

The Curse of the Fourth Commandment

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The Canadian Lord's Day Association

*For the Purpose of Preserving the Sanctity of the Lord's Day
(Exodus 20:8-11)*

‘The Curse of the Fourth Commandment’

What do I mean with “The Curse of the Fourth Commandment”? Many people think that the Fourth Commandment is negative because it means people are not allowed to open their stores and so on. As a result, they see it as a curse. Is the Sabbath a curse? Of course we all know that it is not a curse. As one of the two flowers remaining from Paradise, it is not a curse but a blessing. Nevertheless, the topic before us is “The Curse of the Fourth Commandment.”

In speaking about this topic, we first have to know what is not meant. I do not mean that the Sabbath itself is a curse. I do not mean that the Divine institution of the Sabbath is a curse. How can a gift of God be a curse? It is only a blessing - a great blessing. How marvellous it is that God the Creator gave us this great gift and that He was the first who kept the Sabbath. On the seventh day He Himself rested, that is, He took a delight in His works. In this way, He hallowed or sanctified this day. He made it a holy day, dedicated unto God and separated from other days. For this reason there is no curse in the Sabbath itself.

Yet, there is a curse connected with the Sabbath. How is that possible? The children of God come to know the curse of the Fourth Commandment. Did you ever come to know not that the Sabbath is a curse, but that there is a curse connected with the Sabbath?

We as friends or (board) members of the Canadian

Lord's Day Association see the Sabbath only as a positive thing, and we are inclined to forget that there is a very negative thing connected with the Sabbath. Therefore, it is good to meditate on this fact in order to warn each other and, by the Lord's blessing, to become aware that there is a curse connected with the Fourth Commandment.

How? Because of our flesh, our carnal nature, the good Law of God (all the Ten Commandments, and the Fourth Commandment on which we are focussing, too) became a curse. That good Law, that marvellously good gift of God, those Ten Commandments, written in the hearts of Adam and Eve and still faintly even in the hearts of heathens – yes, that good and holy Law of God, which is only meant as a blessing – became a curse!

No, the Law in itself is not a curse, but a curse is connected with the Law, as Paul declares in Galatians 3, verses 10 and 13. In verse 10 he states that everyone who is under the Law, is under the curse. Everyone who is of the works of the Law and who is trying to keep the Law is under the curse.

"Well," you say, "is it bad to keep the Law?" No, it is not bad to keep the Law. Again I ask: "Is it bad to *try* to keep the Law?" It depends. I could say, "Yes"; I could say, "No." In a certain sense of course it is very good to teach our children to keep the holy commandments of God: Honour thy father and thy mother; Do not kill; and all the other commands, including the Fourth Commandment about the Sabbath.

But to try to keep the Law without grace, without faith, and without the Holy Ghost is nothing else than to try to work out our own righteousness. Is this not a great

danger for every friend of the Lord's Day? Is this not a great danger for every board-member of the auxiliaries throughout Canada? Is this not a great danger for everyone, who thinks: "I love the Law of God. I have a delight in the Fourth Commandment. I even really defend the Fourth Commandment. I try to promote the Sabbath, the Lord's Day, and to keep it holy. Every Canadian, Christian or not, every person in the world, has to obey God also in this one of the Ten Commandments."

A great danger that we may fall into unawares is trying to work out our own righteousness. That, of course, is not good. Why not? Because it is misusing the Law of God. Can you misuse the Law of God? Yes. I can even say that you cannot do anything but to misuse the holy Ten Commandments of God. That is our nature. As we are born from Adam, we can only misuse the Ten Commandments. How do we misuse them? In this very subtle way, that we think we keep them and thereby we eliminate the work of Christ.

"Oh," you say, "do you mean, Pastor, that it is better not to keep the Ten Commandments? Is it better to sin? Is it better to be disobedient?" Well, of course not, although many Catechism class students in Genemuiden in Holland and also even in Canada ask these kinds of questions. For example, I tell them to repeat the Catechism, in which we often find "I," or "my," or "me," or "us" - for example: "What is *thy* only comfort." Then, they ask: is it good to repeat it and say it by heart, without our heart? We all know, that it is bad, when we say, "My only comfort is that I belong to Christ," while it is not true. Then we are liars. So, some ask, "Is it better, Pastor, not to say it?" Then I always ask, "Does it solve the

problem?" and I always receive the same answer: "No, it doesn't help." So, not to keep the Ten Commandments is no solution for this big problem. To break the Ten Commandments, especially the Fourth Commandment, is absolutely not a means to keep us from misusing the Ten Commandments.

If I can only misuse them, perhaps I should not use (keep) them at all. That is the conclusion of the Jews regarding the Third Commandment. They read: You may not take the Name of God in vain. "Well," they think, "let's take it easy and not use the Name of the Lord at all." So they use the word 'heaven' when they mean God. They say 'Him,' or 'the Eternal One,' or 'the Blessed One,' and they never use the Name 'Jehovah' in order to ensure that they do not misuse that name. If we apply this Jewish principle to the Fourth Commandment we may think: not to observe the Sabbath is better than to misuse it and keep it in a wrong way. But then we are wrong. The Lord shows us another way.

What is the curse of the Fourth Commandment? Paul says, when you are under the Law, you are under the curse of the Law. Have you ever come to know this? I assume that all of us agree with this truth. Since it is in the Bible, we all agree and say, "Yes, that is true." Perhaps you never thought about this text in connection with the Sabbath, but now you say, "It is true. I only thought about the Law as an abstract entity, not with a thought about the Fourth Commandment. But, yes, when you explain that we are all under the curse as long as we are under the Law, you are right."

The implication is that the only thing that must happen with you and me is that we escape being under

the Law. Paul speaks about that in Romans 6:14, when he teaches his readers, the holy children of God in Rome, that they are not under the Law, but under grace.

When you are under grace, the curse of the blessed Sabbath is gone. Galatians 3:13 tells us that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse Himself. He became the cursed One on the cross. Oh, how necessary to come to know for ourselves that the Sabbath is connected with the curse, not as being a gift of God but due to my flesh, my carnal nature, and my breaking of the Sabbath.

You say, "But isn't keeping the Sabbath an answer? Then at least you don't break it!" Be careful! All 'keeping' of the Fourth and the other Commandments without a true disposition of heart is not a true keeping of them! When we speak and think about the curse of the Fourth Commandment, it is important to know in what ways and to what extent there is a curse connected with your very strict keeping of the Sabbath.

Or was I mistaken when I said: "your very *strict* keeping of the Lord's Day"? Are you not such a strict keeper of the Sabbath? Do you not really prepare on Saturday night for the Sabbath? On a Tuesday evening, in the Catechism class of sixteen years and up, I was asked "How do we keep the Sabbath? And how should we behave in church?" Then one young person said, "Yah, but it's so difficult not to sleep in church." I asked him, "What time do you usually go to bed?" "Between 10 and 11," he answered. "And what time do you usually go to bed on Saturday evening?" I asked. "Between 11 and 12," he said. This is where Sabbath keeping begins. Preparing for the Sabbath involves going to bed on time. You must

also prepare for the Sabbath in many other ways. I will not elaborate on this because it is not my topic but my point is that you can prepare for the Sabbath in many ways and keep the day itself very strictly, and still break the Sabbath!

Was there ever sadness and grief in our hearts? Did we ever mourn, not only about our children who were unwilling to read and go to church? Yes, you may be sad about your children, but what about yourself? Have you ever confessed: "Oh Lord, I take such a delight in the Sabbath, but I see by the light of Thy Holy Spirit from Thy Word that not simply by my deeds, thoughts, and words but in my heart, I am a breaker of Thy Sabbath"? Everything we do by nature, even when we take a certain delight in the Sabbath, is selfish and not God-centred. We can come as far as the strictest of the Pharisees, like Saul before his conversion.

Oh, to feel sad for it, to mourn for it, and to confess to the Lord: "I am a member of the *Canadian Lord's Day Association*. I am a promoter of the Sabbath. I try to tell my children, 'The Sabbath is the most beautiful day of the week.' But, I am under the curse of the Fourth Commandment because I never kept it as I ought to." One little transgression of one of the Ten Commandments brings us under the curse of the Law. This reality must not only be the confession but also the experience of every one of us. For the first time and by renewal, we must see, "Lord, every new Sabbath I am a transgressor of Thy holy Commandment." This is applicable to all of God's commands. As a result, only one thing can be said after the strictest and most Biblical observance of the Sabbath: we are under the curse.

By the Lord's gracious working in our heart, a blessed result of this experience of being under the curse of the Fourth Commandment is that we come to see that we need a Saviour. Then you say: "I need a Saviour not only due to my transgressions against the other nine commandments, but also due to my transgression of the Fourth Commandment. I need One, Who has kept the Fourth Commandment sinlessly in my place, without any transgression in deeds, words, thoughts or being, without any exception all the Sabbaths of His life."

Is Jesus Christ precious to you as the Keeper of the Fourth Commandment, as the only Sabbath Keeper in all generations of Israel and in all the ages of world history until now? As the only One, is He precious to you? He kept the Sabbath not for Himself but for His people and to the glory of His Father. He kept all the Ten Commandments as a Substitute in the place of His people.

As children of God, do we know what we read in Galatians 3:10: that by nature we are under the curse of the Law? Do we know what we read in verse 13: that we are redeemed from the curse of the Law? Knowing these verses is the summary of spiritual life, in which Law and Gospel meet together in that one precious Person, Jesus Christ. Oh to see the blessed result of the knowledge of being under the curse of the Law, being under the curse of every one of the Ten Commandments, including the curse of the Fourth Commandment! That result is for room to come in our hearts and lives for Another, that Holy One from Above!

Once we did not love Him because we did not need Him. We were content with our own Sabbath-keeping. We were satisfied with our strictness. When many people

made the border wider and allowed more and more things on the Sabbath, and Sabbath-observance went downhill, we were so glad that we as a family could keep the Sabbath so Biblically. Yet, all the while, we never, never needed Jesus.

But now, the blessed result of the experience of the curse of the Fourth Commandment is that we have come to value and esteem the Lord Jesus Christ, not only as the One Who was condemned for the Third Commandment (He blasphemes God!), but also for the Fourth Commandment (He breaks the Sabbath!). Jesus did not defend Himself. He was willing to be condemned, and to be sentenced to death as a transgressor of all Ten Commandments. He was not a transgressor but was reckoned to be one. Even His dear and beloved Father treated Him as if He was a Sabbath-breaker, a blasphemer, a transgressor of all the commandments, because He willingly took on Himself all the sins and all the curses of His people, including the curse on Sabbath-breaking. Blessed Gospel!

As Canadian Lord's Day Association, we ought to work with concern for the Lord's Day with this frame of heart. We are not to keep the Law for our justification. We are not even to keep the Fourth Commandment simply because we ought to by virtue of it being an institution from creation. Yes, you are right, that it is an institution from creation and therefore does not belong to the Law for Israel only. Nevertheless, that it is a creation ordinance is not the highest reason to love and to keep the Day of the Lord. The right disposition of heart involves living out of the Keeper of the Sabbath, the One Who not only carried all the sins of His people and all the curses on His people,

but Who also obeyed every one of the commandments. Although He was condemned as if He was the transgressor of all the Ten Commandments, and although His Father even punished Him as if He was the transgressor of every one of the Ten Commandments, nevertheless, He kept them all. He kept them completely. He kept them always. He kept them without any exception. Now, from this fulfilment in Christ, we are to observe the Sabbath.

In the time of Calvin and Luther there was a large discussion about the function of the Ten Commandments in the life of a Christian. If you are not under the Law but under grace (Romans 6:14); if, by the application of the Holy Spirit and the experience of faith, you can confess with Paul "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us ... [in order] that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles" (Galatians 3:13-14); if this is true in your heart, does the Law still have any function in your life? The curse of the Law is taken away by my Saviour, my precious Substitute and Surety. Do I still have to keep the Commandments? A large discussion with differences of opinion occurred in the time of Calvin and Luther and also since their time.

In his Catechisms, Luther gives much attention to the Ten Commandments. He gives more room to the explanation of how to keep the Ten Commandments as Christians in every day life, than to all other topics of the Bible, such as justification, adoption, and atonement.

The Westminster Assembly was an assembly of God-fearing Puritans, such as Samuel Rutherford, who met in the 1640s to write the last major Reformed confession and catechisms. In their Shorter and Larger Catechisms there is more room devoted to the Ten Commandments

(and especially in the life of Christians), than to all the other topics together.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* also gives much room and attention to its third part of thankfulness or sanctification of the Christian, who is justified by faith alone and belongs to Jesus Christ through the union of the Holy Spirit. Within this third part, the Catechism pays much attention to how to keep the Ten Commandments, not with a slavish but a childlike fear, since the commandments are without curses for the Christian. The Catechism speaks of obeying out of a fear that is united with love and grows from the root of faith. We are to obey as a child. We are not to obey because there is eternal hell and we have to be afraid that breaking the Commandment of the Sabbath can cost us our eternal salvation. No, that is not the way to keep it.

Calvin, in his *Institutes*, and the Puritans, in many of their writings, explain that the Ten Commandments become the rule of life for the children of God. Although people disagreed and still disagree, I say, "Oh what a love-Commandment, fulfilled in Christ and kept by Christ! There is no longer a fear for the curse of the Fourth Commandment, but love!"

When by faith in the atoning work of the Lamb of God you know that all the curses – also this one – are taken away, you join David and Paul in their delight in the Law of God. You do not view the Law as a Pharisee, trying to improve or add something to the work of Christ. No! Out of thankfulness, you love the Law.

Yet, now we go one step further, child of God! By grace you are redeemed from the curse of the Law. You are no longer under the Law as a Covenant of Works, as a

threatening, punishing and cursing Law. I ask you, "How many times do you really keep the Christian Sabbath according to the will of your Father, in the disposition of a redeemed person? Keep it as one who is not afraid to incur the curse of God any longer, but is afraid to grieve the heart of your Father by sin, even though you need not fear that your salvation is at stake? You are not afraid that the faithfulness of God will cease or that heaven will be lost. No no, this is all secure in Christ. You will forever be saved by and in Christ. You may keep the Sabbath out of love because you are no longer under the curse.

I know that there are God-fearing people, also in our days and perhaps in our midst, who say, "The Sabbath is not the Lord's Day. The Fourth Commandment has nothing to do with the Lord's Day. We keep the Lord's Day, not because God commands it in the Fourth Commandment, but only because there must be order in the church. We like to go to the place of worship and we try to be orderly, so we think that keeping the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the best way." These people are mistaken, according to my insight in the Holy Word of God. I do not blame them. It can be that they have an evangelical delight in this Commandment.

It is very important that we as the *Canadian Lord's Day Association*, churches, parents, and servants of God, in teaching, defending, promoting and preaching the holy commandments of God, preach them in that Reformed disposition of heart, which Calvin, the Puritans and our own *Heidelberg Catechism* teach us. Let us tell our children, that the Sabbath no longer has a curse connected with it for ourselves to bear. In holy gladness and joyous excitement we may tell the people that we love the Sabbath, not because we can keep it, but because

our Lord kept it. Oh, to be a lover of the Sabbath, not because you are ever satisfied with your keeping of it, but with the prayer: "Lord, I am still a big transgressor, also of this commandment. But Lord, there is a Refuge and a Fountain of cleansing, also for me and also for my Sabbath-sins. There is a Surety to Whom I may take my refuge every Sabbath from beginning to end."

Oh people of God, what would it be a great mercy if we, by the grace of God, may have this insight into the Law of God. Then we will not try to keep it in our own power, but by living out of the One Who kept it. Then we will never try to keep it as a slave, who is forced to do obey – no, no – but as a child, who cries: "Lord, give me a heart that has seven Sabbaths a week." May this be true.

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