

“The Fourth Commandment” | Deuteronomy 5:12-15
Trinity Presbyterian Church | Reverend Steve Johnson
7/5/2026

Please turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (p. 150). We continue our summer sermon series on the Ten Commandments with the Fourth Commandment. Earlier as we recited it from the shorter catechism, we read the first version from Exodus 20. Now as we read Moses’ second giving of the law in Deuteronomy, you’ll notice a few key differences, with the most notable difference being an additional reason for why the Sabbath should be observed.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (ESV)

¹² “ ‘Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ 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 or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ 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.

Back in the 90s when I was a kid, I was swept up in a Christian fad: the WWJD movement. For those of you born in a different millennium, WWJD stands for “What Would Jesus Do?” It’s an acronym to help you remember to imitate Jesus. My church’s kid’s program rewarded Bible memorization with the popular, cloth bracelets with WWJD embroidered on them. That was highly motivating for me. I memorized so many verses and tried to collect as many different colored WWJD bracelets as I could. And on my left arm I would wear all of them at the same time like a sleeve tattoo. I was oblivious to how prideful (and awkward) I was. I was a lot better at memorizing Bible verses than I was at imitating Jesus.

The phrase “What would Jesus do?” gets at the heart of Christian ethics, which is that we are to imitate God. Every command in Scripture aims at us being holy as God is holy

(Lev. 11:44, 1 Pet. 1:15-16).¹ We are to imitate God as a child imitates a parent. The English Puritan Thomas Brooks said this, “*Certainly Christianity is nothing else but an imitation of the divine nature, a reducing of a man's self to the image of God, in which he was created ‘in righteousness and true holiness.’ A Christian's whole life should be nothing but a visible representation of Christ.*”² We are to develop the same character as God's, to grow in loving what he loves and hating what he hates, and doing what he would do. And so it shouldn't surprise us that the reason stated in Exodus 20 for obeying the 4th commandment is that we are to imitate God. Just as God worked six days and then rested on the seventh, so also we are to work and then rest. God is a working and resting God, and so we are to be a working and resting people.

Our outline today is similar to a couple weeks ago: guilt, grace, and gratitude. We need to first consider our guilt, how we haven't imitated God with this commandment. And then before we consider “what *would* Jesus do” we need to consider “what did Jesus do?” What did Jesus do in his life, death, and resurrection to give us the abundance of God's grace? And then we will end with gratitude, how this commandment guides our life in imitating God in his work and in his rest. Guilt, grace, gratitude.

I. Guilt: The Law Shows Us Our Sin

1. What is the fourth commandment? (Ex. 20:8-11, Deut. 5:12-15)

First, let's consider our guilt, how the fourth commandment shows us our sin. But before we do that, let's consider what this commandment is. As I mentioned previously, Exodus and Deuteronomy have two versions of the fourth commandment, with the main difference being the reasons that ground obedience to the commandment. The Hebrew noun “Sabbath” is connected to a similar verb meaning to cease, to stop, or to rest. Exodus says “Remember the Sabbath” and Deuteronomy says “Observe the Sabbath,” filling out the general idea that the Sabbath was to be regularly and continually observed without neglect.

¹ Lev. 11:44-45, “⁴⁴ For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵ For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

1 Pet. 1:15-16, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

² Brooks, Thomas, The Privy Key of Heaven

The Sabbath is to be remembered and observed as a holy day, a day set apart from all other days of the week to worship the Lord and to rest from work. We see also in the text that it is a day of rest to be observed by all Israel, including servants and even livestock. It was also to be observed by the sojourner, the foreigner, likely to prevent the temptation of foreign trade on the Sabbath (Neh. 10:31).³

In Exodus 31, God called the Sabbath a “**sign**” between him and his people and a “**covenant forever**” (Ex. 31:12-17). The Sabbath was therefore a key marker distinguishing the people of Israel from the other nations. And also in Exodus 31, God declares that the punishment for breaking and profaning the Sabbath was no less than death (vv. 14-15). We see in Numbers 15 that this threat of capital punishment was taken seriously by Moses and the people. While Israel was wandering in the wilderness, a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. The LORD then commanded Moses to put him to death by stoning, and the order was obeyed. To put it bluntly, Israel was to rest or die.

In this commandment we see not only a command to rest one day in six, but also the command to work. Work and rest go together. Work and rest are like salt. Salt consists of two elements, Sodium and Chlorine, two elements that when separated, become very dangerous if eaten or inhaled. But when combined, they become an essential nutrient. So also work and rest, when isolated from each other, become spiritually dangerous. The union of the two bring a rich flavor, joy, and blessing to the Christian life.

2. Why are we to keep the Sabbath? (Ex. 20:11, Deut. 5:15)

So why are we to keep the Sabbath? That question is actually a little misleading as I'll explain in a little bit, since we as Christians don't keep the Sabbath in the original sense. So why are we to keep the Christian Sabbath, or, the Lord's Day? As I mentioned earlier, Exodus and Deuteronomy give different reasons for keeping the Sabbath, and together they give us a deeper understanding of it. Exodus grounds Sabbath observance in creation while Deuteronomy grounds it in redemption. Because God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, so also mankind is to imitate the pattern of work and rest. From

³ Neh. 10:31, “³¹ And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.”

this we see that Sabbath rest is not an invention at Sinai, but something rooted in creation. We see that it comes out of the nature of God. God is the ultimate worker who created all things visible and invisible and sustains the existence of everything moment by moment. God is the ultimate worker *and* he is the ultimate restorer. He is not tired by any of his work, continually maintaining infinite power. He works as he rests on his throne, ruling all things by his word. He never sleeps and he never exhausts himself. He never ceases to work and he never ceases to rest. He is God.

The Sabbath command is also rooted in redemption. Deuteronomy 5:15 says, **“¹⁵ 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.”** Israel was enslaved to the Egyptians, forced to work for them whenever they demanded it, with no guarantee of rest. They could not rest regularly or worship God freely. They were enslaved. But because God redeemed the Hebrews from their slavery, they were then free to enjoy the dignity of consistent rest and the privilege of worship. Yesterday we celebrated America’s 250th birthday, 250 years of the freedom to worship Jesus and to rest as we please, and that long-standing freedom should not be taken for granted. We must continually remember those in history who did not have this freedom and those in the present who long for it. Freedom is never free. Freedom doesn’t just happen. And so in a similar way, Israel was to remember their freedom from slavery in Egypt, to never forget what a priceless privilege it is to worship God in peace and to be no one’s slave. The Sabbath is a sign of the freedom of God’s people.

3. How did Jesus transform the Sabbath? (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Rev. 1:10)

The coming of Jesus Christ transformed every commandment, but I think the fourth commandment is transformed more than the others. So how did Jesus transform the Sabbath? With Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday and with the pouring out of the Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, Christians in the New Testament gathered together for worship on what they called **“the Lord’s Day,”** the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:1-2, Rev. 1:10). B.B. Warfield said this, “Christ took the Sabbath into the grave with him and brought the

Lord's Day out of the grave with him on the resurrection morn."⁴ So what's the difference between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day? To understand this, it's helpful to distinguish the three main categories of Old Testament law: moral, civil, and ceremonial. With the coming of Christ, all the civil and ceremonial laws of Moses were fulfilled in him and then abrogated, done away with. But the moral law remains. It always has been and always will be wrong to worship other gods, to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, and so on. So with the coming of Christ, the ceremonial and civil aspects of the fourth commandment are abrogated, signaled by the day of worship being Sunday instead of Saturday. And so thankfully, there is no death penalty that the church enacts on its members for working on Sunday.

4. What is required?

All the particular Sabbath rules of the Old Testament are done away with. So what's left? What's required for Christians? What is required are the remaining moral aspects of the 4th commandment, that is, the creation pattern for all mankind to work and to rest one day of the week and the gathering of God's people on the Lord's Day to worship. To continue to worship on Saturdays would be to stay in the shadows of the Old Testament, shadows that gave way to the reality of Jesus with his coming. Paul teaches this in Colossians 2, "¹⁶ **Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.** ¹⁷ **These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.**" We have no need for the shadows of the law now that Christ, "**the substance**," is here! And so a pattern of work and then corporate worship on the Lord's Day is what is required of Christians.

And as we look at the ministry of Jesus, we see that several times the gospels record Jesus being accused of breaking the Sabbath for healing someone. But Jesus taught and demonstrated that the heart of the Sabbath is all about rest and freedom, and so showing others mercy on the Sabbath is a fulfilling of the heart of the Sabbath. And so on the Lord's Day, as we rest from our normal work and gather with the church to worship, let us also

⁴ B.B. Warfield, quoted in Kevin DeYoung's book The 10 Commandments, p. 71

keep our eyes open for opportunities to show mercy to others, to those who need rest, to those who need freedom, to those who need Christ.

5. What is forbidden?

That's what's required of us in the 4th commandment. So what is forbidden? What does it look like to break or profane the Lord's Day? The New Testament doesn't have long lists of things people can't do on the Lord's Day. The New Covenant is not like the old, and so my goal isn't to create a whole new list of "thou-shalt-nots" that are binding on the consciences of all Christians. Instead of lists, let's focus on general categories and principles of things that are forbidden. Here's the summary from the shorter catechism which we read earlier, "The fourth commandment forbiddeth the omission, or careless performance, of the duties required, and the profaning the day by idleness, or doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or works, about our worldly employments or recreations."⁵ I think it's important to clarify that the idleness spoken of here isn't prohibiting something like taking a nap on Sunday. I think sinful idleness is when we're completely aimless in what we do, when we waste the day away doing pointless things that are neither restful for our minds, bodies, or souls, or worshipful in any sense. That kind of living is foolish on any day of the week, but especially on the Lord's Day when God has given us this amazing freedom and opportunity to rest... but we don't take it. It's also important to note that the 4th commandment is not forbidding every kind of work or employment on the Lord's Day. Here in Rochester, we have many who work for Mayo Clinic and need to work shifts on Sundays in order to show mercy to those in their care. There are many other kinds of jobs that require work on Sunday to sustain and protect the lives of others. Our perspective needs to change from "God is restricting me from working" to "God is freeing me to rest and worship." Where's your heart's attitude about the Lord's Day?

6. What are common ways we break this commandment?

So what are some common ways that we in 2026 break this commandment? How are we guilty? Kevin DeYoung, in his excellent short book on the 10 Commandments, said

⁵ WSC #61

that we often don't "Trust Christ enough to rest."⁶ We worry about tomorrow and don't trust in God's faithful provision of our daily bread, and so we anxiously pick up a Sunday shift or we open up the laptop and try to get ahead on work. This is the kind of thing God wants you to be free from! God isn't like an Egyptian slave-master driving us to work and work and work. He wants you to flourish in the freedom of meaningful work, regular rest, and corporate worship. It takes faith to rest on Sundays, to trust in God's future provisions, and we often break the fourth commandment because we listen to our fear instead of our faith.

I think we also break this commandment when we turn it into a list of do's and don'ts and we judge others for not following our exact list of do's and don'ts. It's wise for families to make some family rules or guidelines about what the Lord's Day will generally look like for them, but to take your rules and bind the consciences of others is in violation of Romans 14⁷ and the freedom of conscience we have in Christ in the specific ways we worship and rest.

It's also all too common that the Lord's Day turns more into a day all about our own personal rest and worship and we don't consider the needs of our neighbor. We often neglect acts of mercy on the Lord's Day, to, in a sense, heal as Jesus healed, to free others as Jesus freed others. Neglecting mercy is another common way we sin on the Lord's Day.

We also have the tendency to let Sunday be just like any other day. Husbands, if your wife is a fulltime homemaker, are you helping make sure that the Lord's Day is different and restful for her? There's always mouths to feed and chores to be done and so if expectations don't change for Sunday or if you don't help, will your wife be able to rest as God intended? That's just one example of how we all too often treat Sunday as any other day.

I think it's also common for us to not make corporate worship the normal, #1 priority of each Lord's Day. Our children will notice what's most important in life to us. If

⁶ DeYoung, Kevin, The 10 Commandments, p. 74

⁷ Rom. 14:4-6, "⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

⁶The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God."

we worship except for when there's sports to play or watch, then our children will notice that sports are #1. If we worship except for when we would rather work and earn extra money to get ahead, then our children will notice that money is #1. If we gather for worship except for when we're too tired because of Saturday's late-night activities, then our children will notice that having fun is #1. In Romans 12, Paul urges us, saying, "**present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**" ² **Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind"** (Rom. 12:1-2). Our culture tries to conform us and to shackle us to its values, but God has set us apart, he has freed us to be holy worshipers.

II. Grace: The Law Points Us to Jesus

1. Jesus kept the law perfectly

There are many other ways we are guilty of breaking this commandment. The law shows us our guilt, but praise God that we are not left stranded in our guilt. The law also points us to the grace we need in Jesus Christ. Jesus kept the whole law perfectly. He worked, he rested, he worshiped, he showed mercy through healing and deliverance. He was the perfect Sabbath keeper not just externally but also internally, always trusting his Father for his daily bread. By faith and repentance, Jesus' law-keeping becomes our righteousness. Our guilt is forgiven and God sees us in Christ, washed clean and shining with the holiness of Christ. We could never be obedient enough to cover our sins, and so God graciously forgives us of all our sins when we trust in Christ as our Lord and Savior and turn our back on our sin and our old slave-master Satan.

2. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12, Mark 2, Luke 6)

The Sabbath commandment also points us to Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. In the gospels Jesus reveals himself as Lord of the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus had the authority to transform the Sabbath to the Lord's Day with just as much authority as the Lord God had to establish it at the beginning of creation. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus declared that "**the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" (Mark 2:27), that the purpose of the Sabbath was not for man to maintain it, but for man to be blessed by it, or to be more specific, to be blessed through the Sabbath by him, the Lord of the Sabbath.

3. In Jesus, we have the sure hope of an everlasting Sabbath (Matt. 11:28-30, Heb. 4:8-10)

Furthermore, we see that the Bible teaches that in Jesus, we have the sure hope of an *everlasting* Sabbath. The Lord of the Sabbath shows us that the earthly Sabbath was a foreshadow of him and the everlasting rest in him in the new heavens and new earth. Let me read again from Hebrews 4 on this future Sabbath rest, **“⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.”** Brothers and sisters, there is another day of rest coming, the day when Christ returns and establishes his kingdom of forever peace.

That day of rest is coming, but you can enter into God’s rest *today*. We enter into God’s rest by coming to Jesus and receiving all that he has promised to be for us. We enter into God’s rest by accepting this invitation from Jesus himself in Matthew 11, **“²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”** (Matt. 11:28-30). If God’s law is heavy upon your soul, you need to come to Jesus and receive his grace and be freed from your guilt. His burden is light. His commandments will become your freedom and joy. Worshiping Jesus with the church on Sundays will become a deep rest for your soul. But as Hebrews says, to enter into God’s rest you must also rest from your works. You cannot present any of your good works before God as your ticket into his heavenly rest. You must put no trust in your goodness, you must acknowledge your wicked rebellion, and you must rest in Jesus Christ and his works alone.

III. Gratitude: The Law Guides Our Lives

The law convicts us of our guilt, it shows us that our only hope is in the grace of Jesus, and then the law becomes for us a guide for our Christian lives. The fourth commandment guides and encourages our rest in Christ, our faithful work the other six days, and our corporate worship. So what are some practical ways we can remember the Lord’s Day and keep it holy?

Pastor Chris gave me a few great questions to ask ourselves: *How can you make the Lord's Day holy and set apart, a day different than all the other days of the week? What are some things you should do because it's the Lord's Day? What are some things you shouldn't do because it's the Lord's Day?* I think these questions help us to consider what our normal weekdays look like and how we can make Sunday a uniquely restful and worshipful day. That will look different for different people. For the person with a sedentary job at a computer, resting on the Lord's Day might look like getting physical exercise. On the other hand, for the farmers who labor with their bodies day in and day out, resting on the Lord's Day may look more like bodily rest. For those who because of busy schedules are more isolated from fellowship with other believers, the Lord's Day might be an excellent opportunity to have extended fellowship with other believers in a small group or by having people over for a meal. For homemakers it might look like doing errands and chores on Saturday or Monday so that Sunday isn't just another day. Spouses – consider mixing up the usual roles on Sunday to give the other rest from their usual duties. Remember, the Sabbath was meant to be a blessing to you, a rest for you physically, spiritually, and emotionally. The to-do list will never all get done, so slow down and take a break.

One essential way we are to obey this command is that we are to rest spiritually each and every Sunday in the gospel. Rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Rest in the promise that your sins are forgiven. Rest in the truth that you've been justified in God's sight and you've been adopted into his family as an heir of all things. Rest your soul knowing you have God's Holy Spirit dwelling in you. And each and every Lord's Day, rest in God's promise to you that he will preserve your faith in this life through all the trials and sufferings and temptations and he will grant you everlasting rest in the life to come. Rest spiritually every Sunday. But resting doesn't just happen though, does it? It takes intentionally remembering those gospel promises. It sometimes takes memorizing Scripture so that you can remember those promises. It takes focusing on each element in the worship service. Spiritual rest doesn't just happen, it takes remembering, listening, focusing, and, ultimately, believing.

Next, live in the God-given balance of work and rest. Rochester is a very professional city, so the temptation to be a workaholic is very real. Resist the culture that puts work and career goals first. Don't bow down to the idols of achievement, professional recognition and

selfish ambition. For others of you, you face more of the temptation to rest too much. Whether your retired, unemployed, working part-time, or just have a lot free time on your hands, it can be tempting to be unproductive and indulge in endless entertainment. If that's you, find good and honorable work to do, whether it's a paid job or unpaid volunteering in the church or a local ministry, or consider how you can help others in less formal ways.

Or maybe it's time to grow in more regular seasons of prayer on the Lord's Day. Prayer is restful work because we're asking God to do the work that only he can do, and so prayer is often neglected because it feels so unproductive. But prayer is good for our spiritual rest as we train our souls to wait on God. During the school year we have a prayer gathering on the first Sunday of every month and that could be one way you could rest in prayer.

Another important application is to consider how you can show mercy to others on the Lord's Day. How can you bring rest to those with heavy burdens? How can you bring freedom from those enslaved or trapped? How can you bring healing to those who are sick and hurt and dying? Yes, that might mean the Lord's Day isn't as restful for you, but God wants his Sabbath rest to extend to more and more people. Are there lonely people in our church who would be so encouraged with a visit on Sunday? Are there lonely people in a local nursing home that you could go and sing hymns to? Are there people in our church body in need of a meal or with a project they're unable to do themselves? Show mercy on the Lord's Day. Give God's rest to others.

Or maybe instead of giving mercy, you need to receive mercy. Maybe your life is so hectic with things out of your control, maybe with your health or with the constant high needs of those you care for or with your financial situation that you haven't had a restful Lord's Day in a long, long time. I think then it's time for you to ask someone for help, so you can rest. If you don't have family who can help, you do have church family. The church is here to give God's rest to you. Maybe it's time to ask.

Finally, we give God's rest in Christ to others through evangelism, discipleship, and missions. The mission of the church is to share the good news of Christ so that people near and far may enter into his rest. That mission is the work that we all share as the church. Let's us therefore labor in the harvest field so that others might be freed from their bondage to sin and Satan and gathered into the everlasting rest of God.