

Chapter 10

The Sabbath and the Ten Commandments

The Sabbath was commanded before Sinai — only a few weeks before. We find it in Exodus 16. There, Moses told the people that the seventh day would be a day of rest, a holy rest day (verse 23). Nothing in the account implies that the seventh day was a rest day before this. The Lord, through Moses, gave some new instructions in connection with the manna that the Lord was giving the Israelites. He told them to cook all their food in advance (verse 23) and not to travel away from their tents on the Sabbath (verse 29). Moses is telling the people how to keep the Sabbath as if they knew nothing about it.

However, the fact that these commands were given before Sinai does not automatically mean that they are required today. They are still part of the “Law of Moses” that was added 430 years after Abraham (Galatians 3:17). Paul argues in Galatians 3 that commands given after the promise (Genesis 15) do not apply to the covenant of promise, which Christians have inherited. Circumcision (added in Genesis 17) does not apply. The antiquity of a law does not prove its continued existence in the new covenant. Circumcision shows that even a command given in Genesis can be declared obsolete.

Other laws before Sinai

Various obsolete laws were commanded before Sinai. We do not select lambs on the 10th of Abib or smear their blood on our doorposts (Exodus 12). We do not consecrate to the Lord every firstborn male or offer sacrifices (Exodus 13), all of which were commanded before Sinai. We do not gather food each day, gathering twice as much on the sixth day (Exodus 16). We do not stay in our homes on the seventh day.

When the early church met to decide whether Gentile converts should keep the “Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), pre-Sinai commands given through Moses would have been considered part of the “Law

of Moses.” The fact that this command was given a few weeks before Sinai is not theologically significant; it is still part of the Law of Moses and the old covenant.

Some pre-Sinai laws are still valid, as can be shown from New Testament scriptures. But other pre-Sinai laws are not. Our standpoint must be the New Testament, not the Old. We cannot use Exodus 16 to prove anything about Christian requirements today. If the Sabbath is still required, we need to demonstrate it from other scriptures.

Once holy, always holy?

Exodus 16:23 tells us that God made the seventh day of every week holy. But this does not mean that it remains holy forever. In the Old Testament, various places were holy — the ground around the burning bush, the ground covered by the holy of holies in the various tabernacle locations, and an area on the temple mount. However, we have no reason to believe that the soil in such places is still holy.

We cannot *assume* the Sabbath is still holy just because it once was. The jubilee year demonstrates that.

The showbread was holy, but a human need could cause it to become usable for ordinary purposes (Matthew 12:4). The Levites were once holy, having a special role in worship, but they no longer have that special status. After the Exodus, the Israelite firstborn male children and animals were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are no longer holy, at least not in the same way. The jubilee year (Leviticus 25:12) is no longer holy, even though the New Testament does not mention it specifically.

In the Old Testament, people, times and places were declared holy, but such things can also become ordinary — all according to whether God designates

them for his special use. We cannot *assume* that the Sabbath is still holy simply because it once was. If we are to teach it as a requirement, we must have evidence that God still sets the day apart and still tells his people to use it in a specific way. When we look at old covenant holy things and holy time, our principle of interpretation must be “obsolete unless proven otherwise.” The jubilee year, a holy year, demonstrates that.

The Sabbath at Mt. Sinai

When the Israelites came to Mt. Sinai, God spoke to them. Among his commands to them were these words: “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” (Exodus 20:8-11).

Scripture never assigns any special permanence to commands that God himself spoke.

The Sabbath command is one of the Ten Commandments — but what does that mean? Is there any biblical evidence that all ten commands have to stay together, or that all ten are permanently valid? People sometimes *assume* this, and Christians have traditionally given lip-service to the Ten Commandments, but there is no biblical proof that all Ten must stay together as a permanent package. That statement requires considerable proof, so let’s examine the Scriptures.

Remember what God said

First, let’s note that the command begins with “remember” (verse 8). Does this mean that the Sabbath was already a long-established command? No, it does not need to refer any further back than Exodus 16. But even more important, it does not refer to the past at all — it is a command for the future. It could have been a brand-new command, and God was saying, What I am giving you today, I want you to be sure to remember from now on. The word

“remember” does not prove anything about the past.

Second, we observe that God himself spoke this command. Does this make it eternally binding? No, God spoke all his commands, including the command for circumcision, Passover lambs, tree-branch booths, etc. Scripture never assigns any special permanence to commands that God himself spoke. God’s people were expected to obey all commands equally, whether they came directly from God or through a prophet or messenger.

Third, the Sabbath is here connected to creation. Does this mean that the Sabbath was commanded at creation? No. It just means that the pattern made in creation week was being used as the model for the Israelites’ week. We might paraphrase it in this way, “I want you to rest at the end of each of your weeks, just as I rested at the end of creation week. I have set aside that day for my special purpose. Now I am telling you what to do with it.” Exodus 20:11 does *not* say that the seventh day had always been a commanded day of rest. The sabbatical year was also patterned after creation, but that does not imply that it existed at creation, or that it is required now. The patterns are not commands. Reproduction is also connected with creation, but even it is not a command for all Christians.

Christians have given their lives to the Lord. They give him all their time and energy. Every day is dedicated to him, to be used for him. All time is holy. The question we face now is, Does God want us to use the seventh day, or the first, or any other day, in a special way? This was commanded for the Israelites, but is this still a command for Christians?

Obviously, this command is part of the Law of Moses. It is part of the law given 430 years after Abraham, and this puts the Sabbath command in the company of a lot of obsolete laws, as well as with some eternal laws. The fact that it was once commanded does not help us evaluate its validity today. We must look at other principles, especially New Testament verses.

Are the Ten Commandments a permanent group?

Let’s look at the fact that the Sabbath command is part of the Ten Commandments. Are these an eternally valid group of laws? The Ten Commandments are treated as a group in only three places. Exodus 34:28 tells us that the old covenant was composed of the Ten Commandments. So does Deuteronomy 4:13. But this is the covenant that

Hebrews 8:13 says is obsolete!

Paul refers to the Ten Commandments not by name, nor by the fact that God spoke them, but by the fact that they were written on stone tablets (2 Corinthians 3:7-8). He contrasts this old covenant with the new covenant, saying that the old was glorious, but the new is so much better that in comparison, the old is no longer glorious. He's talking about the Ten Commandments! In comparison to Christ, they have no glory (verse 10). If we equate great displays of glory as a sign of permanence, we are wrong (Hebrews 12:18-19). If we equate stone with permanence, we are wrong. The Bible does not assign that kind of significance to these facts.

Further, Paul says that the Ten are “fading away” (verse 11). So we must ask, if all Ten are still in force in exactly the same way or in a stronger way, why would Paul say that they were fading away? We must reckon with the possibility that the Ten are *not* an eternally valid package. *Something* must have changed!

The Ten Commandments are the core of the old covenant. Since God is the One who gave the covenant, it is no surprise that most of the commands are eternally valid laws. But just as the old covenant contained dozens, even hundreds of commands about sacrifices and rituals that are now obsolete, we should be open to the possibility that even the core of the covenant contained a command that is peculiar to the old covenant, as a special indicator of the old covenant. As we will see shortly, this is the Sabbath command.

Hebrews 8:6 tells us that the new covenant has been established, and verse 13 tells us that the old covenant is obsolete. There has been a change of covenants. We should therefore expect a difference between the Sinai covenant and the Christian covenant. Most of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is not. The New Testament doesn't criticize anyone for breaking the Sabbath. But that is getting ahead of the story.

The old covenant, as a group of laws, applied only until the Messiah came (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 9:10). The laws were perfectly appropriate for Israel's circumstances, but they are not all requirements for Christians today. In some cases, old covenant laws are good descriptions of moral behavior and can be quoted in the New Testament. In

other cases, they describe specific practices that are not required today.

The New Testament does not distinguish the Ten Commandments from other laws. It does not give them a special name or status. New Testament writers may quote some of the Ten and another law from elsewhere in the Scripture (Romans 13:9; Matthew 19:18-19; Mark 10:19; James 2:8-11) — without any indication that the Ten are any more authoritative than other laws. In fact, the greatest commandments are not even in the Ten (Matthew 22:36-40).

The last six are a group

There is a consistent grouping in the New Testament — the last six commandments. The first four are not quoted with the others. But even if the last six commandments are quoted together, does that prove anything about commands that weren't quoted? No. We cannot assume that when Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18 that he also meant verse 19. We cannot assume that when he quoted Deuteronomy 5:17-21 that he also meant verses 22-30, or that he meant all of Deuteronomy 5 or even *all* of Deuteronomy. We cannot assume any particular boundaries, so we cannot assume that all 10 must remain together.

If Jesus meant anything more than what he quoted, we have no way of proving *how much more* he meant. That means that we cannot assume he meant anything more than what he actually said. We cannot assume he meant all Ten Commandments when he quoted only six. We have to go by what the New Testament actually says.

The Ten Commandments contain some temporary portions as well as some timeless truths. They were given in the context of physical salvation — they begin with “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath is commanded as a reminder of the Exodus. It was given in that historical context: a covenant with a specific nation.

Also within the Ten Commandments, God says that he punishes “the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (verse 5). This applies to the physical blessings and curses of the old covenant, but it does not apply to the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. Today, God does not punish children for

the sins of their parents.

These show that portions of the Ten Commandments are appropriate to Israel only, and not everything in the Ten should be assumed timeless truth. We cannot assume the continuing validity of the Sabbath law merely because it was given with other laws that have continuing validity — especially when that package, considered as a whole, is called obsolete in the New Testament. We cannot assume that all Ten must stay together.

If we look at the Ten Commandments only, we might wonder why only one might be obsolete. But when we look at the old covenant as a whole, we see hundreds of obsolete commands, many of them worship regulations. If the coming of Jesus did away with the Sabbath command, then it would be one command among many. When we see that *many* commands are now obsolete, it is not strange that one of the obsolete ones happens to be in the Ten Commandments. We'll get to that in a few more chapters. But there is still some Old Testament evidence we must attend to.

How long does an eternal covenant last?

The Lord told Moses to tell the Israelites: "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. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested" (Exodus 31:14-17).

The Sabbath was given for several purposes. Exodus 31 describes one of them: The Sabbath was a sign between the Israelites and God so the Israelites would know that God made them holy. It reminded the Israelites that God had set them apart for his purpose. However, their holiness depended on their obedience to the old covenant (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:9). The Sabbath covenant sign was dependent on the old covenant.

A covenant with Israelites

Exodus 31 is specifically made with Israelites, not Gentiles. However, Exodus 31 does not say that

God makes only Israelites holy, or only those who keep the Sabbath. It leaves open the possibility that God might make other people holy or give them some other sign of being sanctified. God is free to work with whomever he wants, in whatever way he wants.

God worked with Israel as a physical nation, and he told them to observe the Sabbath as a sign between them and him forever (verses 16-17). However, circumcision was given as a similar sign, required for Abraham and his descendants, a reminder of the perpetual covenant between God and the people (Genesis 17:10-14). But the sign is not required for the church — the New Testament gives a different sign.

Circumcision, like the Sabbath, was designated as a perpetual covenant (Genesis 17:13b; Exodus 31:16b). The weekly showbread was also a perpetual covenant (Leviticus 24:8). But all these have been rendered obsolete by the establishment of the new covenant. It is unfortunate that translators have used the English words eternal, perpetual, and everlasting, for it is obvious that the Hebrew word *'olam* does not mean permanent. The "eternal" covenant with the Levite priests (Numbers 25:13) has come to an end.

New covenant signs

For old covenant people, circumcision was the ritual that marked the entrance of a person into the covenant, and the Sabbath was a regular reminder of participation in the covenant. In the new covenant, entry is marked by faith and baptism, and our acceptance of the new covenant is repeated regularly when we partake of the bread and wine in communion. Those are the New Testament covenantal rites. In the new covenant, Christ is our point of reference.

The New Testament shows that God works with everyone on the basis of faith, not external conformity to a covenant (Romans 4:9-10). Even the circumcision covenant, given to Abraham, cannot annul the promise given to him because of his faith. Laws added after that promise (including the covenant of circumcision, the old covenant, the Sabbath covenant and the showbread covenant) cannot annul God's promise (Galatians 3:17).

If there are other reasons to require Sabbath-keeping, then Christians should be willing to keep the Sabbath. But the Exodus 31 covenant is not binding on Christ's new covenant people. The Sabbath

covenant between God and Israel showed that God had separated his people from other nations. This indicates that the Sabbath was not given to the Gentiles. But today, God does not physically separate his people from others, and he does not have laws separating Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-18). The distinguishing characteristics emphasized in the New Testament are spiritual — faith and love — rather than physical, geographic or days of a week.

We can't assume that perpetual covenants for Israelites automatically apply to the church today. Exodus 31 is interesting historically, but we cannot base our Sabbath doctrine on it. We are under a different covenant.

Review 10

- Some laws given before Sinai are now obsolete.
- We cannot assume that holy time remains perpetually holy, or that it must always be used in the same way.
- The Ten Commandments are mentioned only three times in Scripture — always as a covenant that is now old.
- Question: Do any portions of the Ten Commandments apply to Israelites only? How do we know which portions?

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