

Salvation: Here A Little; There A Little

Should Christians Keep the Sabbath?

Introduction

Should believers under Grace still keep the Sabbath day? Should we worship on Saturday? What significance does the Sabbath have for us today? Why do most Christians traditionally meet on Sunday? Are Sunday services a Catholic-based tradition from which we should refrain? What is the seventh day upon which God rested? Does the scripture speak to these questions?

These are all questions that have passed through the minds of believers today at one time or another. Unfortunately, there is little clear teaching on this matter and that sometimes allows a seed of doubt or untruth to creep within the church. Some groups such as the Seventh Day Adventists and other groups such as “Jewish Christians” emphasize keeping the Sabbath and hold services on Saturdays rather than the traditional Sundays. Fortunately, the scripture does speak clearly to all of these issues and so let us take a moment to respond with Biblical answers to these questions. In our efforts to obey all of scripture, we want to ensure that we are following whatever the Bible teaches in regard to these areas.

The Sabbath of the Old Testament Law

The commands to keep the Sabbath was first given in the law of Moses and is found in what is popularly called “The Ten Commandments.” These commandments, written upon stone by the finger of God, were essentially the first ten of the 613 commandments of Mosaic Law. The Sabbath was instituted in the fourth of these first commandments:

Ex 20:8-11 "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. On it 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. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

The root word for Sabbath in the Hebrew means “to rest, cease, desist, leave off.” The law of the Sabbath under the law of Moses can be summarized by the following¹:

- The Israelites were not to do any work on that day, not even cooking, lighting a fire, gathering firewood, harvesting crops, or traveling.
- They were not to force or coerce anybody else to do any of the work described above for them.
- Special sacrifices were to be performed at the Tabernacle or Temple site.

For the average person in Israel, the Sabbath meant a day of rest spend in their homes with their families. Those who were near the temple – in later times, near Jerusalem – might attend a special worship service on the Sabbath, but for the most part, those further away just rested. The concepts of Sabbath worship at local synagogues in the local town did not come into existence until after the temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. Virtually all of the rituals associated with Sabbath worship in Jesus’ day were inventions of the scribes and Pharisees.

The Sabbath law had a two-fold significance for the Israeli people: First, the Sabbath provided for a day of rest from work and thus was instituted for people’s physical, mental, and spiritual well being, and not necessarily because the day itself was anything special. Secondly, the Sabbath served to separate the nation of Israel to a holy and unique people consecrated unto God. Because the heathens around them did not celebrate such a Sabbath day, the Jews were easily marked as God’s people by their adherence to not working on this day.

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See Exodus 16:23-30; 20:8-11; 31:12-17; 35:1-3; Numbers 15:32-36.

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Not A Moral Issue

The Sabbath was a part of the Ceremonial laws of Moses and not a part of the Moral law. The Moral law of God's nature never changes; for example, God still detests the sin of homosexuality and this is affirmed both in the Old Testament and the New Testament after Calvary. God's Moral law never changes under any circumstances and is right and truth no matter the situation or condition. A lie is wrong whether it is told to protect someone, or to try to defend God – it is still a lie and liars shall not enter into eternal life².

The Ceremonial law of God was fulfilled in Christ and was a type or shadow of the reality to come under Grace. For example, instead of burning incense, we praise and worship God and instead of coming to a High Priest with an animal sacrifice, we come to Jesus Christ who is both our High Priest and our sacrifice for sins and we follow His commandments and get forgiveness through properly applying His blood to our lives. Now that we have the reality, the types and shadows are no longer to be followed as they were under Mosaic Law. The Bible repeatedly teaches this throughout the New Testament, but here is a couple of examples:

Rom 7:5-6 When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death. **6** But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit. NLTse

Gal 3:23-25 Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were placed under guard by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until the way of faith was revealed. **24** Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith. **25** And now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian. NLTse

What this means is that the ceremonial law was just to lead us to the reality of Christ and living with the power of the Holy Spirit living within us. We can learn about our spiritual walk from a study and spiritual application of the principles exhibited by the ceremonial laws of Moses, but since we live after Calvary, we are not bound to obey the specifics of the ceremonial commands. That the Sabbath is a part of these ceremonial laws is beyond dispute because Paul wrote:

Col 2:16-17 So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. **17** For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality. NLTse

"Don't let anyone condemn you for not celebrating the Sabbaths because they were only a shadow of the reality of Christ to come!" Here Paul links the Sabbaths in the same ceremonial category of the Jewish dietary laws – which were done away with under the new covenant³ -- and the various festivals and holy days. If we have Jesus Christ, then we have the truth of which these ceremonies were to bring us to and therefore have no more need for the ceremonies themselves except to look back at what used to be done and see how it teaches us of Christ.

The reason that so many people, despite the clear teaching of this verse, confuse the Sabbath day as a moral issue is because of its place in the Ten Commandments. As children, we are taught to keep the Ten Commandments because "God's basic law never changes." There is some truth to that in that the moral law of God does not change but we must admit that the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath day is not a moral code, but a ceremonial one. Such teachings tend to break our traditions of the Ten Commandments as being all needful, but let us look at the matter from scripture. Three points must be established and realized in this area:

1. *The moral law of God is not limited to the Ten Commandments.*

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See Revelation 21:27.

³ See the 10th, 11th, and 15th chapters of the book of Acts.

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Despite being something easy to remember and convenient, there are moral codes within the law of Moses beyond the first ten commandments that are still for us today. For example, the book of Revelation states:

Rev 21:27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

The ESV here uses the word “detestable” and the KJV and NKJV uses the older word, “abomination.” Both refer back to specific commandments of the Old Testament such as prostitution, homosexuality, and the interchange of apparel between the sexes as things that were detestable or an abomination to God. These are sins that God particularly hates and loathes and this passage in the book of Revelation – in the New Testament – confirms that God will not allow those who do such things to enter into the New Jerusalem and eternal life. Furthermore, these principles of moral issue are addressed in other places in the New Testament as well and we find from Paul that sexual immorality including homosexuality will not make it into heaven unless the person repents and turns from that sin⁴. In similar manner, men and women are to have a distinctively different appearance in both their hair and dress⁵.

The principle is that the Moral law of God is always reaffirmed and taught elsewhere in the New Testament and this leads us to the second point:

2. All of the Ten Commandments except the Sabbath are reaffirmed in the New Testament.

With the exception of the fourth commandment, the Ten Commandments are affirmed by Jesus, Paul, and the other Apostles in the New Testament writings:

We should have no other Gods before the one, true God of Israel – 1 Corinthians 8:5-6

We should not make, worship, or serve idols – 2 Corinthians 6:16-17

We should not take the name of the Lord God in vain – 1 Timothy 6:1; James 2:7

We should honor our father and mother – Ephesians 6:2-3

We should not murder – Revelation 21:8

We should not commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet – 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Notably absent is the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath, and it is always missing! For example, when Jesus responded to the Rich, young ruler, He said:

Mark 10:17-19 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'"

Jesus names six of the of ten commandments here and in another place names some more:

Mark 12:28-31 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Jesus notably omits the “keeping of the Sabbath.” A similar case is that of Paul in writing to the Romans:

Rom 13:8-10 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 11:1-16; 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

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If the keeping of the Sabbath were such a vital moral code of God it seems strange that Jesus nor Paul would affirm such. Paul not only did not affirm the Sabbath, but as we read in Colossians 2:16-17 said that we should *not* keep it. Similarly, not only did Jesus not affirm the Sabbath, but at times, He also seemed to go out of His way to prove that it was not to be followed in strictness:

Matt 12:1-8 At about that time Jesus was walking through some grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off some heads of grain and eating them. 2 But some Pharisees saw them do it and protested, "Look, your disciples are breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath." 3 Jesus said to them, "Haven't you read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He went into the house of God, and they broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. 5 And haven't you read in the law of Moses that the priests on duty in the Temple may work on the Sabbath? 6 I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple! 7 But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' 8 For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!" NLTse

Jesus was referring to how that sometimes under special circumstances, the ceremonial law of Moses could be broken without sin. This was evidenced in David, who was not a priest, being given the shewbread when he was hungry, and by the fact that on the day of rest, the priests themselves had to work extra hard in preparing unique and more frequent animal sacrifices. This leads us to our next point:

3. *The Moral law of God is true and correct regardless of the circumstances, culture, conditions, or situation in which a person might be.*

If the Sabbath were a moral law of God, then it would not be possible to sanction of breaking of it under any circumstances, nevertheless for Jesus Christ to do it! But even Jesus allowed that special circumstances validated the breaking of the ceremonial law:

Matt 12:9-12 Then Jesus went over to their synagogue, 10 where he noticed a man with a deformed hand. The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Does the law permit a person to work by healing on the Sabbath?" (They were hoping he would say yes, so they could bring charges against him.) 11 And he answered, "If you had a sheep that fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you work to pull it out? Of course you would. 12 And how much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Yes, the law permits a person to do good on the Sabbath." NLTse

Pulling a sheep out of a well or a person out of a pit of sin was an exception that was worth taking to the ceremonial law! Moral law has no exceptions: a lie is a lie in any circumstance. Adultery is wrong whatever the reason or time or place. Worshipping idols is wrong even if it is in a church and is a statue of Jesus Himself. Obviously the Sabbath law was that of ceremony or Jesus would not have been able to make exceptions without sinning.

Even under the Old Testament, God condemned the Israelites for keeping the ceremonial and neglecting the moral laws:

Isa 1:13-18 Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting— they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings. 14 I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! 15 When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. 16 Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. 17 Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows. 18 "Come now, let's settle this," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool." NLTse

If the Sabbath days had been moral law, then God under no circumstances would have condemned it under any circumstances and so the fact that He did detest their celebrations of ceremony without the keeping of the moral, indicates to us that the Sabbath day was a ceremonial issue and therefore only a type or a shadow that was to be done away with when Christ came.

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There are other scriptures besides Colossians 2:16-17 that teach this. For example:

Rom 14:5-6,13a In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. 6 Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. . . . 13 So let's stop condemning each other. NLTse

In other words if you want to take a certain day and make it special, then that is okay, but do not press your decision upon others as a moral issue. Furthermore, Paul viewed the reinstatement of the Sabbath as going backwards from Christ:

Gal 4:9-11 So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world? 10 You are trying to earn favor with God by observing certain days or months or seasons or years. 11 I fear for you. Perhaps all my hard work with you was for nothing. NLTse

The teachings of the Apostle Paul are clear: apparently some of the Jewish Christians still kept the Sabbath after coming to Christ, and there was nothing wrong with that as long as they did not judge others according to their personal feelings and try to press that opinion on others. For people born Gentiles – like the church in Galatia – to begin to observe the Sabbath day after coming to Christ was a step in the wrong direction and meant that they were becoming enslaved again to sin and spiritual principles of the world. For us who were born Gentiles to suddenly decide to keep the Sabbath would be a step in the wrong direction and leaving Christ!

The Inconsistencies of People Who Emphasize the Sabbath Today

Those who try to emphasize and establish the concept of obeying the Sabbath today, rarely keep the Sabbath perfectly. For example, to really keep the Sabbath, services must be held on Friday evening after sunset and Saturday morning, which was the Jewish Sabbath under the Mosaic Law. Also, in order to fully keep the Sabbath, people could not perform any work or light a fire, therefore they would not be able today to use any type of stove, heater, internal combustion engine, or electricity. They could not cause anyone else to violate the Sabbath for them which they would do if they ate in a restaurant, used utilities, used the telephone or the radio. So, in practical terms, if the Seventh Day Adventists believe that we should absolutely keep the Sabbath day as under the Mosaic Law, then why are they driving their cars to church (which use the starting of a fire and fuel to run) and why are they using the telephone (which requires others to work on the Sabbath to be available)? We cannot pick and choose the terms of the Moral law of God. If it is a Moral issue then we must keep it absolutely and in detail. Obviously this is not the case as is evidenced by such people's own actions.

Worship On Sunday

Lest this study cause confusion in the minds of believers as to why we should attend church on Sunday, we must realize that faithfulness to services is commanded no matter what day they are held:

Heb 10:24-25 Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. 25 And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near. NLTse

When church is being held, you should be there and as Paul wrote in Romans 14:5-6, any day is worthy of having church or a moment of special observance!

However, from the earliest of times Christians have conducted their main worship services on Sunday. The early Apostolic church chose Sunday because it was upon this day that the Lord's resurrection was discovered and having service on this day symbolized that they were not under the old covenant which the Sabbath symbolized, but under the new covenant of Grace in Christ Jesus.

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There are many scriptural examples of the early church having services on Sunday, the first day of the week, rather than the Sabbath, the last day of the week. For example, the believers at Troas met on the first day of the week for worship⁶. Paul commanded that the Corinth church take up offerings:

1 Cor 16:2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

Furthermore, John was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” in the book of Revelation⁷ and the phrase “the Lord’s Day” was a common saying for Sunday, the day that Jesus’ resurrection was discovered.

It was Jesus, Himself, who established this precedent of meeting on the first day of the week. Not only did He first appear to His assembled disciples on the evening of His resurrection day⁸. But eight days later – the Jewish method of counting was to include the first and last day so it would be seven days or a week later to us – Jesus again appeared to the group who had assembled⁹. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit first fell on the assembly of 120 disciples on Pentecost Sunday. This precedent is from where the tradition of meeting on Sunday first came.

At first, Sunday was a normal work day, the first day of the week much like the modern Monday and so believers met early before work and late after work. After the emperor Constantine made Christianity legal and began to publicly support it, he proclaimed Sunday an official holiday and this tradition has been passed on to us, today. Because of this, some critics try to say that the tradition of worship on Sunday was a Catholic tradition – because the Catholic church was in its infancy at that date – and something that we should avoid today. But the truth is that Constantine only made official was already a common practice among believers. He just made it easier for believers to meet. While it is true that Constantine did much in trying to promote Sunday as the “new Christian Sabbath” and such traditions we do not follow, we must realize that Jesus and the original Apostolic church started the practice of meeting on Sunday to worship and there is nothing inherently wrong with such a practice.

If a church decides to hold its primary worship meetings on Sunday, then the believers should attend faithfully. If the church decides to hold its primary worship services on other days or times, then there is nothing Biblically wrong with that, as long as they do not judge others for not following them. To follow scripture, we should meet weekly and often to worship, fellowship, and to receive preaching and teaching. The Bible does not elevate one day as being more important than another, but does give us the early apostolic church example of meeting together in the morning and evenings of the first day of the week, Sunday.

What the Sabbath Means to Christians, Today

To what extent should Christians today, then view the Sabbath and what should we learn from it? First of all, while the ceremonial Sabbath was instituted under Mosaic Law, it was founded upon a greater principle from creation when God rested on the seventh day. God needs no rest, but had created His creation, man, to need rest one out of every seven days. Since we were all created as a descendant of Adam, the principle of our needing rest one day out of seven is inherent. So, although we do not keep the Sabbath law, it would be wise to heed the principle which preceded the Sabbath law and allow one day of rest for your body from hard work. Even modern studies have shown that a rest day one out of seven, helps mental and physical health prosper.

Furthermore, since the Sabbath law was ceremonial, it was a shadow or a type of things to come. We must possess not the type but the reality. The Sabbath law typifies, first of all the Holy Spirit:

Isa 28:11-12 Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people, 12 to whom he said, "This is the resting place, let the weary rest"; and, "This is the place of repose" — but they would not listen. NIV

⁶ See Acts 20:7

⁷ See Revelation 1:10.

⁸ See John 20:19.

⁹ See John 20:26.

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The Apostle Paul quoted this verse when teaching on speaking in tongues¹⁰. Since speaking in tongues accompanies receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit¹¹, it is through receiving the Holy Spirit that we find this rest. Peter alluded to this in the 3rd chapter of Acts:

Acts 3:19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, NIV

This verse is a parallel scripture to Acts 2:38 with "your sins may be wiped out" corresponding with water baptism in the name of Jesus and "times of refreshing may come from the Lord" to receiving the Holy Spirit. When we receive the Holy Spirit, we find rest by receiving power to overcome sin, become holy and unique unto God in this world, and are reminded that we are not what we once were. We are also renewed and refreshed by the work of the Holy Spirit. In these ways and many more the Holy Spirit is the reality of the rest typified by the Sabbath day. If we have and yield to the Holy Spirit, then everyday is a Sabbath day! It is this type of rest that is referred to in Hebrews 3:7-4:11. Because we have through faith received the Holy Spirit and are trusting in it and God's Word to lead and guide us, we have ceased from our own works in trying to become good enough on our own to be saved and therefore we have a rest. It is this type of rest that is referred to in Hebrews 4:9-11.

Jesus Christ, particularly in living within us in the form of the Holy Spirit, is the reality foretold by the ceremonial Sabbath. If we have Christ and His Spirit working actively in our lives, then we have the rest and keep the Sabbath in the way that we must. Not only that, but if we endure to the end, we shall be saved and will enter into an eternal rest without worries, cares, and work. In this sense, the eternal rest awaits us. All of these things were typified by the ceremonial Sabbath of Mosaic Law and all of these things are found by allowing Jesus Christ to work fully within our lives. If we have Jesus moving freely within us through the Holy Spirit and the Word, we keep the Sabbath in a greater way than Moses ever imagined!

Conclusion

Because of calendar changes over the centuries it is impossible to prove that the seventh day of creation corresponds to either our Saturday or Sunday. The original principle of God of man needing rest one day out of seven still applies, but it does not matter which day this rest comes. Jesus had this in mind when He stated:

Mark 2:27 And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

The Sabbath day under Mosaic Law, although founded upon lasting principles, was ceremonial in nature. We know this because Jesus gave conditions under which it might be broken and God expressed displeasure with it through the prophet Isaiah. Furthermore, nowhere in the New Testament is the Sabbath day required of Christians and nowhere are there any hints affirming Sabbath keeping. Some Jewish Christians, as was their culture, continued to keep the Sabbath after coming to Christ but they were commanded by Paul not to judge others or force their views on others in regard to such things. Furthermore, for the Gentile Christians to begin to keep the Sabbath after coming to Christ, Paul viewed as backsliding and going back to slavery and bondage.

Nowhere does the New Testament make Sunday the new Christian Sabbath, either. We are commanded to assemble regularly together for worship and any day will do. The early church, following the practice established by the appearance of Jesus to His disciples after His resurrection, began the tradition of meeting on the first day of the week. Centuries later, Constantine made this an official holiday and thus began the traditions that have been handed down to us today. For these reasons, most churches still meet on Sunday morning and evenings, but some do a Saturday night service instead and there is nothing wrong with any of that because Paul taught that any day could be special. For most areas in America, Sunday continues to be the most convenient day on which a church could hold its primary worship services.

We obey the reality that the Sabbath typified when we receive the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues and rely upon God's commandments and faith rather than our own righteousness for salvation. When we step into eternal life, we will have reached ultimate Sabbath of rest! Christians should strive for these things rather than trying to hold to the ceremonial practices of Mosaic law.

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 14:21.

¹¹ See Acts 2:1-4; 10:46-48; 19:1-6.