

So the Bible says to “keep holy the sabbath”. How do I do that? Is it a sin to do any work at all?

Great question. We owe the very foundations of our faith to our Jewish roots. We have inherited the Ten Commandments from our “older brothers and sisters” in Abraham (the Jewish people). As a part of that deposit of faith, we find the command to “keep holy the Sabbath”.

In ancient Israel, and for modern Jews, the Sabbath is technically the time from sundown on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday evening. The word originates from the Hebrew word “Shavat” which means “ceasing from work”. From its beginnings, it has always been a day consecrated to God and observed through Worship and Rest.

Those are always the two main pieces of observing the Sabbath. But before we go any further, it will help us to understand that to keep a thing “holy” meant to keep it “separate” or “set aside for God” in ancient times. This seems to hint at the reality that the Sabbath is going to be different than the rest of the week. What will make it different? Well, basically, it is the Worship and the Rest.

This command was given (with the other nine Big Ones) after the Hebrews were set free from slavery in Egypt. This is critical. As a sign that they were no longer slaves, and were entering into a new phase of their relationship with God, they were given the Law. That might not make sense to us: they were set free and therefore given the Law? That sounds more binding than freeing.

But consider this: all the Hebrews knew was slavery. They did not know what it was to be free. So they are given a Sabbath: a command to take a day each week to live differently...to celebrate the fact that they were no longer slaves (therefore no work) and they were God’s People (therefore they were allowed to worship Him as His People).

So we see, the Worship and the Rest comes from the fact that they had been brought into a new relationship with God and a new life completely. Both Worship and Rest are essential means of “keeping the Sabbath holy”.

In Christianity, we celebrate our new relationship and new life with God on Sunday. When Jesus was about to be given up to death, He made a new covenant in His own blood. This new covenant fulfilled all of the old covenants and brought us into an entirely new relationship with God. When Jesus rose from the dead, he not only conquered sin and death, but He also made it possible for us to truly become sons and daughters of God. Think about it: a new relationship with God and a new life on this earth. This is a “new Exodus” for all who want to know true freedom in God.

Because of this, we not only keep the Sabbath on Sunday (the day the Lord set us free), but we also keep the day holy through Worship and Rest. The Worship is the prayer Jesus commanded at the Last Supper (the Mass) and the Rest is you and me living like free men and women.

This means avoiding any unnecessary work. The Church makes it clear that those who provide care to others (health care workers for example) have a duty, in Christian charity, to perform their work so that others may experience God's love through them. Further, if the individual who supports the family has a job that forces them to work on Sunday, they ought to attempt to arrange their schedule in such a way that they don't have to work on Sunday.

If they can't make those arrangements, they have a duty to support their family by going to work. See how the Church teaches that charity "trumps" the Sunday obligation to rest?

Working in the garden, building a shed, or tinkering with your car are not necessarily "work". They might be opportunities for you to do what feeds your soul. These things might be opportunities to live as a free person and not as a slave to your "real job".

Lastly, many students will ask me if "keeping the Sabbath holy" means that they can't do any schoolwork on Sunday. Not necessarily. One priest I know recommends that students give what they can. He asks that they do no schoolwork from Saturday evening until after Mass on Sunday (around noon). While not a perfect solution, it is a start to training oneself to live as a free child of God and no longer as a slave to work.