

Exodus 20 vs 8 to 11 Time for God

Introduction

If the third commandment is the one that Christians are most conscious of unbelievers around us breaking, it is most likely that the fourth commandment is the one that Christians are least conscious of breaking ourselves. The first part of this, the longest of the Ten Commandments, states in Exodus 20:8: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy*. When God specifically includes the word **remember** with respect to only one of the Ten Commandments, it does suggest that He thinks we are more likely to forget this one than any of the others. The reasons for this are two-fold: First of all some people can react against legalistic lists of prohibitions of a former era where to ask 'Can I ...' required the answer 'Not on the Sabbath'. Yet Psalm 118:24 states: *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it*. American writer Mark Twain in his satirical work, *Extracts from Adam's Diary, translated from the Original MS*, wrote: 'SUNDAY- Pulled through. This day is getting to be more and more trying. Some time later, using the same character, he came to a different viewpoint. 'I have come to like Sundays myself. Superintending tires the body so. There ought to be more Sundays. In the old days they were tough; now they come in handy.' [Parmiter, *Ten at Work*, p. 127]. How do we observe the Sabbath in an age of internet working, banking and shopping, where we might not physically encounter another human being as we engage in one of these activities? Secondly in an increasingly aggressive secular environment where 85% of the population are not in church on a Sunday many work shift patterns, sports or social activities make no allowance for the Christian wishing to honour God's day. (Interestingly, if all the social surveys are to be believed, with respect to personal freedom over whether to attend church or not in the last few centuries, there has never been more than half the population in church with any degree of regularity. Prior to the last fifty years (approximately) the unchurched kept a low profile on Sunday mornings but this is no longer the case and keeping God's day distinctive from the others takes planning and effort in the twenty-first century. Leaving aside the medical profession and other branches of the caring professions where there has always been a requirement for some Sunday working, without in any way this being considered a violation of God's day, there are now a significant number of careers that would exclude someone who refused to ever work a shift on a Sunday. Therefore, we need to look carefully at what God is saying to us in this fourth commandment and how it can be applied to our lives today.

1. What is the Sabbath?

(a)The Sabbath as a foundation for society The word has the idea of rest, to cease from regular activity this dividing up our time to include a cessation from work related tasks. This was not a new proposal to the Israelites. After the creation of the world has been completed, Genesis 2:2-3 states: *By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all his work.³ And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done*. This was not a declaration that God needed time off due to exhaustion; on the contrary it was the modelling of a pattern of a productive and fruitful way of life which He was commending to the people created in His image. In other words, observing a day of rest as a foundation for life was a creation ordinance from God applicable for everyone, regardless of their faith or beliefs. This interpretation of these words and their application to us is supported by Exodus 20:11: *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*. As this moral framework was for all humanity, for all time, it is evident that God's intention for us was to

enjoy a life that included work (that may or may not be financially remunerated), worship and a smaller proportion of safeguarded time within the family circle for other activities. In practical terms for the Israelites this time-planning was spelt out in the provision by God of the 'manna' food that was an essential part of their food supply while wandering in the desert for 40 years. In Exodus 16 the Lord told them through Moses that this food supply would be available on six days but food shopping on the Sabbath would be futile. ²⁵ *Eat it today, Moses said, because today is a Sabbath to the Lord. You will not find any of it on the ground today.* ²⁶ **Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.** ²⁷ *Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none.* ²⁸ *Then the Lord said to Moses, **How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?*** ²⁹ *Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day He gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no-one is to go out.* ³⁰ *So the people rested on the seventh day.* ³¹ *The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey (Exodus 16:25-31).* Notice carefully that this event took place before the giving of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, this moral code was not new to them as individual guidelines for their lives, rather it was now being enshrined as the formal moral standard by which their society should operate and on which their individual lives should be based.

(b) **Wider use of the Sabbath Principle** This pattern of Sabbath observance was not only a weekly schedule, but also included some additional rest days associated with particular religious festivals. For example, Passover, the commemoration of deliverance from Egypt, instituted before the Israelites left Egypt (observed at the same time as Easter in the Christian calendar), began with a Sabbath as an extra rest day, in addition to the regular Saturday observance (Exodus 12:16: *On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat—that is all you may do.*). This schedule was confirmed in Leviticus 23. First Moses confirmed the weekly pattern of behaviour in Leviticus 23:3: *'There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the Lord.* Then with respect to Passover the guidance included these instructions in Leviticus 23:7-8: *On the first day hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work.* ⁸ *For seven days present an offering made to the Lord by fire. And on the seventh day hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work.* These Sabbaths linked to particular Jewish religious festivals were specific to the Jewish faith and unlike the Fourth Commandment are not instructions for people outside the Jewish faith to follow. Paul's words in Colossians 2:16-17 must be seen in this light: *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.* ¹⁷ *These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* In mixed assemblies of Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus it must have required quite a bit of wisdom and grace working out the guidelines for daily living in the first generation of the Christian Church. The sabbatical principle is also taken further in the Levitical law. In Leviticus 25:1-7 there is a system commended regarding the use of land to enable it to yield good harvests—a Sabbath for the soil, thus inculcating a respect for the environment and the rest of creation. Interestingly within the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union a set-aside policy to take land out of agricultural usage was instituted between 1988 and 2008. There was some criticism in the press of farmers being paid 'to do nothing'. However, between 2007 and 2009 in the UK the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) investigated the best way to recapture the environmental benefits lost as a result of set-aside being abolished. A policy put

in place to reduce food surpluses was actually shown to be good for the environment –the Sabbath principle for the land worked!

2. What is the reason for the Sabbath?

(a)**To institute a work-rest balance to our lives** Social surveys comparing the lives of people a hundred years ago found that the average worker at the present day does twice as much work as their ancestor. Numerous technological advances have allowed for mechanical equipment to perform tasks previous carried out by ‘back-breaking’ labour. All kinds of gadgets and technological advances have transformed offices beyond recognition in the last generation in particular. However, with the assumption that mobile phones, laptop computers or their equivalent are possessed by the vast majority of people the instant erection of a virtual office while commuting to work or at home has erased the formal boundary of the place of work. A recent survey of 2,000 office workers in London found that the lunch-break was virtually extinct with almost all either taking no time off or eating at their desks; what is more 75% of those surveyed, in addition, took neither a morning or afternoon break. The same survey in line with others conducted in recent years found that approximately 60% of people deemed successful professionals by their peers admitted they were suffering from chronic tiredness, stress or depression; and with around two-thirds of those in management positions stating that their employment lacked a sense of meaning or purpose from which they could gain appropriate satisfaction [Parmiter, *Ten at Work*, p. 128]. How many of us bemoan the fact that administration is taking up an ever increasing amount of time even in supposedly people-centred jobs, without any perceived benefit to the people on whose behalf such exercises are undertaken. The problem of becoming more efficient in carrying out set tasks is that even more are piled into the in-tray of fewer workers to reduce costs, especially in a time of economic stagnation. No wonder in the Western world that though the majority of people are financially richer than their parents or grandparents were at the same stage of life the level of personal happiness or fulfilment with life is significantly reduced. In addition, the advertising and entertainment industries bombarding us with seductive images of what life could be like, only serve to increase the levels of frustration at the quality of life many people experience. Into this frenetic world God has this to say to us in Exodus 20:8-10: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ 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.* Observing a day of rest can be guilt free because we do so on higher authority. We need it to preserve our sanity and health, God knew that and instituted it for our benefit, not just for us to honour Him in gathering on His day for worship as a community of His people, though that will be our principal motivation as Christians.

(b)**To maximise the fulfilment from work** We were created to be workers, following the example of our Lord and His Father in heaven. In John 5:17 Jesus declared to a group of people unhappy with his active lifestyle: *My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.* In Genesis 1:26-27 it states: *Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. ²⁷So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* The implications of this declaration are that we will want to work and have the capacity to engage in useful activity not only for our own benefit but also for the benefit of others. This is confirmed in Genesis 2 which focuses on the human beings God created and the tasks they were to

perform. *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*¹⁸ *The Lord God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*¹⁹ *Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.*²⁰ *So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found* (Genesis 2:15,18-20).

(c) **To mitigate the pressures of work** Our first human ancestors chose to break the rules God had given them and suffered the consequences of their own folly. Work something that should have been overwhelmingly fulfilling and creative retains some of those features, yet also contains frustrations and pressures and challenges that reduce our pleasure in this aspect of our lives. Genesis 3: 17b-19: *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.*¹⁸ *It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.*¹⁹ *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.* Holidays, originally called ‘holy days’, together with the weekly Sabbath are an opportunity to relax, be refreshed and energised once more to continue our regular labours –or that is God’s intention behind this scheduling of our weekly routine.

3. **How should we use the Sabbath?**

(a) **It is a day for rest** *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.* What does it mean to keep it holy? The commandment continues: ⁹*Six days you shall labour 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates* (Exodus 20:8-10). The word ‘Sabbath’ means rest. This command is addressed to the householder in a hierarchical society. He must set an example in his own life, encourage his family to do the same, together with releasing any employees or animals used to work on his estate from any expectations of service on that day. It is a comprehensive law for all the creatures God has made, together with the rest of creation, as mentioned earlier. It is remarkable that more than three millennia before British people became concerned for the welfare of animals their wellbeing is taken up in the moral law. Our stewardship of creation included taking care of the rest of the created order. Proverbs 12:10 reminds us that: *A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal...* This principle should be applied in our choices today. We should not normally seek to do our regular work on a Sunday, as far as that is possible, but also not expect others to do theirs in providing services for others. This should involve planning for weekly shopping on other days and not expecting the provision of other goods and services on that day from other people. Safeguarding some time to rest and be with our families or maybe making time to phone or by some other form of communication to set aside time to keep in touch with them is much easier when we guard some of our time. A pleasant afternoon walk in the park or on the beach are amongst some of the simple (and free!) activities we can enjoy. Why not take a break from TV and other forms of entertainment media on God’s day and give that time to spend in activities with others in our family or circle of friends, whom we might have invited round for dinner. The tragedy for so many of us is that the working week is so full of frenetic activity that we want to simply rest or do nothing through tiredness in the extra free hours we have on the Lord’s Day. The health of the nation would be in a better state if some time for rest from the ‘rat-race’ was safeguarded to recharge our batteries. Yet the Lord intended His day to be one we look forward to each week. Listen to these words from Isaiah 58:13-14a: ¹³*If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as*

you please or speaking idle words,¹⁴ **then you will find your joy in the Lord.** Have you / Have I lost some of our joy /pleasure by failing to safeguard God's day as we might?

(b) **It is a day for worship** The motivation behind keeping this commandment is given in Exodus 20:11: *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.* This point is repeated in Exodus 31:17: *It will be a sign between me and the Israelites for ever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He abstained from work and rested.* At the centre of this day is our privilege of taking time to honour Him and all He has done for us –here in the creation of this amazing world we enjoy. A second reason for observing this day is given in the recounting of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:15: *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.* For the Jewish people it was remembrance of deliverance from Egypt and their formation as a nation. It was at a cost of the blood shed of the lambs whose blood 'covered' them from the judgement of the Lord against the wicked Egyptians who had oppressed them (Exodus 12:21-28). For Christians whose observance takes place on Sunday rather than Saturday the change took place after the resurrection of Jesus. All the dated resurrection appearances were on a Sunday. Sunday was the day when the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-16). John in Revelation 1, a prisoner of the Roman authorities and in chains on the Island of Patmos, could not gather with other believers in a service of worship, yet Revelation 1: 10 records him writing: *On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit...unable to gather for worship with others yet on his own having time alone with God.* Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians to remember to take up offerings for God's work when they gathered on *the first day of every week* (I Corinthians 16:2). Luke records the practice of the Church at Troas to observe weekly communion in Acts 20:7: *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread...* Hebrews 4 reminds us that the observance of a weekly Sabbath (Hebrews 4:9 *There remains then a Sabbath-rest [day] for the people of God*) and points forward to the ultimate eternal rest in heaven (Hebrews 4:1). Unfortunately the writer to the Hebrews had to challenge some of his Italian readers about their lack of self discipline in setting aside time on God's day for worship. He wrote: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching* (Hebrews 10:25). The 'day' referred to is the second coming of Jesus.

(c) **It is a day for witness** J. John recounts the testimony of his friend Gary Grant who is managing director and founder of 'The Entertainer' chain of toyshops. Gary began his business with one shop in Amersham in Buckinghamshire in 1981 and for two years worked exceedingly long hours seven days a week to build the business. However, his life was changed in 1991 when he became a Christian. This changed many aspects of our business from product selection to the way we treated our staff, to the hours that we worked, especially Sunday trading. In 1994 Sunday trading became lawful and I was really concerned about how it fitted in with my Christian belief of having a day of rest. I prayed as to whether I should open my stores on a Sunday. I was annoyed that God hadn't answered my prayers, but one night God said to me, 'Gary you've had the answer, but you've been praying for the answer 'yes'. And to this day, I know that the bit in the Bible where God says He will honour those who honour Him is absolutely true. I can testify that God has prospered our business as we have gone from strength to strength. We have gone from three stores back in 1991 to twenty today (2000).

The last few years haven't been easy. Many of the sites where we would have liked to open in, we have been barred from, as the landlords are only interested in people who are doing seven day trading. However, we have found that our staff of 300 are pleased we are taking a stance over Sunday trading, as it gives them the opportunity to be at home with their family and their children. As the owner of 'The Entertainer' I am in a very privileged position to be able to make the decision not to trade my business on a Sunday. We only trade for six days and our business is financially viable.' [J. John, *Ten*, pp.211-212]

People notice the choices we make and when we make good choices in line with God's guidance it can encourage others to do the same. May He help each of us to honour Him as

we honour His day and hopefully find it a delight to have this special time set apart each week, Amen.