

# Observing the Sabbath

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THE widespread neglect of Sabbath observance and the increasing efforts being made by ungodly men for the complete abolishment of this blessed day should cause us concern lest we imbibe the spirit of the age. The force of example is very great. It caused the Lord to make this charge against Israel on one occasion, "For ye have not walked in my statutes, neither executed my judgments, but have done after the manners of the heathen that are round about you," Ezekiel 11:12. The evil example set by the Sabbath-breaker has the tendency to weaken the faithful witness raised by those who love the Lord's Day, and who desire to train up the young in the ways in which they should go. The tendency of the natural heart being to rebel against God, young people often feel under restriction by the observance of the day, and are ready to call it a weariness and to long for its conclusion. Thus beset by enemies without and a deceitful heart within we have great need of divine teaching, lest we cast from us that which God has blessed and sanctified, and embark on a course which will end in our ruin. Many who have had a sad history have confessed that they commenced their downward course by profanation of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was instituted by God when man was still in a state of innocence. When Adam's affections were pure and elevated, his conscience free from guilt, and his will delighting in doing God's will, he observed the Sabbath Day and kept it holy. The Creator, who had completed the mighty work of creation in six days, rested on the seventh day. "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it; because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made," Genesis 2:3. Thus, at the very beginning of the history of man, the Sabbath rest is instituted. This rest is to consist in ceasing from works lawful on the other six days, apart from works of necessity and mercy, and in spending this day in worshipping God. If God in His wisdom saw it fit for Adam in an innocent state to have such a day, how much greater is our need in a fallen and sinful state to have a day in which we may seek to draw near to God without the hindrance of our worldly occupations.

The Lord, however, has not left us in doubt as to the claims of the Sabbath upon us in our fallen state. In the Ten Commandments given at Mount Sinai, we find the Fourth Commandment stating, "Remember the Sabbath Day, to

keep it holy," Exodus 20:8. The position of the Fourth Commandment should be carefully noted. The first three Commandments embrace our duty towards God and the last six Commandments refer to our duty towards our neighbours. The Fourth Commandment seems to bind together our duty towards God and our neighbour, for the keeping holy of the Sabbath involves not only the setting apart of the day to God and His worship but also the responsibility of ensuring that the family, the "stranger within thy gates" and "thy cattle", will not be deprived of their Sabbath rest.

It will be clear from its institution and from its place in the Ten Commandments, that the Sabbath makes its claims upon us still, and has the same ivine authority as the other Commandments. Wherever the light of the gospel has penetrated, the murderer, the thief and the liar are universally condemned. But the Sabbath-breaker must take his stand beside these transgressors and also plead guilty to a breach of God's law. The same law which says, "Thou shalt not kill," also says, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." Involved in the same guilt means being involved in the same curse, for "cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them," Galatians 3:10. Sabbath-breaking is a sin. "The wages of sin is death," Romans 6:23. This solemn fact is lost sight of by the great majority of professing Christians in our generation but nevertheless "the Word of the Lord is right; and all His works are done in truth," Psalm 33:4.

Until the resurrection of Christ the seventh day was observed as the weekly Sabbath, but from that time until the end of the world, the first day of the week is to be observed as the Christian Sabbath. It was on the first day of the week that Christ, having completed the work of redemption, rose from the dead and entered into rest. The Christian Sabbath thus commemorates Christ's resting from the work of redemption, which was a more glorious work than that of creation, and since that time the first day of the week has been universally observed as the Sabbath by Christians. We see this from John 20 when on two occasions Christ revealed Himself to His disciples as an assembled company on the first day of the week. After His ascension, the Holy Spirit was poured out in an extraordinary manner on the day of Pentecost; this again was the first day of the week. Since that day, down to the present time, the Lord has been bestowing innumerable blessings upon His people when engaged in the exercises of this holy day. But although this day was changed from the seventh to the first day of the week, the spirit of the Fourth

Commandment was never changed. Each week we are still to work on six days and rest on one day. The Lord still claims this day as His own. Therefore we read in Revelation 1:10 that it was on the Lord's Day that John was in the Spirit. Breaches of the Fourth Commandment are sin now as surely as breaches of the Commandment were sin in the days of Moses and the Prophets.

May we all be given to realise that the command to "remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy" is vested with the authority of Him who is "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God", and may we be enabled to flee to the blood which cleanseth from all sin and brings the soul into fellowship with the Lord of the Sabbath.

The frame of heart necessary for a proper observance of this day is that which characterised John on the Isle of Patmos when he testified, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day," Revelation 1: 10. Without the teaching of the Holy Spirit we cannot feel the divine authority of the command nor can we properly observe what it requires. Being in the Spirit on that day, John was favoured with a view of One like unto the Son of Man, standing in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, and "He had in His right hand seven stars: and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword." The desire of all who love the Lord's Day and endeavour to keep it holy is that they would see Christ by faith and learn of Him who is meek and lowly in heart. It is here that true Sabbath rest is to be found; therefore the invitation goes forth, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," Matthew 11:28. All who truly desire this rest have the prayer of the Greeks coming up to the Feast, "Sir, we would see Jesus," John 12: 21.

The observance of the Sabbath is scripturally set forth in the words of the Shorter Catechism: "The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy." This holy resting is to continue "all that day." The modern or popish idea of going to church in the morning and spending the rest of the day in doing our own pleasure has no authority from God's Word. The command is, "Keep the Sabbath Day to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee," Deuteronomy 5:12. Neither the wisdom of men nor the precepts of tradition can have any place when the mind of the Lord is revealed. The Lord,

having commanded that the whole day is to be kept, requires that the twenty-four hours of this day be set aside to Him.

A twofold description is given of the Sabbath rest. On the one hand it involves a cessation from worldly employments and recreations, however lawful these may be on the other days of the week. Great care should be taken that all matters of worldly business are set in order before the Sabbath comes, and during that holy day we are required to abstain from engaging in them. All manual labour, such as the building of houses, the gathering in of crops at harvest time, the running of buses and trains, the buying and selling of newspapers and other goods, the opening of golf courses and tennis courts to the public, and the many other forms of unnecessary, worldly business and leisure activities, so daringly engaged in, are forbidden. Secular studies are also forbidden. It is to be feared that many young people devote much of this sacred day to preparation for examinations and similar studies. This sin, though less heinous than the grosser forms of Sabbath desecration, is still a breach of the Divine Law.

“Cursed is that gain,” said the eminent Dr. Love of Greenock, “cursed is that recreation, cursed is that health which is gained by criminal encroachments on this sacred day.”

This rest being a “holy” rest, we are required, on the other hand, to spend the day in holy exercises. This includes secret exercises. Freedom from worldly employment should give time for secret prayer, meditation and reading of God’s Word. Without those secret exercises, the public worship will be attended with weariness and coldness. The Lord, who promises to hear the prayers of His people in secret, also undertakes to reward them openly. Private exercises in the family should be engaged in. Religious instruction should be imparted both from God’s Word and the Shorter Catechism, and young people should be encouraged to discuss the sermons heard, and be taught to derive benefit from them. The public ordinances should be faithfully attended as the Lord gives strength and opportunity. The flimsy excuses advanced by many for their absence from Church only reveal too clearly that they are “of the earth, earthy” and have no desire for those things which are spiritual and eternal. A shower of rain, an imagined fatigue or some other excuse which would not prevent them from going to their place of worldly business is sufficient to keep some out of the house of God. All such excuses when weighed in the light of

the “great white throne” are seen to be but manifestations of the carnal mind which is enmity against God.

Works of necessity and mercy are allowed on the Lord’s Day. In such works the necessity must be real and not imagined. Such works as working a ship at sea, putting out a house on fire or feeding cattle, are obviously necessary. To say it is more advantageous to do a certain thing on Sabbath does not constitute it a work of necessity.

Works of mercy such as visiting the sick and attending to their needs are permitted, but in the doing of these things grace should be sought to preserve the spirit of the day. The Redeemer healed the sick on the Sabbath and allowed the disciples to rub out the corn from the ears when they were hungry. Our sinful nature, however, is only too ready to break through the boundaries God has set round His day, and necessity and mercy are only too often made the pleas for doing so. Our constant prayer should be, “Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slide not,” Psalm 17:5.

The Sabbath Day is not only a memorial of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, but also a type of that rest which remaineth to the people of God, Hebrews 4:9. Heaven is not only a happy place but a holy place. Just as those who love the Sabbath lay aside their worldly employments on Saturday and enter that holy day looking forward to its exercises, so the true people of God at death bid farewell to this world and all that it contains and enter that Sabbath that shall never end. There they will eternally be taken up with the worship of Him who was their God and guide even unto death. “For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes,” Revelation 7:17.

All who despise this day and find no pleasure in its observance openly declare that their faces are not set towards Sion above but that they are on the broad way which leadeth to destruction. All such must meet the Sabbath-breaker’s doom, be condemned by God, the judge of all, and enter that eternity of which it is said, “There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked,” Isaiah 57:21. May the Holy Spirit grant us what was granted to the psalmist: “I thought on my ways and turned my feet unto Thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not to keep Thy commandments,” Psalm 119:59, 60.