

Ten Rules for Life | Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath | Exodus 20:8-11

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Preaching Draft | February 8, 2026
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In our series on the Ten Commandments, we come today to the Fourth: **Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy** (Exod 20:8).

This is the most referred to of the Ten Commandments—mentioned over one hundred times in the Old Testament. It's also the most debated in terms of ongoing significance. Some ignore it; some strictly observe it.

Beyond these debates—I believe this is a commandment we deeply need.

Most of us are tired. And not just physically—we are tired mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. We rest. But we don't feel rested.

The Fourth Commandment speaks directly into that exhaustion. It says: God is not indifferent to how we order our time, or our need for rest, or what will make for lasting rest.

True rest, as we will see, is about more than physical repose; it is about spiritual renewal. And this spiritual renewal, is about more than a cessation of activity—it is about a dynamic relationship that restores the soul. True rest is rest in the Lord of the Sabbath—which is why the fourth commandment is really about keeping the first three.

How do we put God first, make no false images of him, and honor his name? By dedicating time every week where we are disentangled from the webs of this world and reunited to God.

Sabbath is not about work-life balance; it is about finding true rest. We'll dig into this by making three observations about this Fourth Commandment and its ongoing impact across Scripture and life: we'll note, **(1) God Commands Rest, (2) We Practice Rest, and (3) Christ Gives Rest.**

I. God Commands Rest

Command, not invitation—meaning we resist or forget rest

Strikingly, God *command* us to practice Sabbath and rest. On our own, we **resist** and **forget**. What, exactly, does he command?

One day off to worship:

In Exodus 20:8-11, God commands rest on *one specific day*:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep 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. (Ex 20:8-10).

For Israel, this day ran from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Its twin engines were cessation from work—the word sabbath literally means “to cease”—and consecration to God. The command was not to be a burden, but a way to free Israel up for worshipping God.

Development and Tension:

But it attracted a type of legalism over the centuries. An oral tradition of laws grew up around it and by Jesus’ day he was being chastised by the Pharisees for picking grain to eat or healing on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-25; Luke 6:1).

Jesus responded to this by recalling the deeper meaning of the Sabbath:

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27); “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4).

Command ‘s Relevance Today?

Jesus’ attitude here does not mean that there is *no* ongoing relevance to the structure of the Sabbath requiring rest, or happening on one day? What, exactly, is the ongoing application of this Day of Rest in light of Jesus?

The Old Testament Sabbath was a covenant sign marking Israel as God’s people: “the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath...it is a sign forever between me and the people” (Ex 31:16-17).

With the coming of Christ, we now belong to God through faith in Christ not keeping laws—so in this sense, the Sabbath is not binding.

Yet we would be wrong to use this as an excuse to dismiss its deeper relevance. The origins of the Sabbath, you see, go back before the Law of Moses to the foundations of the world: The deeper principle is rooted in **creation** itself. God worked six days and rested one (Ex 20:11). Human beings need rhythms of work and rest. This pattern is a gift built into creation.

And so, Christians kept its essence, but with important changes.

The special day shifted from the last day of the week to the first—from our Saturday to our Sunday. And this was because Jesus was resurrected on “the first day of the week” (John 20:1, 19).

Christians in the city of Troas gathered on the “first day of the week” to “break bread” (Acts 20:7); Paul asked the Corinthians to collect an offering when they gathered “on the first day of every week” (1 Cor 16:2).

Christians soon called this day the “Lord’s Day,” as used by John in His revelation: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10).

By AD 321, as the Roman Empire was Christianized, emperor Constantine enshrined this in law—Sunday was now a day of rest.

So where does this leave us?

Wisdom would tell us to take seriously God’s command, and creation’s law, that we need rest. Wisdom would tell us to anticipate that we will resist this—which is why it’s a command.

Motivation: Sometimes we watch videos or speakers to motivate us to work our hardest; not to quit and keep going. What we also need is motivation to stop working and start resting.

Whole Person: The whole person is in mind here: *physical, psychological, spiritual*—the spiritual man is commanded to rest. Turn from false Gods to real God.

[T] If Sabbath is God's Good Command, something embedded into the nature of things, then how do we receive and observe it? Simply put, it takes practice—or practices.

II. We Practice Rest

Our passage indicates that Sabbath practices involve both stopping and starting, inactivity and activity.

We stop ordinary work:

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 (Ex 20:9-10).

But this stopping is not the ultimate goal—holiness is, setting the day apart for God:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.... The LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Ex 20:8-11).

To “remember” and “keep” Sabbath implies new types of practices—some involving ceasing and some starting.

Let's consider in more detail three areas these practices involve:

Physical: The rest God intends is *physiological*. People are not machines that can work around the clock. When this command is restated in Deuteronomy, Moses reminds Israel of their days of being overworked when they were slaves in Egypt:

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deut 5:15).

Civilizations did not, historically, prize this work and rest balance. In Greek and Roman society, it was common for the elite to work as little as possible while the peasants worked all the time. Most pre-modern cultures had no universal weekly rest rhythm. The biblical vision of built-in, society-wide rest was historically unusual.

Our bodies and minds need a break. This means they must *let go* of what they are clutching all week. And this means surrendering things to God, trusting He is in control and we are not.

Familial—Household: another practice of the Sabbath was social. Notice how the commandment expands to include the entirety of the ancient household:

You shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates (Ex 20:10).

An Israelite father was not to rest while making his son or servant or donkey work. The whole household was to rest.

This has important relevance for us—especially for parents.

Studies show that parental religion is the single strongest predictor of adult religious identity in the U.S; and childhood religious service attendance is among the strongest predictors of adult religious practice.¹

This has particular implications for fathers. The Bible puts an unusual weight of responsibilities on dads to lead spiritually. The fact of this plays out in studies:

A Swiss study found that the likelihood of a child continuing to attend church as an adult goes up exponentially if the father expressed a religious identity and attends.²

These are the numbers as reported in multiple summaries of the Swiss family survey:

- Mother regular / father non-practicing → ~1.5% children regular adult attenders
- Father regular / mother non-practicing → ~44.2% children regular adult attenders

This doesn't downplay the role of godly mothers. Paul's protégé Timothy didn't have a Christian dad and was taught the faith by his mother and grandmother.³ (seemed to have a non-believing Greek father and the boy was disciplined by his godly mother and grandmother). And I could go on about the impact my own mother's faith has had on me.

But it does remind us that parents—especially fathers—must see the Sabbath command as a responsibility for spiritual leadership in the home.

Do you have a plan for how you'll practice Sabbath in your home?

Corporate Worship: Another practice involved corporate worship: On Sabbath, the people of God were to *gather together corporately*, as Moses writes in Leviticus, where he speaks of a "convocation":

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy **convocation** (מִקְרָא) ⁴ (Lev 23:3).

Friends, one of the things I love about this church is how committed we are to gathering together on Sundays. But we are also busy. And with the livestream, it can be tempting to stay home—especially on a cold morning. But you cannot livestream the full spiritual impact of

¹ https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/05/10/most-us-parents-pass-along-their-religion-and-politics-to-their-children/?utm_source=chatgpt.com; https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-10142-7?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² https://opentheword.org/2014/06/16/swiss-study-shows-fathers-are-important-to-a-childs-church-attendance/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 timothy 1:5).

⁴ מִקְרָא *mik-raw*; something called out, i.e. a public meeting:—assembly, calling, convocation, reading.

Sabbath worship. You cannot livestream being shepherded. You cannot livestream the embodied people of God singing around you.

But the Sabbath is about the spiritual power of being *with the people of God, in the flesh, in the house of God*.

Sociologist Peter Berger wrote of Plausibility Structure—the webs of relationships that help us feel the coherence of our beliefs. The local church is this. We need to *experience* the collective people of God, to help keep us from being subsumed in the sea of the people of the world.

Sum: some features of how we *practice* the Sabbath today: we give our bodies and minds rest from the work of the week; we lead our families in a godward directions; and we gather together as his people.

[T] But even a perfect day of rest cannot fix a restless soul. So we must consider yet one more thing: *the person of rest*.

III. Christ Gives Rest

Story of Restlessness: The Bible is a Story of Restlessness: Adam and Eve, East of Eden, live with tension in family, with work; they are haunted by mortality—a return to dust.

Then Israel goes into slavery in Egypt. In their deliverance rest is promised in the Promised Land.

But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety (Deut 12:10).

But this does not materialize. Even in Cana, they know restlessness without and within. Something more is needed.

And we hear a promise of a greater rest building in Scripture. Hebrews states it this way.

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on.⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb 4:8-9).

What is this Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God?

Person of Rest: Paul helps us understand this with his words in Colossians, where he says that the Old Testament practice of the sabbath was “a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” (Col 2:17).

Christ is our rest, from things that makes us truly restless. From Sin: guilt, bondage—He deals with. From Mortality: haunting fact of eternity—he deals with. From Separation from Father—he deals with.

By faith, we enter into the deeper Sabbath rest of the presence and work of Jesus Christ.

I once was told that deep down every person needed three things: to be **seen, soothed and secured**. Some of us may balk at such an idea. But it's true.

King David is a good example. He knew war without and disquiet within. And in the Psalms we see him again and again looking for rest—and he can only find it where His soul comes to rest in the arms of God:

For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in (Ps 27:10).

On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God (Ps 22:10).

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. ² But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Ps 131:1-2).

Exhaustion is a matter of the soul, not just body. Every one of us has a soul—that spiritual part of us laying open to the thrill and terror of eternity, righteousness, judgement, and deep longings. This part of us is *made* to be seen by God—and see with eyes of delight. This part of us, assailed by countless worries and fears in a fallen world, needs to be soothed—like a child with its mother—by the care of God. This part of us needs to know it is safe—that in the end, our worst fears and worries will be overcome. That God himself will never let us go.

Sum: The well rested man or woman has *been with God*. They are contented in Him. They are relaxed under His will for their lives. They are assured about His future plans for them. When they go back to work, it is no longer to compete and obtain, but in gratitude and rest.

When does this rest happen? On the Lord's Day. Every Lord's Day is practice for eternity. Every Lord's Day is a reminder that we are ultimately in the good hands of our loving father. Every Lord's day is a chance for the body and mind to uncoil, and feel the strength and power of God.

Close:

God commands rest. We practice rest. But Christ gives rest. That's the ongoing relevance of the Fourth Commandment for us. And in this sense, perhaps the best way to "remember the Sabbath day" as a Christian is to heed the call of our Good Shepherd: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

Let's pray.

Small Group Questions | Remember the Sabbath

1. Where do you feel most tired right now—physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually? How does the idea that God *commands* rest challenge or comfort you?
2. True rest is about fellowship with God—the “Lord of the Sabbath”—not just cessation from work. What does that look like practically in your life right now? What helps you *rest in God*, not just from activity?
3. Which part of practicing Sabbath is hardest for you currently, and why?
 - a. stopping ordinary work,
 - b. leading or shaping rest in your household or relationships,
 - c. prioritizing gathered worship?
4. Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27). How can you pursue Sabbath in a way that avoids both legalism *and* neglect? What might one small, realistic step toward healthier—and godward—rhythms of rest look like this week?