

The Relevance of the Sabbath¹

THE relevance of the fourth commandment is to be considered in respect of unbelievers and believers.

I. UNBELIEVERS

It is sometimes alleged that it is irrelevant, useless, and even improper to plead with unbelievers the obligation of Sabbath observance. This argument can be made very plausible. What is the use, it is claimed, of speaking of Sabbath observance to those who do not recognize God's claims upon them, who do not acknowledge the authority of God's Word, and have no commitment to Christ as Lord? In the indifference and ignorance so widespread, in the scorn so rampant respecting God's claims, we know only too well the reactions, sometimes of dismay, sometimes of rude hostility, sometimes of blank bewilderment, when we confront desecrators with the divine obligation and sanctions. And so it is easy to relieve ourselves of the unpleasant duty by pleading the futility and saying 'What's the use?'

It must be admitted that, in dealing with unbelievers and desecrators, much more is necessary than to plead the obligations of the Sabbath; and it is true that if this plea is isolated from the fundamental demands of the gospel grave misconception may be created and our witness greatly distorted.

The plea that it is wrong to urge Sabbath observance on unbelievers is invalid for several reasons:

1. Are we to say that it is improper or irrelevant to confront unbelievers

¹ Taken from unpublished notes.

with the law of God, with the sin of transgression, and with the wages that accrue? Consider, in this connection, the other commandments. The argument rests upon the fallacy that the fourth commandment is in a different category, a fallacy that we may not theoretically profess but to which we have practically or indeed pragmatically succumbed.

2. By the law is the knowledge of sin. And once we recognize the fact of the Sabbath law the conviction of sin can come through this command. So the conviction which is the vestibule of faith may be induced in connection with the sin. Hence we are doing a great disservice to the gospel and to the souls of men when we exclude Sabbath desecration from the scope of reproof and condemnation.

Failure to observe the Sabbath law is a conspicuous manifestation of dispute with the authority and goodness of God.

3. Sustained emphasis upon the necessity of Sabbath observance, like emphasis upon other ordinances of God, is a restraining influence that prevents unbelievers from multiplying the transgression that reaps the judgment of God and accentuates the hardening in sin and insensitivity to the demands of God. It is both callous and cruel to allow men to go unchecked in the trespass that reaps damnation.

4. The observances which the Sabbath law enjoins are means of grace and therefore channels of salvation. Jealousy for the eternal interests of men will constrain us to plead with the ungodly that they cultivate these observances, to the end that being in Christ's way they may meet with Christ and become the partakers of his grace. While rightly placing in the forefront the obligations of the Sabbath ordinance, we must also remind men of its privileges, and appeal to all men, that only at the cost of everlasting peril may these privileges be ignored and trodden under foot.

5. The outward observance of the Sabbath promotes public order and makes for the preservation of our most cherished rights and liberties. Unrestrained violation of the commandments of God destroys the peace without which the social order and political order are impossible.

These reasons make the plea with which we are dealing not only fallacious but iniquitous, and shows how alien it is to the principles which govern the witness of the Church of Christ. It is not that we may be disposed to a theoretical espousal or defence of the argument in

question. But we may be the victims of a way of thinking and practice that we do not overtly or theoretically profess.

II. BELIEVERS

When I speak of believers I have in mind all who entertain respect for the Sabbath institution and are characterized by observances in accord with its sanctity. There are several observations—

1. Sabbath observance is relevant only in the context of the whole counsel of God and of the sum total of Christian devotion. It is possible to make Sabbath-keeping, that is, abstinence from overt forms of desecration and attendance upon the exercises of worship, an instrument of the self-righteousness that is the arch-enemy of the Christian faith. This possibility is, I fear, too frequently an actuality. There are people who think that by these 'righteousnesses' they expect special favour from God and their religion consists to a large extent in these abstinences and exercises. They come under the indictment of God to Israel: 'Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them' (Isa. 1:14). The Sabbath commandment must never be isolated from the law of God in its entirety, or from the gospel of redeeming, regenerating, and sanctifying grace. This is most relevantly pointed up in the Sabbath of the New Testament economy. It is the Lord's day, the memorial of Christ's resurrection, and if our Sabbaths are not sanctified by the recognition that the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath, and by devotion to him as the Lord over all, then, however meticulous may be our abstinences and observances, they do not constitute Sabbath observance. They are an abomination to the Lord. The devoted Christian will be meticulous in abstinence and observance, but in the faith of, love to, and hope in, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; and will be in accord with the Saviour's word: 'If ye love me, keep my commandments'.

2. The relevance of the Sabbath in respect of positive requirement. Even for believers there is the danger of negativism in the weariness of inactivity. The rest of the Sabbath is not idleness; it is activity in the sacred exercises of meditation, contemplation, and prayer. If we have this interest there is not a moment for weariness or boredom. The Sabbath day is not one minute too long for us. Is that not the Lord's

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witness to the people of old, and even more relevantly to us? 'Call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable . . . Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord' (Isa. 58:13, 14). God's own rest is not that of idleness or inactivity. It is that of joy and satisfaction in the works he has wrought. So must ours be.

If the Sabbath is the Lord's day, it ought to be suffused with the joy derived from and correspondent with the resurrection joy of the Lord. We should never fail to appreciate our Lord's own resurrection joy. Jesus came trailing the clouds of humiliation. We think of Gethsemane with its agonizing confession, its prayer of holy revulsion, and its bloody sweat; of Calvary with its cry of abandonment. Here are the lowest depths of humiliation, of incomparable agony. But then there is the sequel of resurrection exultation. 'Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . . and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb. 12:2). 'Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?' (Luke 24:26). It is a morning without clouds, the morning of triumph, and therefore of triumphant joy. In this joy ours is begotten (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3).

Those jealous for the sanctity of the Lord's day are often accused of making or seeking to make the day one of gloom. There are two remarks respecting this charge. First, it is true that the observance has too frequently been conspicuously defective in respect of the joy that the day as the memorial of the resurrection should evoke. Why is it that so many in this category find the Sabbath a burden? Is it not because they know not the power and the joy of the resurrection? But, second, those who make the accusation confuse joy with jollity and jollification. The joy of which we are speaking now is a solemn, holy joy, and as such is a triumphant joy, filled with the raptures of adoration and praise. It stands in contrast with cold, hypocritical formalism and with secular jollity.

'This is the day that the Lord has made: we will rejoice and be glad in it' (Psa. 118:24).