

Should Christians keep the Sabbath?

One issue that results from understanding that Ceremonial Law has been abrogated is how in the New Covenant age the Sabbath is practiced. This is because the Sabbath Law is actually a part of the Moral Law, the **fourth commandment** located on the first table of the Decalogue, it deals with man's relationship to God and how one expresses their love toward God. The obvious issue then is if the Sabbath is part of the **Moral Law**, then there should be a **Continuity** in its practice. And if not, there must be some obvious reason and biblical support for its abrogation.

The Sabbath in its original context

In coming to grips with this issue it is important to understand what the Sabbath was in its original context. It was originally delivered to Israel as a part of the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai.

Exodus 20:8-11 - 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 of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work,** you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the 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.** NASB

Appearing as the **fourth commandment** located on the first table of the Decalogue, it is obviously placed as section of the Moral Law. Located on the first table it is obviously giving instruction concerning man's proper relationship to God and how people's love is expressed toward God. God specifically commands that this "*day*" be "*remembered*" and "*kept holy.*" This He says is done by ceasing from the labor daily work, "*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.*" Here God hallows this day by having both man and beast cease from their labor, including any servants or foreigners in the land, and by this to remember the Lord and keep this day holy for that purpose. It is a "*Sabbath of the Lord your God,*" a weekly day of remembrance for God's holy people who have been set apart to worship Him, to hold God in His Kingship as holy in their sight. This He implemented on the "*seventh*" [Saturday] and last day of the week to rest and cease from labor, and so remember as God's holy people that the day is holy unto God as a constant reminder of the proper worship of God.

Creation mandate?

Moreover, God in giving this commandment makes reference to his having rested on the seventh day from His work of creation.

Exodus 20:11 - 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the 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.** NASB

Here God emphasizes the need for rest, not for God but for people who become tired from their labor, in order to remember God as holy. God does not need to remember He is holy, people do. God does not need to rest from His labor, people do. As we shall see, Jesus taught us that the Sabbath was made for man, and not for God (Mark 2:27). In this day of rest "*the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.*" In other words, when the people of Israel rest from their labor and remember the Sabbath to keep it holy in so doing, they will be richly blessed by the constant reminder of ceasing from labor each week, realizing that God is to be worshipped and is more important than even the production of our food and wares. Some have argued that the **Sabbath therefore predates the Mosaic Covenant**, having been instituted before Sinai at **creation**. This however is erroneous in and of the fact that nowhere in Scripture before Sinai, or after in the New Testament, did God ever command such an observance to anyone, nor did He condemn anyone for not doing so. Furthermore, the clear commandment to observe the Sabbath

on the seventh day is a part of the Mosaic Covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai, and not with any other people group in history. It is in fact part of the Old Mosaic Covenant. Nehemiah makes this clear.

Nehemiah 9:13-14 - 13 "Then Thou didst come down on **Mount Sinai**, And didst speak with **them** from heaven; **Thou didst give to them** just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. So **Thou didst make known to them Thy holy sabbath**, And didst lay down for them commandments, statutes, and law, **Through Thy servant Moses**. NASB

More than this, it was God's **covenant sign** with Israel (Eze 20:12-43). The **Sabbath** was God's "**perpetual covenant sign between Him and Israel forever.**"

Exodus 31:12-18 - 12 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 13 "But as for you, **speak to the sons of Israel**, saying, **'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.**' 14 "Therefore you are to observe 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. 15 'For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. 16 **'So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.'** 17 **'It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever;** for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed." 18 And 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. NASB

It is important to realize that the Sabbath is not only a part of the Moral Law, but is uniquely tied to the Levitical Priesthood and Tabernacle/Temple worship. There were burnt offerings given each Sabbath day along with the replacement of the Showbread in the Tabernacle/Temple (Lev 24:8). These were regularly instituted **Ceremonial rites** that were tied to the **covenant sign** of the Sabbath day of rest.

Numbers 28:9-10 - 9 "Then **on the sabbath day two male lambs one year old without defect**, and two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering, and its libation: 10 **'This is the burnt offering of every sabbath in addition to the continual burnt offering** and its libation. NASB

When we consider the **Continuity** of the **fourth commandment Sabbath**, it is obvious that we no longer have a Levitical Priesthood or Temple in which to observe these rites. The Priesthood has been once for all fulfilled in the Person of the Lord Jesus and His Work, and He has so cleansed the true believer that we now become the temple of the Holy Spirit by the powerful regenerating work of God. Moreover the very Sabbath itself has been fulfilled in Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath as He has become the holy rest of God for us, as we cease from labor and toil of sin and rest in His perfect finished work. How then is the Sabbath fulfilled in us, upon whom the New Covenant age of Messianic Salvation has come? We will explore this further as we examine the New Testament teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. Let us suffice to say here that the fourth commandment Sabbath, even though it is located in the Moral Law has a ceremonial element in the keeping of a certain day and prescribed rites in the Temple which have been abrogated in the New Covenant. However, the **Moral character** of the **fourth commandment is still very much alive and in force** in that we **are** God's holy people, set apart by Him for holiness, through Christ (our Priest and offering for sin) and the continual (24X7) presence of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. **We have through faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit in regeneration, entered the Sabbath rest** of God, **forever**. In this there is a Continuity of the Sabbath commandment, which is related to this last point concerning the **creation mandate**.

Another claim by **Sabbatarians** (people who still keep the Sabbath), is that the **creation mandate** is a **pattern** laid down by God for living in which we work for six days and rest for one, even as God Himself did. The problem here is that when God ceased from His work of

creation, He no longer needed to work on the following day, but was finished creating in the old creation, and rested forever from this work. The pattern then is one of working and then resting, **forever**. This unique pattern is has also been displayed in God's work of redemption in the New Creation by Christ. God worked redemption through the ages in Christ, who has now ceased from His labor and sat down at the right hand of God.

Hebrews 12:2 - fixing our eyes on Jesus, **the author and perfecter of faith**, who for the joy set before Him **endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** NASB

Christ having triumphed over His foes has now entered His rest at the throne of God. Similarly, believers fulfill this pattern when they cease from the labor of sin and striving after the Law and come to rest by repentance and faith in Christ and **enter the Sabbath rest of God**. This is the New Covenant fulfillment of the **type** that the fourth commandment **Sabbath** is. This is clear in Hebrews 3 and 4 where the Sabbath rest is discussed.

Hebrews 4:9-11 - **9 There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. 10 For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. 11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest,** lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience. NASB

In its context the believers enters into the **"Sabbath rest for the people of God"** by repenting of their sin of self-reliance and trusting in Christ and His High Priestly work alone for righteousness before God. This is the how the **Old Covenant shadow (or type) of the Sabbath** is fulfilled in the New Covenant age. Greg Ferri comments on this in his excellent article, [**The Sabbath: Shadow and Substance.**] Greg writes, *"Hebrew chapters 3 and 4 give the proper place to the theme of "Sabbath rest" which pervades the entirety of the Scriptures. The Author of the letter uses Psalm 95 in comparing and contrasting Israel's "rest" in the land of Palestine with the believer's eschatological rest in Christ! Briefly, he writes that the Exodus generation failed to enter into the land because of unbelief and disobedience (3:16-4:4:8). He then goes on to say that a "rest" still stands and that Christians are in a similar position as the Israelites were: they could either persevere in Christ, and therefore enter the rest, or they could stumble, disobey and fall away, thereby not entering in that rest (4:9-13). He even wonderfully gives us a picture of the Gospel, of which the Sabbath is also a picture, in verse 10: "for whoever has entered God's rest has rested from his works as God did from his". As Phillip Ryken wonderfully instructs, speaking of God's rest, "This rest was not a temporary state, but God's abiding condition...Unlike the other days, this Sabbath day of rest does not end; it is not brought to completion, but goes on forever" (Ryken, 2006, p.119)."*

The question arises then, does the **pattern of one day in seven** have any significance to the worship of God in the New Covenant age. To this I answer that it is not a thing commanded by God to any but Israel. But as the Law is a bright light as a rule and guide for our life, **the regular worship of God every seven days, is a wise and beneficial thing to do**. Many Christians have held this as a binding tradition through Church History. Surely God has set the days in a weekly cycle, and this weekly cycle was laid down at the creation by God. And even as we people are dull and slow of remembrance, we do in fact need a regular practice of worship to hallow the Lord. What a great privilege is ours, even as there is a pattern in the creation and in the Law for a regular weekly worship, this we do as a joy and privilege! The early church obviously employed this observance, but not by way of command but rather of beneficial tradition. The New Testament does not directly command a weekly observance, nor does it judge or condemn those who do not. And this brings us to the discussion of how the early church viewed the Sabbath.

How did Jesus and the Apostles address the Sabbath?

Jesus clearly explained that He Himself was the fulfillment of the Sabbath. He said of Himself that he was “**Lord of the Sabbath**” (Mark 2:28). This was of course an astounding claim in the eyes of the Jews of His day. This happened when they accused Him and His disciples of violating the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:1-8 - 12 At that time **Jesus went on the Sabbath** through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Behold, **Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.**" 3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; 4 how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? 5 "Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? 6 "But I say to you, that **something greater than the temple is here.** 7 "But if you had known what this means, **'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,'** you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 "For **the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.**" NASB

But Jesus clearly denounced their claim and showed them the folly of their religious rigor. Not only did He point out that “*something greater than the Temple was here,*” claiming Himself to be “*Lord of the Sabbath,*” but He also explained that God was much more concerned for the acts of mercy and necessity than religious observance. This is because the very substance of true religion before God is love and mercy, not sacrifice. “*But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.*” Jesus sharply rebuked them for their false religion and exposed the sin in their hearts. Matthew goes onto give another example of the same point that God is equally concerned with the welfare and compassion toward the helpless and needy as He is of worship. In fact, works of mercy and necessity are substance of true worship. Jesus demonstrates this in the **synagogue** on the **Sabbath**.

Matthew 12:9-14 - 9 And departing from there, **He went into their synagogue.** 10 And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they questioned Him, saying, **"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"** — in order that they might accuse Him. 11 And He said to them, **"What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? 12 "Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."** 13 Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. NASB

From this we derive two important points concerning the **Sabbath** in the **New Testament**. **Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of the Sabbath** being the “*Lord of the Sabbath,*” and that the **works of mercy and necessity** are equally as important as our regularly weekly worship. Remember that Jesus was continually giving an explanation of the Law, and the Sabbath is no exception. He intended to show that the Sabbath was made for the welfare of man as a regular and proper expression of worship to God.

It is important to note at this point that the **New Testament does not command a weekly observance of the Sabbath**, nor does it judge or condemn those who do not. Of all the **Ten Commandments, nine are repeated** in the New Testament, all but the Sabbath command. In all the lists of vices and sins in the New Testament, [example 1 Cor 6:9-10, Gal 5:19-21, Eph 5:3-5, Col 3:5-6, 2 Tim 3:2-5], nowhere is Sabbath breaking listed as a sin. When the **Jewish Apostles** met for the dispute over circumcision in **Acts 15**, they gave clear instructions to the Gentile converts in the church as to what imperatives they were to keep in regard to the OT Law and in offending their Jewish brethren Christians. Here was a perfect opportunity to announce the

imperative of Sabbath keeping to Gentile church but the Apostles do not even mention it. (see pgs 29-30 of this lesson for a closer look at this).

This was clearly the teaching of the **Apostle Paul**. In fact, Paul rebukes the Galatians for thinking that God expected them to observe special days, including the Sabbath.

Galatians 4:9-11 - 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again **to the weak and worthless elemental things**, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? 10 **You observe days and months and seasons and years.** 11 **I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.** NASB

This is also clear from his instruction to the Romans where he describes believers having differences in keeping special days or not. But these he says are not things that we judge one another over, but rather we are to develop our own convictions about such things. He explains that we have liberty in these matters and are not to judge others about the keeping of days.

Romans 14:5-6 - 5 **One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.** 6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. NASB

This is a loud commentary on the issue of Sabbath keeping because Paul clearly accepts the fact that some Christians do not keep holy days at all and that is totally acceptable in his view. This is clear by the statement **“one man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike, but let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.”** See here that Paul gives full acceptance to the idea that some Christians do not regard any holy days, and this he says is perfectly acceptable in the sight of God. Paul also told the **Colossians not to let anyone judge them in regard to keeping a Sabbath day**. These things he says are a **“mere shadow of what is to come in Christ.”** Paul is saying the Sabbath observance has come to fulfillment in Christ and has a new application for us in the church.

Colossians 2:16-17 - 16 Therefore **let no one act as your judge** in regard to food or drink or in **respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day** — 17 **things which are a mere shadow of what is to come;** but the substance belongs to Christ. NASB

Moreover, these statements clearly show the nature of the Old Covenant Law as having been **abrogated** by the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their ceremonial aspects like the keeping of holy days which were commanded as **ceremonial imperatives in the OT Law**. This is because what the **Ceremony** was in **shadow** or **type** in the **Old Testament**, is now the **substance** of Messianic salvation in the **New Covenant**.

Hebrews 10:1 - 1 For **the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things**, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. NASB

And this also applies to the **Sabbath, in its ceremonial aspect**. I think this is abundantly clear in the NT texts we have just seen. Remember that Christ IS the fulfillment of the Sabbath for us and therefore **Christians have entered into the Sabbath rest of God** through the High priestly work of Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews said,

Hebrews 4:9-11 - 9 **There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God.** 10 **For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.** 11 **Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest,** lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience. NASB

Therefore by faith we enter that Sabbath. And since we are in this state of rest as an abiding condition, every day is a holy day (even every moment) of remembrance for the Christian. In Christ we have made holy for the purpose of offering our whole lives to Him in worship and service, seven days a week. This is why Paul can say that some Christians regard every day alike.

Romans 14:5 - 5 One man regards one day above another, **another regards every day alike.** Let each man be **fully convinced in his own mind.** NASB

The book of Acts does give a little insight into the discussion about Sabbath keeping. Obviously among the early Jewish Christians Sabbath keeping was practiced as a matter of Jewish tradition, even if the content of worship changed from Judaism to Christianity. Surely in that age of transition between Judaism to Christianity the earliest Jewish Church looked something like modern messianic Judaism. This is because Jews remain Jews by race, even if they become Christians, and many of the customs and religious traditions are a part of everyday life. Of course it was Paul's regular practice on his missionary journeys to enter the synagogues on the Sabbath, the Jewish day of worship, and try to persuade the Jews concerning the Gospel of Christ.

Acts 13:14 – 14 But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and **on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.** NASB

Acts 18:4 - 4 And **he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath** and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. NASB

Even though this is true it appears that the church was meeting regularly on Sunday, rather than on Saturday. Many believe this became the Christian practice early as a commemoration of the resurrection of Christ which took place on the first day of the week, Sunday (Matt 28:1).

Acts 20:7 - 7 And **on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread,** Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. NASB

1 Corinthians 16:1-2 - 1 Now concerning **the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. 2 On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save,** as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. NASB

This has caused many Christians through Church history to actually move the elements of the original **Saturday Sabbath** to **Sunday** and call it the **Christian Sabbath**. In this practice they would seek to fulfill the fourth commandment, but do it Sunday instead of Saturday. At the very least, Sunday has always been the Christian day of weekly worship, and this is abundantly evident in the teaching of the Church through history, even though some Sabbatarians refute this and say that Sunday worship was not fully instituted until the fourth century. Surely there are some Sabbatarian groups throughout Church history who have kept Saturday Sabbath even until now. But the practice of the **Christian Sabbath**, or the **Lord's Day** has been and remains the practice of many Christians. This was in fact the dominant practice of most Protestant Christians since the reformation period. Although this is true, it is not as a direct result of some New Testament text saying that the Sabbath has changed from Saturday to Sunday, but simply the fact that it became the tradition of the Church in history. Regardless of whether or not we have some passage of Scripture telling us on what day to worship, one thing is really clear in the New Testament, that **the keeping of special days is a matter of preference and not a matter of obedience** to some commandment from God. And even if some Sabbatarian groups want to keep the original Saturday Sabbath for their weekly worship day, they are free to do so and the Bible does not forbid it. However let us be careful and wise in how we judge others who do or do not keep the Sabbath as this matter is clearly addressed in the New Testament.

One thing to note is that they are indeed **practical benefits** from the regular cessation from work on one day in seven. We all need rest, this is necessary for healthy living. Many will point out that without a regular and concentrated day of rest each week, a life of sickness and disorder follows. Not only this, but the **benefits** of such a practice in a nation's culture have been amply displayed in the history of Western Civilization. Let us consider if as God's holy people the practice of ceasing from work and devoting an entire day each week to the worship of God and to rest would be of great benefit to our vibrant faith and our healthy living. And to whatever degree we would, let us commit ourselves to it.