

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**

**Dr. Barry M. Foster**

**February 20, 2022**

***Morality and the Post-Modern World:  
The Ten Commandments for Today  
“Sabbath: Refusing the Worship of Work”***

Hebrews 4:1-11 (NIV)

*Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’”*

*And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”*

*Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”*

*For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.*

Exodus 20:1-11 (NIV)

*20 And God spoke all these words: 2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

*3 “You shall have no other gods before me.*

*4 “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation*

*of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*7 “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”*

*8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”*

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (NIV)

*“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”*

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! We’re continuing in this series, “*Morality and the Post-Modern World: The Ten Commandments for Today.*” The questions about what ought to be considered morally good are pressed upon us if we are followers of Jesus in our culture today. In fact, for many people outside of the church today, the more basic question is whether there is such a thing as morality at all. And often, the answer is “*No—there are only preferences. And all preferences are fine—so long as they align with whatever ideas are held by those who are currently the cultural influencers of note.*”

[Slide 2]

But as followers of Jesus Christ, we must have a different understanding. Biblical morality is derived from God’s revelation of himself to us through his word and through his Son, the Word made flesh. Our moral standards thus reflect the principles taught in the Scriptures and embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

[Slide 3] *Review*

The first three commandments are fairly easy to summarize, since they are all focused on the person of Yahweh, the God of Israel: (1) First: *You are to recognize only one God*; you will have no other gods that you worship. (2) Second: *You are not to make false representations of God*; no idols, no substitutes for God. (3) Third: *You are to make no professions of allegiance to God that are false or deceitful*, no appeals to him as your witness that are actually attempts to deceive others; no claims of belonging to him that are not backed up by your actions of faithfulness to his covenant.

[Slide 4] *Sabbath questions*

When we come to the fourth commandment, though, we find ourselves facing a flurry of questions. What does it mean? How do we obey it? What is the point and purpose of this commandment? Why does it matter? Is it still relevant to us today? And how is this commandment related to questions of morality?

And those are just the initial questions. Questions and controversies over Sabbath-keeping have been a part of the church's experience since the very beginning. We see evidence of that in the gospels themselves, which frequently point out the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees over matters involving the keeping of Sabbath. Various sects over the course of the church's history have insisted that Christians were obligated to follow the pattern of worshiping on the Jewish Sabbath and refraining from working during that time period. One even regards Sunday worship as the “mark of the beast” and claims that true Christians must separate from all those who meet for worship on Sunday, the day of the resurrection. On the other hand, many dismiss ideas of Sabbath-keeping as legalism and pointless, a relic of Judaism which the church has outgrown and doesn't need. And others simply transfer the language of Sabbath to Sunday while selectively keeping some aspects of Sabbath celebration but dropping the rest.

What do we do with all of this history and the questions it brings to mind? I can tell you that we won't be able to answer all of those questions this morning. But let's try to tackle a few that will get us started on the path of understanding and applying God's word to our lives today.

[Slide 5]

Let's begin with the simplest question: what is the “Sabbath”? What is this day that we're commanded to honor and remember? What are we talking about?

The word “Sabbath” comes from a Hebrew verb that means, “to cease”; thus, the Sabbath is a day to cease from one's work. That's fairly clear from the text of the commandment: “*On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your*

*son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.”* Furthermore, this day is specified as the seventh day, that is, the final day in the seven-day week. And by Hebrew reckoning, the day begins at sundown—so the Sabbath begins at sundown on what is Friday for us and continues until sundown of Saturday.

The weekly Sabbath was the most important day devoted to resting, but this idea of a Sabbath rest was extended in the Law to include several other special times. Certain days during the annual feasts were designated as Sabbaths. Every seventh year was a Sabbatical year, where the land was allowed to “rest”—no crops were planted during those years, and only what grew on its own was harvested. The “jubilee” year (every fiftieth year) was a similar year of rest and restoration.

**[Slide 6]**     *Remember the Sabbath*

There are three points of emphasis in this commandment that we should recognize, all of them fairly obvious, but still worth noting.

First, this day is a holy day. It is a day that belongs to God; he has marked it off and set it aside for himself. Just as God’s people were holy—that is, they were marked off as belonging to God—so too was this day. Its inclusion in the Ten Commandments is directly related to this special designation.

The commandment itself does not specifically refer to or require any special religious ceremonies or connection to public or private worship. The reference to other feast days as “Sabbaths,” however, shows us that worship and Sabbath are not unrelated. And history, as we shall see, certainly connected the two.

Second, the intent of the commandment is to provide rest for people. The designation of this day as a day free from work sets it off from the rest of the week when labor is not only permitted, but expected. “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work*” is as much a part of the commandment as the part about not working on the Sabbath day.

Third, as the restatement of the commandment in Deuteronomy 5 shows us, the day of rest was not merely for the privilege of a few, but for all of those in the community, including hired help and servants. Observance of the Law meant that you could not find a work-around (pun intended!) that allowed you to continue harvesting, for instance, by using hired help while you “rested.” The same privilege of a day of rest enjoyed by the owner of the field or the business was granted to those who were day-laborers or indentured servants—even the animals.

**[Slide 7]**     *History of Sabbath: Old Testament*

Both the seven-day week and a weekly day of rest were unique to the Israelites in the ancient world. We don’t see any other cultures from that time that

recognized a seven-day week or that had a regular day devoted to resting that occurs every week. Israel's history with the Sabbath, however, shows us how the commandment came to be understood and observed (or not).

In the early centuries of Israel's history, we don't have many indications about observance of the Sabbath among the people. But by the time we get to the eighth century BC, when Israel and Judah are two separate nations, it's clear that Sabbath observance is something that has changed—both in terms of the weekly day of rest and the Sabbatical years for the land.

Under Jeroboam II, king of Israel, and Uzziah, king of Judah, the eighth century saw dramatic increases in prosperity for both nations. The absence of an imperial power in the region and relative peace meant that commerce could flourish, as the trade routes running through Israel and Judah brought in substantial wealth to the two small kingdoms.

But the prophets—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah—saw something different. The Sabbath religious celebrations may have been happening, but injustice and exploitative treatment of workers were characteristic of the culture. Concern for commercial gain meant that it had become commonplace to ignore the commandment in order to ensure that business could be transacted on the Sabbath. A century later, Jeremiah would add that one of the reasons for the seventy years of exile was to allow for the land to rest for all of the Sabbath years that had been ignored—nearly five century's worth, virtually the entirety of their time in the land.

Following the return from exile, observance of the Sabbath was again a matter of concern. Nehemiah initiated reforms that stopped the practice of doing commercial transactions on the Sabbath. It is also during this time that the synagogues became central to Israelite community life. While the home was still the focal point of the Sabbath meal that began the celebration of the Sabbath, the addition of the synagogue as a communal gathering place made it possible to have a weekly time for the community to gather to pray, sing, read the Scriptures, hear teaching on the meaning of the Scriptures, discuss community matters, and reaffirm their identity as the people of God in this place.

**[Slide 8]**     *Sabbath in the first century*

By the time we get to the first century and Jesus and the New Testament, Sabbath-keeping had become one of the most important markers of Jewish identity and a particular point of emphasis for the Pharisees to show their devotion to God. What had also happened is the development of what was known as the “oral law”: the creation of an enormous number of additional requirements specifying exactly what constitutes “work” and is therefore prohibited on the Sabbath. The Talmud,

which is a later compendium of Jewish law based on rabbinical debates and decisions beginning before the time of Christ, includes two complete sections devoted entirely to discussions about Sabbath observance.

What the rabbis and the Pharisees were trying to accomplish in these debates and discussions about the Sabbath was to determine how the Law applied in every possible situation in life. So, for instance, moving a chair across the room on the Sabbath was forbidden. Why? Ancient homes had dirt floors. If, while moving the chair, you happened to drag one of its legs through the dirt, this could be construed as plowing, which was forbidden. A woman was forbidden to look into a mirror on the Sabbath. Why? She might see a gray hair, and be tempted to pluck it out, which was forbidden.

[Slide 9]

As a result, with the multiplication of the restrictions on what was allowed on the Sabbath and what was not allowed, life became extremely complicated for observant Jews. And the Pharisees were quick to condemn all those whose observance was less than they demanded. This, of course, brought Jesus directly into their sights. The gospels repeatedly point out that disputes between the Pharisees and Jesus over the Sabbath were at the center of their conflict.

Jesus was adamant that the Pharisees had misunderstood both the intention of the law about Sabbath and its proper use. Not only had they placed unnecessary burdens on the people with their additional strictures about what is a violation, but they had failed to recognize the one who is the Lord of the Sabbath, the only one who can say what the Sabbath is for and what is allowed or disallowed. Jesus was clear: *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”* If “keeping Sabbath” becomes another prison (*“I can’t do that because it’s work.”*), then I’ve missed the point of Sabbath altogether.

[Slide 10] *The contribution of Paul*

The apostle Paul takes matters one step further when he wrote to the Colossian church (which consisted mostly of Gentiles), and to the Roman church (which was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles). Paul concluded that Sabbath observation was a matter of custom, which people were welcome to keep or ignore—something that went entirely against his upbringing as a Pharisee, and which earned him their anger and hatred. His reasoning for saying this? He had discovered, after a lifetime of trying to please God through strict observance of the Law, including all of the Pharisaical additional requirements, that what mattered was knowing Jesus the Messiah. That was the substance, the reality to which the Law had been pointing all along; all else was shadow. What was important was

not whether you observed the Sabbath or not; what mattered was why you did so, and if you knew the Lord to which the Sabbath pointed.

Paul's teaching aided the church as it was growing to include more Gentiles. Conflict with the Jewish community over the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and what this meant for inclusion in the people of God was increasing. By the end of the first century, Jewish leaders had forced a separation: the believing Jews who insisted that Jesus was the Messiah had to leave the synagogue. The church, which had begun as a sect within Judaism had now become a separate entity, still connected to its Jewish roots in its history and allegiance to the Scriptures, but with a new understanding of how to read and interpret those Scriptures, a new understanding of who God was, and a new allegiance to Jesus the Messiah.

With that separation, observance of the Sabbath dwindled among Christians as the numbers of Jewish believers in the church dwindled. In its place came an increased emphasis on what had been happening since the earliest days of the church: meeting on the first day of the week in honor of the resurrection.

[Slide 11] *The letter to the Hebrews*

The author of the letter to the Hebrews adds one more point for us on the Sabbath and our relation to it as Christians. In the passage we read this morning, the author makes reference to a new "Sabbath-rest"—one that is not simply a weekly resting from one's labors, nor is it the rest that was promised to Israel when they came into the Promised Land of Canaan. This new Sabbath-rest comes from believing the message of the gospel: it is the rest of eternal life, the life that we experience when we place our faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.

This new "Sabbath-rest" requires the laying aside of our works; that is, we abandon the attempt to prove that we are good enough for God to approve us by offering up all of our good works. Instead, we rest in faith; we put all of the weight of our lives on the truthfulness of the gospel. We depend upon the death of Jesus as the only offering sufficient to make us right with God and provide a way into his presence. That is the rest to which the weekly Sabbath points—a rest that we can experience every day of the week.

[Slide 12] *Things to consider*

How, then, do we look at this fourth commandment? How do we understand God's intention for us in giving us this command?

Although it not a simple task, we really need to consider a number of things, principally what we find in the whole of Scripture: (1) the text itself, in both Exodus 20 and the restatement of it in Deuteronomy 5, of course; (2) the history of the development of the observance of Sabbath among the people of Israel, as

evidenced elsewhere in the Old Testament; (3) Jesus' teaching and example in the gospels; and (4) the understanding expressed in the rest of the New Testament, particularly Paul's teaching and what we find in the book of Hebrews. To this we can add the experiences of the church throughout the ages.

[Slide 13]

For Jewish Christians, worship on the Sabbath offers them a great deal of meaning, and I am happy to applaud their desire to retain this observance and all the richness of what it signifies and provides, in terms of continuity with tradition and celebration of the Jewish rootage for the church.

I am also happy for Gentiles who choose to honor God by worshiping on the Sabbath (rather than on Sunday), or who follow the Jewish tradition and the Scriptural identification of the Sabbath by resting on the seventh day of the week. I stand with Paul on this matter: *“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord.”* (Romans 14:5-6a) Where I draw the line, however, is when anyone, whether a Jewish or Gentile believer, makes Sabbath observance, or worship on the Sabbath, an obligation for all Christians. The New Testament clearly teaches otherwise, and I won't compromise on that point.

[Slide 14] *Key principles*

But even though we are not obligated to observe the Friday through Saturday Sabbath, there are important principles contained in this commandment, as well as a practice that we would do well to follow. Here are some of the more important points, in my opinion, that we should take away from the commandment to honor the Sabbath—especially as we ask the question of how this is related to the matter of morality.

(1) One of the clearest aspects of the Sabbath as it relates to the general question of morality and its basis is what Sabbath signified and where it was to be observed. As part of the central core of the Mosaic covenant, the commandment to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest was a covenantal sign. It signified that those who belonged to God could be identified through this observance: because they believed that God, their God, created the universe and all that it contained in six days and rested on the seventh day, they honored him as Creator and Lord by following his example of resting on the seventh day. (Neither this passage nor the creation accounts require that we understand those days as twenty-four hours in length.) The day was a weekly recognition of God's place in my life as a person, and in the life of my family, and in the life of my community of which I am a part.

Where it was observed is also crucial—Sabbath originally and principally was to be observed in the home. It was a day to rest, to be at home, to be surrounded by family who were together, honoring God together, and enjoying being his people without care. The communal aspect of worshiping together each week came later, but it still reflects this same importance of identifying as God’s people. Celebrating Sabbath together provided a way to recognize that our social and religious relationships and concerns were a part of our communal connection to God. We are his people; we share a common commitment to him. But we do not honor him only in our public worship, but first and most importantly, at home. Our family’s identity is not simply in our lineage or our current location but in our relationship to one another as those who belong to God.

[Slide 15]

(2) When we consider God’s intention in giving this commandment, especially as it was clarified by Jesus, we see that it was intended to provide for people. God was (and still is) concerned that people be well. And a life that is filled with work and no rest does not result in people being well. That kind of life does not reflect the way we were created to live.

When we also remember that this commandment follows the first three, all of which are related to proper worship, we can see that the observance of Sabbath is designed to teach us that we are not to base our lives on the pursuit of things, of wealth, of security. The holiness of a weekly day of rest says that productivity cannot be our god; productivity is not the measure of our value or the goal of our existence. To put it bluntly, my purpose in life is not simply to work; my job is not who I am, it is what I do. Our culture rewards ambition and drive and being consumed by work. But the commandment to honor the Sabbath says ‘no’ to that way of living. The endless drive to have more, to gain more, to accomplish more is forced to bow the knee to the greater need in our lives for a relationship with God that is not found in our work (but which can be lived out in our work).

[Slide 16]

(3) Closely related to this is what Sabbath both symbolizes and requires—the determination to trust in God to provide for our needs. No other cultures in the ancient Near East practiced a weekly day of rest. Several of them had occasional days of rest—at least for the privileged classes—days that were special ceremonial days in their religious observances. But none went so far as to allow everyone a rest day every seventh day! To do so was seen as craziness. In the Greco-Roman world, by, say, the second century BC, Jews were regarded as lazy and odd for not working on the Sabbath.

There are plenty of people today who would say the same thing. I remember overhearing a painter in the credit union, years ago, say that Sundays were the same as every other day, except the banks weren't open. In his mind, every day was simply another day to work. Life was about scrambling to earn money.

But for a follower of Christ, taking a day to honor God each week, to intentionally rest from working, requires that I actively trust that God will provide for me and my family. I not only refuse to make my job or making money my god, but I choose to trust that God will bless my working on the other days of the week so that I can have a day to rest and to worship. I recognize that God is the Lord not only of my religious feelings, but of my schedule and my bank account. (Now, this also requires that I choose to be content with what he provides for me instead of constantly striving to earn more so that I can have more. But that's a sermon for another day.)

[Slide 17]

(4) We've already seen that there is a strong humanitarian emphasis in this commandment. God's concern is not simply for the religious elite, or for the socially powerful; it extends to the common laborer, the migrant worker, the destitute who are reduced to indentured servitude in order to survive. This commandment thus has particular importance for those who are well off, who are in the position to employ others. Not only must I recognize that commerce and acquisition or "necessity" must not be the controlling gods I serve, if I am to faithfully identify with the living God, who cares about the well-being of all people, I must also refuse to be the demanding taskmaster who drives my employees, or those whom I manage or oversee, in order to bleed the most productivity out of them that is possible to secure.

No, their well-being must be my concern as well. To whatever degree I am able, I should make it my obligation to see that they are able to rest—that their lives are not captive to the job I provide for them. That concern for their well-being should result in tangible benefit for them—so that they are able to earn an adequate living commensurate with their abilities and within the capabilities of my business or enterprise. My concern for them must be at least as great as my concern for my profit margin.

[Slide 18]

(5) Even though I don't believe that we are obligated to observe a weekly Sabbath under the new covenant, I do believe that we would be better off, healthier, and more spiritually tuned to the things of God if we did. I've been looking at this practice for the past few years since I was challenged by Peter

Scazzero in his book, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*. It's still something I'm trying to get established in my mind and in my life. But I'm not there quite yet. I'm better than I used to be—I'm regularly taking time to rest more than I used to do. And I believe that it's having a good effect on me, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. So I will recommend that you try what I am trying—taking steps that lead toward the regular, weekly habit of a day that belongs to God, a day to rest. Don't waste time and energy debating about what you're not supposed to do—let the day belong to God and share it with him and with your family. Protect it as needed. And let him guide you as you try things to see what the best way for you and your family is.

[Slide 19]

(6) Finally, as I have already indicated, what is every bit as important as honoring God through resting from our jobs is resting from our attempts to be good enough to earn God's approval. Faith in Christ, having a relationship with God through putting our trust in Jesus, means stepping off of that gerbil wheel of endless effort going nowhere and living in the Sabbath-rest to which the weekly Sabbath is pointed. Whether or not you decide that you are going to observe a day of Sabbath each week (which isn't just a day off—it's a day that belongs to God!), you really must decide to place your trust in Jesus and rest in that—not just once a week, but every day, all of your life. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.*" The fourth commandment is one of those Scriptures that points to him—yes, it's good to observe a weekly day of rest, a holy day that is devoted to God and free from working. But it is even more important to find rest in Jesus, to find a life of devotion to him where I have given up trying to prove I can be good and have chosen instead to allow him to change me so I become good through his power and by his working through and in me that which I could not do on my own.

That's the rest that you need today more than anything.

[Slide 20]

*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . . ]*

*Benediction /Blessing*

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . . ]*

*Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership*