

## **Sabbath and Shabbat Shalom**

*by R.C. Sproul Jr.*

Obedience is a rather narrow road. Disobedience, on the other hand, has a great, sweeping plain of options. Because we are like the Pharisees, we find it easy to convert the law of God into sundry sins of omission. We're much better at not doing what we're not supposed to do than we are at doing what we're supposed to do. Thus, we reduce the Sabbath to all the things we're not allowed to do. We work at fine-tuning the definition of "work" so we can make sure we don't do it on the Sabbath. In so doing, as is our wont, we miss the point. Were we to divide the Ten Commandments not according to duties toward God and duties toward man, as many do, but instead on the basis of prohibitions and commands, the Sabbath commandment would end up with the commands. It is less about what we are forbidden to do and more about what we are commanded to do.

First, believe it or not, the Sabbath commandment commands us to work. "Six days shalt thou labor" isn't an interesting prelude designed merely to set the context for the command to come. It is a command in itself. We're supposed to be busy with the work set before us. We are to be passionately pursuing the kingdom of God. We are to recognize that we live in the not-yet of the kingdom. Not all enemies have yet been made a footstool. We have not yet fully exercised dominion over the creation. The reign of Jesus is not yet universally recognized. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "How does Christ execute the office of a king?" Its answer: "Christ executes the office of a king in subduing us to Himself, in ruling and defending us and in restraining and conquering all His and our enemies." As we rule with and under Him, this is the work we are called to — seeking His kingdom, making manifest His reign.

Second, as the Sabbath commandment moves to the day of observance, it does not command that we refrain from work — it's far more profound: we are to rest. We think we are keeping the commandment if we refuse gallantly to do any of the work that is piling up and causing us to lose sleep at night. Instead, we are sinning. Rest isn't just ceasing from working; it is also ceasing from worrying. It's not easy. Indeed, in a manner of speaking, rest, especially ceasing from worry, is hard work. It takes discipline and fortitude to let go of all that has us worried.

We have not succeeded if our worries are more pious, either. That is, we aren't failing to keep the Sabbath when we worry about the big meeting at work on Monday, but successfully keeping it when we are worried about our persistent failure to mortify that particular sin that so troubles us. Worry is worry, and it has no place in our Sabbath celebration. The Lord's Day is a feast day and should be treated as such.

We rejoice and we get over our worries when we come to understand that the Lord's Day is that time when we leave the "not yet" of the kingdom, and enter into the "already." Is it not the case that the defining quality of eternity is the blessing of drawing near to the living God? When we feast at His Table, is He not declaring His blessing upon us? Is He not blessing and keeping, lifting up His countenance, making His face shine, being gracious unto us? Is He not lifting up His countenance on us? Is He not giving us peace?

When we worry about the more mundane things, we are failing to heed the call of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to set aside those worries, to not be like the Gentiles. We are called instead to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. When we worry about more spiritual

matters, especially our own sins, we are missing the very heart of all Lord's Day preaching — we, the repentant, are forgiven in Christ. We have, by His sovereign grace, succeeded in our quest — we have received His righteousness.

Sabbath, then, is *shalom*, and *shalom* is Sabbath. We have rest because we have peace. We have peace because we have rest. We have both because Jesus is not just Lord of the Sabbath and the Prince of Peace but is also our Sabbath, our Peace.

There is a right way to keep the Sabbath in our context. There is a right answer to this question that divides us. In the end, however, whatever position we take with respect to the Sabbath, whether we believe this law to have been abrogated in the new covenant, or whether we believe it to have been altered in the new covenant, or whether we maintain the passionate commitment of our Puritan fathers, the key question is ultimately the gospel question: Are we resting in the finished work of Christ? The most faithful Sabbath keeper will in the end be the most joyful Sabbath keeper. Sabbath, in the end, isn't something to be observed but something to be celebrated. And we celebrate not merely a day off from work. We celebrate the victory of our King. We are of good cheer, for He has overcome the world. And we reign with Him.

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### **Prayer:**

Lord of Sabbath, Prince of Peace, our King,

We celebrate that you have given us the fantastic opportunity to find rest from our work and our anxieties. Give us the strength to let go of our worries, of meetings, emails, and “to-do” lists. May we find peace as we glimpse into the reality of your Kingdom where we draw nearer to you.

Shabbot Shalom be with us today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.

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### **Questions:**

1. Do you tend to view Sabbath as a day when you *can't* do certain things, or when you *get* to rest?
2. Are you able to rest completely on the Sabbath, or do you still find yourself worrying?
3. When or where do you most feel at peace? What can you do to carry that feeling with you into the workweek?