

# Weekly Encouragement

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

## Voluntary Bondage

By Peter Eng

Photo Courtesy of Eugene Foong



“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” Jesus declared ([Matt 12:8](#); [Lk 6:5](#)).

This assertion came when Jesus and his disciples were charged with not keeping the Sabbath laws according to Jewish customs. Jesus reminded them he was the one who gave them the Sabbath law in the first place. They got it wrong. Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath will explain to them what Sabbath means.

The religious Jews had become legalistic, and were engaged in specious debates about what can or cannot be done on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had a saying that they needed to build a fence around the law so they will not transgress it. This sounds reasonable enough. But when they set up a fence around God’s law, they created a law of their own. In effect, they were saying that God’s law is not good enough and they can do a better job in writing law.

The Jewish legalism concerning the Sabbath remains an issue with a minority of Christians.

The struggle most Christians have with the Sabbath is not legalism but libertinism (the neglect of the day of rest).

First we clarify the misconception that “Sabbath Day” means “Seventh Day.” The Hebrew word means “REST Day.” Sabbath means “rest” and not “seventh.” The Day of Rest (Sabbath) was assigned to the seventh day of the week (i.e. Saturday). This caused some people to mistakenly associate “Sabbath” with “Seventh.” We need to point out the mistake of some who fixate on the seventh day by clarifying that the meaning and the foundational precept of Sabbath Day is Rest Day and not Seventh Day. The Rest Day was assigned to the seventh day, but the command was to keep the Rest (Sabbath) Day holy, which was identified as the seventh day for the Jews.

“The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath.” This means, “The God who is now man gave you the laws concerning the Sabbath.” What an irony that the recipients of the law should tell the giver of the law what the law means! Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He tells us the true meaning of the law; and he is above the law but he keeps it. He has the authority to do what he wants with the law.

This assertion lays the premise for the assignment of the Rest Day to the first day of the week (Sunday). It is interesting that the Bible consistently calls Sunday the “Lord’s Day.” This was due in part to the resurrection of Christ on Sunday. It was also an assertion that the Lord of the Sabbath (Rest), on account of his resurrection which looks to the final rest in everlasting life has renewed the covenant with Sunday as the day of rest.

Some people get too carried away with the seventh day as the proper day of rest, that they forget the Sabbath Day is primarily the REST Day, which was specified to be the seventh day for national Israel. Let's assume that God created the world in six 24 hour days, and rested on the seventh 24 hour day (Saturday). What should we do? Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day (Friday), and that is Adam's first day. The seventh day would then be Thursday. (Friday = 1<sup>st</sup> day; Saturday = 2<sup>nd</sup> day; Sunday = 3<sup>rd</sup> day; Monday = 4<sup>th</sup> day; Tuesday = 5<sup>th</sup> day; Wednesday = 6<sup>th</sup> day; Thursday = 7<sup>th</sup> day.) While God's seventh day may be Saturday, our seventh day is Thursday!

I hope you will forgive me for being pedantic. But I am trying to show how a fixation on the seventh works – or doesn't work.

If the argument is that we need to follow God's seventh day supposedly Saturday, we have a different problem in pedantry. God stopped creating after six days and he rested on the seventh day, and that seventh day extends to now. God's seventh day is from the end of creation to the indeterminate future. How do we follow God's seventh day rest? Work six days and rest the remainder of our life? Is it not the principle of work with rest that is the pattern exemplified to us?

There is little dispute that the early Christians worshipped and rested on the Lord's Day (Sunday); but some mistakenly identify it as Saturday.

Let's return to the main issue as Jesus would, and not become distracted by the legalism of the Jews or the continuing legalism of the Seventh-Day advocates. This is because we seem to have gone the opposite direction of taking too many liberties with the law concerning the day of rest (libertinism). When God gave the command to "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" it was a command to deliver us from bondage. Let's roll back the clock to understand this.

Before God gave the Ten Commandments as a covenant stipulation to the Jews, they were slaves working seven days a week. But slaves were not the only ones working seven days a week. Everybody was working seven days a week. The whole world was in the bondage to

work. Then came the Fourth Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy."

Commands are normally seen as rules that constrain certain actions. But God's laws are liberating. It liberated the Jews, and then the Christians, and then the world, from our slavish bondage to work. Now we can say, "God says I am to rest one day in seven. I am not being lazy, I am just obeying God!"

"I work 60 hours a week," says a tired looking co-worker. Another will reply, "If I work only 60 hours, that is a good week." One person says, "I have so much to do, I get only six hours of sleep." "Six hours!" comes the reply, "That would be a luxury for me!"

We love to work. We may lament work. We may fight for more leave days. We may even steal a little personal time from our work time. But we love to be seen as overworking. It conveys all sorts of messages to our boss, our co-workers and our family. Most of it scratches that infernal itch we have to do more work.

We need permission to rest. The fall of man condemns us to live by the sweat of our brow. It ties our self-worth to what we do. The more we do, the better we feel about ourselves. Then God steps in. He tells us to "Remember the Sabbath (Rest) day to keep it holy." The command to rest one day in seventh is a command that frees us.

It is, therefore, remarkable that the Jews turned it into a burden. The Mishnah, (the Jewish equivalent of the Christian New Testament), has an entire division called the *MOED* (set feasts). It regulates the Sabbath and other holy days, and enters into extensive discourse on what should be done on those days.

The *MOED* represents a pull-back from the days of Jesus, in part, as a result of criticism from the early Christians (who were also Jews). Though the majority of the Jews rejected Christ, they tried to balance their extremism as a result of valid Christian objection.

The sad thing about where Christians have been heading over recent decades is that we have become Libertines rather than Legalists. We are at the other end of the pendulum. We are so loose on what it means to keep the Sabbath that

we only look for ways to laugh at the Jews when we ourselves have swung to the other extreme. Many Christians simply don't keep the Sabbath at all!

Let's remember that the Sabbath day is about our freedom to rest.

Our desire for success, or to get ahead in life is so compelling that we will sacrifice our rest.

The Japanese used to be a nation of workaholics. In order to best the Japanese, the Koreans work even harder. And in many areas, they have surpassed the Japanese – including their suicide rate. Singapore today hardly misses a beat on Sunday, and we just keep bustling on. It is the same in America.

There is a country that stands out as different (that I know), and that is Germany. Most stores are closed on Sundays. While the Germans do not worship on Sundays, they rest. Yet Germany remains the industrial and economic powerhouse of Europe. It is hard to prove empirically that resting one day in seven increased their productivity, but there can be no argument that resting one day in seven has not decreased their productivity.

This image seems to duplicate the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. When they went out to gather on the Sabbath they got nothing. When they compensate for the day of rest as instructed, they received a blessing. When they tried to overcompensate for the Sabbath, they also had nothing more. They experienced a zero sum gain when they tried to work on the Sabbath, and a zero sum loss when they kept the Sabbath.

Christians in Singapore tend to excuse ourselves with all types of reasons why we can disobey God on keeping the Sabbath. Make no mistake about it. We are only making excuses for our own bondage and the bondage of those over whom we have authority.

We should avoid the niggardly meanness of telling everyone how to keep the Sabbath. But the greater danger in our day is that we subject ourselves to the voluntary bondage of work without rest.

Let us learn the unhurried life of Jesus. Jesus our Lord accomplished more than any other person in human history. If he is our Lord, should he not also be the Lord of our Sabbath?

Sabbath rest is powerful. It looks to the past in creation, and it looks to the future in the new heaven and the new earth when we shall enter that perfect rest that God has prepared for us. Our Sabbath is the appetizer of the Sabbath to come ([Heb 4:11](#)).

Enjoy it!

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