

Lord of Time

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:8 -11;
Mark 2:23-28; Luke 4:16-22; 14:1-6; 1~Hebrews 10:25*

The basic principle that underlies the fourth Commandment is that God is the Lord of our time. He has the authority to tell us how to use it, and we must account to Him for each moment.

In this Commandment the Lord of time gives basic guidelines for the organization of our lives. He tells us how to use all seven days of each week. Six days must be devoted to work, while one day must be set apart as a day of special significance.

I. The Special Day

God instructed the Israelites to set apart the seventh day or Sabbath day as their special day. It was distinguished from the other days in that no work was to be done on it (Exodus 20:8-11; 31 :14-17).

The Sabbath Rest

What was the purpose of this rest? Did God require it just because He knew that rest is essential for good health? No, the purpose was mainly religious.

The Sabbath rest was to honor God for redeeming Israel from Egyptian slavery. It called attention by contrast to the cruel labor from which God had saved them. It was a reminder that the nation owed its existence to God. Deuteronomy 5:15 says this:

Remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.

Why was the seventh day chosen? This was the day on which God rested from His work of creation. It was fitting that this be the Jews' day of rest. (See Exodus 20:11; 31:17).

From Sabbath to Lord's Day

Deliverance from Egyptian slavery was the high point in the religious heritage of Israel. It was fitting that their special holy day should commemorate that event. For Christians, however, the high point is something quite different and much more magnificent. It is our deliverance from the bondage of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus! Thus it is proper that our special holy day should honor Jesus and His victory over sin.

With this change in the meaning of the special day has come a change in the day itself. The Jews kept the seventh day, but Christians observe the first day of the week (Sunday), which is called 'the Lord's Day' (Revelation 1:10).

This raises an important question. Was this change of days authorized by God and introduced by the apostles? Some groups say it was not and that Christians must still keep the seventh day.

It is true that there is no direct New Testament command to observe the first day of the week. But other aspects of the Bible's teaching, as well as the apostolic practice, show that God has replaced the Sabbath with the Lord's Day.

The church came into existence on the first day, the day on which Pentecost fell (Acts 2). Under apostolic guidance local congregations continued to meet for worship on the first day, as Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 show. Second-century Christian writers (Ignatius, Barnabas, and Justin Martyr) testify that Christians observed the first day of the week. (Early Christians such as Paul continued to visit Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath day to evangelize the already-gathered audiences. See Acts 13:5; 17:1-3; 19:8.)

According to the Old Testament, Sabbath observance was a sign between God and Israel (Exodus 31:13-17; Ezekiel 20:12), and therefore was not meant to last into the Christian age. Exodus 31:17 does say that it would last for ever, but here *forever* means only "for as long as Israel exists as my special people." Similar language is used of other things that clearly are not parts of the Christian religion. Examples are the temple (1 Kings 9:3) and "perpetual" incense (Exodus 30:8).

The New Testament confirms this by clearly stating that Sabbath observance is no longer binding on anyone (Colossians 2:16).

The Day of Resurrection

The basic reason for observing the first day of the week is that this is the day on which Jesus arose from the dead. It is fitting to honor the Savior on the day when His victory was won.

The resurrection of our Lord was a monumental event comparable only to the original creation of the world. It was the beginning of a new creation, a new age. It is fitting that the mighty act that marked the beginning of the new creation should occur on the *first* day of the week.

Thus we no longer keep the seventh day, which signified the completion of the old creation. We celebrate the first day, the day of resurrection, the day of promise and hope for a new creation.

Lord's Day Observance

What is the proper way to observe the Lord's Day? Basically it should be used to honor and worship Christ the Redeemer. Attending public worship is an essential part of such observance. (See Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 10:25.)

Should the Lord's Day be a day of rest? Not necessarily. Contrary to popular belief, abstaining from work is not essential to Lord's Day observance. The Old Testament required rest on the Sabbath, but such resting does not have the religious significance for Christians that it did for Jews.

The most important point is that the Lord's Day must be kept special and holy; it must be set apart from the other days in a way that honors the Lord.

If one's work schedule requires him to work a shift on Sunday, he must take extra care to make the rest of the day special. He must be sure to attend one of the church's services. It is not failure to rest that violates the Lord's Day; it is failure to make it a special day for honoring Christ.

II. Labor Days

Though mainly concerned with the special day of the week, the fourth Commandment also says, "Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work" (Exodus 20:9). Herein the Lord establishes the moral responsibility for every human being to work.

The Necessity of Work

Why is everyone commanded to work? Many believe it was a part of the curse laid upon the human race as a result of Adam's sin. This is inferred from Genesis 3:17-19, in which God says to Adam, "Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread."

This curse does involve man's working for a living, but this is not when God introduced the requirement for work. Even before man sinned, God commanded him to subdue the earth and have dominion over it (Genesis 1:28). Adam was put in the Garden of Eden to tend it (Genesis 2:15).

The curse in Genesis 3 affects not work's necessity but its circumstances. Work is no longer simply the creature's grateful and loving response to his Creator. Man must now work in order to live; he must sweat in order to eat. Thus there is pressure or burden upon man to work; it is a source of anxiety or sorrow.

If work is not a result of the curse, then what makes it necessary? It is necessary first of all because we are created in the image of God. God himself is active, not idle. Jesus said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5:17). Because God works, those made in His image should also work.

Second, love for one another requires work. The non-worker must live as a parasite off the labor of others. But this is contrary to Christian love. The very nature of love is to give to others not just to receive from them. Thus if we love one another, we must work to sustain ourselves and not selfishly take advantage of others.

Finally, work is necessary because man is a social creature. Subduing the earth is a cooperative enterprise, and each must carry his share of the load. Every day each one of us depends upon the labor of thousands of others. Such an interdependent society requires that all of us contribute to the vast pool of ideas, goods, and services from which everyone draws.

What is Work?

This should lead us to a clearer understanding of the nature of work. Some tend to think of work only in terms of manual labor. The word *work* conjures up ideas of machines and muscles, sweat and dirt.

But this concept is too narrow. Basically work is any activity that helps to maintain and improve society. It may be manual, but it may also be mental. A teacher can work while reading a book. A writer can work while staring out the window. If it adds to the general welfare of mankind, it is work.

To see this should help us develop a better attitude toward our daily occupations, which are neither a curse nor just a means of making money. Seen only as such, work often becomes boring drudgery, and the workman loses pride and interest in his labor. The result is shoddy products and indifferent service. But when work is seen as contributing to the happiness of others, it takes on new meaning. There is new incentive to do work of higher quality, and there is more personal satisfaction in a job well done.

The Sin of Sloth

The Bible condemns slothfulness, or the wilful neglect of work. (See Proverbs 6:6-11; 26:13-16.) Paul says expressly, "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NAS). To those not working he says, "Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread" (2 Thessalonians 3:12, NAS).

Paul does not condemn those who *cannot* work, but those who *will* not, those who deliberately refuse to bear their share of the load. Such a manner of life cannot be allowed because, as does any parasite, it tends to destroy the very system that sustains it.

The Use of Leisure Time

How to use leisure time is a special problem today. Automation, a larger labor force, a four-day work week, longer vacations, and early retirement are giving workers more time away from their bread-winning occupations.

How will this leisure time be spent? The trend is toward using it for personal pleasure. Man-made lakes, large amusement parks, spectator sports, and television provide entertaining escapes from constructive activity. They are do-nothing retreats.

Herein lies the problem. Can we count this leisure time as our time, and squander it on pleasure-oriented, self-centered pastimes?

God commanded the Israelites to work six days each week. He thus intended for them to spend six-sevenths of their time subduing the earth and making a contribution to the development of society.

If we have more time away from our occupational work, we are not free to spend that time in just any way we please. We still have the obligation to work, that is, to do something constructive and useful for mankind. Many activities can contribute to the welfare of society in general. For instance, one can do volunteer church work or hospital work.

Some rest and relaxation, of course, are essential for a healthy mind and body. But we must be very careful not to let our increasing leisure time be dominated by self-centered recreation. God is the Lord of leisure time too.