

Commandment IV

For the children of the Reformation, Anglicans, Presbyterians, as well as Anabaptists and Methodists, Sabbath-breaking was anathema. You can hardly read a catalogue of sins denounced by the Puritans in which violation of the Fourth Commandment is not prominent.

In recent years, however, successors to these holy men are not so certain Sabbath-keeping belongs to Christianity at all. Grace, they assert, has displaced the law, and all who attempt to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” and teach others to do so are contemptuously derided as “Sabbatarians”.

In the controversies over law and Grace (or Christian liberty), when it comes down to concrete issues, two always take the brunt of debate: Tithing and Sabbath-keeping. This is likely because these two things can, and are often, performed assiduously by persons who have no grace in their hearts. They are something that men can do overtly and regularly without any evangelical devotion to God. As such, they lend themselves easily to hypocritical practice and fleshy pride. Practice of them both in an external and irreverent fashion is soundly denounced in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

Both are commanded by God in the Old Testament, and neither are *explicitly* confirmed in the New Testament. Sabbath-keeping, however, presents a somewhat more difficult problem for the abolitionist, in that it is included in the Decalogue. No Christian sect or movement that I know of, no matter how zealous to promote Christian Liberty afforded by God’s grace under the New Covenant, advocates setting aside the moral code verbalized in the Ten Commandments.

It is postulated, therefore, that the Fourth Commandment alone of all the Ten is strictly ceremonial, has no moral implications whatever, and is not to be allowed to bind the conscience of us whose righteousness is of Christ. Having thus cleaved asunder the single stone tablet containing man’s duty to God, men seek to erase with human logic what is written with the finger of God (Exodus 31:18).

Imagined support for Sabbath abolition is found in Colossians 2:14-17. But this cannot be. That which has been “blotted out, taken out of the way, and nailed to his (Christ’s) cross” is said to be “against us” and “contrary to us”; But our Lord expressly declares, “*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath*” (Mark 2:27). Can something which our wise and good Creator made expressly for man be against him and contrary to him? Certainly not! Whatever this is, it *cannot be the seventh day rest*.

What, then, has been “blotted out, taken out of the way and nailed to His cross”? In Colossians 2:16, we are declared to be impervious to men’s judgment in respect to meat, drink, holy days, new moons and sabbaths. What are these “sabbaths”? It must be obvious that they are strictly ceremonial sabbaths, many of which were found in the Old Testament ceremonial law, in addition to the seventh-day rest enjoined in the Decalogue. Colossians 2:17 tells us these were mere shadows (types) of things to come, and that the full realization of the substance of these shadows is in Christ.

All these ceremonial types were abolished with the advent of the New Covenant. These laws were based on a temporary relationship between God and man, that *began* with Moses and ended with Christ.

We are further declared to be free from those “*ordinances (touch not, taste not, handle not; which all are to perish with the using) after the commandments and doctrines of men*” (Colossians 2:20-22). The scribes and Pharisees were not content to let God’s revelation stand as it was, but heaped upon their own gnat-straining interpretations and burdensome commandments which had no divine authority whatever. This is what has been “blotted out,” taken out of the way and nailed to His cross”, not what the Almighty has written with His Finger in tables of stone.

One might now wish to appeal to 2 Corinthians 3:3-13. The ministry of the New Testament is said to be an epistle of Christ written in fleshy tables of the heart rather than tables of stone (verse 3), a ministry of the spirit rather than of the letter (verse 6), one of life rather than one of death (verse 6-7), of righteousness rather than condemnation (verse 9). It is further declared that the ministry of the old covenant and its glory has been done away with, abolished, replaced and superceded by the ministry of the New Covenant in Christ, which so far exceeds the Old in glory as to make it seem as if it had no glory at all (verses 9-13).

All of this is readily and heartily acknowledged. We joyfully proclaim the abolition of the ministry of death under the Old covenant and the bringing in of a better hope in Christ. What we do deny is the abolition of God’s moral *law* written in the Decalogue. And we are not alone in that denial. No Christian would assert that God has freed men to idolatry, murder, stealing, lying, adultery and covetousness.

This puts us back to the original postulation that the Fourth Commandment alone in all the ten is strictly ceremonial. This we propose to thoroughly refute. There is, to be sure, a ceremonial element in it, as there is in all the other nine, but the commandment is primarily moral.

The Decalogue was written on two tables. The first contained four commandments verbalizing man’s relationship and duty to God; the second contained six, spelling out man’s relationship and duties to man. Only the second table can be called moral in the ethical sense of the word, for these words embody rules governing man’s social behaviour. Morality is defined as upright and just social behaviour. It is doing what is right and just. Now, morality can be identified only if there are absolute standards of what is right and wrong. When men speak of right and wrong, they admit that such absolute standards exist. These standards can only come from God, our *Creator*. Our Life-giver, the Cause and Owner of all that exists. The Ruler of the Universe must also be our Law-giver. It is His word and will that is revealed in the last six commandments which form the absolute standard of all human morality.

If the last six commandments are the absolute moral code for human ethics, what, then, are the first four? The first four establish the basis and ground for the last six. They establish Almighty God. Jehovah, first, Jehovah above all, Jehovah only, Jehovah in truth and sincerity, Jehovah the Creator ever before our eyes. It is only as God is thus revealed, contemplated, adored, preeminent

and exalted, that the moral code can have any validity, respect, authority and force. Abolish any of the first four and the last six will immediately tumble down and be trodden under the feet of godless men.

What makes stealing immoral, except God's commandment "Thou shalt not steal"? Men's opinions or feeling that stealing is wrong cannot make it wrong, for the thief may well say, "I have a right to what is yours." Indeed, many of them are saying just that today, because of the erosion of belief in the authority of the first four commandments. If there is to be consistent government of humanity, that government must have a reference point outside of and above humanity. The first four commandments establish Almighty God, our Creator, as that reference point and the absolute and final authority.

If one should ask what is moral about "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy," we can as well ask what is moral about "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image," "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." God alone makes each and every one of these first four commandments moral. They have nothing directly to do with social ethics; rather, they establish the place and authority of God, Who in turn establishes social ethics. We do the basis of morality no less damage by abolishing the Fourth Commandment than we should by abolishing the Second. All of them are equally essential to keep the Person of God continually in our minds and hearts, fresh and preeminent.

But let us turn our attention to the specific purpose, value and effects of the Fourth Commandment.

1. It is given to commemorate the work of creation. "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it." (Exodus 20:11). People who believe the Bible, that the worlds were created by God, keep it. This is a mark that separates them from humanists, evolutionists, rationalists and infidels. When the sabbath is neglected, men tend to forget God and become heathen. It is intended to keep before men the knowledge of the only true and living God Who is Creator.
2. It is given to afford a time for corporate religious instruction and special worship (Acts 13:27, 15:21). Some mistakenly think Hebrews 8:10-12 teaches a cessation of the necessity of teaching in the New Testament era. But the text itself denies it. We are *taught* the truth that God writes His laws in our hearts. Only the Holy Spirit can bring us to "know the Lord", but God has certainly gifted teachers and given them to the church to open up the scriptures for us. The Sabbath provides for a time for us to lay aside all thoughts and cares of mundane pursuits, earning bread by the sweat of our brows, all the secular cares, pursuits and business interests of this life which must be cared for . . . all of the things which we are obliged to occupy ourselves with for the major portion of our waking hours six days a week. On the seventh day we can put it all aside completely and clear our minds of all that would hinder and distract us from wholly seeking the Lord. This certainly does not mean that we pray, worship, seek the Lord, fellowship with Him and the saints only once a week. Certainly this is a continued activity and condition in Christ. But the Sabbath allows us a respite for unhindered worship and contemplation of God. It provides a full break from the tyrannies of physical necessities, a clear interruption in the pursuit of worldly cares, and helps deliver us from the insidious master of mammon, from being ensnared in the power struggle, the rat race of worldly men. We need to regularly push all clamoring demands back to their rightful place, to say to them, "Christ alone is my Master, my Salvation, and I will rest in His all-sufficiency." We need to learn weekly, as the Hebrews in the wilderness, that we will not be one whit less fed if we gather no manna on the Sabbath.
3. The Sabbath was made to provide man *regular*, much-needed physical rest. It is God's divine "retirement plan". One of the most cruel hoaxes ever foisted on man by the devil is the myth of retirement. First, we are urged to believe that work, human labor, is a drudgery, punishment for Adam's sin, and awful burden to be borne all our lives. Then we are sold the illusion that somewhere down the road in our autumn years, we can at last "retire, take it easy and enjoy life". Thus man labors feverishly year after year, with the dream that some day he will have earned retirement and can finally put aside his labors and enjoy life. It is a vain illusion. In the first place, most die before "retirement age". Secondly, they who attain to it find that they are too old, crippled and worn to "enjoy" anything. Third, they have precious little time before death to enjoy retirement if they could enjoy it. Fourth, they find that life without productive, gratifying work is incredibly boring. So they are obliged to find something else to do, or die of boredom and uselessness.

The Fourth Commandment, if heeded properly, will deliver from this frustrating delusion. It not only commands rest, but enjoins work for six days . . . all one's lifetime, not just until "retirement age". Work is not a curse, but a blessing, as one soon learns when he tries to live without working. It is a necessary therapy for our physical and psychological wellbeing. We need to be at it as long as our bodies will function. It may well be necessary to change the type of work we do as we grow older, but may God in His grace deliver us from idle uselessness. A vigorous application of the moral principles of the Fourth Commandment would immediately lift all of the nation's welfare and Social Security burdens. There is plenty of work which older and handicapped people can do, if we would rid ourselves of the idea that work is evil and would junk about 90% of our "labor saving" gadgets.

God's retirement plan is better. It works. Man is allowed to be productive and useful all his life. He rests 8 hours out of every 24, and retires one day out of seven. No one ever gets cheated out of his retirement. Regardless of how early or late one dies, his retirement has been equally proportional to his working days. His body and mind maintain the highest state of preservation and health possible in continued activity, and although he may not be as able as Moses (at 120 years his eye not dimmed nor strength abated), he will be in much better condition than he would have been by sitting around, growing fat and neurotic.

The alternative to God's retirement plan is the *immoral* humanistic welfare and social security program of the state. In them you have the crooks and lazy deadbeats who manage to be supported without working at all, the feverish pressure put on men to hoard up retirement money, the multitudes of predatory insurance rackets clamoring for a big cut of one's wage to insure you of a "comfortable and wealthy retirement", the greed and stinginess nurtured and encouraged by such hoarding. Then there is the estate left by those who died before they could use it, and the consequent mad scramble and fight that rages among heirs, lawyers, tax collectors, "charities", and religious "foundations" to gobble up the fruit of the deceased's life labors. It seems God's plan, when compared to this, is imminently moral.

We conclude, therefore, that the Fourth Commandment is not abolished with the ceremonial law, for the following reasons:

1. It is based on a permanent relationship between God and man, unchanged with the transition from the Old to the New Covenants. It is given to man in view of his spiritual, physical and psychological need, a need that will continue as long as man lives in this world.
2. It is included in the Decalogue, where no ceremonial law appears. Certainly, no one would suggest abolition of any of the other nine.
3. The severity of the penalty assessed for its violation (Deuteronomy 31:14-15) surely marks this commandment to be something far more important than a mere symbol of something future. Death is warranted only in the most grievous and damaging of moral offenses, intrusion of the unsanctified into the holy, and for leading the people of God into witchcraft and idolatry. The death penalty is never commanded for a merely ceremonial breach.
4. Sabbath observance antedated the Mosaic Law (Genesis 2:3). It was not a ceremony instituted with and exclusively for the Hebrew Theocracy, but was a part of God's revealed will for man for all time, as is true of all the moral law. It was a part and parcel of the Great Commandment, "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind*" (Matthew 22:36-40). Upon this, together with the second, "*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*", hang all the law and the prophets. According to 1 John 2:7-8, 3:11-12, 4:20-21, 5:2, we have had these commandments from the beginning. Cain and Abel were both accountable to them. Thence the Mosaic Law says to *remember* the Sabbath: It already was.

This pre-ceremonial existence of the Sabbath is further attested to in the establishment of the seven-day week. It *alone* accounts for the seven-day week. Seven is not an equal or logical division of either months, years, moons, decades or centuries. The seven-day week universally established over all the earth has only one cause: God's institution of the seventh-day rest. This Sabbath remembrance was certainly in force when the Hebrews gathered manna and were forbidden to do so on the seventh day. This was before the tablets came down from Sinai.

The moral and sanctifying value of the Sabbath can be further argued from the record of human history. When it has been neglected, men have deteriorated physically and mentally. They worsen spiritually. Neglect of a special day to come apart for worship and godly instruction results in ignorance of God and truth. Moral and religious apostasy sets in, and men become pagan. On the other hand, spiritual awakenings, the great historic revivals, have always resulted in devout care to keep the Sabbath, with filling church buildings on the Lord's day and all appointed times of worship. The biographies of the great saints of twenty centuries have been records of persons who seriously observed the seventh-day rest.

This brings us to the ceremonial element in the Fourth Commandment, and Christianity's shift from the "seventh day" to the "first day" observance of the Sabbath. From the beginning, Christians gathered to break bread and pray and share their faith together on the first day of the week, celebrating the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). This came to be called "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10.). But most of these early Christians were devout Jews, and they also kept the seventh day (Saturday) attending the synagogue. This provided opportunity for them to intermingle with their unconverted countrymen at a time when the Holy Scriptures were opened and expounded. This provided further opportunity for them to preach Christ from Moses and the prophets (Acts 13:14, 42, 44, 17:2, 18:4). As Jewish hostility to Christianity increased, the synagogue's doors were closed to believers and the faith took on more and more the character of a Gentile rather than a Jewish church, and the seventh day (Saturday) observances ceased, that day becoming a regular work day, leaving only the first day (Sunday) as the succeeding rest day.

This replacement of the so-called "seventh day" with the first day is in perfect harmony with the spirit and intent of the Fourth Commandment. "*Six days shalt thou labor . . . but the seventh is the sabbath.*" The sabbath is the day that follows six days of labor. The name of the day on which you begin counting is unimportant.

In the fullest sense of the word, Christ is our Sabbath. He is our full rest from all our labors to justify ourselves before God. "*We which have believed do enter into rest*" (Hebrews 4:3). The ceremonial significance of the Fourth Commandment is God's finished work of redemption from the foundation of the world. The Old Testament seventh day is the commemoration of the original creation, and looked forward to the rest promised in the Messiah. The New Testament first day observance celebrates God's new creation, the beginning of a new people in Christ. That is why God raised His Son on the first day and shifted the ceremonial element from the last to the first day of the week.

The ceremonial element is not peculiar to the Fourth Commandment. It exists in all the moral law. The verbalized law commanded a literal external observance. But his external observance was no more than letter ceremonialism unless motivated and accompanied by Christian grace in the heart. The person who did not murder, steal, lie, commit adultery, performed ceremony *only*, until Christ came and fulfilled the law in his heart. Such ceremonial moralism is not altogether worthless, but it falls short of God's glory in Christian fulfillment. It is the Christian grace of love to one's neighbor that gives true moral substance to all the letter shadow of the "moral" law in the second table, just as true love to God gives substance to the external keeping of the first four commandments. In the person who not only does not kill, but loves his brother, Christ has fulfilled "Thou shalt not kill." For the man who not only will not commit adultery, but so loves and respects mankind and the purity of divine marriage that he will not lust for his neighbor's wife, Christ has fulfilled, "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

It would be ludicrous to suggest that since Christ has delivered us from hate, one is free to murder. No more logical is it to suggest that since we have found rest in Christ, we may abolish God's gift of the Sabbath and live like pagans as if there were no Creator to be honored.

One final word: Jesus made it clear that the meticulous, gnat-straining interpretations that the scribes and Pharisees had given to the Sabbath were invalid. Sabbath-keeping never forbids anything good and necessary to be done on that day. Any interpretation that *burdens* rather than liberates and gives the believer rest, is a fraudulent application. The Sabbath was made for man. It is not against him.