
KATEKŌMEN

*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without
wavering. — Hebrews 10:4*

THE JOURNAL OF
GREENVILLE PRESBYTERIAN
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Taylors, South Carolina

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“PRINCIPLES OF SABBATH KEEPING: JESUS AND WESTMINSTER”¹

By Ryan M. McGraw

Not all corrective lenses help all people see clearly. A prescription that helps one person see may blur the vision of another person. The truths of Scripture are similar in some respects. Biblical truths do not change regardless of whether people understand them properly or not, yet one person may come to understand what the Scriptures say on a subject through one set of arguments, while another person finds an entirely different set of arguments convincing. Isaiah 58:13-14 is all that is needed to convince some people that “the Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 60-61). However, even though some do not believe that the catechism answer reflects a proper interpretation of Isaiah 58 (which is perhaps the *locus classicus* of debates over Sabbath keeping), it is possible to come to the same conclusion regarding the purpose of the Sabbath from other biblical principles.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the principles of Sabbath keeping set forth in the Westminster Standards are demanded by the principles upon which Jesus and his apostles interpreted and applied the Law of God. These principles demonstrate that the entire Sabbath should be set apart for the purposes of public and private worship in thought, word, and deed. The general characteristics of the Law of God combined with the New Testament application of the sixth commandment shall serve as a “template” for how to apply the fourth commandment. This approach to establishing biblical principles of Sabbath keeping will help bring clarity to the issue by placing Sabbath keeping within the broader context of the biblical and Reformed model of the relationship the attitude that those who love the Lord Jesus Christ should have towards the Law of God.²

BIBLICAL RULES FOR INTERPRETING THE LAW

General Considerations

There are both general and specific considerations that are important in order to interpret the Law of God properly.³ Generally speaking, the Law of God is a reflection of the character of the God himself. The Law is holy, just, and good (Rom. 7:12). It is a mirror that reveals the glory of God and of Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law on behalf of his people (Rom. 8:3-4). When we sin against the Law, we do not sin against an impersonal list of abstract principles, but we sin personally against God himself by violating the reflection of his own holy character. Loving the Law of God and loving God are inseparable. This is a vital point because it means that the

moral Law is an eternal and immutable standard. Whoever is indifferent to the Law of God is indifferent to the God of the Law. Most people do not realize that they are sinners and that their carnal or unconverted minds are at enmity with God (Rom. 8:7) until they are confronted with the Law of God.⁴ To despise God's Law is to despise God. Moreover, Jesus Christ was born of a woman and made under the Law so that he might redeem those who were under the curse of the Law (Gal. 4:4-5). Therefore, the Law is not only a reflection of the character of the God who is the Creator, but it is a reflection of the God who took on human flesh and obeyed the Law on behalf of his chosen people. As Walter Chantry observed, "The life of our Lord Jesus Christ was the first biographical inscription of the Moral Law."⁵ Those who love God because Christ first loved them and gave himself for them, cannot help but love his Law because the Law bears the imprint and image of the God and Savior whom they love.

The fact that the Law is a reflection of the character of God also means that the Law of the Lord is as perfect as the Lord of the Law (Ps. 19:7). God demands allegiance from man in every respect: in body, in soul, and in all of man's faculties. This means that the Law of God, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:22), is a *perfect* standard for righteousness. There is no aspect of life – whether with regard to outward actions, words, and gestures, or "the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul" (Larger Catechism 99.2) – that the Law of God does not address. This is why the Psalmist, while meditating on the nature of the Law of God wrote, "I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad" (Ps. 119:96). No one shall ever be able to say in this life that they have ceased from sin (1 Kings 8:46; Prov. 20:9; Eccl. 7:20; 1 John 1:8-10). This applies even to those who have been redeemed from the power of sin by Jesus Christ. Until believers enter into the presence of the Lord in heaven, the holy and perfect Law of God is the path that has been paved for them to express their love to God through Jesus Christ. God has no other standard than his own holy character, which is reflected by his Law. The rule for God's children is that they must be imitators of God (Eph. 5:1). Although Christians are neither condemned nor justified by the Law, and though they shall keep it imperfectly at best, they are, by definition, those who delight in the Law of God according to the inward man (Rom. 7:22). The Law of God is an inflexible standard of righteousness and that the implications of the commandments of God are far reaching. Additionally, because Christ has taken away the condemnation of the Law, the Law of God is the "perfect Law of liberty" (James 1:25) and has become "the Law of Christ" (Rom. 3:30).

A Specific Example

In general, the commandments of God reflect the character of the God who gave them, and the obedience demanded by those commandments reaches man's inmost being as well as all of his actions. This has important implications for understanding and applying each commandment in particular. The best place to learn how to understand and to apply the commandments of God is from the teaching and example of Jesus Christ and his apostles. Jesus Christ has given a useful pattern for interpreting and applying the Ten Commandments in his exposition of the sixth commandment, which is, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13).⁶ Each commandment is designed to serve as a "subject heading" or category, "That," as the Westminster Larger Catechism summarizes, "under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto" (Larger

Catechism 99.6). For this reason, Jesus contradicted the traditional Jewish interpretation of the sixth commandment, which relegated its observance to the outward act of murder (Matt. 5:21). Jesus added several qualifications, demonstrating that the meaning of the Law of God stretched far beyond the common understanding of his Jewish contemporaries. First, he demonstrated that this commandment forbade unjustified anger in the *heart* just as much as murder with the hand: “But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (v. 22). Not only does God take seriously the breach of the sixth commandment in the heart, but he regards our *speech* in this commandment, for, as Jesus added, “And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire” (v. 22b).

The significance of the next scenario to which Jesus applied the sixth commandment may not be immediately apparent. In verses 23-24, he said, “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” The word “therefore” not only demonstrates that these verses are *connected* with the preceding teaching about the sixth commandment, but that they are legitimately *concluded* from that teaching.⁷ In other words, reconciliation with a brother is a necessary part of keeping the sixth commandment. What is in view here is a man going to the temple with his gift in order to worship God. At the very foot of the altar, he remembers that he has a brother who is holding something against him. Reconciliation with his brother is so urgent that the man must temporarily delay worship in order to be reconciled to his brother first. The text does not say whether or not the complaint of the brother is legitimate; apparently it does not matter. The truth implied in these verses is that the sixth commandment demands appropriate actions towards others when they violate the commandment. Jesus did not teach anything new or surprising here. This concern had already been expressed in the Old Testament: “Deliver those who are drawn towards death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, ‘surely we did not know this,’ does not he who weighs the hearts consider it? He who keeps your soul, does he not know it? And will he not render to each man according to his deeds?” (Prov. 24:11-12). This example reveals an important key to understanding the commandment: it is not good enough to be concerned with keeping the commandments of God without respect to how one’s neighbor keeps it. The negative commandment, “You shall not murder,” implies a positive requirement to preserve the lives of others, and to do all that is in one’s power to prevent anything that may cause them harm.

Building upon these principles, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* summarizes the teaching of Scripture on the sixth commandment by stating that this commandment requires “all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others,” and that it forbids “the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto” (Questions 68-69). Those who are tempted to object that this conclusion stretches the intent of the commandment must recognize that Jesus Christ expected his contemporaries to apply the Law in light of similar principles. Outward acts of murder are the highest expression of violating the sixth commandment. Unjustified anger is murder in the heart because it is out of the heart that murders, adulteries, and other abominable crimes proceed (Matt. 15:19). Malicious speech harms a neighbor, and belongs to the same genre of crimes. That the positive duty of the commandment is to pursue the things that tend to preserve the lives of others is reflected

by the fact that believers must seek to remove all participation in the sins of others against the sixth commandment, even when it involves sins of the heart. James went so far as to accuse some of violating the sixth commandment by showing favoritism to the rich and despising the poor (James 2:5-13). These are only a few examples of how people may keep or break one commandment of God in varying degrees. Truly the commandments are exceedingly broad! Jesus' use of the sixth commandment treats the Ten Commandment as a system of classification, under which every application of the Law of God should be placed. As Calvin noted, "In each commandment we must investigate what it is concerned with; then we must seek out its purpose."⁸

PLUGGING THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT INTO THE EQUATION

If Jesus and his inspired apostles serve as a model for how the Law of God should be interpreted and applied (and if the Church cannot appeal to their example, to what example can she appeal?), the fourth commandment must be understood and applied in a manner that is in harmony with this model. First, the Sabbath is both positive and negative in scope; it contains requirements as well as prohibitions. Second, the Sabbath must be observed and can be broken by outward actions in respect to both requirements and prohibitions. Third, the Sabbath must be observed and can be broken in the heart. Fourth, the Sabbath must be observed and can be broken through speech. Fifth, the Sabbath must be observed and can be broken by actions towards and relationships with other people. If the first two of these categories are combined, then the principles of biblical Sabbath keeping can be summarized under four headings.

What are the Basic Commands and Prohibitions of the Fourth Commandment?

The first thing to observe about the fourth commandment is that keeping it is primarily concerned with direct acts of love towards God. It is not that the first four commandments of the Law have nothing to do with man's relation to his neighbors, but rather that these four commandments deal most directly with man's relationship with God. No one can keep the Sabbath, therefore, unless he loves God through Jesus Christ. Only then shall he exercise that love by keeping the Sabbath accordingly. This is not the same thing as simply acknowledging God in thoughts and prayers while engaging in the daily business of life. In that sense, the saints can love God by loving their neighbors and by going to work. As John Murray astutely observed, "While it is true that we ought to serve the Lord every day and in all things we must not forget that there are different ways of serving God. We do not serve him by doing the same thing all the time. If we do that, we are either insane or notoriously perverse. There is a great variety in human vocation. If we neglect to observe that variation, we shall soon pay the cost."⁹ The first four commandments address the love that people must have for God himself, which is the foundation of their relationship to anyone or anything else in the world. This is brought out clearly by what is required in the fourth commandment.

It has become common to treat cessation from labor or rest as the positive and summary requirement of the fourth commandment.¹⁰ However, "in it you shall do no labor," is the prohibition of the fourth commandment rather than requirement. The positive and summary requirement is, "Remember the Sabbath day *to keep it holy.*" For this reason,

Robert L. Reymond has observed, “‘Rest’ cannot mean mere cessation from labor, much less recovery from fatigue. . . . ‘Rest’ then means involvement in *new*, in the sense of *different*, activity. It means cessation of the labor of the six days and the taking up of different labors appropriate to the Lord’s Day. What these labors of the Sabbath rest are is circumscribed by the accompanying phrase, ‘to the Lord.’ They certainly include both corporate and private acts of worship and the contemplation of the glory of God . . .”¹¹ Just as dedicating an object or person as holy to the Lord set apart that object or person exclusively for the worship of God, so the Sabbath, as a holy day, must be set apart for the purposes of worship.¹² “In it you shall do no labor,” is a prohibition added by God as a necessary pre-requisite to keeping the day *holy*. No one can love a man unless he first stops hating him in his heart. Similarly, no one is able to keep the Sabbath until he ceases from ordinary labor. Thomas Shepard, who founded Harvard University, wrote”

The word Sabbath properly signifies, not common, but *sacred* or *holy* rest. The Lord, therefore, enjoins this rest from labor upon this day, not so much for the rest’s sake, but because it is a medium, or means of that holiness which the Lord requires upon this day; otherwise the Sabbath is a day of idleness, not of holiness; our cattle rest but a common rest from labor as well as we; and therefore it is man’s sin and shame if he improve the day no better than the beasts that perish.¹³

The word order in the title of John Owen’s work on the Sabbath reflects this in a significant manner. The abbreviated title is, “A Day of Sacred Rest,” as opposed to, “A Sacred Day of Rest.”¹⁴ The Sabbath is not a sacred day that is observed by resting. The Sabbath is a day on which the characteristics or quality of the rest is sacred.

Any interpretation of the fourth commandment that makes cessation from labor the sum and substance of the commandment is not in harmony with Jesus’ manner of applying the Decalogue. No commandment of God contains a prohibition only. If a requirement is not stated in any commandment, it is always implied. Prohibiting labor cannot stand by itself without a corresponding positive requirement. Those who interpret the fourth commandment purely in terms of avoiding weekly employments end up with only a mutilated half-Sabbath. This is like a man who clears land to prepare to build a house and thinks that his work is done without laying the foundation. The outward actions required by the fourth commandment are attending the public and private exercises of God’s worship. People cannot keep the Sabbath unless they “keep it holy.” The positive requirements of the Ten Commandments must always govern the Church’s understanding of the prohibitions, not vice versa. The only reason why labor, or any activity, is prohibited on the Sabbath day is because it contradicts the positive purposes of the day. Labor is the greatest example of what is prohibited in the fourth commandment, but labor is not the only example of what is prohibited in the fourth commandment. The command to keep the Sabbath day holy excludes “worldly recreations” as much as “worldly employments” because the holiness of the day does not consist in recreations. This does not mean that recreation cannot be “holy” on other days in the broad sense of the term, but the holiness required in keeping the Sabbath requires setting the day apart from common uses to holy uses. If we must observe a prohibition and a requirement in the sixth commandment, then we must observe a prohibition and a requirement in the fourth commandment. “Rest” and cessation from labor are synonymous expressions. If we rest on the Sabbath day, then we have obeyed part of the prohibition of the commandment, but how do we “keep it holy?”

How Should Christians Observe the Fourth Commandment in their Hearts?

Just as the sixth commandment is violated by unjustified anger in the heart, so the Sabbath can be violated in the heart. It must be sanctified in the heart by calling the Sabbath a delight (Is. 58:13) through loving the day and the activities of the day. For a believer, the highest delight of the Sabbath should be celebrating the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, who inaugurated the New Testament Sabbath on the day that he rose from the dead. What is more conducive to worship and joy? If the duties of the day become a burden and Christians cannot wait until the Sabbath is over, they are guilty of Sabbath breaking. The Israelites committed this sin in the days of the prophet Amos. They said, "When shall the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath that we may trade wheat?" (Amos 8:5). If people cannot wait for the Sabbath to be over in anticipation of any activities that they prefer, then they are violating the Sabbath day. Should believers not *love* the one day that is specially designed for worshiping their God and Redeemer? Sadly, few people are willing to give much attention to the disposition of the heart in keeping the Sabbath. If our hearts do not rest upon the glory of God and his worship, then the praise of our mouths on the Lord's Day has become forced hypocrisy. Like the depiction of the "worshipping" Jews in the last book of the Old Testament, we effectually say, "O what a weariness!" (Mal. 1:13). Even from the standpoint of ceasing from weekly labors, can we genuinely say that we are resting from our labor when we do so with our bodies only on the Sabbath, but not with our hearts? If we must keep the sixth commandment in our hearts, then we must keep the fourth commandment in our hearts.

How Should Christians Observe the Fourth Commandment in their Speech?

The Sabbath must be kept in word as well as in the heart and in outward actions. The more God's people grow to love the Sabbath day and its purposes, the more naturally this shall come to them. If believers occupy their time with the worship of God in the corporate assembly, in the family, and in private, as well as with edifying conversation with his people, it is impossible that their speech shall not correspond to what is in their hearts. They shall rejoice in their hearts that they have nothing else to concern them on the Lord's Day. Our speech shall often betray us. If we are not at work on Sunday and we attend church, enjoying fellowship with our brethren in Christ, but we speak predominantly about what is happening at the office, or about our favorite sporting events, how can our hearts be in our Sabbath keeping? If a Christian's body is where it should be on the Sabbath, but his or her mind and mouth travel abroad, his or her bodily presence is more like that of a corpse than of a living, worshiping soul. On the contrary, the speech of God's people on the Sabbath should be filled with the glories of their God and his worship.

Some things that are lawful and appropriate topics of conversation on other days of the week become signs of apathy and disregard for God glorious presence on the Lord's Day. If spiritual conversation proves difficult even for genuine Christians, the Sabbath is the best occasion for them to grow in this area. If you object that you struggle with material for conversation, then consider what materials you have to glean from the preaching of the Word in corporate worship. Is it not part of our calling as believers to seek the profit of others in all that we say and do? If we must keep the sixth commandment in our speech, then we must keep the fourth commandment in our speech.

How Does our Sabbath Keeping Relate to Other People?

In what respect must God's people exercise care and concern for others in their Sabbath keeping? If *all people* must keep the Sabbath, they must not encourage their neighbors to violate the Sabbath.¹⁵ According to Jesus, if a brother has something against you, you must do all that is in your power to be reconciled to him so that neither of you are guilty of violating the commandment not to murder. In a similar manner, if your neighbor is working on the Sabbath, then the *least* that you can do out of love to his soul is to avoid giving him your business. If you hire others to break the commandments of God for you, then you have still broken them. If you hire someone to kill another person, then you are guilty of murder. If you hire someone to steal something you them, then you are guilty of theft. If you bribe someone to act as a false witness in a courtroom, then you are guilty of perjury. This principle of keeping the law in relation to others is not required by Scripture alone, but even the laws of modern secular society recognize that this is a necessary moral implication of law. Is it not strange when the Church does not apply this to Sabbath keeping? Is it not strange when Christians do not hesitate to hire pilots and flight attendants to break the Sabbath for them? Is it not strange when believers hire waiters and waitresses to break the Sabbath for them? Is it not strange when God's people hire attendants at gas stations and cashiers at grocery stores to break the Sabbath for the sake of their convenience? Can we in good conscience invite these people to attend church to hear the gospel, when perhaps we have skipped worship in order to hire them to help us travel that day, or when we leave worship early in order to beat the line at the lunch buffet? Can we call them to repentance and to sincere faith in Jesus Christ while we are in the act of hiring them to break one of the King's laws? If we must keep the sixth commandment in relation to others, then we must keep the fourth commandment in relation to others.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

The pattern that the Son of God has provided in order to interpret the commandments of God demands that the Sabbath requires much more than cessation from labor. Too often the fourth commandment has been interpreted in such a manner that it can be kept in perfection with relative ease. Is it not easy to think of the fourth commandment with regard to outward actions only, with little regard to keeping the day holy in heart, speech, and with respect to others? Yet is this not the very problem Jesus was confronting when he expounded the sixth commandment in the Sermon on the Mount? Any interpretation of any of the commandments of God that gives the impression that it is *possible* for sinners to keep them is suspect at best. It has become common in Reformed churches to interpret the fourth commandment in a manner that is out of accord with the way in which all of the rest of the commandments have been interpreted.

In light of Jesus' principles of interpreting and applying the Law of God, believers must come to terms with several questions. If you say that the prohibition is, "You shall do no work," and that the requirement is, "rest," then what kind of "rest" does God require? It cannot be inactivity; therefore, what does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy? If you do not break or keep the Sabbath by thoughts about your employments and recreations, then *how else* can you apply this commandment to your thoughts? If you cannot break the Sabbath by speaking about labor and recreation, then how is it *possible* to break it in

speech at all? Yet if you do not speak about these things, then which subjects of conversation do you replace them with? If you do not believe it is a sin to support the labor of others on the Sabbath day, then *how does* your Sabbath keeping relate to your neighbor? These are questions that we must come to terms with. Unless other viable answers are supplied from Scripture, what better conclusion is there than this: “The Sabbath is to be sanctified by an holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days, and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship, except so far as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy,” as well as by avoiding, “unnecessary thoughts, words, or works about our worldly or recreations?” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 60-61). Can this conclusion be averted without implying that Jesus misinterpreted the sixth commandment? May the Church reassess how she interprets and lives according to the Law of God, and may she love the Law out of love to her Savior!

¹ Most of this material has been adapted from chapter 7 of my *The Day of Worship: Re-assessing the Christian Life in Light of the Sabbath* (Forthcoming, Reformation Heritage Books).

² Some of the most helpful recent works on Sabbath keeping are: Robert L. Reymond, “Lord’s Day Observance,” in *Contending for the Faith: Lines in the Sand that Strengthen the Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 165-186; Joseph A. Pipa, *The Lord’s Day*, Geanines House, Fearn, Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1997; Iain D. Campbell, *On the First Day of the Week: God, the Christian, and the Sabbath*, Leonminster, UK: Day One Publications, 2005; and Rowland S. Ward, “The Lord’s Day and the Westminster Confession,” in ed. Anthony T. Selvagio, *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Wayne R. Spear* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007).

³ For an excellent treatment of the interpretation of the Law, see the introductory chapters of William S. Plumer, *The Law of God*, Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1864, reprint, Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1996. I am greatly indebted to Larger Catechism Question 99 throughout this article.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards wrote: “The strictness of God’s law is a principle cause of man’s enmity against him.” Jonathan Edwards, “Men Naturally God’s Enemies,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (orig. pub: n.d., reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), vol. II, 133.

⁵ Walter Chantry, *God’s Righteous Kingdom* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 78.

⁶ Since my purpose in this article is not to give a full defense of the Reformed view of the Law, but simply to establish principles that should be used in interpreting and applying the fourth commandment, space does not permit a full defense of these principles. For the most part, I am only able to identify and describe them. For a detailed and powerful exposition of the principles set forth here, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 157-167.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeil (, vol. I, 375. Book II.8.8.

⁹ John Murray, “The Sabbath Institution,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), vol. I, 209.

¹⁰ For example, see Robert Vasholz, *Leviticus: A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 284, fn 4, who wrote: “The sole goal of the weekly Sabbath is rest.”

¹¹ Reymond, 181.

¹² See chapter 1 of my *Sabbath Keeping*. Contra Jay E. Adams, *Keeping the Sabbath Today?* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2008), 89, 91. See Vaholz, *Leviticus*, 278-281 for a useful treatment of holiness.

¹³ Thomas Shepard, *Theses Sabbaticae* (Orig. pub., 1649, reprint, Dahlonega, GA: Crown Rights Book Company, 2002), 254.

¹⁴ John Owen, *A Day of Sacred Rest*, in, *An Exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (orig. pub. N.d., reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), vol. II, 263-460. This is an outstanding and powerfully argued work that has not been outdated.

¹⁵ There is an excellent example of this in Nehemiah 13, which I have treated at greater length in chapter 1 of my *Sabbath Keeping*.