

4. The Fourth Commandment

Exodus 20:8-11 -- "Remember the day of rest (or, Sabbath) to consecrate it. Six days you shall work and do all your business (or, labor). But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall do no business (or, labor) in it, neither your son or your daughter, your servant or your handmaid, or your cattle or your sojourner who is within your gates. Because six days the Lord made the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it."

a. The Purpose of the Sabbath

(1) Cessation of work

The Hebrew word שָׁבַט means "to cease, cease working, rest."

But what does "work" include? And what does "rest" include?

The word "work" is defined by the dictionary in a more specific and a more general manner. In the more specific sense, work is "the labor, task, or duty that affords one his or her accustomed means of livelihood," or "labor exerted in connection with one's occupation." In this more specific sense are included all forms of occupation which involve an exchange of labor for remuneration which can be used to purchase food, clothing, shelter, transportation, medical care, etc., as well as all activities connected with the actual provision of food, clothing, shelter, etc. Thus "work" includes the occupation of homemaker. In this sense, the children of Israel were to carry on their occupations during six days, but to cease from their occupations on the seventh. Some exceptions are necessary; for example, if a dairy farmer had ceased milking his cows on the Sabbath, or a homemaker had ceased all of her activities on the Sabbath, some serious results would have followed. Other qualifications are necessary because of the other purposes of the Sabbath, but the general principle stands.

In the more general sense, work is defined as "activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something." This meaning includes labor exerted in connection with one's occupation and labor not related to one's occupation. In this general sense any form of physical or mental or emotional or spiritual exertion not connected with one's occupation is work. This includes walking for exercise, jogging, doing calisthenics, playing golf, doing a large jigsaw puzzle, playing chess, carrying groceries or luggage, moving furniture, fixing a broken lamp, listening to someone's problems, visiting a sick person, bringing a meal to a shut-in, entertaining guests, giving a dinner party, attending the services of the church, preparing a Sunday school lesson (and giving it), and preaching!

Failure to recognize this important distinction between work in the more general sense and work in the more specific sense of occupational labor characterized the rabbis of Jesus' day, and led them into all kinds of burdensome and absurd legalisms.

The Mishnah, in the tractate Shabbath, includes many regulations that illustrate this system of legalisms, plus a number that simply attempt to apply the Fourth Commandment to various kinds of occupational work.