

## The Fourth Commandment

### Keep the Sabbath Day Holy!

Genesis 1:31-2:3 & Exodus 20:8-11

Lord's Day 38 Q&A 103

Work is good. And it is good for us to work. We know this both because our God is a working God and because work is a duty God gave to Adam and Eve before sin entered the world. But rest is also good. And it is good for us to rest! We know this because the same God who worked for six days to create the world also rested on the following day, the seventh day. The Bible teaches us that we have a duty to work and a duty to rest from our work. And in the fourth commandment God addresses our need for rest by telling us to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8).

#### 1. The 'What' of the Fourth Commandment

What does it mean to keep (or to make) something holy? Let's look at a couple other passages to answer this question. In Genesis 2:3 we find the Hebrew word for '*holy*' translated as '*sanctified*.' “Then God blessed the seventh day and *sanctified* it because in it He rested from all His work.” Similarly, in Exodus 28:41 we find the Hebrew word for '*holy*' translated as '*sanctify*.' In this passage the Lord is giving instructions about how Israelite men are to be initiated into the office of priest. God tells Moses to clothe Aaron and his sons with specially-made priestly robes, and to then anoint these men with oil. This was part of a special ceremony that was performed to consecrate or *sanctify* Aaron and his sons so that they could serve the Lord as priests.

What is going on when God sanctified the seventh day or when He sanctified Aaron and his sons? God is setting one day apart from the other six for a special purpose. And God is setting some people apart from other people for a special purpose. That is what the word 'holy' means: *to set something apart for special use*. In the fourth commandment God is instructing His people to set one day of the week apart from the other six days of the week. He is telling us to separate it, to make it special or different from all the other days of the week.

The question may be asked, “Which day should we set apart?” The Bible does not give an explicit statement, but it does give us a pattern we do well to follow. In the Old Testament era God's people followed the pattern of creation, setting aside the seventh day of the week, our Saturday, as the Sabbath. However, in the New Testament era, God's people followed another pattern, the pattern of redemption. Jesus rose from the grave on the first day of the week, on a Sunday morning. Jesus first appeared to His disciples on the first day of the week. Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon His disciples on the first day of the week. And the early church met together for worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). For all these reasons the Christian church has set the first day of the week apart from the other seven as the day that is to be kept holy. And over time this day became known as “the Lord's day” (Revelation 1:10).

#### 1. The 'How' of the Fourth Commandment

How are we to set this day apart and make it special? The very first thing Exodus 20:9-10 tells us is: Do not work on this day. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work.”

None of the Israelites were to work on this day. Not the man or woman of the house, nor their sons and daughters, neither their servants or any foreigners who happened to be temporarily living in their midst. Not even their animals were permitted to work on the Sabbath! Why such an

extensive list of different classes of people who may not work? Deuteronomy 5:14 says, “so that they may rest as well as you.” One pastor refers to the fourth commandment as “the world’s first ‘worker’s bill of rights.’” All classes of people are to rest from their work because all classes of people are made in God’s image, and all people are to image God. With respect to the fourth commandment, imaging God means resting from our work one day per week.

What kind of work are we to rest from? Is God forbidding any and all work on this day? Is God telling us to sit on our hands and do nothing at all—all day long? No! There are many things that still need to be done on this special day. Parents have children to feed and farmers have animals to feed. Police officers and firefighters have communities to protect. Doctors and nurses have patients to care for. And paramedics need to be on call in case there is an emergency. We can, and we must, care for each other on the Sabbath day. We know this to be true because when God rested from all His work of creating, He did not then also stop His work of caring for the world He made. No! He continued to care for His creation, and so should we. Jesus gives us proof that God is always at work caring for His creation, for He said to the Jews who criticized Him for healing a lame man on the Sabbath, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17).

What kind of work does God want us to rest from on the Sabbath day? The Hebrew word used in the fourth commandment for ‘*work*’ refers to a very specific kind of work: the work related to one’s occupation or career. The kind of work that you are busy with all week long. We are to leave that kind of work alone on this day. We are to abandon it for the day—take a break from it!

That’s what we are not to do on the Lord’s day. But if all we do is talk about what not to do, then we will still not do what God wants us to do with this day. So let’s consider what we should do on this day.

Leviticus 23:3 tells us, “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of solemn rest, a *holy convocation*.” A ‘holy convocation’ is a sacred assembly of the people of God for the purpose of corporate worship. Q&A 103 of the Heidelberg Catechism spells out in more detail what the church is to do when she gathers together on this day: learn what God’s Word teaches, participate in the sacraments, pray to God publicly, and give offerings (alms) for the poor.

In addition to gathering together as a group of believers to worship God, Jesus also teaches us by way of example that we can and ought to perform works of mercy on the Lord’s day. Jesus healed many people on the Sabbath day: the sick, the lame, and the blind. In the same way, we should perform acts of kindness and compassion on the Lord’s day too. The New Testament church also teaches us by way of example that we should enjoy Christian fellowship on the Lord’s day. In Acts 2:42 we read that believers in the early church “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

## 1. The ‘Why’ of the Fourth Commandment

The final question we consider is why we should set one day of the week apart from the other six. The most obvious reason is: Because God says so! But God is pleased to give us two reasons regarding why we are to rest.

The first reason is rooted in the pattern God set in His work of creation. Exodus 20:11 tells us we should set the Sabbath apart as holy because “in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day.” We are to rest one day

per week simply because God did! And in Exodus 23:12 God gives us another reason, very practical reason, regarding why we ought to enjoy a weekly day of rest: “*so that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman and the alien may be refreshed.*” Jesus makes clear that God has our good in mind when commanding us to rest one day per week when He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

The second reason for observing the Sabbath is rooted in the pattern God set in His work of redemption and is stated in Deuteronomy 5:15. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” Back in Egypt the Israelites had to work hard, slaving away seven days per week, fifty-two weeks per year, three hundred and sixty-five days per year. They never got a break! But now that God has redeemed them from bondage in Egypt, He gives them this most blessed command to rest from their work one day per week. This day of physical rest provided them with a weekly opportunity to reflect on the deliverance God gave them from their status as slaves of Pharaoh. The Sabbath was to be a weekly celebration of redemption!

The same is true for us today. The Israelites' deliverance from slavery to Pharaoh is a picture of our deliverance from slavery to sin and Satan, a deliverance which comes through Jesus' death and resurrection. And we have the privilege of celebrating this every Sunday! What a blessed day!