

# Keeping the Sabbath Holy

By Ronald L. Dart

**Just what does it mean to "keep the Sabbath?" What should a person do on that day? Or, as some would prefer to ask, what should a person NOT do? Can you work at your normal job? What about emergencies? Can you buy groceries on the Sabbath? What if you have unexpected guests? The Sabbath is indeed a holy day, and to worship God properly requires a right view of His day.**

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When I was fresh out of high school and looking for work, I took a job working twelve hours a day, seven days a week. At \$1.25 an hour, I was making pretty good money, or so I thought. The way I figured it, I could earn 455 dollars a month, live with my folks, and buy a new car.

And so I went to work. I started at six in the evening and worked until six in the morning. I had a ten minute break every two hours, and a short break for "lunch" at midnight. I was working on a drill press helping fulfill a military sub-contract. The lathe operators would cut the cast iron stock to shape and then I would place the finished stock into a jig on my drill press and put a hole in the middle of it, shaping a flange at the same stroke. The job required absolutely no thought. There were three simple movements required on each piece – on to the press, down with the tool, off to the stack of completed material. This went on for twelve hours.

When we got off at six in the morning, there was the bus ride home, a shower, a bite to eat, and a few minutes to unwind before getting to bed about eight o'clock to dream about the drill presses. I got up about four in the afternoon, showered and shaved, had a bite to eat, pattered about for a short while, and then caught the bus back to work.

When I started on that job, I had no idea how depressing it would be. Remember, I was eighteen, single, and just out of high school. I didn't last long – I quit. But I have often thought of the other men who were working that same job. They didn't have the same option I had. They had children to clothe, mouths to feed, and rent to pay. Jobs were not that easy to come by in those days. In truth, those men were not far removed from being slaves.

It is looking back on this experience that helps me truly appreciate the Sabbath day. Too often we think of God's law as restrictive, prohibitive, taking away from us things we want. If you happen to be a person of leisure, you may feel the Sabbath interferes with your recreation. But if you are a working stiff, you are more likely to think of the Sabbath as a day of liberty, of freedom, of rest. You are more likely to welcome the Sabbath as the great gift it is.

## The Fourth Commandment

If we are to understand Sabbath observance, the obvious place to start is with the commandment itself, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."

Most of us make a peculiar omission when we talk about "keeping the Sabbath." For merely saying we keep the Sabbath stops one word short. God said, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Simply put, that which is holy belongs to God. The Temple and all its accouterments, for example, were holy because they belonged to God.

In this case, the Sabbath is declared to be holy, and we are commanded to keep it that way. The law goes on to explain: "Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of

the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work . . ." (Exodus 20:10). Six days of the week belong to us, but the seventh day belongs to God.

Not only are we to keep in mind that the Sabbath day does not belong to us, and to avoid any work on that day, we are not to require work of others: ". . . thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates."

Does this mean you stop the boy from delivering your paper on the Sabbath day? No, he doesn't work for you. In most cases he is self-employed and makes his own decisions about when to work and when to take off. The commandment forbids you to require work of anyone who is under your control. Notice the use of the possessive: thy servant, thy daughter, even thy stranger. The commandment is to you and has to do with what you do and what you require. It does not call on you to prevent work by others, nor does it prevent you from benefiting from the labors of those who decide to work. Otherwise, you would have to avoid even the use of electricity on the Sabbath.

Why are we to do this? "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it" (Exodus 20:11). Some funny arguments have grown up around the Sabbath. There are those, for example, who believe the Sabbath originated with Moses. And yet it is plain that in resting on the seventh day, God set it apart and hallowed it from creation. To hallow something is to make it holy. The Sabbath day was made holy right from the start.

As Jesus put it, the Sabbath was made for man. It was created when man was created. The fourth commandment itself points to creation as the origin of the Sabbath.

The account in Deuteronomy adds another element to the Sabbath: "And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:15).

To people born in slavery, the Sabbath was without a doubt the greatest expression of liberty these people had ever known. No longer did they have to work seven days out of seven. No longer were they left without time to think about God, to worship, to pray, to rest as God Himself rested.

### **Judgments**

The commandment was pretty simple. "Keep the seventh day apart as belonging to God. Do not work on that day. Rest on that day. Do not require work on that day. Remember that God your creator rested on the seventh day, and remember that He liberated you from slavery." That was all the fourth commandment had to say about the Sabbath.

Even though that is all there is to the commandment, it doesn't take a great theologian to realize that there are a lot of unanswered questions raised here. For example, does it really matter which day is the Sabbath, or can we keep any one day in seven? Just what constitutes work? What if my house catches fire – would it be work to remove some of my belongings?

These two versions of the Ten Commandments are not all the Bible tells us about Sabbath observance, but there is an important difference between this commandment and all the other Scriptures about the Sabbath—all the other references are judgments. What difference does that make? Judgments are administrative statements applying the law to specific situations. The principle remains in force, but it may not always have the same force when applied to different circumstances in different times.

There has never been a law given which does not require interpretation. And if there is to be official interpretation, then sort of official administration is called for.

Someone must have decision making powers in any governmental structure. Israel was no exception, and the procedure for handling questions and disputes was described in Deuteronomy 17:8. If there arose a matter too hard for them in judgment – especially a matter creating controversy – then they were to get up to the seat of government and inquire of the priests, Levites, and judges. These officials were charged with the responsibility of rendering judgments in doubtful matters. Their decisions took on all the force of law for those who had so inquired (verse 10), even to the extent of the death penalty (verse 12).

These judges could not decide arbitrarily. They were constrained to derive their decisions from the law and to support them by exposition of the law (verse 11). This was, in effect, the supreme court of the day. Like our Supreme Court, their decisions actually became a part of the body of law, and we find biblical writers referring to the law in terms of commandments, statutes, and judgments. Like our Supreme Court, they made narrow decisions that applied only to the case in point or they made broad decisions that could find application in many similar cases.

Whatever the decision, it became the law of the land, and was just as binding on applicable cases as if it were written with the finger of God.

Sometimes the judgment came from God Himself. Take for example the young man who went out to gather sticks on the Sabbath day. Numbers 15 draws a distinction between sinning through ignorance, and sinning presumptuously: "But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously [margin: with a high hand], whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people" (Numbers 15:30).

In this context, a case study is included of a man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath (verses 32-36). He was arrested and held "because it was not declared what should be done to him." In other words, the law did not specify this particular violation – after all, no law can cover every contingency.

God's judgment was that he should be put death, but in terms of the courts, this was a "narrow" decision. Not every man who ever gathered sticks on the Sabbath would be stoned. This man had not acted out of ignorance, weakness, necessity or even stupidity. He had acted defiantly – with a high hand. His attitude and intent had figured in the decision. Jesus would later make it clear that human and even animal necessity could create exceptions in the Sabbath Law. This man had reproached God by sinning "with a high hand."

### **The Preparation Day**

We will not be called on to discipline someone for gathering firewood on the Sabbath, but the judgment is still important. It underlines a fundamental concept of Sabbath observance: the preparation day. If you are going to need firewood on the Sabbath, collect it the day before. After all, the Sabbath does not come as a total surprise each week.

When God decided to "rain bread from heaven" for the Israelites (Exodus 16:4-30), He did it in such a way as to drive home two important lessons about the Sabbath. Bear in mind that this is not a commandment, but an administrative statement as to how the Sabbath should be observed in this situation. It is a judgment. We will derive lessons from it, but we may apply those lessons a little differently under Christ's administration.

Lesson one: The proper observance of the Sabbath requires forethought and preparation. "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them [it was a test commandment], whether they will walk in my law, or no. And it shall come

to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily" (verses 4, 5).

God gave them a very simple procedure. Gather just enough for your family each day and eat it all. If you gather too much and try to hold it over, it will breed worms and stink. It was to be their "daily bread." Then, on the sixth day, they were allowed twice as much and told to prepare extra for the Sabbath day. This time being carefully taught to prepare for the Sabbath day.

Lesson two: The Sabbath could not be any one day in seven. It was established on a specific day. Some people tried to do otherwise and were left with smelly, worm-eaten bread. Those who went out on the Sabbath to collect manna found none and were rebuked for their efforts: "How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws? See, for that the Lord hath given you the Sabbath, therefore He giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place [stay put], let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day" (verses 28, 29).

What we learn from these judgments is that the Sabbath is on a specific day, and that proper observance of the Sabbath requires preparation. There is nothing in Christ's teaching to change that.

What we have read so far are God's judgments for a people fresh out of slavery. They had to be taught, and that teaching required discipline. There were questions to be asked about the observance of the Sabbath in that time and place, and those questions had to be answered.

When preparations were being made for building the Tabernacle, Moses' opening instructions clarified a matter regarding the Sabbath. Even the work on the Tabernacle would cease on the Sabbath. In fact, they were not even to kindle a fire on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:3). Did this mean that they could not start a fire to keep warm in case of a sudden change in the weather? Not likely. They were not even to build a fire on the Sabbath preparatory to resuming work after the Sabbath was over, even if the work was on the Tabernacle. Remember, this is a judgment of Moses given on a specific occasion. It has not been abolished. It remains in the law as a precedent, but judgments may be interpreted differently when we face different circumstances. Kindling a fire in our own age is hardly work. It may only involve the flipping of a switch. And there is no prohibition in any age to kindling a fire to get warm. It is a matter of judgment.

Nevertheless, the concept of the preparation day calls for us to get our firewood ready the day before so we can truly rest on the Sabbath.

Much later, after the captivity when the leaders of Israel were anxious to restore obedience to God, a governor named Nehemiah rendered some judgments about the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15-22). In those days some of the Jews were carrying on all their normal activities on the Sabbath day including setting up farmers' markets in Jerusalem. By means of a "city ordinance" he forbade the marketing of produce in Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. There was little he could do about work done elsewhere, but in Jerusalem, he was governor. Even when they tried to set up markets outside of Jerusalem, he drove them away. If you have ever been to that kind of market, you will realize how it can shatter the peace of a Sabbath morning.

Some have taken this as proof that it is wrong to buy, sell, or even for money to change hands on the Sabbath. There are five things to be considered about this passage. First, there is nothing in the fourth commandment to prohibit money or goods changing hands on the Sabbath. The commandment is that you are not to do any work. Second, although it is a small point, Nehemiah was the governor, and was establishing a Sabbath keeping society. Third, different judgments may be called for in a non-Sabbath keeping society where you have no authority. Fourth, this is a judgment of a governor to meet a specific situation. While it is a precedent, it is a narrow precedent. Fifth, we have yet to consider Christ's judgments relative to the Sabbath.

Jesus' administration of the Sabbath was a common sense approach. By the time He came on the scene, the Jews had rendered the Sabbath almost unrecognizable. Following what they thought was Nehemiah's example, they had decided how far a person could walk on the Sabbath, how much he could carry, whether one could take things out of his house if it were on fire, and even whether one could heal on the Sabbath.

Jesus and His disciples for the most part ignored the traditions of the Jews regarding Sabbath observance. On a day when they were passing through grain fields, they were plucking ears of grain as they went (Mark 2:23). To the Pharisees, this was unlawful and they challenged Jesus on the question. They saw no real difference between the act of plucking one head of grain, and harvesting fifty or five thousand. The difference was only a matter of numbers.

Now common sense tells you that isn't so. Obviously there is a difference between plucking a few heads of grain to eat right then and there, and harvesting your entire crop. What is the difference? The difference is in your intent. One man might have gone out to collect sticks on the Sabbath to build a fire to keep warm after a sudden cold snap. This man might have gone unpunished while another man who performed exactly the same act might have been stoned. One was reluctantly working to meet a human need, and the other was arrogantly flouting God's law. It was purely a matter of intent.

Jesus replied to the critics, "Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?" (Mark 2:25-26).

What did this reply have to do with the Sabbath? Merely that a simple human need like hunger could, on a rare occasion, take precedence over the law-even the fourth commandment. Such an occasion in no way invalidates or sets aside the commandment-it is an exception to the rule.

Jesus even acknowledged that there could arise a conflict between two laws. In Matthew's account of this incident, Jesus continues by asking, "Or have you not read in the law, how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?" (Matthew 12:5). In truth we would expect that the greater law would take precedence over the lesser, and who would argue that the sacrificial law is greater than the Sabbath? The priests were commanded to do the work of sacrificing animals. The Sabbath forbade work. Which commandment took precedence? The sacrificial law took precedence.

This deserves some consideration. The Sabbath, Jesus continued, was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Man was not expected to worship the Sabbath, but to worship God on the Sabbath. The offerings were a part of the worship of God and so were offered every day. They were also a presentation of the Gospel since every sacrifice pointed to Christ.

Having made this point, Jesus continued "But I say unto you that in this place is one greater than the temple" (Matthew 12:6). If the service of the Temple could continue on the Sabbath, then so could the service of Christ. "But if you had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless." The rigid, ritualistic observance of law was not as important as mercy, according to Christ.

He concluded, "For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day" (verse 8). Jesus is the final judge of proper conduct on the Sabbath day. He took us beyond the ministration of death to the ministration of the spirit and defined this day at a level no Pharisee would ever have seen.

They asked Him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?" They were only setting a trap - trying to find some accusation against Him. When they asked this, there was a man standing near who had a withered hand. Jesus asked, "What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?" Plainly, all of them would have rescued the

dumb animal. If not, then His question would have been meaningless. Elsewhere, He asks a similar question regarding an ox in a ditch, plainly expecting that even the strictest Pharisee would save the animal even though it involved back breaking work. After all, it was an emergency. Jesus taught that work is permissible in an emergency, even to save an animal.

Then He hit them with the clincher: "How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore, it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days. Then saith He to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other" (Matthew 12:13).

You would think the dramatic healing would have been all the authority Jesus needed to pass judgment on how to observe the Sabbath, but the men went out and conspired how they might destroy Him.

It was almost as though Jesus sought out opportunities to correct the errors of the Jews. On another occasion, He found an impotent man lying on a pallet. He could easily have said, "rise up and walk," but that would have left an issue unresolved. He went on to say, "Rise, take up thy bed and walk." This was on the Sabbath, and the Jews had precisely defined the size of the burden a man could carry on the Sabbath.

When the Jews saw the man carrying his pallet, they said, "It is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed." The man's answer is instructive: "He that made me whole, the same said unto me, take up thy bed and walk." He had no question about Jesus' credentials in interpreting the Sabbath. Any man who could heal him could certainly explain the nuances of Sabbath observance.

Did Jesus intend to completely invalidate the Sabbath? Hardly. What concerned Him was the trivializing of the Sabbath.

The Jews can hardly be blamed for being careful. They knew it was carelessness on the Sabbath that had resulted in the Babylonian captivity. They recalled vividly Jeremiah's admonition to "bear no burden on the Sabbath day" (Jeremiah 17:22). God had warned through Jeremiah that if they would not listen, and routinely carried a burden through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, that He would kindle a fire in the gates of the city (verse 27). They recalled Nehemiah's admonition that God had brought captivity upon their fathers for profaning the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:18).

What they could not see was the difference between carrying a heavy burden of firewood, and carrying a rolled up blanket under the arm. There is a difference, but it cannot be measured in kilograms. Once again, it is a matter of intent.

When Jesus was challenged on the matter, He responded, "I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of my Father which hath sent me" (John 5:30). It was not God's intent to prevent a man from carrying even a light burden on the Sabbath, or from doing good on the Sabbath. It was His intent to set a man free from his work on the Sabbath.

Jesus' judgment about the Sabbath was the Father's judgment, the Father's intent. It was the true interpretation of the original intent of the Sabbath law.

But Jesus also realized that there was no way He could answer all questions for all generations. What about the questions that would arise as technology radically changed man's lifestyle? Would there be a continuing need for interpretation?

Jesus told, not only Peter, but all the Apostles, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). This does not include the power to

change laws, but simply to pass judgment on doubtful matters. Jesus' statement does include the support of these decisions at the highest level of God's Kingdom.

This is not to say that the ministry decide for the people what they can decide for themselves. As it was in Old Testament times, the decision-making process was only for those things, "Too hard for you in judgment . . . being matters of controversy within your gates." The body of ministerial judgments, given to resolve questions and controversy, become a part of the tradition of the church. This is a major factor in maintaining the unity of the church.

Using Jesus' principle that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath, the ministry have long since determined, that while it is wrong to work at your job on the Sabbath, it's not wrong for you to benefit directly or indirectly from the work of others. The extreme opposite view would argue that proper observance of the Sabbath requires that we use no electricity on that day. We must turn off our air conditioners and use candles to light our home. Even the candles should be lit before sundown as we are to kindle no fire on the Sabbath.

But in following that approach, we are going far beyond the requirements of the law, and we may well defeat the very purpose of the Sabbath.

The keeping of the Sabbath is very much a matter of intent. God revealed through Isaiah the right attitude toward the Sabbath: "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honour Him, not doing thine own ways, not finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isaiah 58:13,14).

The purpose of the Sabbath is to get man to pause - to step out of the rat race for a moment and to find a little time for God, for family, for friends, for brothers. It is not a time to sit in the dark because you don't want to turn on a light on the Sabbath. It is not a day to be cold because you don't want to light a fire in the fireplace. It is not a day to be alone because you won't go to a restaurant with brethren for fellowship.

But it is God's day. It is a day when you have all the time in the world. You have time for reading the Bible, time for prayer, time for fellowship, time for your children, time for thought, time for yourself, and, above all, time for God.

Don't you feel sorry for those poor souls who have no Sabbath?