

Problems in Understanding the Fourth Commandment

There has been a great deal of debate over the fourth commandment:

- First, because the Jewish Sabbath was originally a Saturday. Yet the vast majority of Christians ignore Saturdays and keep Sundays special in varying degrees. Whenever Luke writes of the Sabbath in Acts, he's talking of the Saturday – when Paul entered the synagogue and debated with the Jews it was on a Saturday. In modern Greek Saturday is “*the Sabbath*”ⁱ. It was the same in the ancient Greek in which the NT was written. Today Sunday in modern Greek is “*the Lord's Day*”, making the difference obvious if you're a Greek!
- There's also a disagreement over how this day is to be ‘*set apart*.’ The Puritans were the first to call Sundays “the Christian Sabbath.” They interpreted it quite rigorously. According to them it was made holy:
“when men, after a due preparation of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words and thoughts about their worldly enjoyments and recreations, but also are to be taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of worship, and also in the duties of necessity and mercy.” (Westminster Confession of Faith. 21.8)
- The problems arise when you try and put that sort of theology into practice. I've heard Christians debate whether knitting was forbidden. Or should we use electricity if using lights means others have to work on Sundays? One generation of Christians never used the radio, only read. Another generation used the radio, but not the TV. And in different cultures you'll find widely differing interpretations – especially if you attend an international Christian event held over a weekend.
- Then there is the fact that we don't generally enforce the rules that enlarged upon this commandment. We don't forbid the lighting of fires, or press for the stoning of people who break this commandment. But why not?
- Then there is the question as to how widely this commandment applies in a diverse society. Should we press for shops to be closed on Sundays? Should Christians avoid taking up a certain sport when fixtures regularly occur on Sundays? Does the fact that this is the last of the God-ward commandments and in a sense the middle one mean that it also has a man-ward, social reference for our benefit as being “*made for man*,” as Jesus said.ⁱⁱ

As you can see, there are lots of questions (Taken from introduction to sermon on the 4th Commandment).

ⁱ “Saturday is *the Sabbath*” (τον Σαββατον) and Sunday is “*the Lord's Day*” (Η κυριακε)

ⁱⁱ **Mark 2:27 NKJV** And He said to them, “**The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.**”