

# STUDY 7 - KEEP THE SABBATH

**Commandment 4:** 'Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any kind of work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; then he rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.' (Exodus 20:8-11)

This commandment is all about our time. Time, like wealth, is a gift that God gives us, and -like wealth -is something that he expects us to use wisely. And, as with wealth, God also expects that we honor him by returning to him at least a part of his gift.

There are aspects of this commandment that are unique. For the Christian a key aspect is the fact that, unlike all the other commandments, this is not re-emphasized in the New Testament. Differing views have emerged on how Christians should treat this commandment. The three main positions are as follows:

- A small number of Christians (notably the Seventh Day Adventists) worship on Saturday in the belief that the church was mistaken in switching its holy day to Sunday.
- Another section of the church has felt that the Christian Sunday should retain much of the character of the Old Testament Sabbath. Believers in these churches mark Sunday by strictly abstaining from all work, recreation and sport.
- The position of the majority of Christians -and the view developed here -is that the Sabbath is part of the Old Testament Law that is now no longer binding on Christians. On this view the Sabbath *regulations* ('you must not do this or that') were fulfilled in Christ and have been abolished; however, the Sabbath *principles* (each week, we are to have a day where we especially honor God and take a break from work) still remain. In other words while we are no longer required to keep *the* Sabbath, it is no bad thing that we allow ourselves *a* Sabbath.

## → 1 STARTER

A) Either:

Have each member of the group quickly fill in the table.

	Actual time spent (hrs per week)	Ideal amount (hrs per week)
<i>Work (where employed)</i>		
<i>Travel</i>		
<i>Leisure</i>		
<i>Sport</i>		
<i>Shopping</i>		
<i>Housework</i>		
<i>Church meetings</i>		
<i>Relaxing</i>		
<i>Sleep</i>		

(The total number of hours per week is 168.)

- Does anybody have two columns that match?
- How do people feel about the discrepancy?

Or:

Discuss briefly the following:

- Does your work control you or do you control your work?
- What is the longest you have ever worked without taking a day off?
- Do you feel guilty when you relax?

B) Have different people give brief responses to each of the following dilemmas:

- You hear a Sunday newspaper will be publishing an article that greatly interests you. Do you buy the newspaper?
- You have some special people coming for Sunday lunch and have put a lot of time and preparation into planning a meal. However just before you go to church you realize you have forgotten an essential ingredient. You realise that you could buy it at the supermarket on the way back from church. What do you do?
- A friend of yours has been out of work for some time and has at last been offered a job. But when he is sent the contract to sign he sees that it requires him to agree to work any Sunday that is demanded. What would you advise him to do?
- Your church leader's wife has been offered a well-paid job that will require her to work every day except Sunday. As her husband is busy that day, they would have no shared day off. Should she take the job?
- A relative comes to spend a Sunday with you. They go to church with you and as you come out of church they say, 'We've done what you want to do; now can I take you shopping? There's some things I really want to buy for you.' Do you go together to the shops?

## → 2 SURGERY

Discuss one of the following:

A) Have a few people briefly describe what a Sunday used to be like twenty, or even thirty, years ago.

B) What, if anything, have we lost with the increase of Sunday commercialism?

C) In what ways can work come to take the place of God?

## → 3 STUDY

This is divided into an Old and a New Testament part.

### The Old Testament

A) Read Genesis 2:1-3.

- Why do you think God took a break from working?
- What does this teach us about a one day in seven break?
- What do we learn from this about the nature of this seventh day?

**B) Read Exodus 16:13-30. Having been delivered from Egypt the Israelites are miraculously fed in the wilderness by manna.**

- Why does manna need to be collected daily?
- What happens on the Sabbath? What happens on the day before?
- What does this passage teach is the purpose of the Sabbath?
- What are the people to do on it?
- What has God done to help them keep it?

*Note: These events took place before the Ten Commandments were given.*

**C) Read Exodus 20:8-11.**

- What, according to this commandment, is the purpose of the Sabbath?
- What reason is given for the origin of the Sabbath?
- What are the people to do, and not to do, on the Sabbath?
- Why do you think foreigners and livestock are included in the commandment?

*Note: In the restatement of this commandment in Deuteronomy 5: 15, the Israelites are told to remember on the Sabbath that the Lord their God had brought them out of Egypt. The Sabbath therefore came to commemorate both creation and redemption.*

**D) Later on in the book of Exodus the nature of the Sabbath is elaborated. Read Exodus 31:12-18.**

According to verses 13 and 17, what is the meaning of the Sabbath?  
Why do you think the breaking of the Sabbath is to be treated so seriously?

**E) Read Isaiah 58:13.**

- What were the people to avoid doing on the Sabbath?
- According to this passage, what sort of attitude were they to have towards the Sabbath?
- Do you see the Sabbath as it was given by God, as a blessing or as a burden?

**F) Read Jeremiah 17:19-27.**

- What was now taking place on the Sabbath?
- What does God promise will be the results if the Sabbath is respected?
- What does God warn will happen if the Sabbath is neglected?

## The New Testament

By the time of the New Testament the efforts to keep the Sabbath holy had produced thirty-nine separate categories of banned actions, with a long list of specifically banned acts in each category.

### A) Read Luke 4:14-16.

- What do we learn here about Jesus' normal practice on the Sabbath?

### B) Read Mark 2:23-3:6.

- Why were Jesus' disciples breaking the law? Did Jesus deny they were breaking the law?
- What was the point that Jesus made about David?
- What did Jesus imply by saying that he was the Lord or Master of the Sabbath?
- Given the purpose for which the Sabbath was given, why do you think Jesus was angry about the rules that had come to surround this day?
- What principles does Jesus establish here about a) the Sabbath? b) his own relationship to it?
- What was the result of this confrontation? Why did it arouse so much hostility? If we are Jesus' disciples, what are the lessons for us?

### C) Read John 5:2-18.

- In verse 17 what does Jesus admit that he is doing on the Sabbath?
- How does he justify himself? What does this say about who Jesus is? (Note the response in 5:18.)
- What do you think is the relevance of this for the way that Jesus' followers are to treat the Sabbath?

There is evidence very early in the history of the church of worship on the Jewish Sabbath being gradually replaced by worship on the first day of the week (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).

### D) Have different people read aloud John 20:1,19,26 and Acts 2:1-4

- If the Old Testament Sabbath was a time to commemorate the creation of the world and the deliverance (or 'redemption') of Israel from Egypt, what extra things do you think that Christians would have remembered in their Sunday worship?

When Gentiles started to become Christians, a major issue that surfaced was: over which parts of the Old Testament law the new converts should follow.

**E) Read Colossians 2:16,17.**

- What seems to have been the problem that Paul is addressing here?
- What does Paul say has replaced the Old Testament law?
- What does this mean for celebrating Sabbaths?

**F) In Galatia, very zealous Jewish Christians began to teach the Gentile believers there that if they wanted to really follow Jesus they had to obey everything written in the Jewish law. Paul's response to this situation is found in the letter to the Galatians. Read Galatians 4:3-12.**

- In what way does Paul say that the Galatians had been slaves?
- How had they been freed?
- What were they doing by returning to their old practices?
- How should people who are free from the law live?
- What does verse 10 suggest about how Christians are to view the Sabbath?

The whole issue of what aspects of the Jewish law were to be kept by Gentiles who became Christians soon faced the church leaders in Jerusalem. Acts 14 summarizes the discussion among them and Acts 15 records the letter sent as a result.

**G) Read Acts 15:22-31.**

- Although arguments from silence are notoriously suspect, what do you conclude from the absence of any mention of the Sabbath?

*Note: The reference to sexual immorality may be to the marriage of close relatives as prohibited in Leviticus 18.*

**H) Read Romans 14:5-13. There was clearly some variation in the early church over which day, if any, was kept holy.**

- What, in verse 6, does Paul suggest should be the right attitude to these issues?
- What (in verses 10 onwards) does Paul suggest should be our attitude to those who take different views on these issues?

**I) Read Hebrews 10:24-25.**

- Does our freedom from Sabbath rules mean that we have freedom to do anything we want?
- Why should we meet together? What is likely to happen if we do not?

## → 4 SUMMARY

Think about the *principle of the Sabbath*

- For the Jew, the signs of being in a covenant relationship with God were circumcision and keeping the Sabbath. What are they for the Christian?
- Breaking the Sabbath was all too easy for the Jewish believer; but how can Christians break the Sabbath?
- If we are no longer bound by the law, what principles should govern how we live on Sundays?

Think about the *nature of rest*

- How do you react to the idea that God is concerned that we take a rest?
- Are we cheating on a day of rest if, while resting, we are continuously thinking about our work all the time?
- How can we balance keeping Sunday as a day of rest and having it as a day for worship?
- How can we recover the Old Testament idea that the Sabbath was to be a joyful day?

### **Discussion**

1) What would you say to someone who had just become a Christian and wanted to know what they should do on Sunday?

2) What might be different about the responsibilities and priorities for a day off for the following people:

- A sixteen-year-old college student.
- A single mother with two children.
- A father with a highly pressured job and 3 children.
- A retired couple who rarely see their grandchildren.
- The minister of a local church.

3) Think of the following situations:

- Angie watches sport on Sunday.
- Lara likes to go jogging on Sunday mornings before church.
- Bill kicks a ball around with his children on Sunday afternoons.
- Jim plays in the church football team, which often has an informal fun match against another church on a Sunday afternoon.
- Ted plays in an amateur league which plays on Sunday.
- Brian is a professional footballer and regularly plays Sunday matches.

Where, if anywhere, do you draw the line?

4) What do you say to someone with a busy week job who feels exhausted by all the church responsibilities that he or she faces on a Sunday?

5) Imagine that in your church there is a firm conviction that the Sabbath laws do not apply to Sunday. You want to organize an inter-church sports event and Sunday afternoon seems the best time. However one church you want to invite believes strongly that having such an event on Sunday would be sinful. Do you reschedule the event for another day?

6) You meet a Christian who is too busy at sport to go to church more than once a month. He says he has been 'set free in Christ'. What would you say:

**So what?**

At the end of this study:

- What has challenged you most?
- In what areas are you most vulnerable?
- What attitude or action do you need to change?

## → 5 STEPPING OUT

**Practical suggestions**

- Evaluate how you spend your day off. Are you using it rightly?
- What two things could you stop doing that would help you to use it better?
- What two things could you start doing that would help?

## **Further study**

A) Read Psalm 92:1-4: The title of this psalm makes it plain that this is a song for the Sabbath day.

- What is the mood of this psalm?
- What is its basic theme?
- What does this teach us about the way that a Sabbath ought to be observed?

B) Read Nehemiah 13:15-22. Here Nehemiah acts to remedy abuses of the Sabbath.

- What is taking place on the Sabbath?
- What does Nehemiah say was the result of profaning the Sabbath in the past?
- What practical action does Nehemiah take to preserve the Sabbath?

C) Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

- When are we to pray and praise God?
- What could this suggest about reserving all our worship for Sunday?

D) The Fourth Commandment also tells us that work is good and something that God expects us to do. Read Colossians 3:23.

- What, according to this passage, should characterize our attitude towards work?

## **Questions to think about**

- Is your idea of what you do on Sunday something that you have thought through or just something that you have inherited or absorbed from others?
- Is what happens on Sunday a matter only for Christians and churches? Do we have any responsibility to society in general in this matter? Should we try and persuade non-Christians to keep Sunday special? How?
- Does a collective day for everybody make sense any more? Does it matter if some people take one day and others take another?
- What would be your ideal for Sunday? What practical steps can you take to move towards it?
- For many of us Saturday is also a day off. Where does this fit in?
- We often think or say, 'It's my time, I'll do what I want with it.' Is it our time?

## **For prayer**

- Pray for the way you use your time.
- Pray for the right attitude to work.
- Pray for the right attitude to leisure.
- Pray for others that they might be able to balance work, rest and worship.