

The Lord's Day

Archibald Alexander (1772-1851)

REASON teaches that there is a God, and that he ought to be worshipped. Had man remained in his primeval state of integrity, social worship would have been an incumbent duty. But it is evident that continual worship, whatever may be the fact in heaven, would not have been required of him while on the earth. We know, from express revelation, that it was appointed unto him to keep the garden of Eden, and dress it; and this would have required much attention, and vigorous exertion. He was also constituted lord of the inferior animals; and the exercise of this dominion would of necessity occupy a portion of his time and attention. In order to perform the primary duty of worshipping his Creator in that manner which was becoming and proper, he must have had some portion of his time appropriated to that service.

The worship due to the great Creator requires time for the contemplation of his attributes, as revealed in his glorious works. It requires time, also, to recollect all the manifestations of his wisdom and goodness in the dispensations of his Providence, and to give vocal expression to feelings of gratitude for the benefits received, and the happiness bestowed. No doubt, devotional feelings were habitual in the hearts of our first parents. No doubt, they sent up, more formally, their morning and evening prayers; but more time is needed to draw off the thoughts from visible things, and to concentrate them on the great invisible Giver of existence. Short snatches of time are not sufficient to perform this noblest of all duties in a proper manner. A whole day, at certain periods, was needed, so that there might be time for the contemplation of divine things, and for the full and free exercises of devotion. And as man is a social being, and so constituted, that by uniting with others who have the same views and feelings, his own through sympathy are rendered more animating and pleasing, it is evident that it was intended that mankind should worship and praise God in a general and public, as well as in an individual and private capacity. What proportion of time should be consecrated to this service, the reason of man could not have determined. If it had been left free by the law of God, the obligation to set apart the due proportion of time would not have been so binding and sacred, as if the Almighty Creator should designate the day which should be employed in his service. And behold the amazing condescension of God! With some view to this very thing, He was pleased to perform the work of creation in six days, and to rest on the seventh; thus setting an example to his creature man; for He not only rested on the seventh day, but *sanctified* it; that is, set it apart to a holy use – to be employed, not in bodily labour or converse with the world, but in the contemplation of the works and attributes of God, and in holding

delightful communion with his Maker. God could have commanded the world into existence, with all its species of living creatures, in a single moment; but for man's sake, he created the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, the light, and the air, and vegetables, and animals, in six successive days, and then ceased to work; not that the Almighty could be weary and need rest; but for the purpose of teaching man that whilst he might lawfully spend six days in worldly employments, he must rest on the seventh day. This day, from the beginning, was a holy day.

It is wonderful to find learned commentators trying to prove that no day was sanctified at the beginning; but that Moses mentions it in his history of the creation, by way of anticipation. But this is an unnatural and forced construction. When the fourth commandment was proclaimed from Sinai, and written by the finger of God on one of the stone tables, the reason given for sanctifying the Sabbath day is, that "in six days God made the heavens and the earth, and the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the Sabbath day, and hallowed it." When the Sabbath is first mentioned by Moses, after the exodus, there is no appearance of its being a new institution; but it is referred to as a day accustomed to be observed; or, at least, as one on which it was not lawful to perform the common labours of the week. The mention of it occurs in the account of the descent of the manna. It is said, on the sixth day, they gathered twice as much as on other days. "And he said unto them, this is that which the Lord hath said, tomorrow is the rest of the Sabbath; bake that which ye will bake today, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over, lay up for you, to be kept until the morrow. And Moses said, Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath unto the Lord. And so the people rested on the seventh day." Exod. 16:23. Evidently, this was no part of the ceremonial law, which was not yet given. It seems clear, that the reference is to a day of rest, of which the people had some knowledge.

The decisive argument for the perpetual obligation of the Sabbath is the fourth commandment. The ten commandments, as being of a moral nature, and therefore always binding, were promulgated in a very different manner from the other institutions of Moses. They were first uttered in a voice of thunder, from the midst of the fire on Sinai, and were then inscribed by the finger of God on two tables of hewn stone. Now, it is admitted, that all the other precepts of the Decalogue are moral; and would it not be an unaccountable thing that a ceremonial, temporary commandment should be inserted in the midst of these moral precepts? This is the law which Christ says he came not to destroy, but to fulfill. None of these commandments have been abrogated; and therefore the fourth, as well as the others, remains in full force. And it is remarkable that the prophets, in denouncing the sins of the people, always mention the violation of the Sabbath in the same catalogue with the transgression of moral precepts.

It may seem to cursory readers of the New Testament, that our Lord abrogated the Sabbath, and in his own conduct disregarded it. But this is far from being a correct view of the fact. The Pharisees insisted on such a rigid observation of the day of rest, as to prohibit works of real necessity and mercy. This superstitious and over-scrupulous opinion, our Saviour denounced, and showed, that healing the sick, and satisfying the cravings of hunger, were things lawful to be done on the Sabbath. And what renders it certain that this is the correct view of the matter is, that our Lord justifies his conduct by the practice of the saints in ancient times, when the Sabbath was in full force by the acknowledgment of all, and by the provisions of the Levitical law itself, which required the priests to perform double labour on the Sabbath. And he, moreover, showed, that the accusation against him, for a violation of the Sabbath, was hypocritical; because, the very persons who made it, would pull an ox or sheep out of a pit into which it had fallen, on the Sabbath day; and also, because they thought it no violation of the sacredness of the Sabbath, to lead an ox or ass to watering, though they objected to the disciples satisfying their hunger on that day.

One of his expressions has evidently been misunderstood, by some interpreters. It is where he says, that "the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath." They have interpreted this to mean, that Christ claimed the right to do those things on the Sabbath, which would be unlawful to others on that day. But this cannot be the meaning; for Christ was made under the law, and had bound himself to obey it. He came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. A breach of the fourth commandment would have been sin in him, as much as in any other. I take the meaning to be, that as he appointed the Sabbath, so he best knew how to interpret his own law.

There is a text in Paul's epistle to the Romans, which has been supposed to teach that it is a matter of indifference whether we observe the Sabbath or not. – "One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be full persuaded in his own mind." But evidently, the question here discussed relates to the ceremonial law. It relates not to the Sabbath; which, as we have seen, was no part of the ceremonial law, but belonged to the moral code. The ceremonial law was virtually abrogated by the death of Christ; but all Christians were not yet enlightened to understand their Christian liberty; and such were indulged in their continued observance of these rites. The apostle is treating here of meats and drinks and festival days, the binding obligation of which had ceased.

But in the epistle to the Colossians, Paul says, "Let no man, therefore, judge you, in meat or drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or the Sabbath days." Here, again, the ceremonial law is obviously the subject of discourse. He is speaking of "meats," "drinks," "new moons," and "Sabbath days." And the word Sabbath relates to the numerous

Sabbaths of the ceremonial law, distinct from the weekly Sabbath. Whenever a festival of the law continued eight days, the first and the last were always kept as Sabbaths. Or the reference might be to the sabbatical year, for the word days is not in the original.

But on supposition that the weekly Sabbath was intended, the meaning might be that the Jewish Sabbath, namely, the seventh day of the week, was no longer obligatory on Christians, since they had, by divine direction, adopted the first day for their day of sacred rest and of holding public assemblies for the worship of God. This leads to the inquiry, what evidence have we that such a change was ever made by divine authority? The uniform practice of Christians, to meet on the first day of the week, from the very time of Christ's resurrection, is strong evidence that this change was introduced by Christ and the apostles. It was suitable, that as the worship of God by his people, would have principally respect to the work of redemption, it should be celebrated on that day on which it was made manifest that this glorious work was completed. Accordingly, Christ having risen from the dead always met his disciples on this day. And afterwards, the apostles and the churches were accustomed to come together on this day, "to break bread," that is to celebrate the Lord's supper. And when the apostle wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians, it was already established as a custom, not only in the church of Corinth, but in the churches of Macedonia and Galatia, that their contributions for the poor, should be collected on this day. From the apostolical practice, we rightly infer the divine authority for this change. So generally was the first day of the week observed, in commemoration of Christ's resurrection, and for the celebration of religious worship, that in the times of the apostles, it had obtained the significant denomination of the Lord's Day.

Unless we had a particular day set apart, by divine authority for the worship of God, this important duty could never be performed in an edifying manner; and public worship would, for the most part, fall into disuse. And if a certain day should be agreed upon by the church, or by the civil government, it would want that authority and sanctity which are necessary to its general observance. As it is, we find how difficult it is to get men to cease from their earthly cares and pursuits on this day. It was, therefore, wisely placed among the most binding precepts of the moral law.

This chapter shall be concluded by a few directions for the observance of the Lord's Day.

1. Let the whole day be consecrated to the service of God, especially in acts of worship, public and private. This weekly recess from worldly cares and avocations, affords a precious opportunity for the study of God's word, and for the examination of our own hearts. Rise early, and let your first thoughts and aspirations be directed to heaven. Meditate much and profoundly on divine things, and endeavour to acquire a degree of spirituality on this day

which will abide with you through the whole week.

2. Consider the Lord's Day an honour and delight. Let your heart be elevated in holy joy, and your lips be employed in the high praises of God. This day more resembles heaven, than any other portion of our time; and we should endeavour to imitate the worship of heaven, according to that petition of the Lord's prayer – "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Never permit the idea to enter your mind, that the Sabbath is a burden. It is a sad case, when professing Christians are weary of this sacred rest, and say, like some of old, "When will the Sabbath be gone, that we may sell corn, and set forth wheat?" As you improve this day, so probably will you be prospered all the week.

3. Avoid undue rigour, and Pharisaic scrupulosity, for nothing renders the Lord's Day more odious. Still keep in view the great end of its institution; and remember that the Sabbath was instituted for the benefit of man, and not to be a galling yoke. The cessation from worldly business and labour is not for its own sake, as if there was any thing morally good in inaction, but we are called off from secular pursuits on this day, that we may have a portion of our time to devote uninterruptedly to the worship of God. Let every thing then be so arranged in your household, beforehand, that there may be no interruption to religious duties, and to attendance on the means of grace.

As divine knowledge is the richest acquisition within our reach, and as this knowledge is to be found in the word of God, let us value this day, as affording all persons an opportunity of hearing and reading the word. And as the fourth commandment requires the heads of families to cause the Sabbath to be observed by all under their control, or within their gates, it is very important that domestic and culinary arrangements should be so ordered, that no one be deprived of the opportunity of attending on the word and worship of God which this day affords. If we possess any measure of the true spirit of devotion, this sacred day will be most welcome to our hearts; and we will rejoice when they say, "Let us go unto the house of the Lord." To such a soul, the opportunity of enjoying spiritual communion with God will be valued above all price, and be esteemed as the richest privilege which creatures can enjoy on earth.

4. Whilst you conscientiously follow your own sense of duty in the observance of the rest of the Sabbath, be not ready to censure all who may differ from you in regard to minute particulars, which are not prescribed or commended in the word of God. Beware of indulging yourself in any practice which may have the effect of leading others to disregard the rest and sanctity of the Sabbath. Let not your liberty in regard to what you think may be done, be a stumbling block to cause weaker brethren to offend, or unnecessarily to give them pain, or to lead them to entertain an unfavourable opinion of your piety.

5. As, undoubtedly, the celebration of public worship and gaining divine instruction from the divine oracles, is the main object of the institution of the Christian Sabbath, let all be careful to attend on the services of the sanctuary on this day. And let the heart be prepared by previous prayer and meditation for a participation in public worship, and while in the more immediate presence of the Divine Majesty, let all the people fear before him, and with reverence adore and praise his holy name. Let all vanity, and curious gazing, and slothfulness, be banished from the house of God. Let every heart be lifted up on entering the sanctuary, and let the thoughts be carefully restrained from wandering on foolish or worldly objects, and resolutely recalled when they have begun to go astray. Let brotherly love be cherished, when joining with others in the worship of God. The hearts of all the church should be united in worship, as the heart of one man. Thus, will the worship of the sanctuary below, be a preparation for the purer, sublimer worship in the temple above.

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