

ASK ANYTHING (2)

Do I need to keep the Sabbath?

A. Introduction

1. Do I need to keep the Sabbath? Yes or No?

If yes, how do I keep the Sabbath?

Is the Lord's Day the Christian Sabbath?

Is it essential that Christians rest and gather for worship on a Sunday? Could it be on a different day?
Is it acceptable, to worship and rest on different days of the week?

Are there any rules and restrictions about what can or can't be done?

2. We are dealing with a disputable matter.

There are a range of answers to this question, and within each position there is a spectrum of views.

It is even possible for Christians to give different answers and yet how they apply what they believe looks identical to a person who holds a different position to them.

We must not judge other Christians who disagree with us.

"Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters... One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord." (Romans 14:1, 5-6)

We must not harm other Christians who disagree with us.

"Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in your brother's way." (Romans 14:13)

Unlike other disputable matters (like baptism or church leadership) this is not something that as a local church we need to have an official view in order to function well.

We can disagree with one another and still enjoy fellowship and be part of the same local church.

3. Why is it important to ask and answer this question?

If we love Jesus we will keep His commands.

"If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15)

To keep His commands, we need to know what He has commanded, including whether or not He wants us to keep the Sabbath command, and if He does, how He wants us to keep it.

B. A Pattern to Imitate

1. At the end of the creation account, we read that on the seventh day God rested from all His work.

"Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." (Genesis 2:1-3)

Two things this resting communicated:

First, His work as Creator was complete. Second, His joy as Creator at the work He had done.

2. By blessing the seventh day and making it holy, God gave a special purpose for the day.

It was to be a day for people to rest from their work and enjoy being in relationship with God.

In doing so, a pattern of 6 days work and 1 day rest was established.

3. God's intention was for His people, made in His image, to imitate Him, by working for 6 days and resting for 1 day.

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children." (Ephesians 5:1)

C. A Pattern to Obey

1. When the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt they were unable to keep this pattern of 6 days work and 1 day rest.

"But the king of Egypt said, "Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labour? Get back to your work!" Then Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working." (Exodus 5:4-5)

Once God had rescued them, they could imitate Him once more.

"So the people rested on the seventh day." (Exodus 16:30)

At Sinai, the pattern of 6 days of work and 1 day of rest they were to imitate, became a pattern that God's people were specifically to obey.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates." (Exodus 20:8-10)

Did that mean they weren't to obey this pattern prior to the giving of the 10 Commandments? No. The pattern was given for all humanity to follow at creation.

So why then was this command given?

2. To set them apart as God's chosen people.

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6)

The Israelites as they kept the Sabbath, were a holy nation that reflected the God who worked for 6 days and rested for 1.

The Israelites as they kept the Sabbath, were the only nation that reflected the God who worked for 6 days and rested for 1, and so were a kingdom of priests, showing the other nations of the world what God is like.

3. To remind them that the goal of creation and redemption is rest.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:8-11)

God created people to be in a relationship with Him and to enjoy His presence.

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God had commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

God saved people to be in a relationship with Him and to enjoy His presence.

We see this purpose in the instructions the Israelites were given about how to keep the Sabbath.

“There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.” (Leviticus 23:3)

They were to rest – “you are not to do any work”.

They were to gather – “a day of sacred assembly”.

Apart from these two things, we’re not told very much about what they could or could not do on the Sabbath.

4. To show them that they needed Christ to give them this rest.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the LORD who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites for ever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.” (Exodus 31:12-17)

For Israel to have a relationship with God and enjoy His presence, they needed to obey the Law, something they could never perfectly do, which is why God gave them the sacrificial system. This pointed them to their need to trust in Christ, who would keep the law for them and die to pay the penalty for those who break it.

The way Israel demonstrated that they were doing this was by keeping the Sabbath.

Keeping the Sabbath was a way for them to acknowledge their need to trust in Christ who would keep the covenant (summarised in the 10 commandments), so they could enjoy the rest (salvation) He would bring.

5. The Sabbath therefore was a blessing for the people of Israel.

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

It refreshed their bodies.

It showed that they were God’s people – made by Him, saved by Him, set apart by Him.

It pointed them to the Saviour who would give them eternal rest.

However, in the period between the Old and New Testament, lots of extra rules were added, and Israel turned what was meant to be a blessing into a burden.

6. Jesus explained the Sabbath command.

"Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28)

Jesus who was there at the beginning when the pattern was set, who wrote with His own finger and spoke the command that this pattern was to be obeyed, is the rightful interpreter of the Sabbath.

He has the authority to say what can and can't be done on the Sabbath, and He restored the Sabbath to the blessing it was always meant to be.

7. Jesus obeyed and fulfilled the Sabbath command.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Matthew 5:17)

Jesus never transgressed any of the Old Testament laws concerning the Sabbath. If He had, He could not have been the sinless Saviour of the world.

The rules the Pharisees accused Him of breaking were those extra ones added.

By fulfilling the Law, including everything to do with the Sabbath, and dying to pay the penalty law breakers deserve, He can give people rest.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

8. In Jesus, we have kept the Sabbath command, along with every other command.

Now as His saved people, we are to do everything He has commanded.

"If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15)

Does Jesus ask us to keep the Sabbath? Yes, and not just the Sabbath, the whole of the Law.

"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (Matthew 5:18)

All of the Old Testament makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

But how we keep the Law has changed since Christ has now come and God's people are no longer a nation but made up of all nations. So the principles behind all the laws remain, but the specifics of how we keep the laws have changed for some of them.

10. Do we keep the Sabbath command, the same way as Israel did?

Clearly we don't.

"While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp." So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses." (Numbers 15:32-36)

Paul also tells us that now Christ has come we don't need to keep the Sabbath like Israel did.

"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." (Colossians 2:16-17)

How, then, do we keep the Sabbath?

The New Testament teaches us that the primary way we keep the Sabbath is by trusting and continuing to trust in Christ for our rest.

The big concern of the letter of Hebrews, is that we don't give up trusting in Christ and by doing so fail to enter this rest the Sabbath points to.

"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith." (Hebrews 4:1-2)

"It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as we said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience." (Hebrews 4:6-11)

By keeping the Sabbath in this way, the purpose of the Sabbath command remains.

Who are set apart as God's chosen people? Those who trust in Christ.

How do we remember that the goal of creation and redemption is rest? By trusting in Christ.

How do we show that we need Christ to give us rest? By trusting Him.

11. Does that mean we should no longer set aside a day to rest and gather to worship God?

No, because Christ commands us to do these things.

We are to regularly gather with God's people.

"Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:23-25)

We are to imitate God by working for 6 days and resting for 1 day.

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children." (Ephesians 5:1)

Taking a day off to rest and gather with God's people shows that we are trusting in Christ.

Taking a day off to rest and gather with God's people also helps us to keep trusting in Christ.

The New Testament encourages us to gather with God's people every Sunday, but does not command it.

To start with, the early church gathered together every day.

"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people." (Acts 2:46-47)

In due course, these gatherings would take place on the first day of the week, which became known as the Lord's Day in remembrances of Jesus' resurrection.

"On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." (Acts 20:7)

However, the Lord's Day is not the Christian Sabbath.

D. A Pattern to Enjoy

1. For Christians, following this pattern of 6 days work and 1 day rest, is not only a way for us to imitate God and obey Christ, it is also something we should enjoy.

It is a blessing from God for us to have a day off to rest and refresh our bodies.

It is wonderful to gather each week with God's people as a foretaste of the final Sabbath to come, to read God's Word, to hear God's Word preached, to pray God's Word, to sing God's Word, and to see God's Word in baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to encourage one another to keep trusting Jesus.

I think there is an issue when we choose not to rest, or when we choose not to gather with God's people to worship, or make choices that make these things difficult.

[For this reason, while in principle I don't see any issue with playing sport on a Sunday, I do when it stops you from gathering with God's people].

2. Do we have to gather together on a Sunday?

No. We are free to rest and gather on a different day. (In some countries and cultures, churches do just that).

In this country as the majority of churches meet on Sunday, it is wise to try and structure our lives to make that possible.

We are also free to gather more than once a week, like we are free to rest more than one day a week. In fact we are encouraged to gather more frequently.

"But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." (Hebrews 3:13)

3. Do we have to rest and gather together on the same day?

No. Whilst it is beneficial and makes sense if we can, it may not always be possible.

Even though the early Christians met together every Sunday to hear God's Word preached and celebrate the Lord's Supper, it appears that for many in the church, it was not a day of rest.

"When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?... So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment." (1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 33-34)

Most likely, the church would have gathered early Sunday morning before some of its members went to work or Sunday evening after some of its members had finished their day of work.

E. Do I need to keep the Sabbath?

1. Yes.

We keep the Sabbath by trusting and continuing to trust in Christ for our rest. The 10 commandments have not become 9.

2. Does this mean that I shouldn't set aside a day to rest and meet with God's people?

No. Christ tells us to regularly rest and regularly gather with His people. By doing so, we show that we are trusting in Christ and are also helped us to do this.