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GOD'S DAY OF REST

Genesis 2:1-3

By

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Genesis Lesson 5

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If you or I had lived in colonial America and behaved as we do, we all would have spent time in jail, our arms and feet locked into the stocks in public humiliation. Why? Because each one of us has traveled and done things for recreation on Sunday. It was called "sabbath breaking," and it was against the law.

C. H. Mackintosh, a popular Plymouth Brethren devotional writer of the last century, wrote,

The idea of any one, calling himself a Christian, making the Lord's day a season of what is popularly called recreation, unnecessary traveling, personal convenience, or profit in temporal things, is perfectly shocking. We are of opinion that such acting could not be too severely censured. We can safely assert that we never yet came in contact with a godly, intelligent, right-minded Christian person who did not love and reverence the Lord's day; nor could we have any sympathy with any one who could deliberately desecrate that holy and happy day. (*Miscellaneous Writings*, "A Scriptural Inquiry as to the Sabbath, the Law, and Christian Ministry" [Loizeaux Brothers], 3:6-7.)

I'm not in full agreement with these views. But I want you to see that "We've come a long way, baby!" Most American Christians never think twice about watching football games or mowing their lawn or doing other things on Sundays that would send C. H. Mackintosh into cardiac arrest. Some progressive evangelical churches even offer a Friday night service so that their people can have the rest of the weekend free for whatever they want to do.

What does the Bible have to say about all this? The good news is that it has quite a bit to say; the bad news is that it isn't always clear how to apply what it says to the church age. So you have everything from strict Seventh Day Baptists and Adventists to evangelicals who see no Christian significance at all in the sabbath or Lord's Day. Each of us must try to rid ourselves of any cultural bias and try to answer the question, "What does the Bible teach about the sabbath for today?"

Genesis 2:1-3, describes God's day of rest, the seventh day of creation. God is omnipotent and could have spoken the whole creation into existence in an instant. When He was done, God didn't need a day off because He was exhausted! God created the world in six days and rested on and sanctified the seventh day to instruct us. By His action at the beginning, God is telling us that there is a pattern of work and rest for our existence on earth. God's setting apart the seventh day models the weekly rest and worship we need. Created to reflect His image, we must follow His pattern. Thus our text shows that

God has called us to a weekly day of rest and worship.

I want to answer three questions:

- (1) What is the sabbath for?
- (2) Must Christians keep the sabbath? And, if so,
- (3) How should we keep the sabbath?

WHAT IS THE SABBATH FOR?

1. The sabbath is for rest and worship.

The Hebrew word "rested" is the root word for "sabbath." It means to cease from busyness. Exodus 31:17 says that God "ceased from labor, and was refreshed." The fact that God blessed and sanctified (= "set apart") this day at the completion of creation implies that we are to set apart one day in seven to be different from our normal routine. On that day we who are made in His likeness are to cease from the work of the other days and be refreshed in body and soul as we spend time worshipping our Creator.

There is a big difference between the rest God intends for us and the so-called "rest" of pursuing leisure and recreation. We probably have more leisure time and recreational equipment than any other culture in history, and yet we're burning out like light bulbs. Lots of people are "stressed out." I can't help but wonder if a major part of our problem is that we're neglecting God's ordained cycle of a weekly day for rest and worship, when we cease doing "our thing," and devote the day to taking delight in the Lord (Isa. 58:13-14). Recreation may refresh the body, but we need worship to refresh the soul. Recreation is often self-centered, but worship focuses us on the Lord. As Calvin puts it, "God did not com-

mand men simply to keep holiday every seventh day, as if he delighted in their indolence; but rather that they, being released from all other business, might the more readily apply their minds to the Creator of the world" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Associated Publishers & Authors], 1:15).

That God sanctified and blessed the seventh day means that it is a special day, set apart from the other six days. Since He sanctified and blessed this day, it belongs to Him, not to us. It should not be a day for doing what we normally do, but rather a day to take the time out of our busy lives to spend with the Lord and His people. Often we're so busy during the week that time with the Lord gets squeezed out or hurried. We don't take time to read God's Word, to pray, or to reflect on whether our lives are pleasing to Him. Taking time to spend with someone is a way of saying, "I love you, you're important to me." Taking one day each week to be with the Lord says, "Lord, I love you and want to get to know You better because You're first in my life." On this set apart day, we should rest from our normal work and take the time to be with the Lord and to worship with His people.

What is God's intent for such rest and worship?

2. Sabbath rest and worship are both to honor God and to benefit man.

The first day of existence for Adam was a day of rest. Later God assigned him tasks to do, but the first order of business for this newly created man was a day of rest. What do you suppose Adam did that day? It's likely that God told Adam about the world He had just created. Thus Adam, in communion with God, living in a perfect environment, reflected on the greatness and majesty and goodness of God. He enjoyed fellowship with God and thought about the wonder of himself, a creature, being able to commune with God, the Creator. The first sabbath was spent in rest and worship.

Worship is not for our benefit, but to honor God as the Almighty Creator and Redeemer, who alone is worthy of praise and glory. But the by-product of worship is that we are blessed by blessing God. So when we set aside one day in seven to stop doing our normal work and to worship God, we are benefited. As Jesus

said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

You say, "That's all well and good so far as it pertained to Adam and later to Israel. But we're not under the law, are we?" That leads to the second question:

MUST CHRISTIANS KEEP THE SABBATH?

Here the controversy rages! There are three main views. Seventh Day Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists say that Christians must strictly observe Saturday as sabbath as ordained by God at creation and in the Mosaic law. A second view, following the Westminster Confession, transfers sabbath observance to Sunday, making it a Christian sabbath. The third view is that the sabbath was a part of the law of Israel; since we are not under the law, it is not applicable to the church at all. This is probably the view of most evangelicals in our day.

I'm somewhere between the second and third view. I do not believe that Sunday should be a strictly observed Christian sabbath; but neither am I comfortable casting off the sabbath principles altogether. Sunday is the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10); this means it belongs to Him. There are principles in the sabbath, both as established at creation and under the Mosaic law, which apply to the Christian observance (or celebration) of the Lord's Day. While we are not under the law, there is much in the law which applies beneficially to us. The prevailing view today, which sees Sunday as a day to go to church and then do whatever you please, is robbing God's people of the blessing He intended at creation by setting apart one day in seven to cease from our work and to focus on our Creator and Redeemer.

1. The principle of sabbath stemming from both creation and the law is valid for today.

There is debate about whether the sabbath was instituted at creation, with application to all people, or in the Ten Commandments as applying only to Israel. Those who say it was only for Israel argue that Genesis 2 and Exodus 16 (both of which occur before the giving of the Ten Commandments) were anticipatory, not prescriptive. Without going into all the arguments pro and con, it seems to me that a normal reading of Genesis 2:1-3 would lead us

to say that God's ordering of the creation and resting on the seventh day had some instructive purpose as it applied to Adam and all his descendants. There is a rhythm of work and rest built into creation, and it applies to all who are created in God's image, whether they know it or observe it or not.

Another debate concerns whether the sabbath as the fourth commandment is a part of the moral or ceremonial law. If it is a part of the ceremonial law, then obviously we need not regard it, since no Christian claims that we must observe the Jewish laws of diet, purification, sacrifice, etc. But if it is part of the moral law, then it would be binding on us, since the moral law stems from the holiness of God and does not change.

It would be tough to argue that there is no moral aspect to the sabbath commandment, since the rest of the Ten Commandments are clearly moral. The moral aspect is the fact that it provides for the regular worship of God, which is binding upon all human beings. But there are also ceremonial aspects to the sabbath which applied to Israel alone: The people could not do any work at all. They could not even kindle a fire (Exod. 35:2-3). A man caught gathering sticks on the sabbath was stoned to death (Num. 15:32-36). And yet Jesus defended His disciples for plucking grain on the sabbath, which He never would have done if they had broken the moral law of God (Matt. 12:1-8).

As Christians, we are not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14; Col. 2:16-17). The meaning of that is a sticky theological issue, but I see it as entailing two things. In the first place, we are not under the Jewish ceremonial law nor under the laws which applied to Israel as a theocratic nation. We don't have to wash in order to be ceremonially clean. We don't stone adulterers, homosexuals, and rebellious children. Those things applied only to Israel as the theocratic people of God. Second, not to be under the law means that we are not under the principle of law as a means of relating to God. The law was given in part to show sinful man that he could not live up to the holiness of God in his own effort. Under grace, God gives us the Holy Spirit so that the requirement of the law is fulfilled in us who walk according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4; 10:4).

When it comes to the sabbath, then, we are not under the rigorous Jewish regulations for that day. But there is a moral aspect to the sabbath, that of the proper worship of God and stewardship of our lives, which requires that we set aside a day each week for rest from our normal work so that we can worship God. It stems both from creation and from the moral law of God as revealed in the Ten Commandments. As we walk in the Spirit and grow in the love of God, He will work in us the desire to honor Him by setting aside a day for Him each week, not as a duty of law, but as a delight of love.

But, which day: Saturday? Sunday? Friday evening?

2. The day of sabbath rest and worship for the Christian should be Sunday, the Lord's Day.

I disagree with those who worship on Saturday. But I also disagree with progressive evangelical churches which have a congregation that meets only on Friday evening (or some other day), but not on Sunday. I think there are solid reasons why we should set aside Sunday as the Lord's Day.

The main reason it's important to observe Sunday as the Lord's Day is that our Lord arose from the dead on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). That fact alone is enough reason to gather in celebration on Sunday. At least six of our Lord's eight resurrection appearances recorded in the gospels took place on Sunday.

It was on Sunday that the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost. The early church gathered on Sunday to break bread, listen to the teaching of the Scriptures, and give offerings (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). It was on "the Lord's Day" that John received that great revelation of Christ in His present glory (Rev. 1:10). In addition, from early in the second century on there are many testimonies that the Christians gathered on Sunday for worship (see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Zondervan], 3:965-971). By worshipping on the Lord's Day we affirm His resurrection along with the saints down through history. So it is important to set aside Sunday as the Lord's Day, a day when the principle (not the letter) of the sabbath can be observed.

Thus we have seen that the sabbath is for rest and worship, a day designed to honor God but also for our blessing. Also, we have seen that there is a sabbath principle stemming both from creation and the law which is valid for today, and that Christians should set aside Sunday as the Lord's Day for observing that sabbath principle. One question remains:

HOW SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH?

As I said, I don't agree with calling the Lord's Day a Christian sabbath, so perhaps we should ask, How should we observe the Lord's Day? Should we require our kids not to play? Are we allowed to go the store or mall? Should we go to restaurants, thus making others work? What about those who have jobs that require them to work on Sundays? I can't deal with every question you may have, but let me state two broad principles for observing the Lord's Day.

1. Don't observe it legalistically.

Martin Luther, with his characteristic bluster, said, "If anywhere the day is made holy for the mere day's sake--if anywhere anyone sets up its observance on a Jewish foundation, then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to dance on it, to feast on it, to do anything that shall remove this encroachment on Christian liberty" (cited in ZPEB 3:969).

God looks on our hearts, not on outward observance of man-made rules. The history of the Jews shows how prone we all are to set up rules that are not from God and take pride in keeping them, even though our hearts are far from God. We all tend to judge others by our own standards, based on outward matters. All such judging is sin because it stems from pride. The idea of the Lord's Day is not to produce a list of things you can and cannot do. Legalism doesn't produce godliness (Col. 2:16-23).

2. Observe it joyfully before God.

View the Lord's Day as a gift from God, not as a duty to be fulfilled. God has established many principles for our benefit, principles of health, nutrition, mental outlook, emotional well-being, relationships, etc. The principle of one day each week set aside from our hectic lives to rest and worship God is for our benefit. The God who made us built the principle into creation, and we

violate it, just as we do the law of gravity, to our own peril. God blessed the seventh day and set it apart, and there is blessing for us if we honor Him one day each week.

Gather with God's people on the Lord's Day. It ought to be a day of celebrating the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with others He has redeemed. Part of your time on Sunday ought to be spent reflecting on who God is as our Creator and Savior. Think about His sacrificial death for you. Rejoice in the finished work of Christ, that you can rest in all that He is and cease from your own efforts to merit God's favor through good works (Heb. 4:1-11). Reflect on your own relationship to Him. Think back over the week that has just gone by. Did it reflect the direction it should for a child of God? Think about the week to come. Does your schedule reflect the proper priorities? Make sure that any known sin is confessed and put away. Sin robs us of God's rest. Use the Lord's Day to serve Him and do good deeds.

Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards points out that since God sanctified and blessed the sabbath, since the risen Lord Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples on Sunday, and since He poured out His Spirit on the church on that day, it is a day when the Lord especially delights to confer His grace and blessing on those who seek Him (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:101-102). If Jesus appeared bodily to you and said, "I would like to spend the day with you and give you a special blessing," would you say, "I'd really like to, Lord, but my day is full. After church I need to get some things done around the house. I need to run over to the mall and do some shopping. And, there are a couple of shows on TV I don't want to miss. Maybe some other time?" Every Sunday the Lord is saying, "I want to spend this day with you and bless you. Will you set this day apart for Me?"

Observing a weekly day set aside unto the Lord is a gift of our time. It's not really our time, since God graciously gives us every day. But He asks us to give that first day each week back to Him. It's not easy in our busy world to stop and give God our time. The busier you are, the more you honor someone when you give him your time. If you were the President and you gave someone an entire day each week, you are showing that person great honor. Giv-

ing the Lord one day each week says that you honor Him. It's like giving money--it's never easy. It always costs you something. But if you give only that which doesn't cost you, you don't really give.

Giving to the Lord a day each week from our busy schedules will cost us time from our many projects and plans, but we will be blessed for doing it. The Lord said through Isaiah, "If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father" (Isa. 58:13-14). God blessed and sanctified one day a week; so should we.

Discussion Questions

1. How should a Christian whose job requires him to work on Sunday deal with the sabbath principle?
2. How can we keep the sabbath principle without falling into legalism?
3. How should a Christian family determine what activities are permissible on Sundays? Why does it matter?
4. Should the principle of Deut. 5:14 be applied by Christian businessmen to mean that their business should not be open on Sundays? What about a business (restaurant, grocery store, real estate, etc.) which depends on Sunday business to survive?

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