

“The Christian Holy-day” (The Fourth Commandment)

Ten Commandments Series, No. 5

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-28

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I’ve chosen to read the 4th commandment from Deuteronomy 5 rather than from Exodus 20 because, the 4th is the first commandment that is modified somewhat in the second rendition of the Ten Commandments. And I’ve chosen to add perhaps the most important statement regarding the Sabbath to be found in the New Testament, the more arresting because it comes from the mouth of the Lord Jesus himself. It supplies that perspective on the meaning of the Sabbath day that has so often been lost by God’s people through the ages.

Text Comment

- v.15 You will notice that the rationale has changed from the version of this commandment found in Exodus 20. There we are to keep the seventh day holy because it was the day on which God rested from his work of creation. Here the reason for keeping the Sabbath holy is Israel’s redemption from bondage in Egypt. There is much to be said about this, but we have time only to observe that there are several reasons to honor the Lord’s Day. The Exodus 20 rationale is by no means forgotten in the Bible’s exposition of Sabbath sanctification; it appears, for example, in Hebrews 4 to remind us that God’s rest after creation and our eternal rest in heaven are related to one another.

Mark 2:24

It is hard for Christian people of our Western culture, for whom the Lord’s Day is more and more a matter of indifference, to appreciate how important the Sabbath was to the Jews in the first century. Together with circumcision it was the defining feature of their self-identity and of their spiritual culture. It was what most plainly distinguished them from other people. The fourth commandment is the longest of the ten, the only one in which we are commanded actually to imitate God himself, as we are in the version of the commandment found in Exodus 20. They noticed that the fourth commandment received special attention and emphasis. By this time, the rabbis had developed an extensive and elaborate concept of Sabbath observance. They had developed a long list of regulations including some 39 classes of work forbidden on the Lord’s Day. Plowing and hunting we might have expected; perhaps not so much tying or loosening knots, writing more than one letter, or taking anything from one place to another. The rabbis’ intention was to leave nothing to chance, to anticipate every conceivable question. In this way no one would violate this very important commandment unknowingly. The sweeping regulation of Sabbath observance at this time is reflected in the ruling that if a building fell down on the Sabbath enough rubble could be removed to determine if those buried in the rubble were alive or dead. Those alive could be rescued. The corpses of the dead must be left until the Sabbath was over. [*m. Yoma* 8:7] Further, it was unlawful to set a dislocated foot on the Sabbath because the injury was not life-threatening and so the work was not absolutely necessary. The Sectarians at Qumran had, if possible, a still more rigorous

approach to Sabbath keeping: forbidding the carrying of children, giving help to birthing animals, or the retrieval of an animal that had fallen into a pit. [CD 10-11] The Pharisees' objection must be understood against this backdrop of a very serious commitment to Sabbath-keeping, seen in terms of a rigid determination to avoid *anything* that might be regarded as the work forbidden to be done on the Lord's Day. It was a typically wooden concept of obedience, a concept that, as the Lord took pains to show, largely missed the point of the commandment.

In this case the Pharisees apparently objected to the Lord's behavior with his disciples in precisely this respect: they were doing work, work that was forbidden on the Sabbath. First, and explicitly, the disciples were "reaping," a category of work forbidden on the Sabbath by the Law of Moses (Ex. 31:13-17) and then still further regulated by the rabbis. Taking a small amount of grain from a neighbor's field was, in fact, explicitly permitted by the Law of Moses, it was not regarded as reaping but, according to the rabbis, not to be done on the Sabbath day. The Law of Moses didn't say this, but the rabbis understood the obligation in this way.

The fourth commandment is unusual among the Ten for being the only one that large numbers of Christians believe no longer applies to them or, if it does apply, applies in a very different way than it applied to believers in the ancient epoch. We know we must not steal, must not commit adultery, must not lie, and must honor our parents; but many are not persuaded they are still required to observe the Sabbath Day. That makes every discussion of the commandment more complicated.

I have preached on the obligation of the Sabbath day many times in past years, have even preached a series of sermons – six in all – on the Sabbath: why it is still to be kept holy by Christians today and how that is to be done. The subject is far too large for a single sermon and so I have decided this morning to take a different tack. Into the 19th century a typical method of higher education and in particular theological higher education was the *disputatio*. University students studying a certain subject would gather to hear *disputationes*. This is the way it was done. The student presenting his *disputatio* would reduce his subject – say, the tri-unity of God or the obligation of Sabbath observance – to a number of propositions, statements of one or two sentences. That exercise itself required a great deal of study and careful thought. How many statements do you need fully to state a particular biblical doctrine? And which statements? These propositions together, in the student's mind, amounted to the biblical teaching on that subject. The university printer would print up these propositions in pamphlet form and this would be handed to the class as they appeared for the public presentation and defense. I met a professor at the Free University of Amsterdam whose hobby was collecting copies of 17th century theological *disputationes*. Once the class had gathered, the presenting student would provide the argument and evidence for each proposition, defend it against counter-arguments, and so on. Both professors and students would then grill him with their own questions or objections. Some famous works of Reformed theology, for example, are simply those *disputationes*, polished by the professor and published with all the argumentation. For example, the *Leiden Synopsis*, a much used 17th century manual of theology, has 52 chapters or *disputationes*, each of them originally a class disputation. Each chapter begins with the name of the student who presented

that particular *disputatio* and the name of the professor who presided. The professor, of course, was responsible for the final published form of the argument.

Well, to save time, I'm going to present you with the biblical doctrine of the Sabbath Day in the form of a *disputatio*, a series of propositions that together summarize the biblical teaching with only a little bit of explanation and argument for each proposition. Not all the possible propositions to be sure, but the most important ones. In this way I can cover the ground without keeping you here for the next three or four hours. As I begin, let me assure you that I am confident that I can defend each of these statements biblically, have often done so, though I am fully aware that there are good men, capable scholars who will disagree with any number of these statements. I've read their arguments and remain unpersuaded.

Proposition No. 1: From the beginning of human life in the world God divided time between work and rest. That is, six days of work and a day of rest is an ordinance of creation, as are, for example, marriage and family. It is God's intention for the life of mankind.

This explains, for example, why the rhythm of work and rest is a feature of all human life. Every human culture stipulates both work days and holidays, though, as we expect in a fallen world, the relationship between them has often been corrupted. But this also means that its obligation is perpetual and would not and could not be abrogated at some later time, any more than marriage or family could be abolished in human life. This is fundamental. If you accept that the Sabbath day is God's plan for human life from the very beginning, the popular notion among Christians that the obligation to observe the Sabbath ended with the New Testament immediately becomes highly unlikely.

Proposition No. 2: To sanctify the seventh day, as the Lord did at the creation and as we are to do in keeping the day holy, means to set it apart for sacred use. That is what sanctification means in the Bible, to set things or people apart for sacred purposes. That is, the purpose of our resting from work is not only that we may be refreshed after the hard work of the week, but that we may be free to do other things.

Those other things are mentioned or illustrated throughout the Bible: public worship supremely, but also fellowship, and ministry to others. It remains *the Lord's Day*, not simply a day on which to please ourselves. To cut to the chase: to sanctify the day is *not* to spend the entire afternoon taking a nap! It is made for man, as the Lord said, but it remains *the Lord's Day*.

Proposition No. 3: the Sabbath Day was always to be and should be for Christians today a holiday, a happy day, the best day of the week, a day we are glad to see coming, a day we are sad to see going. If we regard the observance of the day as a burden we have either misunderstood its obligation or have hard hearts that take no pleasure in the things of God and prefer the things of this world.

This has been a chronic problem from biblical times to our own day, an overly negative and restrictive understanding of Sabbath observance. As I have often reminded you, there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that God ever intended Laura Ingalls Wilder to sit on a straight back chair

and recite the catechism all Sunday afternoon when the outdoors were beckoning her to run and play. To make the Sabbath something that we must *endure* is to despise God's gifts.

It was a fateful error in exegesis when the Puritans took the phrases in Isaiah 58 – “doing your own pleasure” and “going your own ways” – to mean doing things that would be appropriate on the other six days of the week but not on the Lord's Day. In the language of the prophets and in the context of Isaiah the meaning of both those phrases, and very clearly, is not doing things proper in themselves but improper on the Lord's day, but doing *sinful* things, sinful on any day of the week. A proper understanding of that text leaves without any biblical support the sweeping statement in the *Westminster Catechisms* that on the Lord's Day are forbidden “all needless works, words, and thoughts about those worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful.” That is a view very much more restrictive than anything said in the Bible and has for long years created an overly negative and discouraging view of what it means to keep the Lord's Day holy.

It was also a serious mistake, made by a number of our theological authorities in earlier times, to understand the execution of the man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath day as a demonstration of how severely God condemned virtually any activity on the Sabbath, as if in the OT any transgression of the commandment against work was to be met with draconian punishment. No wonder the rabbis thought, “We'd better be really careful, we'd better define exactly what work amounts to lest the same punishment overtake us.” In fact, that incident in Numbers 15 was very like the execution of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Both were examples of defiant sins committed at a time the Lord's presence was powerfully experienced by the people of God and so amounted to a direct repudiation of the authority of God. Both were cases of church people thumbing their noses at God. Happening so soon after great events in the history of redemption both events served as perpetual warnings to the church to revere the Lord and obey his Word. It was no more a promise that any amount of activity done on the Sabbath would be met with divine vengeance than the execution of Ananias and Sapphira meant that the Lord would never forgive one of his children who was short on his tithe. In Numbers 15 the man serves as an example of a defiant or high-handed sinner, the kind of sin we would refer to today as apostasy, the punishment of which had just been described in the previous sentences. The man was not picking up sticks to warm his family on a cold Sabbath day; he was preparing publicly to work at his trade in defiance of the just published will of God. *It was never God's will that the Sabbath be kept even if it meant a family shivering its way through the Lord's Day!*

Proposition No. 4: In both the Mosaic Law and the practice of the OT saints, the Sabbath was regarded as God's gift to his people. A time to remember their Creator and Redeemer, to fellowship with him and with one another, and to serve others in his name.

In Isaiah 58, for example, God's people were urged to “delight” in God's holy day. It was then, as it is now, one of the principal engines of the life of faith, a day for worship, for time spent with other believers, and a day that afforded time to practice one's faith whether privately in communion with God or outwardly in the service of others. For this reason, in the Bible as in church history, the church's prosperity and her faithfulness to the Sabbath day have gone hand in hand, risen or fallen together. As one older writer put it, “No Sabbath, no religion.” [A. Green in

Gaffin, “Westminster and the Sabbath,” *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, vol. 1, 128]

Proposition No. 5: The nature of Sabbath obligation has not changed in the new epoch introduced by Christ and his apostles; only the day of the week has changed on which the Sabbath is to be observed.

While there have been a few Christians who have argued that the work of Christ made the fourth commandment obsolete in its entirety, there have been many more who have thought that, in one way or another, the requirements of the ancient commandment have simply been relaxed. It is very hard for any honest reader of the Bible to imagine that one of the Ten Commandments would simply have disappeared; that now there would be just nine! Much of the motivation for their view that Sabbath sanctification has changed substantially comes from their mistaken belief that in the ancient epoch the obligations imposed by the 4th commandment were so severe and so oppressive that it was only natural that the Lord would relax them! Many, including a number in our own PCA, argue that all that is left of the 4th commandment is that it is to be the day of the church’s worship. *But this is never taught anywhere in the NT.* Jesus explicitly provided for the abrogation of the OT dietary regulations that distinguished between clean and unclean foods, declaring all foods to be clean. [Mark 7:19] But he said no such thing about the 4th commandment.

Indeed, he taught that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, that it was for man’s boon not his bane, for his blessing not to make his life more difficult, and he made that remark in reply to criticism from the Pharisees who believed that Jesus was not requiring of his disciples a proper strictness in Sabbath observance. Indeed, he said plainly that in their strictness they had badly misunderstood what the 4th commandment actually requires. Would our Savior take away from us one of God’s great blessings? As always with the Pharisees, his argument *was not* that they *used to be* right, but that things had now changed. His argument was that they didn’t understand their own Bible. After all, it would have been a small thing for him to have had his disciples prepare a snack beforehand so that plucking grain would have been unnecessary. But the Lord’s point was that the law never forbade what his disciples had done in plucking grain on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was never intended to make people’s lives more difficult, but to make them easier, better, and happier. Keeping the Sabbath shouldn’t be difficult; it should be natural!

All the changes made to accommodate the influx of Gentiles into the church – from circumcision to baptism, from a Jewish diet to a Gentile one, from sacrifice to Lord’s Supper, and from the Saturday Sabbath to the Sunday Lord’s Day – were controversial. The Jewish Christians were loath to surrender the most precious and important features of their religious identity. This was the context of Paul’s remarks about the observance of days in Romans and Colossians. He hardly can be taken to mean that he was removing one of the Ten Commandments from the number! The Jewish Christians were happy to observe Sunday in honor of the Lord’s resurrection, but they also wanted the Gentiles to observe Saturday as they had observed it for more than 1,000 years! They wanted them to do that in the same way they wanted them to be circumcised. *They were happy to be baptized as Christians – add whatever you wish – just don’t take circumcision, don’t take Saturday from our lives.* That was the issue: the Mosaic form of the

Law, not the Law itself. People forget that there remains a Lord's Day in the New Testament, of which we read in Rev. 1, and that "Lord's Day" is simply one of the OT names for the Sabbath.

In any case, as we are told in Hebrews 4, the Sabbath is a sign of our future rest in heaven, not of some spiritual rest that believers now have that they did not have in the days of the Old Testament. There, if we follow the author's argument, we gather that the Sabbath continues as a sign of God's own rest, into which he entered when he finished creating the world, the rest into which believers will someday themselves enter at the consummation. The Sabbath is thus an eschatological sign of heaven, grounded in creation and continuing until the consummation. [Gaffin, 137] By observing the Sabbath Christians are publicly demonstrating their belief in heaven and that their lives are a pilgrimage from this world to God's rest.

In any case, we must not forget that if we remove the 4th commandment from the Ten or gut its obligations, we lose the right to insist on the biblical rhythm of work and rest. I've noticed in my conversations with other Reformed men on this point that though they will piously say that now in the New Testament era Christ is their rest, they still want a day off (or two) each week; usually two! If Christ is now their rest, shouldn't they work all seven days?

Proposition No. 6: the biblical Sabbath day is a mighty witness to the truth that man does not live by bread alone.

It is the very existence of the Lord's Day that illustrates the reality of the life of the soul, of the necessity of communion with God in the company of the saints, and of the love of God who cares for and provides for his people. It is not enough to work hard, make money, and enjoy the fruits of one's labor. Life is more than the accumulation of or the enjoyment of the things of this world. Human welfare and happiness require much more than eating, drinking, and being merry, much more than success in one's daily labor, much more than the satisfaction of a job well done. Human beings require God's presence and blessing in their lives. They need to worship and serve God to live life as it ought to be lived.

Proposition No. 7: in light of the general lack of specific directions for Sabbath keeping, Christians are left to sanctify the day according to the general principles so far mentioned: its being the Lord's holy day, its being a day of rest from work, and its being a day for worship and for fellowship and for good works.

In the middle of the 20th century a Dutch theologian by the name of van Selms speculated that in Holland in his day there was a serious quarrel every week in 10,000 homes over what may or may not be done on the Sabbath day. He calculated that amounted to half a million quarrels every year. At the same time in our Presbyterian world in America there would have been at least an equal number of such quarrels. What that means, of course, is that Christians were at least taking the 4th commandment seriously. You only argue about what may and may not be done on Sunday if you agree that there is a divine law to obey. I fear there are many fewer such quarrels today.

But I also suspect that in many if not most cases the quarrels were not particularly enlightened. Far too often God's people have entertained a deficient understanding of what it means to keep

the Lord's Day holy. Like so much else in the Law of God, the application of general principles to specific cases requires a genuine appreciation of the law, in the first place, and a genuine desire to obey it in the second. And the very general statements regarding Sabbath sanctification that can be found in the Bible do not answer the thousand and one specific questions that we ask. John Newton said, "Love is the best casuist." Casuistry is the application of the general law to specific cases and Newton meant that the person who would get the application right was the person who loved God and wanted to please him, loved God's law as the expression of God's righteousness and goodness, and loved others in Christ's name.

I have often illustrated how biblical casuistry works by referring to the life of Eric Liddell, the Scot Olympian and missionary to China. He was right, I believe, not to run in the heats of the 100-meter race in Paris in 1924 – which, by the way, had been scheduled on Sunday more than a year before the Olympics were to be held, not something he learned, as in the movie, just days before the heats were to be run – because they had been put on a Sunday (even though the organizers new very well that this would eliminate some important competitors). His was a public and heroic act of loyalty to God. On the other hand, I also think he was right when in the Japanese internment camp in China where he died of a brain tumor just before the end of the Second World War, he refereed a boys' soccer game on a Sunday afternoon in order to prevent the fighting that had occurred the previous Sunday. The Sabbath is a day for good works and it was made for man, not man for it.

In the same way, I would never go to Century Link field to watch a Seahawks game on a Sunday – clearly if the 4th commandment means anything it means that there are things one will not do on Sunday – I couldn't justify that activity on *the Lord's Day*. I would be making it *my* day, not his. On the other hand, if I had a neighbor I had long wanted to talk to about Christ and he asked me to accompany him to the Seahawks game because he had two tickets and his wife could not go, I would seize the opportunity to have several hours with my neighbor and a golden opportunity to talk to him about Christ and salvation. That is the way casuistry is practiced. That is what Jesus taught us in Mark 2. Most of the time no one could eat that bread in the tabernacle, but then God never intended someone to starve when food was at hand!. And the Christian who will know which is which is the Christian who loves God and wants to honor him in his or her life.

There is the 4th commandment. Treat it as the gift of God that it is, as the blessing God intends it to be in your life, love it and make it the best day of the week for you and your children, use it for all its holy purposes, and without a doubt you will be much better, much happier, and much more useful to God for having done so. Do what you will do in heaven and the Sabbath day will become more like heaven to you. On the Lord's Day do what you can to help others to heaven and the Sabbath will be something others will thank you for and God will reward you for. What in the world is not to like about a holiday once a week!