

Remember the Sabbath

Remember the Sabbath day

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 5th February 2006

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Exodus 20.8 - 11).

Introduction

These verses record the fourth commandment, in which God called his people to do no work on the Sabbath day, and to keep and to keep it holy. Of all the Ten Commandments, this is the one whose continuing relevance is most debated amongst Bible-believing Christians today, and so I am going to need to explain why I believe it is binding on us today. Then I want to say what the commandment actually teaches. After that I wish to say why God gave the commandment, and finally to speak about how we are to apply it today.

1. The Sabbath is an enduring commandment for all men

Some would say that that this commandment is essentially a “ceremonial” law, looking forward to the rest that we would have in Christ. Now that Christ has come, they would say, we remember the Sabbath by entering into the rest that we have in Christ, in other words, by receiving eternal life. Those who hold to this view would say that we may, if we choose, meet together on Sunday, but we could also meet together on other days of the week. Equally, they would in many cases say that it is good to have a day of rest each week, but they would leave it to the individual to decide what was the best day for him to have “off”.

Here I have to make a confession. I myself not very long ago held views which I have just outlined, and have in the past spoken in defence of them. However, I now believe that this position is mistaken, and that to observe the Sabbath is an enduring commandment for all men. Here are ten reasons why I believe this to be the case:

1) Because the commandment refers back to creation, and gives this as a reason for obeying it: "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the seventh day and made it holy." This is a reference to the account of creation in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. At the end of that account it says,

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day he rested from all the work of creating he had done (Genesis 2.1 – 2).

Thus Genesis teaches that from that first week of the world, the seventh day has been holy, a Sabbath to the LORD. Thus God instituted the Sabbath, not on Mount Sinai, but at creation, and he has wanted it to be observed since then. Like marriage, it is therefore something which God has ordained for as long as the world shall exist. Jesus also said that the Sabbath was "made" (Mark 2.27), implying it goes back to creation.

2) This law is one of the Ten Commandments, written on tablets of stone by the finger of God. All agree that all other nine commandments are moral, not ceremonial laws, which are permanently binding on all men. It would seem strange to have a law which was only ceremonial as part of a group of commandments which are otherwise so clearly moral in their purpose.

3) When God gave manna to the Israelites he told them through Moses to gather it on six days only, and on the sixth day to gather twice as much, and not to gather it on the seventh day, because this was a Sabbath to God (Exodus 16.29). This was *before* the Ten Commandments were given, implying that the God already expected Sabbath to be kept before he gave the Ten Commandments.

4) God said that those who broke the Sabbath were to be put to death. In Exodus 31.14 – 17 we read that God said:

Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.

The death penalty in the Old Testament was laid down for serious breaches of moral laws. Although the death penalty does not apply under the New Covenant for breaches of moral laws, the moral laws which were enforced by it do apply to us. For example, God also said that idolaters were to be put to death. Idolaters are no longer put to death, but idolatry is still very wrong.

5) The prophets called on the people to observe the Sabbath properly. For example, in Isaiah chapter 58 verses 13 to 14 we read,

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

6) Jesus kept the Sabbath. He was accused of being a Sabbath breaker, but in fact he only broke the traditions of the Pharisees as regards the observance of the Sabbath, not the Old Testament law itself.

7) In the controversies that Jesus had about the Sabbath, he corrected misinterpretations and misapplications of the Sabbath. He said that he is the "Lord of the Sabbath", but he did not say that the Sabbath was being done away with through his forthcoming death and resurrection. This is in strong contrast with his teaching about foods. He made it clear that food laws were passing away, and Mark comments at one point "Jesus declared all foods clean" (Mark 7.19). But Jesus never said anything about the Sabbath being ended or fulfilled.

8) The apostolic church met together on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7). Bearing in mind that the Jews would meet together in the synagogue on

the Jewish Sabbath, the fact that the Christians met on the first day of the week implies that they regarded it as the Christian Sabbath. No doubt they did this because the Lord was raised from the dead on first day of the week.

9) John says that he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1.10). This would suggest that he treated one day a week as a Sabbath for meditating on Christ. John would have called the first day of the week the “Lord’s Day”, because this was the day on which the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead. The term is similar to the term the “Lord’s Supper”, which is the special meal that Jesus instituted.

10) Although it is true that when we believe in Christ we enter the “rest” of Christ’s salvation, nevertheless we shall not properly enter that rest until we get to glory. Therefore, it is valid for us still to observe the Sabbath, looking forward to the rest that we shall enjoy. Just as we will still have to work until the end of this world, so also it is good and right that one day in seven we should stop and concentrate on spiritual things.

So for all these reasons I believe that the Sabbath is something which continues today. The one thing that has changed with the coming of the New Covenant is the day on which the Sabbath is to be kept. Whereas up to the coming of Christ it was to be kept on the seventh day, in remembrance of the completion of the work of creation, now it is to be kept on the first day of the week, in remembrance of the completion of the work of redemption in Christ.

2. What God has commanded

Here are four things that this commandment says we should do:

1) Work six days a week

The first thing to see is that God has commanded that we should work on six days of the week. “Six days you shall labour and do all your work”. Work is something which God has given us to do, and it is good and right for six days a week. Paul said, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28. See also 2 Thessalonians 3.6 -12).

2) Not to work on the seventh day

The second thing to notice is that God has commanded that on one day a week we should do no work. "Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work." There is to be a cessation of all work on this day.

3) Not to impose work on others

Not only are we to abstain from work, but we are not to employ the services of others on the Sabbath. "On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates."

4) To set aside the day for God

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." The word "holy" means "separated" or "dedicated to God". So to keep the Sabbath holy means to give the Sabbath over to God, for worshipping him and growing in our relationship with him, and proclaiming him to others. It is not day for lazy self-indulgence. As Isaiah said in the quotation cited above, we should not do as we please on the Sabbath, but we should call it a delight, the LORD's holy day (Isaiah 58.13).

At this point it is worth correcting a misunderstanding that has come into much modern Christian thinking. Somehow the idea has got around that God has said that Sabbath is meant to be a family day. So it is suggested that there should just be one service in the morning on Sunday (if that) and then the rest of the day should be given over for families to spend time together. I know not of a single reference in the whole Bible which indicates that the Sabbath is for families. Rather, it is to be set aside for the Lord.

3. Why God has commanded it

1) That we may properly honour him

Remember, God said in the first commandment "You shall have no other gods before me." He wants the devotion of our hearts, minds, lips and lives. Everything else must take second place to him.

This will take time. Time needs to be allowed to worship him properly, to hear his Word, to meet with other believers and to pray. For his sake, and for our

sakes, he has given us this day where we can cease from other activity and devote the time to worshipping him and growing in our relationship with him.

2) As a sign of our belonging to God

We saw above that God said that the Sabbath “will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever” (Exodus 31.17). Although the Sabbath is a command to all men, if God’s people particularly honour it, and use it not for their own indulgence but to worship and draw near to God, it is a sign to the rest of the world that they belong to him.

3) That we may have a right perspective on this world

It is very easy for us to become completely absorbed in our paid employment and our household tasks. If we stop one day a week and focus back on God and on eternity, then when we resume work the following day we shall come to it with a completely different perspective. This will help us to overcome idolatry and greed.

4) For our physical and mental health

Jesus said that the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2.27). By this Jesus cannot have meant that the primary focus of the Sabbath was not meant to be God, as that would have plainly contradicted Scripture. It is to be holy to the LORD. But it is holy to the LORD for *our good*, that we may benefit from observing it. Sabbath observance is good for you.

4. How we should apply the commandment to us today

I have argued that the commandment is essentially unchanged for us as believers under the New Covenant, except that we now are to treat Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, the Lord’s Day. Here are some suggestions for things to do during the week, things not to do on a Sunday, and things to do.

1) Things to do during the week

Work! If you are able-bodied and in a position to work, then do so. Some, like full time housewives, will work without being paid. Some will have paid employment. But whoever you are, unless you are ill, or disabled, or too old, you

should be working. Even if you are disabled or old, you should work to the level of your strength and ability.

2) Things not to do on Sunday

Here are some suggested applications to what we have seen:

- Do not have a late night on Saturday night. This will enable you to get up in good time on Sunday, to have a prayer time and read the Bible before you come to church, so that you are in a right frame of mind when you come to meet with God's people.

- If your job entails Sunday work, seek to make alternative arrangements with employer. If you explain how important Sunday is to you as a Christian, your employer may well be sympathetic to your position. If your employer will not change your days of work, then look for a different job. I would say *seek* alternative employment rather than leave your job without having found another one, because if you leave your job without having found another, you are liable to break the command to work for six days. Of course, there are some jobs which it is right and good that they are done all days of the week. Jesus said it is "lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12.12). For example, it is quite lawful for doctors, nurses and policemen to work on Sundays. But if your work is not something which is essential for people's life and safety, then find another job.

- Do not shop on a Sunday, because it is work for you, and because it is employing the services of others, which is also forbidden by the commandment.

- Do not do DIY, home repairs and non-essential housework on a Sunday. Although some people call DIY "leisure", in reality it is another form of work. It is just that you are doing the work yourself.

- Keep off websites which are for buying and selling on Sunday. I would not say do not touch a computer on a Sunday, because you may be able to use it to access helpful Christian books or to send an email to a friend to encourage him. But to go on sites which buy and sell is not in line with this commandment.

- Do not do your homework or preparation for work on Sunday. It is very

tempting if you are a student, if you have something due in on Monday, and you did not finish the work for it on Saturday, to work on it on Sunday. Similarly, if you are a teacher it will be tempting to spend time preparing Monday's lessons on Sunday. Get into the habit of doing any homework on Saturday, so that you can devote the whole of Sunday to the Lord.

– What about watching television or films? Are these not harmless leisure activities for a “day off”? We have seen that the Sabbath is more than a “day off”. It is a day where we cease from work *in order* to focus on God. It is a day “holy to the Lord”, not for us to “do as we please”. I personally cannot see how watching TV or videos on Sunday is consistent with this teaching.

– What about sport on Sunday? This is a point of debate between Christians. Some would say that you should not so much as touch a football on Sunday. I would suggest that relatively light exercise for a period of time, for example a walk or a light “knock around” with a football, may actually help us to “clear our heads” after lunch, prior to meeting with God’s people in the afternoon. But professional sport, or seriously competitive sport, or sport which competes with meetings of the church, or leaves us too tired to participate in such meetings, must be considered to be wrong.

3) Things to do on Sunday

Here are some suggestions for positive things to do on Sunday:

- Get to church – twice

- Take other opportunities for fellowship, such as a young people’s group if you are a young person.

- Have people to lunch

- Phone or visit a Christian friend, or write a letter

- Read the Bible

- Pray, privately or with another person

- Read a good Christian book

- Listen to sermons on tape or on your MP3 player

- Be engaged in outreach

Thomas Watson called the Lord's Day "the market-day of the soul." Let us thank God for this special day, and make full use of it.

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