

The Sabbath

Some people teach that the Bible commands Christians to not work on Sunday. However, is that actually the case? Does the Bible require believers to set aside Sunday as a day of rest?

Before we answer this question let's take a look at some background information. At the time of Moses the Lord commanded the Israelites to honor the Sabbath day:

Exodus 20:8-11: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.”

First, it's important to note that the Sabbath day was the *seventh* day of the week. God was very clear about this! The reason He hallowed the *last* day of the week was because He created the entire world in six days and then rested on the seventh day. This means the Sabbath is Saturday, not Sunday. *There has never been a commandment to rest on the first day of the week.* This means that resting on the first day of the week has nothing to do with this commandment. No one is allowed take God's commands and say “Let's just honor a different day of the week and call it the same thing”. There are no verses in the Bible which teach the Sabbath was moved to a different day of the week.

The reason Christians gather on Sunday to worship is to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, who rose from the dead on the

first day of the week. It has nothing to do with keeping the Sabbath.

However, there is something else that must not be overlooked. The command to keep the Sabbath holy was given as a sign between God and the Israelites. This commandment was specific to *the Jews*, not to all of mankind. It never applied to Gentiles. This fact is made clear in this passage:

Exodus 30:13-17: “Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefor; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”

Three times in this passage the Lord clearly says that this command applies to *the children of Israel*. God didn't say that about the command to honor your parents, or not murder, or not commit adultery, or not steal. It would have been easy for God to say that this commandment applied to everyone, but that's not what He said! Instead God stated that this commandment only applied to *the Jews*.

The command was also extremely strict. Anyone who did any work at all on the seventh day of the week (which would be our Saturday, *not* our Sunday) was to be put to death. In other passages the Bible elaborated on what was meant by not being allowed to work:

Jeremiah 17:21-22: “Thus saith the Lord; Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; Neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the sabbath day, neither do ye any work, but hallow ye the sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers.”

In this passage the Lord commanded the Israelites to bear no burdens on the Sabbath. Don't go about your normal business, don't carry things into the city, and don't even carry things out of your house. In another passage the Bible goes even further:

Exodus 35:3: “Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day.”

Notice that no exception is made for winter weather! The Jews weren't even allowed to *start a fire* in their own homes on the Sabbath. Even gathering sticks on the Sabbath to start a fire was punishable by death:

Numbers 15:32-36: “And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put in in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall

stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses.”

People weren't allowed to do *any* kind of work *whatsoever* on the Sabbath. Now it's true that in the New Testament Jesus explained that the commandment wasn't intended to prevent people from helping one other. The Lord healed people on the Sabbath, which angered the Pharisees. But any kind of work at all – even something as mundane as starting a fire – was strictly prohibited on pain of death.

People today generally don't even come close to keeping this commandment. Not only do they rest on the wrong day of the week (Saturdays tend to be very busy!), but even when they rest they perform activities that would have gotten them *executed* under the Mosaic Law.

Another thing to notice is that the commandment says nothing about worship services or going to the temple. This wasn't a day where the Israelites went to the temple and offered sacrifices. The Lord said that He wanted the Jews to keep the day holy *by not working* – not by singing hymns or listening to priests.

As a side-note, the Sabbath wasn't the only holy day on the Jewish calendar. Leviticus 23 gives an entire list of days which the Jews were commanded to keep holy. The Sabbath is simply the one that we're the most familiar with. The Jews were required to keep *all* of the various Sabbaths which were on the calendar. As Gentiles we are required to keep *none* of them.

If you search the New Testament you'll find that many of the Ten Commandments are repeated and given to the church. However, one commandment that's *not* given to the church is the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Instead we're given a very different set of instructions:

Colossians 2:16-17: “Let no man therefore

judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

This verse says that we must not judge one other on the basis of whether we keep certain holy days or Sabbath days. *It is left up to our discretion* what days we do or don't keep holy. This is entirely different from executing someone for gathering sticks on a Saturday! In case we missed the point, the same teaching can be found in Romans:

Romans 14:5: “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and give God thanks.

...

10 But why doest thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at naught thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”

Far from teaching that Christians must not work on Saturday, these verses say that we have liberty to do as we think best. If we want to abstain from eating meat then we may do so; if we want to eat meat then that's fine as well. If one man wants to keep a particular day holy then that's fine; if another man wants to not keep any day holy then that's equally fine. This is *not at all* what you would expect the Scriptures to say if working on the Sabbath was a sin. You won't find any passages which teach that

we have the same liberty to steal, covet, lust, commit adultery, and so forth. All of those commands are still binding – but the one to honor the Sabbath day is not.

Some might point out that Jesus kept the Sabbath, which is true. However, Jesus also kept the *entire* Mosaic law. The reason He did this is because He was under that law and was required to keep it. The Mosaic Law didn't pass away until after He died and rose again.

In summary, the commandment to keep the Sabbath was only given to the Jews and never applied to the Gentiles. As Christians we aren't required to keep Saturday holy by not working on that day. God has given us the liberty to keep days holy or not. If we wish to honor God by setting aside a day of rest then we may do so, but if we don't then it's not a sin. What the Bible does say (in Romans 14:10) is that we must not judge one other on the basis of Sabbath keeping.