

A God who Speaks: The Fourth Commandment

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 July 2006

Preacher: David Alexander

[0 : 0 0] Let us pray. Father, we thank you for gathering us here together this morning in the name of Jesus.

And we ask for the help of your Holy Spirit, that the unfolding of your word would give light, and that by walking in that light that you give us, we would have true fellowship with you, our Father, and with your Son, Jesus, and with one another.

These things we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen. Please be seated. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

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

These are the words of Jesus. Come to me, he said. And who was it who receives this great invitation?

[1 : 2 4] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden. All. None are excluded from this universal invitation, this universal call from the lips of the Lord Jesus.

All are invited to come. All who labor. All who are heavy laden. There are probably some here this morning who labor and are heavy laden.

Some here this morning who would be glad to have rest for their souls. It could be that you've never responded to this invitation before.

You're living your life for number one. But that's quickly growing old. You're tired of running from one thing to another in pursuit of pleasure and of beautiful things.

You're tired of the feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness and aimlessness that gnaws away at your heart, especially when you're quiet and alone.

[2 : 3 3] Or maybe at some point in the past, you have turned to Christ. You've accepted. You've heard that invitation to come to me and you've turned to him and you've come to him.

And there was joy and delight and refreshment for your souls. But somehow, in the months and years that have passed, old sinful patterns and habits have crept back in.

They've stolen away your sense, your awareness, your experience of the peace and the joy and the rest in the Lord that you once knew. Old ways of thinking and acting and speaking that quench and grieve and resist the Holy Spirit have taken root in your life again and you feel cut off from the power and the presence of the Lord.

Perhaps that's you. Perhaps you even despair of your salvation or have come to believe that now it's all up to you. You began by grace but now you feel like you're dragging yourself toward the kingdom of heaven entirely under your own power and you're not at all sure that you're going to make it.

You're worn out from the roller coaster of good days and bad days. Or perhaps you've been living your life faithfully as a disciple of the Lord Jesus in this world but you're being battered and bruised by the blows that inevitably will come.

[4 : 17] You've been bereaved of the ones you love facing sickness and trials of various kinds tempted and tested day after day by temptation after temptation enduring perhaps the scorn of this world.

Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

This is the invitation of the Lord Jesus given to all and it's given to you. And it is this same invitation that is at the heart of the fourth commandment that we had read this morning.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. 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 you nor your son nor your daughter nor your male servant nor your female servant nor your cattle nor your stranger who is within your gates.

[5 : 41] for the Old Testament people of Israel the central thrust of this commandment then was that they were to set aside one day in seven the seventh day as a day of rest.

A day that was set apart to God and made holy and on that day they were to do no unnecessary work not themselves nor those under their authority nor even the animals that were in their care the beasts of burden all were to have a day of rest.

And God provided two different reasons why he gave his people this rule. In the two different versions of the Ten Commandments you see the two different reasons. The first which we didn't have read is from Exodus chapter 20 and God points the people back to the very act of creation.

He says in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth the sea and all that is in them and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

So in a sense to keep the Sabbath was for the creature for human beings you and me who have been made in the image of God to imitate the creator.

[7 : 01] God established a precedent in his great work of creation by working for six days and resting on the seventh. And he sets an example in that way for his people to follow.

But in Deuteronomy which Jason read this morning the reason was different and surprising and I wonder if you noticed what it was. In Deuteronomy the people were reminded of the great event of God rescuing them from slavery in Egypt of bringing them out of bondage to become his own special people.

People to whom he freely bound himself by a covenant relationship. I will be your God and you will be my people. I invite you to turn it open and take a look at Deuteronomy chapter 5.

In your pew Bibles it's on page 161. Page 161. And we'll just look at verse 15.

He's given the rules of the Sabbath day and then in verse 15 he says God says and 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.

[8 : 34] Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. What's the connection? you might ask. How does it logically flow that the fact that he rescued his people from slavery and made them his people would lead him to give them this law that they are to rest one day out of seven on the seventh day.

How does that follow? Well, in fact there are some other surprising things that the Old Testament says about the Sabbath. In fact there are for example there are several passages that give an importance to keeping the Sabbath that seems entirely out of proportion with the nature of the commandment.

It's sometimes implied that the Sabbath is in some way above or apart from the rest of the law. For example in Nehemiah it's written you made known to our fathers your holy Sabbath and commanded them precepts, statutes, and laws.

You made known your Sabbath and all these other laws. and you also come across certain passages that give you the impression that if you fail to keep the Sabbath regardless of what else might happen in your life you overturn your entire relationship with God.

Listen to what God says through the prophet Jeremiah but if you do not listen to me to keep the Sabbath day holy such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day then I will kindle a fire in its gates and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and it shall not be quenched.

[10 : 36] Does that surprise you? Does that seem maybe a bit excessive or over the top or even arbitrary?

I mean we might understand that God would say something like that for example about murder. You can say and do what you will but if you murder an innocent person our relationship is terminated and you will face my judgment.

And we might say well I can understand that but he says this about keeping the Sabbath. And far be it from me and from us to imply that God is in any way capricious or arbitrary or unjust shall not the judge of all the earth do right?

Abraham once asked and he shall indeed. He is righteous in all his works and he's just in all his dealings with people.

So how then are we to understand this great importance that he lays on the Sabbath in the Old Testament? Well we've already seen a pointer toward the answer in that surprising verse in Deuteronomy 15 that God makes a connection between observing the Sabbath and the fact that he rescued his people.

[12 : 02] But there are other passages that will spell it out for us even more plainly. So I invite you to turn with me to a second verse in Exodus chapter 31.

It's on page 76 in your pew Bible. Exodus chapter 31 in verse 13.

We'll just read, well I'll begin at verse 12. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak also to the children of Israel, saying, Surely my Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Here we have God explaining to Moses why the Sabbath is so critical in his eyes.

He says, It's a sign between you and me throughout your generations that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you.

[13 : 24] That is to say, he is the one who sets apart his people for himself, who makes them his own special people, devoted to himself. And this is the primary purpose of the Sabbath commandment.

It is to represent to God's people the source of true spiritual rest, allowing God and God alone to work in us.

Just as it was God alone who acted to rescue his people Israel out of Egypt and they had nothing to contribute to it. He inflicted the plagues, he parted the sea, he brought his people out and they simply entered into what he had done.

So it is by God's grace alone, by his powerful work alone that he sets us apart to be his people. people. And so the Sabbath was for the people of Israel like a sacrament.

It was a sign, just like baptism is a sign of being washed of sins, of dying to an old way of life, and being born to a new life, a life to God.

[14 : 47] it's an outward and visible sign that communicates an inward and spiritual reality. Just like the Lord's Supper, which represents to us Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice to take away our sins, that we receive simply by trusting in him.

in the same way, outwardly observing the Sabbath represented an inward reality, namely that we must put all our trust, put away all our own work, our sinful practices, our selfish interests, the cares and concerns of this life, even our own efforts to make ourselves right with God.

We put all that aside so that we can be wholly at rest and allow God to work within us, to cease our strivings and to rest our hearts in him alone.

The Sabbath is a sign to God's people that God works in us to make us his own, and that we must rest in him. And what's more, the Sabbath is a foreshadowing.

It's a foreshadowing. It was a ceremonial observance of a day, but it pointed to something beyond itself that was far greater. It pointed to someone who was far greater, the Lord Jesus himself.

[16 : 31] Jesus is the true fulfillment of the Sabbath. All that the Sabbath signified is represented in him, because it's only when we despair of all our own ways of making ourselves right with God, it's only when we come to know that on our own, we are sinful people, and we're guilty before a holy God.

When we answer Jesus' invitation to come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, when we cast ourselves on the mercy of the Savior alone, that's when we become God's people.

That's when we are sanctified, when we are set apart as his people for himself. So when we look to the cross, and when we hear Jesus' words from the cross, it is finished.

We know that all that was necessary for us to make ourselves right with him is finished, and we trust in his finished work as our only hope. We contribute nothing of our own to making ourselves right with God, just as Israel contributed nothing to making themselves free of bondage and slavery.

It is God who works in us. It's God who touches our hearts and does a work of grace, a miracle, who gives us a new heart and a new beginning and a new relationship with him and with one another.

[18 : 15] I'll be your God, and you shall be my people. This is the reality to which the Sabbath was a pointer.

character. This is the substance of which the Sabbath was a shadow. And with that, I ask you to turn with me to one final Bible passage, this time in the New Testament.

It's in Colossians, chapter 2. It's on page 1020 in your pew Bible. if you have your own Bible, Colossians 2, 16 and 17.

Therefore, let no one judge you in food or in drink or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are but a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

Now that Christ has come, the ceremonial Sabbath has been done away with.

[19 : 39] What need is there for shadows when the substance is here? Jesus is the true fulfillment of the Sabbath, and in his presence all the shadows are left far behind.

So does this mean that now there are only nine commandments that as Christians we no longer observe the Sabbath? No, on the contrary, far from it.

There are ten commandments, and we fulfill them all, but in the case of the Sabbath law, now that the true meaning and application of the Sabbath, of this commandment that God gave his people Israel, has been revealed in Jesus.

We no longer observe it in the way that the people of Israel did under the Old Testament. For us, the reality of the Sabbath is not confined to one day in seven, but it is our everyday lived experience.

It has become our everyday life. Sabbath. The Sabbath now extends through the whole course of our life, and it shall be completely fulfilled and perfected in that day of the Lord when Jesus will return, and we will fully and finally enter into and experience the rest of our souls, the rest from our labors in him.

[21 : 10] As it says in the letter to the Hebrews, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. And so until then, we do keep the Sabbath. We keep the Sabbath by daily reminding ourselves of Christ's finished work on the cross.

We keep the Sabbath by clinging day by day to Christ alone as the basis for our being God's people. people rescued from slavery, not to Egypt, but to sin.

And we keep the Sabbath by day by day setting our minds on the goal, on the ultimate fulfillment of the Sabbath, and the rest for our souls that we will enter into in its final consummation.

These are the ways that we as followers of Christ observe the Sabbath law today. And let me suggest to you that we need to be careful how we think about what we do on Sunday, the Lord's day, the first day of the week.

It's important that we do not regard the Lord's day as identical to the Old Testament Sabbath that has merely been transferred from the seventh day to the first day of the week.

[22 : 33] week. This may be different from what you have heard or read in some books or sermons, I'll grant you. But let me state again, we must not regard the Lord's day, Sunday, as simply the Old Testament Sabbath that has been transferred to the first day of the week.

There is simply no New Testament basis for this type of thinking about the Lord's day. There are plausible arguments that you might hear for doing this, but there is not a single verse of direct biblical basis for doing it.

Now, with your goodwill, I don't know what you're thinking right now, but with your goodwill, let me make two points about this before we conclude, if you'll hear me out. because firstly, although the central purpose of the Sabbath, as we've seen, was to signify spiritual rest to the people of God, there are two other significant purposes as well, why God instituted the Sabbath.

And one was that it was a day to assemble, a day to gather together as God's people, to hear his word written, to offer sacrifices to him, perhaps, to meet with others of God's people in a holy assembly.

And this dimension of the Sabbath law does not need to be relegated as a shadow to distant times past, but it can be carried over into the age of the church with minimal change.

[24 : 13] It remains necessary for the good order of the church that we meet together, that we not forsake gathering to meet together for the hearing of the word, for the breaking of bread, and for the prayers.

And from the earliest days of the church, the major day that has been set aside for this has been Sunday, the Lord's Day. I suggest that that's probably to avoid the Sabbath associations if they'd continue to meet on the seventh day, as well as to commemorate the day of the Lord's resurrection.

And so that's the pattern in this church. And in virtually all the churches of the world, they meet together on Sunday. Now, if you desire and you're able to set aside the entire Lord's Day for spiritual purposes, to pray and to read and to meditate on God's word and to enjoy fellowship with other believers, you are most free to do so.

And I don't doubt that it would be much to the health of your souls if you did that, to celebrate the Lord's Day in that way. But, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 14, one person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. And for the rest of you who do not follow such a practice of the Lord's Day, well, I put it to you that you should do everything in your power to avoid having to work on Sunday morning so that you can gather with your brothers and sisters in Christ as the people of God.

[26 : 11] But we lay on you no greater burden than this. And no one ought to think that the first day of the week is inherently in some way mystical or holy, or that by doing some sort of work or other activity, you or someone else is committing a sin against God.

It's that sort of distinction of days that obscures the gospel of Christ, the glory of Christ and the light of the gospel that we saw in the fulfillment of the Sabbath in him.

It was this kind of thinking that led Paul to tell the Galatians that he was afraid he might have labored over them in vain, for they still observed the days.

Secondly, then, in addition to a day to gather, the Sabbath was also given as a day of physical rest. Simply that.

And here also we see God's special care for the powerless, for the people who don't have a voice, for the weak in society. Because he's explicit in the Sabbath that it applies no less to the servants, no less to the alien, no less to the refugee seeking shelter than it does to the master.

[27 : 33] Even the animals are to be given a day of rest. So simply, it's not good. It's not good for you to work seven days out of seven, week in and week out.

There's probably some among you who have done that, maybe for years, and you know that it's hard on you. But it's even worse for you to force those who are under your authority to work without rest.

It's far better to follow the creator's pattern, to work six and rest one. And you must not inhumanly oppress those who are under you.

And so to sum up, the Sabbath law was given to the people of Israel as a shadow, as a sign. But the truth has now been set before us without shadows, in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so we are to meditate throughout life upon this everlasting Sabbath rest for our souls, that the Lord may work in us through his spirit.

[28 : 46] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.