

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 38: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM QA 103

Question 103: WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE IN THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT? **In the first place, God wills that the ministry of the Gospel and schools be maintained, and that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church to learn the Word of God, to use the holy sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms. In the second place, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, allow the Lord to work in me by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the everlasting Sabbath.**

The Hebrew word *Sabbath* means *rest*, or ceasing from labor. God established the weekly Sabbath day when He *finished* His work of creation in six days and *rested* the seventh day: “on the seventh day God *ended* His work which He had done, and He *rested* on the seventh day” (Gen. 2:2). God’s resting does not mean He was tired or stopped His work of providentially preserving and governing the universe (John 5:17). It means He *ceased* His work of *creation*. After creation week, for example, God did not *create* any new people but He brought new people into existence according to His providential laws of reproduction. God’s rest also means He *delighted* in His finished work of creation. “God *saw* everything that He had made, and indeed it was *very good*” (Gen. 1:31); “on the seventh day He *rested* and was *refreshed*” (Ex. 31:17). God was refreshed “in the sense of His receiving joy and delight in the contemplation of the beauty of what He had created” (Kelly, *Creation and Change*, 238). “**Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work**” (Gen. 2:3). To bless a day means to make it a day of blessing for man. The Lord Jesus said, “The Sabbath was *made for* man” (Mark 2:27). To sanctify (make holy) a day means to set it apart from the other days. By resting the seventh day God set it apart from the other six days to be a day of rest for man – to **imitate God’s rest. Thus, the main purpose of ceasing from work is not for physical refreshment, but spiritual refreshment!**

“God rested; then He blessed this rest...He dedicated every seventh day to rest, that His own example might be a perpetual rule.” Since “it was commanded to men from the very beginning that they might employ themselves in the worship of God, it is right that it should continue to the end of the world” (Calvin on Genesis 2:3).

“The principle underlying the Sabbath is formulated in the Decalogue itself. It consists in this, that man must copy God in his course of life” (Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 139). “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy [set apart]. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work.” **Why?** “**For** in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed [*sanctified*] it” (Ex. 20:9-11). The unchanging moral principle of the Sabbath command is that God created us in His image to imitate Him in all of life – to work six days for His glory and to rest one day for His glory. The fall *ruined* our ability to imitate God, but redemption through faith in Christ *restores* our ability to imitate God out of thankfulness for salvation. “Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children” (Eph. 5:1); “be holy for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16).

The day can change without changing the moral principle. Christ’s resurrection on the first day of the week did *not* abolish the weekly cycle of working six days and resting one day for God’s glory (Mt. 5:17). Rather, it showed that Christ perfectly

fulfilled the law, paid the eternal penalty of sin, and obtained eternal life (eternal rest!) for all who believe in Him (He. 4:3). The new covenant has a new day of rest (just as it has new signs and seals – baptism and the Lord’s Supper) to show that sinners are saved only by trusting (*resting*) in the *finished work* of Christ alone!

The new day of rest, which “*God has instituted through the church* [under the authoritative leadership of the apostles],” is “the first day of the week, which is called Sunday, or, more properly, the Lord’s Day, which the Christian Church has observed in the place of the seventh day from the time of the Apostles [Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:7], in view of the resurrection of Christ, as appears from what the Apostle John says: ‘I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day’ (Rev. 1:10).” (Ursinus, 562).

In regards to Romans 14:5, Galatians 4:10, and Colossians 3:16, most reformed commentators agree with Matthew Henry: “Paul is not speaking of the Sabbath command. Paul is speaking about special Jewish feast days, such as Passover, Pentecost, new moons, and the feast of Tabernacles.”

The main focus on the day of rest is still spiritual worship and refreshment – to “call the Sabbath a delight,” to “delight yourself in the LORD” (Isaiah 58:13). This is why there is still to be a *holy assembly* every Sabbath (Lev. 23:3; Heb. 10:24-25). “God will not only be praised and called upon by everyone privately, but also publicly by the whole church [Ps. 68:26], for His own glory and comfort. It is for this reason that Christ has added a special promise to such prayers as are offered up publicly [Matt. 18:19-20]” (Ursinus, 571). The ministry of God’s Word is still the means by which God saves and sanctifies His elect (Ex. 31:17; Ac 15:21; 20:7; Rm. 10:17; Ep. 4:11-16).

Therefore, “To keep holy the Sabbath, is not to spend the day in slothfulness and idleness; but to...devote it to the purpose for which God instituted it” (Ibid., 558); “to frequent the public gatherings of the saints for the purpose of hearing and learning the doctrine delivered from heaven [Acts 2:42], and having heard it, to meditate seriously upon it and inquire into its truth [Acts 17:11]” (Ibid., 567). It is our *daily* duty to meditate in Scripture (Ps. 1:2), but “every seventh day has been especially selected for the purpose of supplying what was lacking in daily meditation” (Calvin, Gen. 2:3).

“When God forbids us to work on the Sabbath day, He does not forbid every kind of work [such as works of love, which our own necessity or that of our neighbor requires (Matt. 12:7-12; Mark 2:27)], but only such works as...hinder the worship of God, and the design and use of the ministry of the church” (Ursinus, 558). Some believers work on the Sabbath out of necessity – nurses, public officers, and others. But they can still make time for private devotions and Bible study.

Every commandment has a wider meaning, as Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount. You shall not murder also means you shall not hate your brother in your heart (Matt. 5:21-22). You shall not commit adultery also means you shall not lust after a woman in your heart (Matt. 5:27-28). You shall do no work on the day of rest also means you shall *rest every day* from your evil works, allow the Holy Spirit to work in your heart (by doing your daily Bible reading and prayer), and thus begin in this life the everlasting Sabbath (cf. Heb. 4:9-10).

To sum up [lest we make too sharp a distinction between the “continental” and “puritan” view of the Sabbath]: “The Lord’s Day (Sunday) shall be kept a holy day, devoted to the public worship of the Lord, to reading the Holy Scriptures, to private devotions, and to works of love and mercy” (*RCUS Constitution*, article 180).

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