

# Should Christians Observe the Sabbath?

Unedited Notes Used to Record the Podcast Episode

## What is the Sabbath?

- The Sabbath in the Old Testament.
- The Sabbath is a day of “solemn rest” or a day of rest. It is first introduced as such in Exodus 16:23.
- The Hebrew word here, sabbat, referred to two possible things: the day of rest instituted by God at the end of the week or the sabbatical year (notice the Hebrew root sabbat in the word sabbatical).
- The Sabbatical year was a similar idea to the Sabbath in which the land would be left fallow so it could rest, slaves/bondservants would be let free, debts would be removed, and the law would be read aloud at the feast of Tabernacles.
- These two ideas are important to understand and differentiate in order to exegete the New Testament texts on the Sabbath.

## The purpose of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was to be a day of complete rest. It was very important throughout the Old Testament, not only under the Sinaitic Covenant.

We see the principle was followed even by God in the account of creation in Genesis 1. He created for 6 days and then spent the 7th day resting. Because we are expected to work hard and labor during the week, God saw that it was fit to institute a law requiring rest on specifically the 7th day of the week.

## What does the New Testament teach about the Sabbath?

We could answer this by talking specifically about the New Testament understanding of the law. But I want to just go straight to the texts since there are more than a handful clear passages specifically addressing the Sabbath in the New Testament church.

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## Colossians 2:16–17 CSB

“Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.”

This text is extremely clear, but I’m going to do my best to exegete this passage because of some naysayers who claim that the word ‘Sabbath’ here does not truly refer to the weekly Sabbath.

One of the most important questions we need to ask: “How would the original audience have understood this?”

The original audience of this book was the church at Colossae. The textual and historical evidence leaves little doubt that this church was primarily Gentile converts (meaning they were not ever Jews). As Gentiles, the term Sabbath would have likely not been foreign to them. They would have understood it at least in the most common use, which was clearly to refer to the day of the week. Moreover, any Jewish readers would more likely have understood it as referring either only to the day of the week (since that was the most common usage) or to both the Sabbath day and Sabbatical Year.

However, the text doesn’t leave much question about what he is referring to. He lists festivals and new moons as well, and the Sabbath.

Note: many English translations of this passage specifically say “Sabbath day”. This is not necessarily reflected in the Greek which just says the word “σαββάτον”. The inclusion of the word day in English is an interpretive decision that translators make for clarity, but it is not necessary that it be included.

Regardless, the interpretive decision made by those translators seems to be a fairly obvious one. Which is why good, reliable translation teams have made that decision. The original audience and the context both clearly point to the fact that this is referring to the Sabbath day, the weekly rest.

How can anyone think otherwise? Well simply, you can only come to another conclusion by interpreting your theology onto the text. You can only do it by doing what students of the Bible call eisegesis. And it is a completely improper way to handle it. The Bible informs our theology down to its roots, our presuppositions do not inform our exegesis. But let’s move on.

What does Paul say about Sabbath in this passage? He says that we should not be judged for not keeping the Sabbath day. Why? Because it was only a shadow of Christ. The Sabbath was only a picture of the rest our souls find in Christ. Christ is superior.

You know what? Another passage in the NT Makes this exact point.

Hebrews 4:4–11 CSB

“For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in this way: And on the seventh day God rested from all his works. Again, in that passage he says, They will never enter my rest.

Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news did not enter because of disobedience, he again specifies a certain day—today. He specified this speaking through David after such a long time:

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.

Therefore, a Sabbath rest remains for God’s people. For the person who has entered his rest has rested from his own works, just as God did from his. Let us then make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall into the same pattern of disobedience.”

The book of Hebrews is written like a homily, a sermon and the content explains the New Covenant and its relationship to the Old Covenant. It was also written to a church, but we have less detail about the author and original audience than we do other NT books.

One of the main points that Hebrews makes over and over, chapter after chapter is that Christ is superior to everything.

He is superior to the angels. He is the superior prophet, priest, and king. He is the superior sacrifice. And in this chapter we see the argument that Christ is the superior rest.

Does a Sabbath rest remain for us? Did God nullify the Sabbath? No he did not.

A Sabbath rest remains for God’s people. Who does the text say it is? Christ Jesus! Every person who has entered the rest of Christ already has rested from his works! This is just quoting the Bible.

Christ is our Sabbath. He is our rest.

The author of Hebrews and Paul both make the point very clear that we do not have to observe the Sabbath tradition. Paul in Colossians even says not to allow anyone to judge you for not observing it! But Paul gets even more explicit than this about this point.

Romans 14:1–10 CSB

“Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don’t argue about disputed matters. One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him. Who are you to judge another’s household servant? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind. Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and returned to life for this: that he might be Lord over both the dead and the living. But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

In this passage, Paul does not specifically say the word Sabbath. And I’m not going to labor as deeply in exegesis as I have in the previous passages. It’s pretty clear that Paul here is referring to the concept of the Sabbath. Talking about it as a ‘day’ and observing it is the language which would refer to the Sabbath.

The audience possibly is a little different than Colossians. There’s not as much known about the Roman church, but it seems to be “first to the Jews” and “also to the Greeks”. Historical evidence also points to the fact that there was likely a large number of Hellenists here who would have previously been Jews and understood the context. Nevertheless, they would have understood clearly that this is referring to the Sabbath Day.

In fact, this audience is probably the reason why Paul includes this. Because this church was a mixture of Hellenists and Gentiles, there was likely disagreement about the Sabbath as the Hellenists would have been accustomed to following it and the Greeks would not.

Paul tells them that they should not look down on one another for choosing to observe the day or to not observe the day. Paul says that every day should be observed as holy. However, he has a command that we should not judge one another according to this issue.

This brings up an important point: Those who observe the Sabbath are not in sin for doing so. It isn't wrong for people to choose to take the 7th day off. However, it is sinful for them to judge their brothers and sisters for not doing the same as them. This is crystal clear in the text.

## Addressing Naysayers

I don't want to spend the whole time on defense since God's word is clear enough to defend itself, but I do want to mention a few Sabbatarian arguments and discuss them biblically

For many who hold to Thomas Aquinas' tripartite division of the law, the main question is whether or not the Sabbath should be identified as ceremonial, civil, or moral law. Sabbatarians would identify it as moral law which would still be binding on the Christian.

I'm not going to say whether or not I hold that particular understanding of the division of the law, but I do think that if it is true, these passages make it pretty clear that it should be classified as ceremonial law.

Second, I want to look at a text I've seen used multiple times to defend the continual observance of the Sabbath. In my experience, this text has been the most frequently cited in Sabbatarian discourse.

It comes from our Lord Jesus Christ in his famous Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:17–20 CSB

“Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”

What an amazing passage in an amazing sermon! Jesus is teaching here on how Christians are to relate to the law. He fulfilled the law without abolishing it. What does this mean?

To fulfill the law means that he has satisfied its demands for those who are in Christ. The law has no right to condemn the believer because Jesus came and fulfilled its obligations in our place.

Is the law abolished then? No, absolutely not! Jesus is clear that the law still exists. In fact, one of the themes of Jesus' entire message here is that the law could not get to the heart, but God judges the heart. You see this when he says that simply being angry with his brother or sister has murdered in their heart. Or that whoever lusts after a woman has committed adultery with her in his heart.

The question that must be asked... The question that I believe is neglected by Sabbatarians in this passage is this: What purpose does the law serve under the New Covenant?

The New Testament goes into great detail about the purpose of the law! For the sake of time, I don't want to go in depth with this point. There are many, many opinions from just about every tradition about the continual purpose of the law in the NT church. We simply don't have the time to do what could be an entire podcast episode in itself.

Note however: the passage says "the law or the prophets". This was the common phrase to refer to what we know as the Old Testament. The Law was the term for the first 5 books of the Old Testament: the Pentateuch. I think it's exegetically influential that Christ is referring to the books of Moses in this instance inasmuch or more than he is referring to the concept of the Law itself. He was the fulfillment of the law and prophets because he is the truer and greater version of every promise, every prophecy within them.

This would also likely be referring to the concept of the law, but the question here could best be interpreted in context regarding the heart. Are we obeying the Sabbath command? Absolutely because we are in Christ. This is the teaching of the NT. Those who hold to the Tripartite division might convey this differently, but the essence boils down to realizing that we have the fulfilled rest in Christ.

## Concluding Thoughts

The great reformer and theologian John Calvin (easily one of the most influential theologians in the history of the church) summarizes how we as Christians can observe the Sabbath in a NT way as it has been fulfilled in Christ.

“First, that during our whole lives we may aim at a constant rest from our own works, in order that the Lord may work in us by his Spirit; secondly that every individual, as he has opportunity, may diligently exercise himself in private, in pious meditation on the works of God, and, at the same time, that all may observe the legitimate order appointed by the Church, for the hearing of the word, the administration of the sacraments, and public prayer: And, thirdly, that we may avoid oppressing those who are subject to us.” - John Calvin