The Lord’s Day

Despite this phrase, “The Lord’s Day,” many professing Christians still view Sunday as just another day in the weekend. It is, to them, as my pastor puts it, ‘Saturday with church in the morning.’ Many find it perfectly acceptable to attend Sunday school and the Morning Worship Service and, after a hearty meal, flip on the TV for some football or the latest action flick. “So what?” you may ask, “What’s the big deal? We went to church, right?” Yet there’s a serious problem with this mindset. It’s not that going to only one service isn’t enough; that we need to be as spiritual as possible to gain God’s good favor. Rather, as Jesus tells the Pharisees in Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The Christian Sabbath wasn’t instituted as a continuation of the Old Covenant rites and rituals that pointed to Christ – for after Christ’s coming such an institution would be legalistic – instead, it is an entire day set aside for man to worship God. The Lord’s day isn’t just one more thing to put on the list, but a break from all the temptations and trials and worldly things of life; a day to step back and focus on God and his Word. While it is an obligation to the Christian as part of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:8), it is also a blessing to God’s people that needs to be taken advantage of. Some may say, “oh, but I do! The worship service is a great blessing to me and I’m very grateful” – and yet they throw the afternoon down the drain. The phrase “Lord’s *DAY*” is not some idiomatic catch-phrase tossed around by hardy, beer-drinking reformers – its origin is thoroughly biblical, as John receives his revelation on Patmos on “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). “Great,” you say. “So I’m supposed to live to the glory of God all the time, I knew that. What’s so special about Sunday?”

Sunday – the first day of the week – is referred to as the “Christian Sabbath,” that is, the continuation of the Old Testament Holy Day that was established at creation when God set apart one day in seven to be Holy. The Jewish Sabbath was constantly reestablished, reinforced, and reemphasized all throughout the Old Testament as Moses gave the civil, ceremonial, and moral laws to the people. The most notable re-expression of this day was at Mount Sinai, where God established the Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments.

After Christ’s resurrection on the first day of the week (Sunday, see Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke24:1, John 20:1), Christians began meeting on anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection, symbolizing both a continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament Sabbath, as well as a new Sabbath that now looked back upon the glorious news of Christ. This Lord’s Day theology is intricately linked to New Covenant Theology – now that Christ has returned, the veil has been removed and a wealth of doctrine becomes clear and able to be exposited and preached on Sunday.

But the death and resurrection of the Messiah didn’t do away with the solemnity and obligation of the Sabbath. Jesus himself said that he came not to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). When the newly forged church came together on this newly appointed day, they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). When Paul was in Troas, he prolonged his Lord’s Day sermon ‘till midnight and beyond. (Acts 20:7) And the penalty for Old Testament disobedience of the Sabbath laws was death (Exodus 31:13-17).

In Isaiah 58:13-14 Isaiah says,   
“If because of the Sabbath you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, And honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word, then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah is telling us that the Lord’s day is a *holy* day, not to be corrupted or wasted by frivolous worldly pursuits. While finishing up those homework problems is probably one of the best uses of your time on any other afternoon, on the Lord’s day it is wasting the precious time God has specifically set apart for *us*. Not only are we worshipping God, but we are benefiting ourselves – God knows that we need to read, pray, and meditate on his Word. Yet the abandonment of our own pleasures does not mean we must then make Sunday a boring day where we sit motionless and speechless in stiff-backed chairs, afraid to move lest the ever-vigilant eye of “Father” see us and the paddle be brought out. No, we are to “call the Sabbath a *delight*,” to take “*delight* in the LORD.”

But this doesn’t mean that all practicality is forgotten on the Christian Sabbath. Jesus himself told the Pharisees when they accused him of law-breaking when he healed a sick man on the Sabbath that “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” “Which of you,” he says, “who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?”

The Westminster Confession sums it up nicely in sections VII and IX of Chapter XXI:

“As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.   
VII. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”

Those are strong words. Section VII is also one of the most common sections that PCA ministers take exception to. It makes sense. Most of us don’t really want to have to be “taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship.” Honestly, it seems rather toilsome and boring. Who wants to read stuffy theology all day long? Hopefully that’s something that sanctification fixes in us. We need to pray that the Holy Spirit would work in us and make us “heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him” (Heidelberg Catechism Q. 1), that we’d want to read his Word, to meditate on it, to study the aspects of doctrine, to read the biblical stories, to pray God’s Word back to him, to read commentaries on his Word – both in private (as Jesus said to his disciples, see Matthew 6:5-15), but also together in Christian Fellowship – with family, and in Corporate Worship (a morning service opening the day, and an Evening Service closing out the day with God-centered worship).

And yet the Westminster Confession does include that phrase “and in the duties of necessity and mercy,” which of course is Scripturally based. Doing the dinner dishes, for example, is an act of practical necessity – if I didn’t do them, there would be a pile of dishes backed up Monday morning and nobody would be able to eat breakfast – just like leaving the sheep in the ditch would be impractical as you’d have to come back and get him the next day – and not to mention cruel and heartless. (It does make me wonder why the man with the sheep was anywhere near a ditch on the Sabbath, but oh well…)

Finally, though, the Sabbath is a sign. God says, “Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them.”   
  
 And Augustine, in his *City of God*, Book XXII, 30, “Certainly [the City of God] shall have no greater joy than the celebration of the grace of Christ, who redeemed us by His blood. There shall be accomplished the words of the psalm, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ There shall be the great Sabbath which has no evening, which God celebrated among His first works... For we ourselves shall be the seventh day, when we shall be filled and replenished with God’s blessing and sanctification. There shall we be still, and know that He is God.”

“And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” The Lord’s day is a day of rest. Sure it’s a day of physical rest, rest from our daily jobs, but really, it’s a day of resting in Christ; resting in the grace of God. Ultimately, the Christian Sabbath points to a greater day, a day that will last into eternity, that will encompass all the joy and happiness you’ve ever known to a power of infinity, for we will be with God, resting in an eternal Sabbath, forever.

# Bibliography

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