, therefore, is that Christians today can't just pass it off as a law that no longer matters.

The question then must be not whether Sabbath applies today, but rather, how does Sabbath apply today? So in order to help us with that question, just as we've considered Sabbath in the past, we now want to think about Sabbath in the future.

If Sabbath past was a law for Israel, well, Sabbath future can be defined as a hope for God's redeemed people. Because Sabbath is ultimately a picture of an even greater rest that God's people have been promised.

And that even greater rest is Christ himself and the promise of a new creation. So let's consider, firstly, the rest that is found in Christ.

This is our present experience. But when the commandment was first given, that hope of Christ was still to come. And so Sabbath, at its core, has always been looking forward to a greater rest.

[12:00] When Jesus was on earth and teaching around the region of Galilee, he said this, and this is what Monica was reading for us earlier, from Matthew. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

So to follow Jesus is to find a truer and more perfect rest than even the Sabbath day offers.

Sabbath rest is ultimately found in Jesus.

When people follow him and give their lives to him, they experience a transformational sense of rest for their souls. And if you don't know Jesus personally like that, come to him and realize that actually his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

In other words, although there's a cost to following Jesus, there is a deep and overwhelmingly profound experience of rest that goes with it.

[13:12] A transformational sense of soul rest that makes the sacrifice of following Jesus so, so worth it. It's no surprise that in Matthew's gospel after Jesus says this, the very next story, and this is where we got onto in Matthew chapter 12, is one about his disciples walking through cornfields and picking grain to eat.

And the Pharisees, Jewish religious leaders, condemned them as breaking the fourth commandment. They weren't. The fourth commandment did forbid work, but it did not forbid all activity.

The exceptions are sometimes classified as works of necessity and works of mercy. And I think we can all agree that eating is definitely a work of necessity. Now Jesus says this to his accusers.

If you had known what these words mean, and he quotes from the Old Testament from Hosea, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent, for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

This is the point Jesus was making. The Sabbath is a day of sacrifice to God. But, not at the expense of God's people. A day of sacrifice to God that ignores the works of mercy towards God's people that God desires, well, that goes against the very heart of Sabbath.

[14:31] And more than that, Jesus himself, the Son of Man, is the Lord of the Sabbath. It's his day. The story continues. Jesus goes into the synagogue to worship where there's a man with a shriveled hand.

The Pharisees, they want to test Jesus and they ask him if it's lawful for him to heal on the Sabbath. This is what Matthew says happened next. Now I'll just read it for about him.

He said to them, if any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep? Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Then he said to the man, stretch out your hands. So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. The way in which Jesus talks about himself as the giver of rest and shows that the Sabbath is a day for mercy and for restoration.

The way in which he calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath. All these things are pointing towards this idea that Sabbath is in a way personified in Jesus himself.

[15:41] He is the perfect rest. He is the merciful one. He is the one who restores all things and he is the Lord of the Sabbath.

So when we read that commandment in Exodus, we cannot but see how it looks forward to Christ and our perfect rest in him. And when someone believes in Jesus, well, they receive the promise of an even greater rest in the future.

In Christ, Christians do experience a very present rest for their souls and you'll know what that feels like if you're trusting in him. But even that is only a taster of the future rest for us.

It's going to happen when Christ returns and we get to experience life with him forever in his new creation, which is going to be free from sin and death and from all those things which drag us down and tire us out as we live out our lives right now.

The writer to the Hebrews, he speaks of this future rest. He's speaking to a group of early Christians who were wanting to return to the now defunct ways of Judaism. He says this, there remains then a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

[16:58] For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works just as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

So this writer is making it clear that there is a Sabbath rest that God's people have yet to enter into. And the way to experience it is to keep following the way of Jesus in obedience.

It's not until sometime later in the letter that the writer shed some light on what sort of rest lies at the end of this. He says that faithful followers of God in the past were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared a city for them. That's the rest that we have in the future. A parallel verse we can find in these heavenly words from Revelation.

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. They will rest from their labor for their deeds follow them. You know how it is even when we have a really restful weekend or a wonderfully relaxing holiday.

[18:16] Monday always comes around again. We never really stop, do we? We always feel that there must be some end to this hamster wheel of work that we're trapped in, but it never really seems to come, does it?

Things just keep going. But we do feel that there must be some sort of end. That's because there is. That feeling that there must be a greater rest is because there is a greater rest.

I wonder if that's why so many unbelievers and agnostics still feel they can speak of heaven or of the dead being in a better place. Because actually in the heart of mankind is this unshakable hope of somewhere after death.

This better country, this city where we will finally be able to be at peace. To rest in peace, that's more than just a platitude for the Christian.

In Christ and the future that his people have with him, there will be an eternal rest. Not an eternal sleep of death, but eternal life.

[19:22] An eternal Sabbath where the trials and the frustrations of this world will no longer trouble us. This is what we find in Sabbath and it matters immensely because it looks forward to the perfect rest which Christians will one day enter and enjoy forever.

But here's the question and this brings us onto our third point. Does that future Sabbath then negate our continued celebration of Sabbath in the present? In short, no, I don't think so.

After all, it's in the future. In the present, there is still a need for a weekly Sabbath rest which points us forward to that eternal Sabbath. The trials and tiredness that we experience in the world, they're not gone, they're still there.

Therefore, we still need a weekly Sabbath for rest and for worship. It's a good thing. It's a good thing for us to celebrate it. After all, Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is not something to try and avoid, it's not a chore, but actually it's something to embrace as a good gift. So that principle remains.

[20 : 41] But is Sabbath to be observed in the same way that it was when the commandment was first given? Well, again, no, I don't think so. After all, Paul in Colossians says this, therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

These are a shadow of the things that were to come. The reality, however, is found in Christ. So what does Paul mean here? Well, many of the earliest Christians were Jews and many of them thought that they had to keep up the various different Jewish traditions and rituals in order to obtain their salvation.

And even some of the non-Jews were tempted towards that as may have been the case in the Colossian church. So Paul and others discouraged them from celebrating the Jewish Sabbath which was on a Saturday because they were putting too much superstition into the day and the ritual and that's not the point of Sabbath.

At the same time, the early Christians had started meeting together on a Sunday, the first day of the week, the day when Jesus rose from the dead. We see this in the book of Acts as the church of Christ grows.

And by the time Revelation is written, which is one of the last books to be written in the Bible, John calls it the Lord's Day which very directly parallels the way that the Sabbath was described in the Old Testament, a day holy to the Lord.

[22 : 10] Now it's worth noting that the New Testament doesn't give us strict rules for following the Christian Sabbath. And I suspect that this is because unlike Israel which had a Sabbath inbuilt into their culture, well the early Christians were living in the Roman Empire which didn't have a Sabbath inbuilt into their rules.

And so as Christianity grew and as it became the dominant religion in the empire, well it became a lot easier to celebrate Sabbath. So Christians did because the principle still stands.

Now today of course in Scotland Christianity is no longer the dominant worldview, it's not the dominant religion and culturally, well Sabbath's become almost an alien concept, hasn't it?

So to return to our question, does Sabbath still apply? Well absolutely. But because we don't live in a Sabbatarian culture, I don't think there's any shame when we find ourselves because of various reasons unable to celebrate Sabbath.

For example, a lot of jobs expect us to work on a Sunday. The ideal is not to work on a Sunday but the ideal is not always possible.

[23 : 25] What we're to do is to honour the principle to the best of our ability. Where the challenge comes for Christians I think is where there is the opportunity to take Sabbath, do we?

Because of the many idols in our culture, I think possibly one of the most influential is the idol of work. It's very influential. We are a workaholic culture and even from school age we're kind of indoctrinated to find our identity in what we work as.

That's the idol behind an innocent seeming question like what do you want to be when you grow up? Apparently I once answered that question by saying a theologian so be careful what you wish for. But in all seriousness, when you're told you can be and do anything, work becomes such a huge idol and it's a cruel one because you feel shackled to the desk.

We feel basically in servitude to that identity. Rest feels like slacking off. So isn't it comforting then to know that according to God rest is a good gift.

Isn't it wonderful to know that God actually he wants us to take a full day off to recover. And isn't it freeing to know that in God's eyes rest does not equal laziness.

[24 : 48] So don't listen to culture. Remember the Sabbath every week that you can because it's a day for us for God's people. It's a gift. And as we celebrate it it is a symbol of hope.

It's a picture of that perfect rest when all of God's people come together to worship Christ in eternity. That's where our Sunday meetings come in.

As Jews met together on Sabbath to worship God well that's what we do too and we're doing it right now. Jesus did it. The early Christians did it on the Lord's Day. We continue to do it and it's a blessing.

And in the future when we come to experience our eternal Sabbath rest we're not going to be doing it alone. Sometimes when we rest we do feel the need to rest and have time by ourselves.

For me it's taking an hour with my nose in a novel. But the biblical picture of rest is of rest together. When Christ returns his people are all going to be there with him to enjoy his eternal Sabbath together with him and with one another.

[25 : 57] And so on a Sunday it's a joy to meet in person and to enjoy the blessing of Sabbath together as we rest from our work and as we worship God as we listen to God together as we speak to him together and we'll definitely appreciate this one as we sing to him together.

Now at this point it's maybe worth encouraging all of us if we can to come to our Sunday meetings in person as often as is possible. One of the absolute joys of Sabbath is to be with our brothers and sisters in the flesh to worship God.

A spiritual rest enjoyed as a family together. Sabbath is it's an oasis if you like. It refreshes us for the week.

A day when we are able to be spiritually in the altitudes as one writer once put it. We experience God's blessing all the time we know this but when we celebrate Sabbath there's a particular joy and blessing that we're able to have.

Now we've only been able to really scratch the surface of the implications. I'm sure there's lots of questions so do ask those in our time for Q&R; afterwards. But as we close let me just reiterate a few key truths about Sabbath.

[27 : 19] Sabbath is no chore. Sabbath is rather an invitation from God himself. It's a rule and it's a principle for rest, physical and spiritual.

It's an oasis from the responsibilities of work and the idol of work that so easily ensnares us. It's a letter of freedom to take time off.

It's an invitation to enter into the rest that God enjoyed when creation was done. And it's a promise, a promise that in Christ we will enjoy an even greater rest in his new creation.