



The Ten Commandments

(15) Why We are Still Required to Keep the Fourth Commandment

(2) The Moral Law

Exodus 20:8-11

Matthew 22:34-40

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This is the 15th sermon in our series on the Ten Commandments and our second sermon dealing with the question of whether or not the Fourth Commandment still applies today. As a church that takes the whole of the Westminster Confession of Faith seriously, we believe that the Fourth Commandment is still in force and that all that our Lord Jesus fulfilled during his time on earth did not change that. The Fourth Commandment is the command to keep the Sabbath day holy. We believe that the day has changed from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week and the early church, guided by the apostles, began meeting for worship on the first day of the week. We believe that this meant that the Lord had changed the holy day of rest mandated in the Fourth Commandment from the seventh day to the first day of the week.

Now, as I said last time, the reason that I want to treat this matter so thoroughly is that the vast majority of Christians today do not take this position on the abiding nature of the Fourth Commandment. That puts pressure on us as Reformed people who still hold to the conviction that the Fourth Commandment is still binding upon us today. If so many smart and godly people believe that the Fourth Commandment is not binding upon the New Testament Church, perhaps we are wrong. It is tempting to think along those lines. And many Reformed people have

been persuaded that the Sabbatarian position is not the correct interpretation of Scripture.

I believe that that is unfortunate. The reasons for believing that our Sunday is the continuation of the Old Testament Sabbath of the Ten Commandments are solid and weighty. They clearly do not convince everyone, but they are based on solid biblical reasoning. This is not just some kind of stubborn following of a tradition. The biblical case is a strong one. And I want to make that clear.

I also want to make clear that the whole idea of seeing the Fourth Commandment as binding upon us is not necessarily legalism. It can be. And no doubt it has been approached in a legalistic way. But that can be the case with every commandment. All the commandments of God are binding upon us. We are required to keep them. But as David puts it in Psalm 19, in keeping them there is great reward.

There is no incompatibility between the binding nature of God's commands and loving those commands and delighting in them. That is what grace does. That is what Jesus obtained for us – new hearts that love God and love his commands. And grace gives us love for the Fourth Commandment as well. It is important to preserve the biblical teaching about the Fourth Commandment because it is biblical teaching, but also because it is such a great blessing. What Paul says of the law in Romans 7:22 is the experience of every true believer. "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being." Of course, every true believer also experiences the struggle that Paul talks about in that passage, but it is an integral part of what salvation means that we delight in the law of God in our inner being. If we never feel that way about the law of God, it is not likely that we have been born again because when we are born again, the Holy Spirit writes the law of God upon our hearts.

That is why it is so important to preserve the biblical teaching about the Fourth Commandment. It belongs to the way of life. Not the way **to** life, but the way **of** life – the way of life that we are blessed to live because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It is in that spirit that I want us to be convinced in our hearts that when God gave the Fourth Commandment to Israel, it was not his intention to

cancel it once Christ had come and fulfilled it. Christ did not come to cancel any of the Ten Commandments, but rather to fulfill them and part of what that means is that he came to enable us to keep them and to flourish through keeping them.

The point that I want to make in this sermon is that the Ten Commandments is a unit that expresses the permanent moral law of God. That is the conviction expressed in the Westminster Standards and which is the historic Reformed and Presbyterian way of understanding the Ten Commandments. Here is how this is expressed in chapter 19:5 of the WCF. "The moral law [earlier identified as the Ten Commandments] binds all people at all times to obedience, both those who are justified and those who are not. The obligation to obey the moral law is not only because of its content, but also because of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. In the gospel, Christ in no way dissolves this obligation, but greatly strengthens it."

The Ten Commandments summarize God's moral law. They summarize right and wrong, good and evil, for all time. In this sense they are like the creation ordinances that we looked at last week. They were not spelled out at the time of creation. We do not read of them until God spoke them to Israel from the top of Mount Sinai. So, we do not speak of them as creation ordinances. But they are **like** the creation ordinances that we find in the first chapters of Genesis **in that** they are part of the structure of the creation. The moral law is also part of the nature of things. The Ten Commandments summarize God's will for his people from the beginning to the end of the world. They summarize what is always right and what is always wrong.

And they are distinguished from the ceremonial laws and the civil laws that were meant for Israel for the period between the giving of the law and the time of Christ. These laws are not identified with those labels in the Bible, but there are laws concerning the temple worship that are clearly abrogated or abolished in the NT and there are laws concerning Israel's life in the land that are clearly abrogated or abolished in the New Testament. So, while the categories of ceremonial laws and judicial laws are not precise biblically-given categories, they are a useful way of distinguishing between those laws which were never meant to be

binding for all time and the moral law which was meant to be binding for all time.

The Reformed confession is that the Ten Commandments were and are a summary of the essence of God's will for his people for all time. And part of the argument for this is that the Ten Commandments are clearly a unit and they are different from the multitude of other laws that we find in the books of Exodus-through Deuteronomy. The Ten Commandments give the basic principles of morality. The other laws are the application of those principles to the specific situation of ancient Israel. The Ten Commandments were spoken by God at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments were carved on the two tablets of stone and placed in the Ark of the Covenant. The Ten Commandments are repeated twice in the Old Testament in virtually the same form, once in Exodus 20 and once in Deuteronomy 5.

So, they stand out from the other commands of the Old Testament. They are a summary of the principles behind all the other laws. And they are given a prominence that the other laws are not given. And so it is a natural conclusion to draw from the Old Testament materials that the Ten Commandments are the timeless expression of God's will for his people and the other laws represent the application of the principles of the Ten Commandments to the specific situation of ancient Israel as God's covenant people and the bearers of the promise until the time that Christ would come and fulfill the promises and inaugurate the new Israel which would no longer be identified with a specific nation, but be a transnational people made up of people called from death to life from every tribe and every nation.

So, it is just odd to think that when Christ came and brought the new creation through his ministry on earth and his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, that God would take one of those Ten Commandments and abolish it while the other 9 commandments remained in force. That, by itself, is not a very strong argument, but it does suggest that that it is very unlikely that God would break up the Ten Commandments in that way.

Now one of the reasons that this is a controversial issue is that there are no texts in the New Testament that explicitly say that all Ten

Commandments are still binding on the New Testament church. God could have given us a Bible written with the clarity and precision of a theology textbook or a carefully worded confession of faith, but he has not done that. The Bible does not answer all of our questions and it is not always explicit in what it teaches. The Westminster Confession puts it like this in chapter 1:6 “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory and man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture or by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture.” And those things that must be deduced from Scripture by good and necessary inference tend to be more controversial. Not everyone agrees that a specific inference or deduction is good and necessary. We all tend to think that the inferences or deductions that people who differ from us make are not good and not necessary. We all tend to think that the inferences and deductions that we make are good and necessary. That is one of the reasons that there are so many different traditions and denominations in the Church.

The issue of the status of the Fourth Commandment for New Testament Christians is one that requires good and necessary inferences. So, we as confessional Reformed people, believe that it is a good and necessary inference to make that since the Ten Commandments are given as a unit in the Old Testament, and since they are general principles rather than specific applications, it follows that they are a summary of God’s moral law that is binding for all time. Clearly not all Christians agree with us on that.

Now of course, we need to consider what the New Testament says about this matter and that too is a thorny question. The New Testament does not explicitly say that the Ten Commandments as a unit are still binding, but that does not mean that there is not a strong care to be made that Jesus and the apostles saw the Ten Commandments in that way. One of the key passages here is Jesus’ summary of the law that we find in Matthew 22:34-40. When Jesus is asked “Teacher, what is the great commandment in the Law?”, he replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Now Jesus is not quoting the Ten Commandments here. He is quoting two other great summary verses found among the Old Testament laws, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. But it just so happens that the first four commandments explain what it means to love God and the last six commandments explain what it means to love our neighbor and so our forefathers in the Reformed tradition felt that it was a good and necessary inference to make that Jesus here was giving a summary of the Ten Commandments. If that is so, Jesus is pointing to the Ten Commandments as an abiding summary of the law of God.

Now confessional Reformed believers see this as a good and necessary inference to make. Most other evangelicals do not. If Jesus had just answered the lawyer’s question by explicitly referring to the Ten Commandments, Bible-believing Christians would not disagree on the status of the Ten Commandments as a unit in the New Testament era. But Jesus did not do that. And that, more often, is the nature of God’s Word to us. It requires us to make good and necessary inferences and deductions. And for Reformed people, it seems reasonable to think that Jesus was giving a summary of the Ten Commandments.

Now another reason that there is not agreement on the Ten Commandments as a summary of the permanent moral law is the different way that the word “law” is used in the New Testament. The word “law” is used a lot. It is very important. But it is used differently in different contexts. Sometimes the word “law” refers to the law that is still binding upon New Testament Christians. Sometimes the very same word “law” refers to the Old Testament laws that are no longer binding upon us.

So, we have Ephesians 2:14-15 that says that Jesus “has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” Paul here is saying that the law, in some sense, has been abolished. Now some Christians think that Paul here is referring to the Old Testament laws that kept Israel separate from the other nations, but not the Ten Commandments. Other Christians think that Paul is referring to all the Old Testament

laws and that Christians are now only required to keep those laws that are given or reaffirmed in the New Testament.

There are other passages which teach that the Old Testament law in some sense is still binding on us today. Hebrews 8 applies the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31 to the New Testament church and part of that promise is that God will write his law upon the hearts of his people. That is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and his salvation. One of the great results of what Jesus did for us is that God writes his law on our hearts. But the question is, what law is that?

We say, the moral law which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. That seems like a good interpretation because the promise was given in the Old Testament and it clearly did not refer to all the ceremonial and civil laws of Israel because the New Testament explicitly abolishes many of them. It is very likely then that the law that is written on our hearts as New Testament Christians is the abiding law of God which is summarized by the Ten Commandments including, of course, the Four Commandment.

Let's look at one more New Testament passage, this time Romans 13:8-9. The apostle Paul is writing, and he says, "Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For 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.'"

Now Paul here is speaking about the law. "[T]he one who loves another has fulfilled the law." New Testament Christians are to fulfill the law by keeping it. What law is he talking about? Well he quotes four of the 10 commandments as examples. It is reasonable to assume that by pointing to some of the Ten Commandments to illustrate what he means by the term law in this context, he is thinking of the whole unit, the Ten Commandments. That seems like a good and necessary inference to make because of the way that the Ten Commandments summarize the moral law of God in the Old Testament and because of the way that Jesus summarized the law of God by alluding to the Ten Commandments.

It is the combination of all these points that makes a strong case for the conviction that the Bible as a whole sees the Ten Commandment as a whole as the permanent moral law of God. There is no direct statement that says that explicitly. But there are a lot of passages that together strongly suggest that the Ten Commandments are the summary of God's moral law and that they, all of them, are all still binding upon us today. And if that is the case, the Fourth Commandment is still binding upon us today.

Now all this must be understood in the light of the gospel – in the light of the grace of God. The law of God is something that Christians love and cherish. Because God's law is written on our hearts, it is no longer experienced as a burden, but as a delight. Also, because Jesus Christ has taken upon himself the curse of the law, we are free from the law in the sense that we are no longer guilty before the law. We are free from the curse that is attached to the law for those who break it.

According to the Bible, what is truly a burden and a slavery is sin and the power of sin in our lives, and what is true freedom is to be set free from the power of sin through our union with Christ so that obedience is now an expression of freedom rather than only an unwelcome obligation. Law-keeping is still an obligation, but it is a welcome obligation – it is a freely embraced obligation because our hearts have been changed from rebellious hearts to hearts that love both God and his law. We love the law because we love God and want to please him, and we love the law because we have come to see that the law is good – it is the best way to live – it is the way we were designed to live – it is the way we were saved to live, and so it is the way of life and blessing. It is because of all of this that Paul wrote in Romans 7:22, "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being."

What does this mean for our attitude towards the Four Commandment? Well we will spell that out in more detail in the coming weeks, but for now let's just think about the connection between loving God and loving his law – therefore loving the Fourth Commandment as well. God has given us a day where we are not allowed to work. How cool is that! We can "not work" free from feelings of guilt because we are not working. In fact, we are guilty if we do work, except in those cases of

necessary work. And it is a holy day – a day set apart for God – a day in which we can focus on God without the busyness and distractions of the other six days.

Now if we are in the process of being shaped by the word and Spirit to love God with all our heart, and mind, and strength, what could be more delightful than a day set apart for the worship of God? That being the case you would think there would be little resistance to the idea that God commands us to keep the Sabbath as a holy day. It would be sad if God had taken away this command after the coming of Christ. It would be a loss. It would be the taking away of a blessing and a benefit.

Isaiah 58 speaks of the Sabbath as day of delight because it is a day to take delight in the LORD. That being the case, it is odd that so many in the church have seen that Sabbath as a burden rather than as something they would hope that God would not take away from us in a time of richer outpouring of his grace in connection with Jesus Christ.

This is part of Jesus' point when he says that the "Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" in Mark 2:27. The Sabbath was made for man! It was given by God to be a blessing! It was given for our benefit! It was given to give us a chance to set aside our work and to focus on God. Psalm 36:8 speaks of feasting on the abundance of God's house and drinking from the river of his delights. Psalm 84:2 says, "²My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." That is what we especially get to do on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a good thing, like all of God's laws are good things. And one of the results of God's saving work in our hearts is that we are being shaped gradually, to delight more and more in the law of God. We have looked at some of the reasons that we as Reformed people believe that the Ten Commandments, including the Fourth Commandment is still in force for today. And that is something to be celebrated.

Now it is true that it is also a blessing that we are no longer under ceremonial and the civil laws of the Old Testament. Those laws are not binding upon us because they are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. They served a specific purpose during the period between the time of Moses and the

time of Pentecost. It would be a denial of the significance of Jesus' saving work if we still kept those laws. But the Ten Commandments, the moral law, including the Fourth Commandment, belong to ongoing blessings of having God as our God and of being reconciled to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the reality is that we do not delight in the commands of God as we should, even if the Holy Spirit has written the law on our hearts. The law of God not only shows us the blessed way to live as people who are being transformed by the word and Spirit of God, it also shows us our sins. And it is important that we consider it in that light as well. Hopefully we all can identify with the blessedness of the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship. But if we know our hearts, we will also be aware of some of the sins that the Fourth Commandment exposes.

We do not always delight in God as we are meant to do. We do not always find the Sabbath to be a delight. We do not ever love God with all our heart and our hearts do not always long for the courts of the LORD. If we are being renewed by the salvation that Jesus has obtained for us, we will know something of these things, but we will also know of dullness in worship and weakness of desire for fellowship with God. We will sometimes find it difficult to focus on God and be too reluctant to set aside our daily this-worldly preoccupations.

And that reminds us of how utterly we depend on Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. It is wonderful to reflect on the law of God as a blessing – as something that we love and delight in. Keeping God's law because we want to is a huge part of what it means to be saved. If we never delight in God's law, then we have not yet had God's law written on our hearts. And if that is the case, we are called to come to Jesus both for the forgiveness of our sins and the transformation of our hearts.

But even if we do love God's law and delight in the Sabbath as a day to focus on God, we must remember that we are worthy of death many times over for our law-breaking and our lack of love for God and his law.

It is important to be aware of this because it is fundamental to the Christian life that we are looking to Jesus and celebrating Jesus as the

one in whom we find forgiveness and renewal. Indeed, part of the delight in the Fourth Commandment is delighting in Jesus as our Saviour. A significant part of our joy in God and our delight in him has to do with celebrating his grace in the light of our sins. And the two go together. We can only celebrate God's grace and mercy in Jesus from the place of the knowledge of our sins and what we deserve.

So, we think of the Fourth Commandment in the light of the gospel. We have seen how the Ten Commandments are the summary of God's moral law. The Fourth Commandment is still in force and it is part of the law that God uses to convict us of our sins and show us our need of Jesus and it is part of the law that we are saved to keep for the glory of God and for our flourishing and well-being.