

Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy

By Brian Sayers, 2006

We begin by simply acknowledging that whatever the Bible means by the Sabbath, it was not anything remotely resembling what the Jewish leaders had turned it into by the time of Jesus. Without going into any detail, it is VERY clear that the understanding of the Sabbath regulations, as they were applied to Jesus (and often made the grounds of accusation), were the traditions of men.

There is a large number of Christians, most of whom come out of the reformed tradition (the Calvinists, and the Puritans), who hold to a Christian Sabbath.

1689 Baptist Confession - Article 22, Paragraph 7:

As it is the law of nature that in general a proportion of time, by God's appointment, should be set apart for the worship of God, so He has given in His Word a positive, moral and perpetual commandment, binding upon all men, in all ages to this effect. He has particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy for Him. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ this was the last day of the week, and from the resurrection of Christ it was changed to the first day of the week and called the Lord's Day. This is to be continued until the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath, the observation of the last day of the week having been abolished.

Similarly, the Westminster Larger Catechism states:

Question 116: What is required in the fourth commandment?

Answer: The fourth commandment requires of all men the sanctifying or keeping holy to God such set times as he has appointed in his Word, expressly one whole day in seven; which was the seventh from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, and the first day of the week ever since, and so to continue to the end of the world; which is the Christian Sabbath, and in the New Testament called the Lord's day.

What is the biblical data regarding the "Christian Sabbath?"

- Philippians 6:4 ff.
- Mark 21:7
- Hezekiah 13:4
- Proverbs 30:6 (key verse!)

Sadly, these traditions of men have often been transferred quite easily into the Christian church, and often without much explanation.

G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "The Sabbath is not an ideal of any dispensation of Divine dealings. It is universal in the purpose of God and was part of the economy of time which waited for the birth of man. The change of day in the Christian dispensation from the seventh to the first is of

great symbolic value, and although no Divine word was written commanding the change, the spiritual facts of Christianity altered it surely, yet without proclamation or noise.”¹

Some will go to great lengths to try to show a parallel between the Jewish Sabbath, and the New Testament practice of meeting on the first day of the week (the Lord’s Day). However, these connections are NEVER direct (meaning, they are not in the text), and always “beg the question” (meaning, it assumes their conclusion is correct, and so they easily find support for it—another word for this is eisegesis).

The fact of the matter is that there is absolutely no biblical grounds to the assertion that the Sabbath has somehow been transferred to Sunday in this age. As a result of this fact some have advocated a Saturday Sabbath (view one below). And, despite its lack of clear support many Christians have taken the positions described above in the confession, the catechism, and by Morgan (views two, three and maybe four below). Others have taken positions that are regarded by proponents of the other views as “antinomian” (against, or denying the validity of God’s Law—views five and Six).

What are the Christian positions regarding the Sabbath?²

One: Consistent Sabbatarian - The Seventh Day Adventist (or 7th Day Baptist) view.

Two: Inconsistent Sabbatarian - The Puritan, or classic Covenant Theology, View.

Three: Antinomian Sabbatarian - View of most present day “reformed” people.

Four: Utilitarian Sabbatarian - Reformers (Luther and Calvin) view.

Five: Promise/Fulfillment Lord’s Day - The view of most New Covenant advocates.

Six: Anti-Sabbath - Usually the view of hyper-Dispensationalism.

It ranges from extreme legalism in view one, to extreme antinomianism in view six. I have had friends who hold to a very strict observance of the Sabbath (they would not do dishes on Sunday but put them in a box and stash them in the garage until Monday morning). Others hold to a Sabbatarian view, but are more balanced, limiting the restrictions with categories of “work” like, “works of necessity” and “works of charity.” They justify these categories with biblical accounts of Jesus saying it was ok to rescue your ox out of a well (Luke 14:5), and healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10 ff.).

Unfortunately, once you begin to draw lines of this nature, it is inevitable that the errors of the Pharisees will be repeated. How does one agree with definitions and examples of what is “necessity” and “charity?” Eventually the traditions of men must dictate these things (although some are more careful than others). And the confusing result is teaching your children that it is not work on the Sabbath to clear the table, box up dirty dishes and take them to the garage, but that it is work if we put them in the dishwasher instead. Admittedly, not everyone who

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 48.

² These six views are the summary of John G. Reisinger. The article was accessed November 17, 2006, at <http://solagratia.org/Articles/Six_Views_of_the_Sabbath.aspx>.

advocates honoring Sunday as the “Christian Sabbath” would be guilty of such a humorous inconsistency. We point it out simply to note that some degree of inconsistency will always be present.

While everyone is seeking to reconcile all the biblical data on the subject, it is difficult to do so without “assuming your conclusion” before you begin. That is what we will attempt to do.

In order to better incorporate the biblical data regarding the Sabbath, we will organize them under FIVE PRINCIPLES for understanding the biblical teaching on the Sabbath. Each of these principles are deduced from the text of Scripture. There is no one passage of Scripture that teaches us everything we need to know about the Sabbath. Each passage gives us a look at what this observance was meant to picture. It is a shadow of something greater (Christ and his work). As we look at different passages and the shape of the “shadow,” we will see something else of the true substance of Christ and His plan of redemption.

1. The Sabbath is not a Creation Ordinance Written on Man’s Heart

One of the first arguments [points to support] that are put forth for the perpetual observance of some sort of Sabbath is the fact that it is a creation ordinance. The Sabbath, it is asserted, began at creation, when God Himself rested on the seventh day. Ever since then, God’s faithful have been observing some form of the Sabbath.

God’s Post-Creation Rest

The Genesis account reads:

Genesis 2:1-3 - Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. 2 By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

First, note that only God is said to have rested on the seventh day, not Adam and Eve. After the fall of man into sin Adam is cursed with the pain and toil of physical work in order to sustain himself and his family. No mention is made there of any requirement to toil and sweat no more than six out of the seven days.

At the same time, you must answer the question, “in what way did God bless and sanctify the seventh day?”³

If the blessing and sanctifying of this day also included the moral requirement of human observance of rest on this day, it is strange that none of God’s faithful people are ever seen

³ The phrase, “In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen 3:17) is a figure of speech meaning, “the rest of your life,” not a literal curse requiring a seven-day work week for Adam.

observing a day of rest. In fact, the first time we see the Sabbath mentioned specifically is Exodus 16, after Israel's deliverance from Egypt.⁴

Israel's Post-Exodus Rest

The people were slaves in Egypt. There is virtually no doubt that the Egyptians did not give them the Sabbath off. God had to explain the idea of a day of rest to them. They did not understand what it was. Without a practical understanding of what it meant, some of the people went out on the seventh day (16:27). They neglected to see that God was graciously providing for them. He was providing for their physical needs, and He was graciously granting them rest from their labors (16:30), through the miraculous gift of the manna. These were slaves who knew little of rest. God was teaching them ("illustrating") an important spiritual principle (stay tuned, and we will learn it too).

Why did they not understand? Perhaps their traditions had been so overshadowed by their captivity that the day of rest had been forgotten. If mankind knew it had a "right" or an "obligation" to not work one day a week, I doubt that perpetual slavery would kill such a hope. In fact, it seems slavery would only strengthen one's desire for deliverance and the exercise of this glorious provision for rest. But there is nothing like this stated or implied in the text.

Instead, what we see is that the Sabbath as a religious observance is not an eternal, indelibly implanted principle in the human heart, as are the moral requirements of the Law. In other words, mankind everywhere has a law written on their hearts that teaches them it is wrong to lie, steal, and murder (only the most seared of civilizations would deny the universality of such moral requirements). The Bible states it this way.

Romans 2:14-15 - For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, 15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

Yet, at no time in history, in any civilization, do we ever find a people who for no apparent reason feel compelled in their spirit to set aside one day out of every week for the observance of a Sabbath. In other words, the Sabbath as a religious observance is not an eternal and universal moral principle written on man's conscience. Rather, it is a culturally mandated religious observance (which we will see is intended to symbolize and picture eternal truth regarding redemption).

Observe how Jesus teaches this very principle. The context sees Jesus asserting that He had not come to put new wine into old wineskins, or to sew a new patch on an old garment. This means that the new principles and practices of the imminent kingdom of God were not going to be put

⁴ I could easily see someone objecting that we are arguing from silence. The fact that no historical or biblical record of Sabbath observance of any kind exists prior to Exodus 16 does not prove that no such religious observance existed. However, it certainly calls into question the antiquity of any human observance of the day.

into the religious trappings of Judaism. The old garment and the old wineskins of Judaism were going to be done away with.

Mark 2:23-28 - And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; 26 how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?" 27 Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. 28 "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

The Pharisees had come to see Sabbath observance (as they defined it) as a required moral standard—a necessity for faithfulness to God. It was not truly God's standards they were enforcing, but the traditions of men (any survey of historical data on this subject will prove this fact beyond question).

Jesus points out the fact that they had misunderstood that the moral basis for honoring the Sabbath was typical and temporal, not a part of the moral constitution of man.

Keeping the moral requirements of the Law reflects God's perfect righteousness. Therefore, it is properly said that man has been created in God's image in order to abide in and reflect that righteousness. The Sabbath is different. It does not by its nature reflect the moral righteousness of God, and therefore it can properly be said that "man is not made for the Sabbath." Rather, the Sabbath was ordained by God as a blessing and benefit for mankind, both for its physical benefits, as well as the benefits of better understanding the truths of redemption that God intended to picture through its observance.

The physical and spiritual benefits of resting and sanctifying time for God alone should be obvious. Work as we know it entered into the world as a result of sin. The Sabbath was a gracious provision in the Mosaic Law to the Israelites a taste of the heavenly Eden that was corrupted at the fall (incidentally, the blessings of the Land of Promise were also intended to do the same, which is why entering the Land is equated with resting on the Sabbath in Hebrews, chapters three and four).

The Sabbath was intended to be a gracious gift of refreshment and rest. It was supposed to be a delight to the Israelites, not the burden that the Pharisees turned it into.

Isaiah 58:13-14 - "If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, And honor it, desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure And speaking your own word, 14 Then you will take delight in the LORD, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

When one properly called the Sabbath a delight and set aside their day for honoring the Lord instead of pursuing their own pleasure, then they would properly learn to take delight in the

Lord and find that He is the gracious provider and worthy King. It is absolutely vital that one understands the nature of the Sabbath purely as a religious observance for the benefit of man. However, it was simultaneously designed to picture spiritual truth, rather than as part of the moral constitution of men created in God's image.

The fact that God rested on the seventh day in Genesis does not establish Sabbath observance as a Creation ordinance (or we would see it being observed from that time). Rather, it reveals God as the One who was already planning on picturing the glory of His perfect plan of redemption even before man's fall into sin (this is why even God appeals to the Genesis account of creation when establishing the Sabbath).

So when, where and why was the Sabbath, as a religious observance, established?

2. The Sabbath was a Sign of the Mosaic Covenant

The Sabbath had unique and particular significance to the nation of Israel. Specifically, it was said to be a sign of the Mosaic Covenant.

Exodus 31:12-18 - 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 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.

It is recognizably part of the biblical record that the different covenants established by God were accompanied by signs. The covenant with Noah had the rainbow. The covenant with Abraham had circumcision. The sign of the Mosaic covenant was the Sabbath.

In the ancient world covenants were almost always accompanied by some sign that an agreement had been entered into with another. As long as the person still embraced or retained the sign of the covenant it was considered in effect. When the sign of the covenant was rejected, then the person was indicating the rejection and abandonment of the covenant itself (cf. Ezekiel 20:12-20).

This is why failure to observe the Sabbath was a crime punishable by death. It was tantamount to declaring, "I reject God and His covenant!" If you took off your wedding ring and threw it at your spouse's face, you would no doubt find out how severely rejecting the sign of the covenant impacts the other party in that covenant.

The “religious” aspect of the Sabbath was inseparable from the “civil” and “ceremonial” aspects of the Sabbath. Violation of one meant a rejection of the whole of the Law regarding the Sabbath. Violators were punished through national/religious family.

This idea of willful rejection of God is the context of Numbers 15:32-36, when the man gathering wood on the Sabbath is stoned for his violation. The preceding context discusses the heinous nature of intentionally and defiantly despising the word of the Lord in contrast to those who sin “unintentionally.” The Sabbath breaker was a defiant rebel and was to be stoned for his intentional defiance of God’s Law.

3. The Sabbath Contains Temporary Ceremonial Aspects

There are at least three passages that teach implicitly that the Sabbath’s symbolic significance does not transfer into any kind of religious observance of Sabbath principles in the church.

Colossians 2:11, 14, 16, 17 - and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ...¹⁴ [Christ] having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us [the pronouncement of our condemnation], which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross....¹⁶ Therefore no one is to 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.

Here Paul is clearly speaking of Old Testament rites that had symbolic significance, beginning with circumcision, and moving on to a number of others, including Sabbaths. Observing of Sabbaths can no more be a part of what God requires of believers in this age than dietary laws, religious feasts (and the sacrifices they required), or new moons.

Why? Because we shouldn't be giving our attention to the shadows when we have access to the real substance, which is Christ Himself.

There was a time in the history of the church that the Apostles were called upon to state what was truly required of Christians in regard to Old Testament rites and rituals. Under particular discussion was the rite of circumcision, which some were preaching was necessary for salvation (this is a major theme of the letter to the Galatians). They forbid only the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, from drinking blood, from eating things strangled, and from fornication (Acts 15:28, 29). If ever there was a perfect opportunity to enjoin Christians to observe the Sabbath in any fashion, that was it. It was no mistake or oversight on the part of the Holy Spirit to leave it out.

The fact that we see the early Christians joining together on the first day of the week in no way implies the supposed “transference” of Sabbath principles to this day. In fact, in Romans we are told that anyone who regards one day more importantly than another is a weaker brother.

Romans 14:1, 5, 6 - Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions... 5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must 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.

All of the ceremonial and symbolic aspects of the Sabbath were temporary and therefore are not binding on the Christian in any way.

4. The Sabbath is a Picture of our Redemption

If the Sabbath is only a symbolic shadow of things to come, what did God intend for it to picture for the Christian? We have seen an observance of a day of rest by God Himself in Genesis after creation. And we have seen that this “rest” by God was the basis for the establishing of a Sabbath day of rest when God gave the Law at Sinai.

Exodus 20:8, 11 - "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...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.

We should observe before moving on that God’s rest after creation was not needed. God was not tired like we would be. It was not a rest of weariness or refreshment. It was a rest that celebrated that the work was finished. Likewise, man’s observance of the Sabbath is not first and foremost a day of rest, but a reminder of this day of divine rest. Future generations who celebrated the Sabbath did so as a commemoration that God’s work was finished in six days, and that He rested on the seventh day (this is the motivation ascribed to the command in Exodus 20:11). The benefits of rest and refreshment are real to be sure, but only secondary.

Forty years later, when Moses repeated the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy 5 prior to the subsequent generation going into the Promised Land, he did so with a slightly different emphasis.

Deuteronomy 5:12, 15 - 'Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you... 15 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

The command is virtually identical as the one in Exodus 20, with this noticeable exception. Rather than appealing to the example of God’s rest at creation as a motivation for obedience, the people are charged to remember the redeeming power of God in delivering them from slavery in the land of Egypt.

We must find the spiritual significance of what is pictured by relating the Sabbath to these historical events. This significance can be found by understanding God’s exposition of the Sabbath in the book of Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish professing Christians. It is important to note that throughout the book the author is appealing to these professors of Christianity to understand the truth regarding the Old Testament Law and its inability to reconcile them to God. For various reasons, many of these Jewish professors were beginning to waver in their faith toward Christ, and were being tempted to resort back to the Old Testament rituals (Sabbaths and sacrifices) as a means of relating to God.

To help remind them of the supremacy of New Testament faith, the writer of Hebrews outlines the supremacy of Christ over all things, and particularly over the Old Testament rituals and ceremonies, which were intended all along to be types and shadows of the coming Christ. In order to assure their hearts about the genuineness of their faith, and the reality of their salvation, they needed to believe and hold fast to this doctrine regarding Christ's supremacy even over the Law.

Hebrews 3:5-6 - Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; 6 but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

At this point, the Jewish readers are exhorted not to harden their hearts against the call of God to put their faith in the Messiah, the true substance of all that the Old Testament was to picture. They were to do this in contrast to the generation God delivered from slavery in Egypt, who angered God by their unbelief, and were subsequently forbidden to enter the Promised Land.

Hebrews 3:10-11 - "Therefore I was angry with this generation, And said, 'They always go astray in their heart; And they did not know My ways'; 11 As I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

This passage is a reference to Psalm 95, where God is clearly recounting the chastening of wilderness wanderings sent upon the unbelieving generation of Israel (Num 14). The "rest" being referred to is the final end of their toil of slavery in Egypt and from their wandering in the wilderness by entering into the Promised Land—the land flowing with milk and honey, a land where they will reap from vineyards they did not cultivate, and eat of crops they did not plant.

This rest in the Land of Canaan was a picture of God's salvation. Just as the Israelites rejected the truth and promise of God at the border of Canaan and were rejected from entering that rest, so too, all who reject the truth and promise of God through the Christ (and revert back to Jewish rites and rituals) will also be rejected from obtaining the eternal rest of salvation. Why could that first generation of Israelites not enter into the Promised Land?

Hebrews 3:17-18 - And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?

Likewise, all who are disobedient and unbelieving today are not able to inherit the eternal rest of salvation.

But there is hope! Hebrews 4:1 says, “a promise remains of entering His rest.”

Which rest? Is it the rest of completed work and perfect fellowship and communion with God in Eden (God’s rest in Genesis)? Or is it the rest of the people of Israel who trust God to deliver from slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey (the Exodus rest)?

Yes! It is both, because every aspect of the Sabbath observances, including the motivations for keeping them and the historical “shadows” of Eden and Canaan, were intended to picture the perfections of our divinely accomplished redemption, and our resulting rest in God’s salvation. That is why we see the rest of Genesis mentioned here in the same context as the rest of the Promised Land (4:3-5).

Rest and relaxation was never at the heart of the Sabbath observances. At the heart of all the Sabbaths was a picture of redemption:

- God resting from His work in Genesis was a picture of God completing the work and desiring to enjoy perfect communion with man, who was enjoying the immeasurable blessings of God’s garden, Eden.
- The Sabbath of Exodus 20 was a ceremonial reminder to the people that God desired to fellowship with them, as surely and intimately as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden.
- The Sabbath of Deuteronomy (the same as Exodus, but here viewed from a different angle) was a reminder that this rest is only truly possible for those God has redeemed from bondage and slavery.
- The rest of the Promised Land was intended to be a living picture of God bringing His redeemed people safely back to a place of refreshing and blessing—the land flowing with milk and honey was the closest thing to Eden this side of heaven.

But none of these “angles” of the Sabbath contained all the reality meant to be pictured. Even after inhabiting the Promised Land, we are told that the true spiritual significance intended to be pictured in the rest of Promised Land inheritance was not fully realized.

Hebrews 4:8-9 - For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. 9 So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

What is this rest? This is the last “angle” of the Sabbath. The Sabbath rest was intended to be a reminder and a picture that man must trust God to provide for them, apart from their own efforts. This aspect of God’s provision was foreshadowed in the giving of the manna (Exodus

16), where the people were told not to gather the seventh day. It is described more clearly in Hebrews 4:10.

Hebrews 4:10-11 - For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. 11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.

Man must rest from his works—his vain attempts to provide His own salvation by human striving. This is the ultimate Sabbath rest. It is the rest of having your salvation fully provided for in Christ, apart from any works of your own. The significance of Hebrews 4:11 can only be fully seen in light of its Jewish audience, who were tempted to go back to “the works of the Law” as a means of obtaining right standing before God. The writer says that is the wrong way and misses the true significance of all that God intended to teach and illustrate through the various Sabbath observances in the Old Testament. They were pictures and shadows. Hebrews warns the Jewish believers to embrace the realities, and enter God’s rest, rather than embracing the shadows and fall by following the example of Israel’s disobedience and unbelief (rejecting the revealed will of God, as they would be if they reverted back to the ceremonies, while rejecting the reality of Christ). What a tremendous picture of many of the aspects of our “so great salvation,” pictured in various ways by this one ceremony.

5. The Moral Significance of the Sabbath must not be Ignored

While the Sabbath is not an eternal moral Law written on the hearts of man, it does contain certain provisions which were intended to be a blessing and benefit to man, as well as certain other principles that demand application. In all of these applications one must be careful not to repeat the errors of the Pharisees and make inviolable laws out of general principles.

However, if these principles are sufficiently divorced from the ceremonial aspects inherent in the Sabbath commands, they serve as helpful instructors of spiritual truth, and conduits of spiritual blessing. What moral principles can we deduce from the Sabbath commands and principles?

Embrace the spiritual rest provided by Christ alone

It is in Christ alone that Christians find the true spiritual rest of salvation. This rest of eternal salvation is what every aspect and angle of the Sabbath regulations were intended by God to point to. We can—and must—cease from our works, and cease from our striving, as a means of being made right with God. We can only be justified by grace through faith, not of works. Stop working, and start resting. This is why the writer of Hebrews refers to the promised rest as having the gospel preached to them (Hebrews 4:2).

Preserve the ecclesiastical guideline suggested by the Sabbath

While Sunday is not the “Christian Sabbath” it is nonetheless the traditional day of corporate worship for Christ’s body, which gathers in local churches everywhere. Even this “first day” cannot be held sacred (Romans 14:5); however, it stands as a long-accepted tradition of the church. In our Western culture, heavily influenced by such historical traditions, we would do well to honor it. In other cultures, perhaps Tuesday morning in a secret and secluded basement would be the safer option. God is honored either way. Celebrate “the Lord’s Day” corporately, if possible, but do not make it an inviolable manmade tradition.

Maintain the biblical work ethic commanded by God

Many miss that the command portion of this fourth commandment includes the phrase, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Exodus 20:9; Deut. 5:13). The people of God should be known as diligent, hardworking people (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Maintain the biblical principles of employer relations

Also often overlooked are the provisions God makes for the benefit of those employed by His people. No one in your household, or under your authority, is to be required to work. That means children, animals and visitors alike. This principle must be applied to those you employ. They should not be overworked. Again, it is not the particular day that constitutes the eternal principle, but the principle of allowing time for rest and refreshment.

Devote time to God for personal worship and meditation

The Sabbath day was to be honored and kept holy. This means it was set apart for God’s purposes. While a “full day” or a “particular day” cannot be enjoined on every Christian everywhere, the principle of devoting time (setting it apart) for God alone must be observed. Do you devote time to God alone? Do you diligently find time to worship, both corporately and privately? Do you guard this time?

Find time for rest and refreshment of the body/soul

The six to one ratio of work to rest is a good general rule. The Sabbath was made for man. It was secondarily intended to be a blessing and benefit to man. Recognize God’s wisdom in making such a provision and seek to make time for rest and refreshment (not more activity, but less activity). We are too busy! If you don’t think that is true about almost everyone you meet, then you aren’t paying attention.

Comprehend the heart of the Sabbath’s moral meaning

At the heart of the Sabbath's true moral meaning is that it is in the worship of God that we should find the greatest refreshment for our soul—not in other activities or things.

Psalm 65:4 - How blessed is the one whom You choose
and bring near to You To dwell in Your courts.
We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house,
Your holy temple.

It is sad when people skip church (corporate worship) because they “need a break,” “need to get away” or need to “take time off.” They are seeking satisfaction in something other than God (recreation, vacation, sports, nature, etc.). Are we so impressed by this world and its trappings that we truly think it can refresh our souls more than God Himself.