

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

#2046
March 28, 1982

"The Fourth Commandment"
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In the fourth commandment, as recorded in Exodus 20:8-11, God stated, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it."

The command, in unmistakable language, makes clear what God demands with respect to the sabbath. Since all of the other nine commands remain obviously in force, we must maintain the same of this one. In maintaining this, one runs counter with the teachings and practice of many today who treat this day as though it is no different than the other six. Though I remain convinced that one cannot legislate morality, yet the demand of God must be heard: Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy!

Our Sunday, of course, is the first day of the week. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath was on the seventh day of the week--our Saturday. Though some today refuse to acknowledge this change, we are convinced that there is sound Scriptural basis for it. In the first place, Scripture shows that the essence of the Sabbath is rest. When God created the heavens and the earth in six days, He rested on the seventh. Adam in the state of paradise, was required of God also to rest on the seventh day. After man's fall into sin, this requirement of God remained. Rest remained the culmination of six days of labor. It was a picture of the Rest which God would provide through Jesus Christ. Yet the Old Testament shows clearly that man could never really attain to true rest. For all of his labors, he fell short of any requirement of God. He could not pay for sin--thus redeeming himself before the just and holy God.

God Himself provided the Rest for His people in the sending of His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus offered Himself on the cross, pays fully for the sins of His people as He bears the full vials of the wrath of God for their sins, and dies under that wrath of God. But the third day, early on the first day of the week, He arose from the dead. This resurrection is the proof of the justification of His people: their sins are forgiven and true rest is obtained for them. Because of that resurrection of the victorious Christ on Sunday, we observe the day of Rest on the first day of the week. To do otherwise would be to reject the truth that Jesus has obtained true rest through His death and resurrection again.

But what is this "rest" in which God Himself was first engaged? Genesis 2:3 states that God rested on the seventh day. Such rest cannot possibly mean that God is idle. God is never idle. Jesus Himself testified, "My Father worketh hitherto and I work." (John 5:17). If God rests yet continually works, these two must be essentially identical. God eternally determines all things. He never takes "time off;" God never "sleeps."

However, God rested after six days of creation. The emphasis is upon the idea that God has finished His handiwork of forming all things. He had fashioned space, time, and all that these contain. Then, on the seventh day God rested--that is, He actively contemplated all that which He made and beheld that it was very good.

That idea of rest must also be applied to the Christian who is called to rest on one day of seven. Our rest also cannot be idleness--never that. Sunday is not a day for staying in bed or lounging about all the day. Sunday is not just to be a cessation of physical work.

Rather, our Sunday must be a busy time--the time to contemplate in a special way the great and glorious work of God. We consider the wonder of God's work in creating, not only, but also and especially that tremendous wonder of the cross where the Son of God redeems His people from their sins. One can spend a lifetime considering all of this work--yet never reach the full depths and height of that which God has done. God in His mercy for His people has provided that day in which their time might be spent just considering the greatness and glory of God.

Our Sundays, our day of Rest, must serve then at least a three-fold purpose. In the first place, Sunday must be still the culmination of the six days of labor. The six days of labor represent the strivings of man. But six such days, without the day of rest, points to certain condemnation. If man does not enjoy rest, his labors are all in vain. The number of man, according to Revelation, is 666. It is the number which stresses that man continues to labor, never stops laboring, yet never attains to proper rest. It is the mark of depraved mankind too that these do not want one day for rest. But for the child of God, there is labor which reaches its climax in true rest. Sunday serves to remind us that God has provided rest from our labors through Jesus Christ our Lord. What our labors could never accomplish, Christ did accomplish on the cross. He brings true rest and peace. And He, through His Spirit, guides His church into the joy of contemplating the wonder of this work of God.

Secondly, our Sunday serves as proper preparation for the labors of a new week. On Monday one must again enter into the world with all of its corruptions. One must earn his daily bread. There is ever present the cursing of wicked men, the crime, the cheating and other forms of dishonesty. Yet what the Christian receives on Sunday serves also to equip him to face the evils and trials of another week. Sunday nourishes and strengthens one to serve God throughout the new week.

Finally, Sunday serves as a foretaste of the heavenly rest promised Christians through Christ's completed work. Heaven will be perfect rest and perfect peace. To all eternity, the church will stand in awe at the glory and greatness of our God. To all eternity, that body of Christ shall sing His praises and worship Him. Now already on this earth, we have the opportunity to do so in a special way on Sunday. It serves as a foretaste of that which is to come. Strange it would be if one, professing to desire the heavenly, shows no inclination to enjoy this foretaste of rest here on the earth!

But how is one to observe this day of rest properly? First of all, one must diligently frequent the house of God. Simply put: one must go to church regularly. But more: one must seek to worship where the Word of God is most purely maintained. One cannot be content with less than the best when it comes to worship of God.

Scripture itself points out the necessity of worshipping God in church on Sunday. We read in Romans 10:14,15, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?.." The passage teaches that there is the official ministry of the Word--the preacher must be sent. There one sees the wonder of sinners brought to repentance and led and directed in the truth. And again in Hebrews 10:25, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." The need and the duty to gather with God's people in church to hear faithful preaching of the Word is obvious.

Therefore too, the church which is faithful will insist on the regular attendance of its members at the services. Each is to attend diligently not in order to satisfy some dear ones, nor the pastor, nor even the ruling elders--but to glorify God in due order. In faithfulness, one is incited to greater diligence in his daily living. He is one who develops in his spiritual life. Such an one has the opportunity too of fellowship and communion with fellow saints; he can support those who are in need; he can encourage and comfort those in great trials. Neglect of the preaching of the gospel has the same detrimental effect on one's spiritual life as would abstinence from food on one's physical well-being.

It must also be emphasized that Sunday must be used in its entirety to the glory of God and our spiritual profit. On the one hand, one cannot be as the Pharisees of old--regulating even how many steps are permissible in travel; but also, one cannot claim a Christian "liberty" to use this day as he sees fit: in recreation or work. This latter is the great evil of our day. Many, if they would attend church at all, will worship early in the morning--in order to have the rest of the day for golf, sailing, or some other physical recreation. Others will use it simply as a day for sleeping or catching up on work about the home. Many travel regularly on Sunday; others make it a point to eat out on that day. We are then, not observing Sunday as God demands.

In the Old Testament one instance is recorded where a man, gathering sticks on the sabbath, was stoned to death for this transgression. Still today God requires that this special day be highly honored. One must use it for meditation upon God's work; for teaching and guiding of one's children in the knowledge of God's Word; for prayer and supplication to God. Our spiritual lives will reflect our faithfulness in this regard. It is only the half-hearted, outward, superficial Christian who would dare to neglect Sunday with its worship and prayer. Let the command be proclaimed loudly and clearly: this one day must be holy, that is, separate from all the others that we may in a unique way honor the Name of our God.

This is not to say of course, that as long as one day is wholly dedicated to God--that then the remaining days of the week are ours to use as we see fit. How often it is thought that service and obedience apply only to one day! One can then cheat, swear, live sinful lives during the rest of the time. But this is not what the Word of God teaches. He who uses Sunday properly, will inevitably also use the rest of the week also to the glory of God. He who understands the principle of rest on Sunday, will go forth through the rest of the week desiring to serve God in his schooling, his work, or his entertainment.

Thus there is seen in our daily living the principle, the beginning, of eternal rest which is ours in Christ. In heaven the church will surely serve God without interruption in all that it does. But that is even seen now on this earth. This principle of new obedience operates already in the lives of true saints of God.

There is involved in the fourth command, another responsibility placed upon the child of God. The ministry of the Word, the work of the church, does not continue somehow apart from any action on the part of the Christian. There is, rather, the support of the work of the church on the part of all of its individual members. There is the duty to support, even sacrificially, this cause of God's kingdom. There is both financial support required as well as constant prayers offered before the throne of God. This is as it should be. Surely money is also required in order that the Word may be preached in the local congregation as well as for the sending forth of that Word through the labors of missionaries. Thus the church, in obedience to the fourth command, contributes in order that the Word may be proclaimed far and wide.

Also, there is the necessity of seeing to it that ministers of the Word are trained for their tasks. Though many have assumed that a preacher is one simply moved by the Spirit, the fact is that normally training and education are necessary in order that the gifts God has given an individual may be fully developed. God indeed moves by His Spirit that servants of His may speak His Word. But God also requires that abilities be developed that the church may be the more edified in and through the preaching. Therefore churches have maintained seminaries where the truths of God's Word are taught and where training is given that one may more capably enter into the ministry of the Word. Nor is the church content with seminary training--no matter where or by whom it is given. There are many seminaries in the land training ministers. Yet many of these are fountainheads of false doctrine. Those who come forth from them are ready to spread false doctrine to the hearers. Therefore, we as Protestant Reformed Churches, though we are but a very small denomination, have felt the urgent and continuing need of training ministers in our own seminary. Thus we believe that we can supervise the training of candidates for the ministry and properly equip them to preach the Word of God in all of its fulness and truth.

So, the fourth commandment involves many duties and obligations. He who would observe it, is far from idle--on the contrary, he is very diligent and faithful.

And all of this is not in order again to attain to rest, to earn rest after much hard labor. Rather, obedience now to the fourth command is a fruit of the rest which Christ has obtained for His own people. When Christ works His rest in us (joy in God and the salvation He has provided) then we also find our pleasure in manifesting that beautiful rest in our own activities in thankfulness to God. May our God so guide us in this truth to the praise of His glorious name.

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