

The Right Use Of The Lord's Day

Unconverted people do not have much interest in the right use of the Lord's day and countless Christians are confused about it.

This confusion will not go away until we all take on board eleven important facts.

WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

1. When the Bible says 'Sabbath', it does not mean 'Saturday'. 'Sabbath' is not the name of a day of the week. The word is used to describe a sort of day, a day of rest from work. Although Old Testament years were 365 days long, every year began with a Sabbath day (Leviticus 23:4-16). Certain other fixed dates could never be Sabbaths (Exodus 12:1-28, Leviticus 23:15). To make sure that this happened, the calendar had to be adjusted regularly. We know from history that this was done by adding within the year extra Sabbaths which ran consecutively. To identify 'Sabbath' with 'Saturday' is thus an error. It is only since the definitive Jewish calendar adjustment of AD 359 that Jewish Sabbaths have always fallen on the day we now call 'Saturday'.

2. The Sabbath is not a Jewish institution. God instituted it at creation (Genesis 2:1-3). It is his gift to mankind (Mark 2:27).

3. The Ten Commandments are in a different class from all the other laws found in the Scriptures. God wrote them with his own finger. His fourth commandment is positive, the longest and most detailed of the ten, and links the Godward and manward, and moral and ceremonial aspects of the Law (Exodus 20:8-11, 31:18).

4. The Sabbath was important to our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us nothing of his habits, except that it was his custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). He announced that he was Lord of the Sabbath day (Mark 2:28). To say that there is no longer any Sabbath day is a denial of the Lordship of Christ.

5. The Lord of the Sabbath transferred it to the first day of the week. This is the day on which he rose from the dead (John 20:1-18), appeared to His disciples (John 20:19, 26), and poured out His Spirit (Acts 2:1).

6. The apostles and the early church kept the first day of the week distinct (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). To avoid confusion, the Greek New Testament calls the Jewish Sabbath 'the Sabbath' and calls the first day of the week 'the first of the Sabbaths' (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2,9, Luke 24:1, John 20:1,19, Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). Some people believe that this is a Greek idiom simply meaning 'the first day of the weekly cycle', but there is almost no evidence for this. We must face the facts: the first day of the week is a Sabbath day. It is also known as 'the Lord's day' (Revelation 1:10).

7. Throughout church history, it is Sunday that has been observed as the Christian Sabbath. The documentary evidence goes back to AD 74 and it is unanimous. During the worst persecutions, people suspected of being Christian were asked 'Dominicum servasti?' ('Do you keep the Lord's day?') True believers answered: 'I am a Christian; I cannot omit it.' What would believers answer today?

8. It is actually immoral not to keep the Sabbath Day. The fourth commandment, which reminds us of this, is in a code that also forbids idolatry, murder, stealing, lying and coveting. The fourth commandment has never been withdrawn, and never will be (Matthew 5:18). To break one point of the law is to be guilty of all (James 2:10). The violation of the Sabbath brings the judgment of God (Nehemiah 13:15-22).

9. The Sabbath is a day of joy and gladness (Psalm 118:24, 122:1). God's Word calls it 'a delight' (Isaiah 58:13). God gave it to be a blessing to us all (Mark 2:27-28). Speaking of the gospel age, Isaiah says, 'Blessed is the man . . . who keeps from defiling the Sabbath' (Isaiah 56:2).

10. The blessings of the Sabbath are there for all to see: it reminds fallen men and women that there is a God whom they should worship; it gives believers the opportunity to gather around the Word, and thus it maintains their spiritual life; it provides opportunities for gospel witness; it strengthens family ties; it permits a whole nation to rest; it promotes health . . . and so the list could go on.

11. In the Old Testament, godly men like Moses, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Nehemiah contended for the Sabbath. Church history is full of others who have done the same.

What is stopping us from following their example?

HOW ARE WE TO USE SUNDAY?

With these facts in mind, we can see that, for us, Sunday is the God-ordained day of rest. It is the day that embodies all that is permanent and universal in the fourth commandment. So how are we to use Sunday? To answer this question properly, we must speak both negatively and positively.

WHAT WE SHOULD NOT DO

We should not copy the Pharisees.

The Sabbath goes all the way back to creation. For a while, it wore Old Testament clothes. It then took them off, and today it wears New Testament clothes. This means that we are not to impose upon it Mosaic regulations which have passed away, such as those found in Exodus 35:2-3 or Numbers 15:32-36. Nor are we to have in mind any man-made list of do's and don'ts, such as in Matthew 12:1-2. In addition to the Mosaic legislation, the Pharisees added all sorts of rules of their own. To them, rubbing grain in your hand was the same as threshing. They also had rules about how much weight you could carry, and how far you could walk on the Sabbath day. Behind all their rules was a certain mindset; and it is a mindset that has no place in the life of a New Testament Christian.

We should not work.

In the Bible, the word 'work' means much more than earning your living. It also refers to the day-to-day duties of our lives, to our recreation, and to the thought that lies behind these things. As far as possible, all these things are to be put aside, both by ourselves and those who are answerable to us. This is not because they are sinful or unholy, but because God has commanded that they should be done on the other six days of the week (Exodus 20:8-11).

We should not be idle.

God's rest after creation was not inactivity, but a ceasing from one sort of activity (John 5:17). Sunday is to be a holy resting from one set of objectives so that we can pursue some very different objectives. It is not a day for lazing around.

WHAT WE SHOULD DO

We should meet up with other Christians, both formally and informally (Acts 2:1, 20:7, John 20:26, Prov. 27:17, Romans 1:12). The Bible does not lay down any sort of timetable for Sunday, but the principle is clear. It is not a day to spend alone, or only with the family.

We should meet together specifically for edification, that is, for building one another up in the things of God. Whatever else may take place in this respect; nothing is more important than the teaching of the Word and the observance of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7).

We should evangelise. The day of Pentecost began with a Christian assembly for mutual help and encouragement, but the Spirit's coming also consecrated the day to evangelism. His coming may be seen as a pledge of his blessing in this connection (Acts 2).

We should engage in works of mercy. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day, especially to save life, to heal, and to work for the spiritual welfare of others (see Luke 6:9, Matthew.12:5, 10-13, Luke 13:10-17, 14:1-6, John 5:6-9,16-17). Sunday commemorates the greatest act of mercy of all time. Every one of us can think of countless ways of doing good to people, but this aspect of Sunday observance is now largely forgotten. Those who find Sunday 'boring' are nearly always people who have become self-centred.

We should engage in works of necessity. We must not narrow these down just to those things which are necessary for our survival, otherwise we would spend the whole day doing little else but breathing! The Sabbath was made for man - in other words, it was made for his welfare. There is no tension between keeping the Sabbath and pursuing our best interests (see Matthew. 12:1-8, 11-12). Go on, enjoy the day! In addition to the activities we have already mentioned, surround yourself with friends, prepare a good meal for them, talk, walk, laugh, pray, admire God's creation, and go to bed with a glad and thankful heart.

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