

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **Failing to Work and Rest**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:8-11

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**Introduction:** Our series on the Ten Commandments brings us today to the Fourth Commandment. The Fourth Commandment may be the riskiest one to preach in the evangelical church; certainly it is the most controversial. There is actually little disagreement over the other nine. It's not that everyone keeps them, to be sure, but few evangelicals would argue with the fact that God alone deserves to be worshiped, or that adultery is sin, or that stealing violates His will.

Of course, the other Nine also generate some difficult questions. For example, does the Second Commandment against images forbid pictures of Jesus? Does the Sixth Commandment against killing forbid Capital Punishment? Does the Ninth Commandment against lying prevent one from lying in order to save a life? These are all legitimate questions, and godly people can differ on the answers. But the Fourth Commandment stands alone in the degree of controversy surrounding its interpretation.

In fact, let me share with you four distinct views that evangelicals have taken on the Fourth Commandment. (1) There are those who believe Sabbath observance is required today just as in Moses' day, and they mean Saturday. (2) Others accept all the Sabbath requirements but transfer them from Saturday to Sunday, which they call "the Christian Sabbath." (3) Still others reject all restrictions on either day, believing Christians are free from Sabbath observance altogether. (4) And finally there are those, myself included, who believe that the Sabbath commandment is no longer in effect but the Sabbath principle is. I will, of course, try to steer your thinking in the latter direction through our examination of God's Word today.

I invite you to turn in your Bible to Exodus 20:8-11.

*"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 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 manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 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."* This is the Word of the Lord.

Let's begin with the uniqueness of this Commandment.

**The Fourth Commandment is unique.**

**1. It is unique in that it is the longest of the Ten Commandments.** Some are as short

as four words. This one is four full verses.

**2. It is unique in that it is the only one stated in both positive and negative forms.** I have already observed that each of the commandments entails both a positive and negative truth. For example, “You shall not murder” implies that you shall treat all human life as sacred. And “You shall not commit adultery,” implies that you shall live a life of purity and faithfulness. But the Fourth Commandment is the only one that is actually stated in both positive and negative form in the text. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” is the positive form. “On it you shall not do any work” is the negative.

**3. The Fourth Commandment is the only one not found implicitly in the New Testament.** Every other commandment is confirmed and reiterated in some form the New Testament, but not this one. Sabbath observance is, of course, mentioned in the Gospels but never commanded. And when you come to the Epistles, the Handbook of the Early Church, you discover surprisingly that (1) Sabbath-keeping is only mentioned twice—once in a negative reference and the second time metaphorically,<sup>1</sup> (2) Sabbath-keeping is never commanded, (3) Sabbath-breaking is never included in any of the many lists of sins, and (4) most importantly, in several epistles the Fourth Commandment is specifically contradicted. I will show you those in a few moments.

But first, in order to get a complete picture of the Sabbath issue, I want us to do a brief historical analysis.

### **God required Sabbath observance in the Old Testament.**

This is beyond dispute. And the concept didn’t originate with Moses. God Himself observed the first Sabbath during creation week.

**At Creation the Sabbath was first observed by God.** In Genesis 2:1-3 we read,  
*“Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”*

I confess I don’t fully understand why God needed to rest, because He certainly wasn’t tired. I assume He rested because His work was done and to set an example for us. He knew that for our mental, emotional, and spiritual health we needed a regular rhythm of work and rest, so He provided the Sabbath as a gift and a blessing for His people.

Though the Sabbath didn’t originate with Moses, it was through Moses that God first attached clear and uncompromising rules regarding the Sabbath.

**Moses added clear and uncompromising rules and penalties.** The first thing God told his people in Exodus 20:8 is that they were to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy; i.e. by setting it apart from all other days. Then He defined exactly *how* they were to keep it holy—

by refraining from any and all work. But what is work? God knew His people's penchant for rationalization, and to keep them from skirting around His commandment He carefully defined work in scores of OT passages as everything from sowing a field to pruning a vineyard, gathering wood, lighting a fire, selling food, carrying a load, fishing, or any number of other activities that people of that day were regularly involved in on a daily basis.

Furthermore, God made it clear that Sabbath observance applied to men and women, adults and children, servants and masters, foreigners in their midst, and even the animals. And the punishment for violation is clearly stated in Exodus 31:14, where we read, "Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people." So the commandment was very clear regarding what it required, who it applied to, and what penalty was attached for disobedience.

Strangely the Jewish religious leaders were not content with the rules and restrictions God Himself placed upon the Sabbath. They developed over 1500 *additional* rules and regulations for it.

**The Scribes and Pharisees turned the blessing of the Sabbath into a burden.** It was generally the Scribes who developed these rules and the Pharisees who kept them. You've heard about some of their legalistic shenanigans, but allow me to review just a few of them. One could lift a child on the Sabbath, but not if the child had a stone in his hand, for the stone was a burden even if the child was not. A doctor could take steps to keep a sick man from getting worse, but he could do nothing to make him better. One could not cook a dinner, use false teeth, or rescue a drowning man on the sabbath.

Now if you think this kind of thing died out with the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day, let me disabuse you of that notion. There is a large Jewish community in St. Louis. In fact, the high school I attended there was about 75% Jewish even though it was a public school. A few years ago there was an article in the Post Dispatch about how the Chesterfield City Council had approved a petition to designate a section of the northeastern part of the city as a special area for an Orthodox Jewish congregation.

Since their interpretation of the Sabbath does not allow the Orthodox to carry anything, including children from one place to another on the Sabbath (even without stones in their hands), mothers of young children could not attend synagogue. So they asked Chesterfield to designate the telephone lines from Olive to Woods Mill to Conway to White Roads as an "eruv." They could then call the encircled area a domain and everyone living within the area could carry a child to synagogue because they wouldn't be leaving their domain. The synagogue paid Chesterfield \$1 a year for this convenience.

What did Jesus think of this kind of legalism which surrounded the Sabbath in His day?

**Jesus refocused attention on the purpose of the Sabbath.** He taught that the Sabbath was a gift from God. He said that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In fact, He frequently went out of His way to violate the Pharisaical rules and

regulations about the Sabbath, and in the process He established two major exceptions to the prohibition of work on the Sabbath. He taught that works of mercy and works of necessity can and ought to be done on the Sabbath.

Jesus illustrated the first exception (works of mercy) by healing on the Sabbath at least six different times. He illustrated the second (works of necessity) when He approved of His disciples gathering food on the Sabbath because they were hungry. The point He seemed to be making is that the letter of the Law must not be allowed to overshadow the spirit of the Law.

Now I would summarize Sabbath observance from creation to Christ by saying that it was absolutely required, that there were clear rules as to how it was to be observed, that severe penalties were attached to the violation of it, but that it was not to be observed legalistically. Now we must move to the issue of Sabbath observance for the Church.

### **God does not require observance of the Jewish Sabbath for believers today.**

**The requirement of Sabbath observance was specifically abrogated by both NT teaching and example.** Turn with me to two passages (and I ask you to turn to the passages because I want you to see them with your own eyes!) First, Romans 14:5, where Paul is dealing with debatable issues in the Christian life. The primary issue he deals with is meat sacrificed to idols, but then he addresses another in verse 4: “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” Friends, it would have been impossible for any prophet or leader of Israel in the OT to say something like that. The Fourth Commandment does not have a phrase in it that says to the Israelites, “keep the Sabbath holy if you feel like it” or “make up your own mind as to which day is sacred to you.” Clearly Paul believes that with the death of Christ and the establishment of the NT church something has changed in regard to the Fourth Commandment.

The other passage is Colossians 2:16-17: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” In the OT God actually ordered His people to judge one another in regard to religious festivals and Sabbath days, even to the extent of putting a person to death for a violation; now they are no longer even *permitted* to judge one another.

But not only does the NT teach that observing the Jewish Sabbath is no longer required; it also demonstrates by example that the early Christians did not do so. The Jewish Sabbath was on Saturday, but soon Christians began to shift their allegiance to Sunday. In Acts 20:7 it was on the first day of the week that the congregation at Troas met for worship and communion. In 1 Cor. 16:2 it was on the first day of the week that the Corinthians were to put something aside for the collection for the Jerusalem church, apparently because that was when they worshiped. And it was the Apostle John who first used the term “the Lord’s Day” to refer to Sunday, when he writes in Revelation 1:10, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.”

It is true the Apostles still frequently went to the synagogues on Saturday, because that's when they could find large groups of Jewish people to evangelize. But when the church met for worship, it was generally on Sunday, the Lord's Day. Without doubt that was to commemorate the resurrection.

One might conclude from these facts that the early Christians merely transferred the OT Sabbath requirements from Saturday to Sunday, making Sunday the Christian Sabbath. But not so.

**Sunday observance was treated by the early church as a matter of personal conscience, not obligation.** Clearly the early believers did not refrain from work on Sunday. Many were from the lower classes, even slaves, so they had no choice but to work on Sunday. Those who lived in Jewish communities undoubtedly rested on Saturday because that's when their neighbors rested and that's when commerce shut down, but they worshiped on Sunday—generally in the evening, after work. That's undoubtedly why Paul is preaching late into the evening in Troas, resulting in Eutychus falling asleep and falling out of the window (Acts 20:7-12)

**Later in church history some turned Sunday into “the Christian Sabbath.”** By the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century there is evidence that some Christians were not only worshiping on Sunday but also observing it as their day of rest.<sup>ii</sup> In 321 Emperor Constantine passed the first law against work on Sunday, exempting only agricultural workers. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century Alcuin was the first to actually identify Sunday as “the Christian Sabbath.” And in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Aquinas made it a matter of church law that “The Sabbath is changed into the Lord's Day.” All work on Sunday came to be viewed as a breach of the Fourth Commandment.

While this was going on in the Catholic Church, however, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers objected that the Lord's Day and the Sabbath were not the same, and they were equally unanimous that the Fourth Commandment was, for the Christian, abrogated. In his Larger Catechism Luther insisted that people have a day of rest and refreshment, and a day when they could gather to hear God's Word, and to praise and pray. But in principle it was of no importance what day that was. Calvin said essentially the same thing. The Helvetic Confession (1536) summarizes the position of the Reformers:

*The Lord's Day itself ever since the Apostles' time was consecrated to religious exercise and to a holy rest. . . . Yet herein we give no place to the Jewish observance of the day or to any superstitions. For we do not count one day to be holier than another, nor think that mere rest itself is acceptable to God. Besides, we do celebrate and keep the Lord's Day, and not the Jewish Sabbath, and that with a free observance.*

It was not long, however, before the Puritans in England had reverted to a strict Sabbatarian view of Sunday, and the Westminster Confession, 1646 (probably the most influential of all doctrinal statements since the Apostles' Creed) followed suit. The church began to draw up rules for Sunday observance that were almost as detailed as the Scribes and Pharisees did for Saturday. Blue laws were subsequently passed in many countries with Christian majorities to enforce the Christian Sabbath. Not only was work forbidden, but also virtually any kind of amusement,

sports, dancing, or singing—essentially anything that anyone might possibly find enjoyable. Jonathan Edwards once resolved never to utter anything humorous on the Lord’s Day, but then Edwards was not a real funny guy anyway.

I would suggest to you that this whole movement to see Sunday as the Christian Sabbath was wrong-headed. Listen carefully to William Barclay:

*One thing has become completely and inescapably clear. The Sabbath day and the Lord’s Day are different days and commemorate different events. The Sabbath is the last day of the week and commemorates God’s rest after the toil of the week of creation; the Lord’s Day is the first day of the week and commemorates the Resurrection of our Lord. Here we must be very plain and very definite. For the Christian the Sabbath has ceased to exist. . .*

*. . . This fourth commandment is not binding on the Christian at all, for there is no evidence in Scripture that the rules and regulations which govern the Sabbath were ever transferred by divine authority to the Lord’s Day. The Sabbath is not a Christian institution, the Lord’s Day is. . . . This means we are not asking: How ought I to keep the Sabbath? We are asking, How ought I to keep the Lord’s Day?*

To that question he then responds . . .

*The Lord’s Day is not primarily and essentially a day when this, that, or the next kind of work and action is prohibited, which is what the Jewish Sabbath is. The Lord’s Day is primarily and essentially a day when we remember that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and is alive for ever more, and therefore with us here and now. Every time we become involved in arguments about what may or may not be done on the Lord’s Day we are, in fact, being Jewish instead of Christian.*

It may surprise you, I essentially agree with Barclay on this issue. But if so, why am I preaching a series on the *Ten* Commandments. Why not the *Nine* Commandments? Do we have a right to drop one? Well, yes and no. Yes, we have the right if the NT itself tells us the Jewish Sabbath is no longer in effect, and I believe it does. But no, we don’t have the right to drop the sabbath concept altogether. Why not?

### **There is still a sabbath principle that we violate to our own detriment.**

Essentially what I am suggesting to you this morning is that the Sabbath Commandment is no longer in effect but the sabbath principle is. The Sabbath *Commandment* was given through Moses but was rescinded through the Apostle Paul. The sabbath *principle* was established at Creation and has never been rescinded. The sabbath principle is that God established a divine rhythm to life, namely six days of work and one day of rest. (That’s why I entitled this sermon, “Failing to Work *and* to Rest.”). Both are essential. Let’s look at the first part of that.

**Six days of work are optimal for good physical, emotional, and spiritual health.** It’s very interesting to me that almost no one pays attention to one of the important statements in our text today, namely Exodus 20:9. It says, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” Some

argue that this is not an imperative and really should be translated, “six days you may work,” but most scholars see it, at the very least, as the God-given pattern for life.

There have been many experiments through human history to establish a different rhythm. During the French Revolution I understand an attempt was made to go on a ten day week—working nine and taking the tenth off. It was abandoned quickly when worker productivity fell off. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the western world established a five-day work week, and more recently in some industries the four-day work week has become the norm.

I don’t know what the long-term effects of these more recent experiments have been or will be, but I am fairly sure that they will not be positive, particularly if the resulting two or three-day weekend is consistently used entirely for leisure and pleasure. That’s not how God made us. That is not what contributes to our fulfillment and happiness. We were made, I believe, to work six days a week. Now, let me hasten to add, that doesn’t necessarily mean we have to work at the same job for six days. If a person works a four-day week and then has a part-time job for two more days, or if he has a five-day-a-week job and then on the sixth day works hard around the house, or gardening, or volunteering his service to others, that is perfectly consistent with the sabbath principle.

But frankly there are many today who view work as their enemy, or at best, an unhappy necessity. They work in order to live rather than seeing their work as a meaningful part of their life. We’ve even developed a pejorative term for hard workers; we call them “workaholics,” and they have received a lot of bad press in recent years. In fact, *obeying* this part of the Fourth Commandment (the command to work six days) seems to be viewed by some as a greater sin than *violating* the other part of the Commandment (the command to rest one day).

Obviously, if hard work causes a person to neglect his health and his family and his church, then his work habits are out of control and need to be corrected. But why should we think that a 40-hour work week is somehow a divine maximum? The 40-hour week is actually a relatively recent product of American capitalism and humanistic social philosophy. I assure you there were very few, if any, in either OT or NT times who experienced a work week of as few as 40 hours.

What I am trying to convey is that the Fourth Commandment is not just about rest but also about work, and we must take the one part as seriously as the other. But while there are some who don’t follow the biblical injunctions about work, there are also those who don’t follow its advice about rest. The sabbath principle also teaches about rest also.

**One day of rest out of seven is optimal, even essential, for good physical, emotional, and spiritual health.** We live in a harried society. We are going full speed, only we often don’t know where we are going. We are stressed out and uptight, often working not for the love of work but so we can afford to buy more things that end up stealing more of our time and causing even more stress.

The divine rhythm demands one day in seven for rest and recharging, and there is no known substitute. There are times, of course, for all of us when we of necessity miss a day of rest. Even twice in a row may not hurt us severely, but if that is allowed to continue indefinitely, we will eventually harm our bodies, our emotions, our spirits, or all three. There is an old Indian proverb to the effect that the bow that is always bent will cease to shoot straight.

Barclay has observed that the Fourth Commandment . . .

*“. . . is primarily a great piece of social and humanitarian legislation. It is not primarily a religious regulation at all. There is nothing at all said about worship or about religious services. What is laid down is a day of rest on which even the serving men and women lay aside their tasks and on which even the toiling beasts are not forgotten, and when even the stranger and foreigner share in this rest.”<sup>1</sup>*

I believe we live in a culture where rest has to be consciously scheduled or it may not happen. Even our leisure activities have a way of wearing us out. As much as we might enjoy a day at the stock car races or at a pro football game, do we really come home rested and refreshed, or are we even more worn out by the noise and the tension? How many times have we said after a week of vacation, “I’m so glad to go back to work and rest up from my time off!”? We need to learn to enjoy times of silence, to practice meditation, and to center ourselves on the Lord.

**The values of the sabbath principle are many and varied, among them rest, worship, joy, and service.** This point could be an entire sermon in and of itself. Rest is essential, but it is not a static concept. Some kinds of work can be very restful. If you work at a computer all week, inactivity is not restful. Instead, going out and chopping wood on Sunday afternoon might be the most restful thing you could do.

Another key component of the sabbath principle is worship. While the Fourth Commandment itself does not mention worship, other Sabbath passages in the OT make it clear that was the day when the people of God gathered together to worship. This was clearly true also of the Lord’s Day in the NT. Worship included teaching, prayer, fellowship, praise, music, and gathering at the Lord’s Table. We are not required to do these things on Sunday, but we *must* do them sometime. “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together,” the writer of Hebrews tells us. In our culture, Sunday is the optimum time for most people to fulfill this command, but there’s certainly no fault attached to Saturday night services at some churches.

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William Barclay, *Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 27

Another key element of the sabbath principle is joy. God took great satisfaction in his Creative handiwork when He rested on the Sabbath, and we need to find time as well to sit back and enjoy both His creative handiwork and our own. How often do we take the opportunity at the end of the week to look back and reflect with joy on the fact that we are able to work, that we have jobs, and that we are able to make a difference for eternity. This too is part of the sabbath principle.

And I must not close without mentioning service. One of the ways in which Jesus tweaked the Pharisees the most was by healing on the Sabbath. He taught us here by example that one of the great purposes of the sabbath principle was for us to serve one another. We have largely become selfish with our sabbaths—our free time is for us and our families. I believe many of us might find our sabbath time much more productive, fulfilling, and even restful, if we spent a portion of it serving others. This may be through hospitality, teaching a children’s class, mentoring a teenager, or visiting a retirement center. That is an appropriate way to live out the sabbath principle.

In conclusion, let me mention a sabbath rest that is infinitely more important than the one of which Moses spoke in Exodus 20, or the one the Puritans spoke of as the Christian Sabbath. In the Book of Hebrews, the author speaks at length about the superiority of Jesus to Moses. Contrasting the Sabbath of Moses to the sabbath-rest Jesus provides, he tells us that God *has established* a day as holy for us. Do you know what that day is? It is *Today*: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. . . . There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God . . . Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:7-11). He is speaking, of course, of the salvation-rest Christ provides to all those who put their faith in Him, who rest from our sin and selfishness, a rest that lasts for eternity.

We can rest, friends, because Jesus worked. And when He completed His work, He said, “It is finished.”

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i. Colossians 2:16 says, “do not let anyone judge you by . . . a Sabbath day.” Hebrews 4:9 mentions “a Sabbath-rest for the people of God,” but clearly this is speaking metaphorically of the salvation-rest that awaits the believer.

ii. This was due to several factors. The Jewish influence in the church had declined, so there were fewer people who had a tradition of Saturday Sabbath. Also Christianity had penetrated the higher ranks of society where people could, if they so chose, observe the Lord’s Day without