

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

The LORD asks Israel to observe the Sabbath as a reminder of their redemption from slavery in Egypt.

The Fourth Commandment

The fourth commandment is the longest of the ten and is presented as a positive formulation.

The fourth commandment relates to the observance of the Sabbath. The LORD said to His people, “*Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.*” The verb translated as “observe” basically means “to keep,” “to watch,” or “to preserve.” The idea is of a celebration. Thus, the Israelites were commanded to celebrate *the sabbath day*.

The word “sabbath” comes from the Hebrew verb “shabath” meaning “to cease,” “to stop,” or “to rest.” It is the word Moses used in [Genesis 2:2](#) when he stated, “By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He *rested* (shabath) on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”

Moreover, we see that in both contexts of [Genesis 2:2-3](#) and [Deuteronomy 5:12-15](#), the *sabbath day* was to be kept *holy*. The biblical understanding of keeping something *holy* is setting it apart for special use or dedicating it for a special purpose. Thus, God asked His people to withhold the *sabbath day* from ordinary use so that it might be consecrated to Him. The Israelites were to do “*as the LORD your God commanded you.*” The Sabbath belongs to the LORD and it was supposed to be set apart by the people to be used for God’s purposes ([Exodus 16:23-24](#); [Isaiah 58:13-14](#)).

Such a consecration is further confirmed by God’s own statement that no work was to be performed on the *Sabbath day*. God said, “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work.*” Then, God listed the various beneficiaries of the sabbath rest for Israel. He said, “*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 cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.*”

While this list includes the head of the family as well as his sons and daughters, it also includes his animals, as well as a sojourner who stays with

him. Also, special consideration is given to the servants. The servants are also to have their Sabbath set apart to the LORD. Such a reading is made explicit at the end of the verse which reads, “*so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.*” This command echoes a theme that is found throughout scripture, that God values all humans and does not show partiality based on economic or social status ([Jas. 2:1-9](#)).

Furthermore, the LORD told the Israelites why they were to be considerate of their servants. He stated, “*You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.*” The nation Israel spent many years in slavery in Egypt and was mistreated by Pharaoh. However, *the LORD their God* redeemed them from slavery and *brought them out there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm.* Therefore, God urged them to *remember* how they lived under Pharaoh’s rule and how they were redeemed when He sent Moses and Aaron to them ([Exodus 3](#)). Such a reminder should encourage Israel to treat their servants well by allowing them to rest on the Sabbath.

One of the purposes for God’s creation of man is that man can work to earn a living ([Genesis 2:5](#)). As the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes states, “The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much” ([Eccl. 5:12](#)). However, man’s work should not completely dominate his existence. God commanded Israel to dedicate the *sabbath day* to Him.

In Egypt the Israelites knew nothing but labor. They were to remember that, and not cause themselves or others to fall back into a slave-like existence, where all they knew was work. *Therefore, the LORD their God commanded them to observe the sabbath day to keep it holy.*

The practice of sabbath-keeping continued also in the New Testament era (first century A.D). Many of the conflicts Jesus had with Jewish leaders involved interpretation of Sabbath laws. The Jewish leaders had made the Sabbath a burden rather than a blessing, and Jesus rebelled against that misapplication, stating in [Mark 2:17-18](#), “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” This is one of many declarations of divinity Jesus made, and in this instance makes it clear that God made the Sabbath to bless humanity.

Jesus Christ himself remained faithful to the Scriptures of the Old Testament because he used to attend services in synagogues every Sabbath ([Mark 1:21](#); [Mark 3:1](#); [Luke 4:16](#)). The apostle Paul used to attend synagogues on the Sabbath and preached the good news on numerous occasions ([Acts 13:14](#); [17:2](#); [18:4](#)).

Christ is also the Lord of the Sabbath ([Matt 12:8](#)). The other nine commandments are repeated for believers in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is specifically excluded. That does not mean the principle is no longer in force. [Heb. 4:9](#) uses the Sabbath as a picture of our time in heaven, when our work on earth is done. But [Colossians 2:16](#) makes it clear that each person gets to determine their own application of the principle as unto the LORD.

Biblical Text:

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 of the Lord your God; *in 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 cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so 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 of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.