

727 Should We Keep the Sabbath?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

A recent letter asks if we today are still to keep the fourth of the Ten commandments to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. The ten commandments have come from God, but are they for us today. Exodus 20:8-11 says, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 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. 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." The ten commandments came from God, but are these commandments binding on Christians today?

God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel from Mount Sinai after they left the land of Egypt. God fed them with manna during their exodus, but the children of Israel were not to collect any manna on the seventh day of the week, the "Sabbath." The word "Sabbath" comes from a Hebrew term meaning "to cease or desist." The idea is not that of relaxation or refreshment but a ceasing from activity. Israel was commanded to keep the Sabbath for two reasons: first, because after the sixth day of creation, God rested from his labors or ceased from His activity (Gen. 2:3); and second, because God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5:15).

In Deuteronomy 5:1-3 Moses discussed the nature of the Ten Commandments and to whom they were given. It says, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, *with* all those of us alive here today." From this passage it becomes clear that God made these commandments to Israel; they were never binding on Gentiles. The Sabbath was a sign between God and Israel, not a sign between God and all nations. The Lord spoke to Moses in Exodus 31:13-14 saying, "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. Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you.'" There is no record in Scripture that God ever made this covenant with Gentiles.

Further, God did not make a Sabbath covenant with the fathers before the time Israel came out of Egypt. Deuteronomy 5:3 says plainly, "The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, *with* all those of us alive here today." God declared in Ezekiel 20:10-12, "So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live. Also I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them." Paul said in Romans 3:19 that the Law of Moses spoke to those who were under the Law. So we must be careful not to make the commandments given to Moses binding upon everyone.

The Ten Commandments were part of a covenant God made with Israel on Mount Sinai. The Lord told Moses in Exodus 34:27-28 "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." Many people think of the Ten Commandments as a religious and moral law for all people of all places for all time, but they were actually part of covenant made only with Israel, and the Sabbath was a sign of that covenant. A covenant is a legal binding

relationship in which two parties makes vows that are permanent. The commandments were details of that covenant which Israel promised with an oath to keep. They were stipulations that regulated the relationship Israel had with God.

Because Israel did not keep the covenant, the Old Sinai Covenant was to be nullified, and a new covenant was to be made. Jeremiah prophesied there would be a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. He said, "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

This passage is quoted in the book of Hebrews, chapter 8, verses 8-12. The writer of the book of Hebrews then concludes in verse 13: When He said, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear." The new covenant of Jesus was to replace the old covenant. People were born into the first covenant as Jews; that is why they were after they came into the covenant. But people in the new covenant hear the gospel first and then come under the covenant when they become obedient to the gospel. This is why in churches of Christ we do not baptize babies. The Scriptures teach that people are to be taught first, to believe, and to obey the gospel. In baptism, the old man of sin dies, and a person is born again into the kingdom of Christ. The covenant of Christianity is not the one made at Sinai but the one ratified by the blood of Jesus.

The Hebrew writer said in Hebrews 10:9, "He takes away the first in order to establish the second." The first covenant is now obsolete; Christians are under the covenant of Christ. Paul specifically stated that Christians are dead to the Law, released or delivered from the Law containing the Commandments in Romans 7:4-7. He said, "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."

Paul said the Law we died to is the Law that said, "You shall not covet." What law said that? Why you know, it is the tenth of the Ten Commandments. It is no wonder that Paul said Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4). Paul further said in Galatians 2:16 that "a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." When some Jewish Christians tried to bind the law on others, Paul said in Galatians 5:4, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have

fallen from grace." Christians cannot please God by keeping the Law of Moses. They need to keep the commandments of Christ.

Christians throughout the centuries regarded the first day of the week as the day for worship, not the Sabbath. There are several reasons why the first day of the week is important. Christians called the first day of the week "the Lord's Day." Why? First, Jesus Christ arose from the dead on the first day of the week (Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). These verses are sometimes held to contradict Matt. 28:1, which in some versions use the phrase, "late on the Sabbath." The word "late" (*opse*) should be translated "after" when it is used as a preposition (as it is in Matt. 28:1). Some scholars regard this word as a technical term referring to that period of time between sundown (the official end of the Sabbath) and sunrise of the first day of the week. This would remove any possible disagreement between the gospels or as to when Jesus arose from the dead. He arose on the first day of the week.

Second, Pentecost always came on the first day of the week (Lev. 23:15-16). All the events of Pentecost of Acts 2 (the Pentecost after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) happened on the first day of the week. It was on the first day of the week the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles. The first gospel sermon, the beginning of the church and the first baptisms in the name of Jesus Christ all happened on that Pentecost, the first day of the week. Further, the churches of the New Testament assembled on the first day of the week to break bread, that is, to observe the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7). They also met on the first day of every week to give their contributions (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

The Lord's Supper was eaten on the Lord's Day. The term "Lord's" in the phrase "Lord's Supper" and "Lord's Day" occurs only twice in Scripture, once in reference to the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20) and once in reference to the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). This word is unusual and unlike the common word for "Lord" in the New Testament. Both of these phrases "Lord's Day" and "Lord's Supper" are linked very closely in the early writings. Everett Ferguson, a great scholar of early church history said, "Both are peculiarly the Lord's, and both belong together, united to each other by the resurrection. The day, as the day of the resurrection, is the day for taking the supper; and the supper, in remembrance of the event of salvation, gives significance to the day."

The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, should not be confused with the Lord's Day, which is the first day of the week. While early Christians worshipped on the Lord's Day, they did not observe it as a day of rest. According to the *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*: "No evidence for the equating of Sabbath and Sunday is found before the end of the third century... Emperor Constantine in 321 issued an edict requiring "rest on the venerable day of the sun" by the cessation of public works and the closing of the law courts, but agricultural labor was expressly excepted. From then on we find a growing stress on the necessity of

Sunday rest, but the reason given is that men should be free to attend worship, not that Sunday is the "Christian Sabbath"--a phrase not found until the twelfth century." (p. 940)

Early Christian writers knew the difference between the Lord's day and the Sabbath. Barnabas said in 120 AD, "Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day, also, on which Jesus rose again from the dead." The Didache, an early document, written in 125 A.D. said, "But every Lord's day do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving." Justin Martyr said 150 AD, "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place... But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly...." From these quotations it is clear that early Christians did not keep the Sabbath, but worshipped on the first day of the week.

Occasionally I hear people say, "you folks in the church of Christ don't believe in the Old Testament." My friend, nothing could be further from the truth. I believe every word of every verse or every chapter or every book of the Old Testament. Paul said in Romans 15:4, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." There are many things in the New Testament that we would not understand, if it were not the Old Testament: the creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, Lot's wife, Esau's birthright, Jonah and the great fish, the patience of Job, and many other people and events mentioned in the New Testament. Now, while the Old Testament is inspired of God and valuable, we do not bind what God commanded to the Jews on Christians, including the Ten Commandments. Someone says, "Well, Phil, do you believe it is right to murder or steal or commit adultery?" No, those things are sinful because the Lord Jesus in the new covenant condemns them. Jesus said in John 12:48, "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day." We will not be judged by the Law of Moses or the Ten Commandments. We will be judged by the words of Jesus. My friend, passages such as John 14:15, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" isn't referring to the Ten Commandments but to the teaching of Jesus.

Have you obeyed the gospel? Have you heard the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus? Do you believe in Him with all your heart? Out of love, have you repented of your sins? Have you been baptized into Christ? Salvation is not in keeping the Law of the Old Testament; it is in a relationship with Jesus Christ. When you are baptized into Christ, He washes away your sins, raises you up to walk in newness of life, causes you to be born again, and gives you the hope of heaven. My friend the most important thing you can do today is to obey the gospel and be right with the living God. I hope you won't put that off another day but will come to Jesus in love and faith. Today is the best day to give yourself to the Lord Jesus.

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