

Celebrating Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11; Lord's Day 38)

Reading: Hebrews 4:1-13

Haven't things changed rapidly in our society?

Changes in transport, communication and technology.

And there are other changes too in our lifetime.

That is especially true when you deal with the fourth commandment.

Then we see how things have come a long way from our own childhood.

There was the time when for example,

on Saturday evening the shoes were polished,

and the potatoes were peeled,

and all the things of the week were set aside,

and we were ready for the Sabbath.

How things have changed.

But are the changes all that bad?

A lot of books have been written on the Sunday-Sabbath subject...

and many more will.

But what do we find God says about our Sabbath rest,

and how the authors of the HC interpret that?

And I think that what we discover about the Sabbath observance of the past seems to go beyond what God has commanded.

[Lord's Day 38; Exodus 20:8-11]

What is Missing

Do you notice what is missing from the Heidelberg Catechism's explanation of the fourth commandment?

The Heidelberg Catechism says nothing about work and resting from our work.

You need to realize there are two streams of thought in Reformed churches when it comes to the fourth commandment.

The **first** stream is that of the Puritans and is found in the Westminster Confession and Catechism; this stream does talk about work and resting from work.

The **second** stream is that of other churches as expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism; this stream says God's New Testament people find rest in a person – the Lord Jesus Christ – and not in a day.

Remember what Jesus said?

He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

Our rest is in Jesus and not in a day.

I also want you to notice why we are to keep the fourth commandment.

When we look at Exodus 20, we are pointed to the created order:

(Ex 20:11) For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

God's people were told to be like God: to work six days and rest on the seventh.

And it is true that the Sabbath is woven into our existence...

that in the wisdom of God people should rest every seven days.

There is a story told of a wagon train on its way from St. Louis to Oregon. Its members were devout Christians, so the whole group observed the habit of stopping for the Sabbath day. Winter was approaching quickly, however, and some among the group began to panic in fear that they wouldn't reach their destination before the heavy snows. Consequently, several members proposed to the rest of the group that they should quit their practice of stopping for the Sabbath and continue driving onward seven days a week.

This proposal triggered a lot of contention in the community, so finally it was suggested that the wagon train should split into two groups - those who wanted to observe the Sabbath and those who preferred to travel on that day. The proposal was accepted, and both groups set out and travelled together until the next Sabbath day, when one group continued while the other remained at rest.

Guess which group got to Oregon first?

You're right.

The ones who kept the Sabbath reached their destination first. Both the people and the horses were so rested by their Sabbath observance that they could travel much more vigorously and effectively the other six days of the week.

There are many other examples of how God's pattern of resting every seven days is woven into our lives ... both physically and mentally.

I am certain that the Divine rhythm is to rest every seven days ...

But our rest is for God ... not Rest for more work

When we look at Deuteronomy 5, we are pointed to another reason:

deliverance from the slavery of Egypt:

(Deut 5:15) Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Do you hear the reason for keeping the fourth commandment?

Keep the fourth commandment because the Lord has saved you.

The Heidelberg Catechism has chosen to emphasize the reason of Deuteronomy 5.

The New Testament clearly says that we are not under law (Romans 6).

So when it comes to the Sabbath, the key issue is not following precise rules about what we can and can't do.

Under the New Covenant, God's laws are written on our hearts and it becomes a heart attitude rather than a ritualistic legalistic rule.

As Christians we are not bound to keep the Sabbath in the way that the Jews were. In Colossians 2 and Galatians 4 Paul declares our freedom from the Sabbath and such religious festivals.

How Did Legalism Distort This Commandment?

The Old Testament contains ever more complicated rules about what you can and can't do on the Sabbath.

There are 39 categories of work described.

For example, "winnowing" (separating wheat from chaff) becomes any activity to separate edible food from inedible, so picking out fish bones or filtering water is prohibited.

"lighting a fire" leads some today to ban driving a car or switching on an electric light, or even going in a lift.

How Does the New Testament Apply This Commandment to Us?

In Mark's gospel, and elsewhere, Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:23ff)

Jesus seems to argue that the Sabbath is for the benefit of man.

It is not to become an oppressive law.

He also says it is fine to "do good" on the Sabbath.

It's amazing how easily we tend to turn something that's meant for our benefit... first into a duty, and then into a legalistic command.

For example, take church attendance or small group attendance.

Each of these things is designed to give us a break from our weekly routine and to refresh us;

to give us a chance to worship and/or study the Bible together.

We would do well to get into the habit of just doing them every week.

But too often we think of each of these things as “work” and “an effort.”

We come home from a busy day and think, “Shall I go to small group?”

That is our mistake right there.

We would do better to build it into our lives in such a way that we don’t have to make a decision, we just go!

For when we try and decide, we are tempted instead to watch TV.

But we don’t ask you to turn attendance into a duty, still less a law.

Rather, we commend it as good for you!

If you love God and want to grow in your faith, just decide now that you are not going to constantly be deciding whether to go or not, but instead you build it into the rhythm of your life...you make it a habit.

The Catechism tells us, that out of gratitude to God for salvation, we are to make every effort to come together for worship when God's people "regularly" meet.

The Catechism also tells us what we, out of thankfulness, should be doing when we gather together for worship.

I regularly attend the assembly of God's people
to learn what God's Word teaches,
to participate in the sacraments,
to pray to God publicly,
and to bring Christian offerings for the poor.

We come to church to hear God's Word.

We come to church to pray and sing to God.

We come to church to bring our offerings to God.

And we come to church to participate in the God-ordained sacraments.

Do you notice the verbs, the action words, in the Catechism's answer?

Sunday worship is NOT a spectator event...

like a volleyball or soccer game, like the Olympics, like a movie.

It requires personal involvement.

We don't just sit in the pew and wait to be entertained.

We all are to be involved and our all is to be involved because God has saved us.

The meaning of Sabbath.

God did not rest on the seventh day because he was tired.

He stop from his work and entered into the enjoyment of what he had made.

His rest meant enjoying creation.

When we share in that rest, we enter into the enjoyment of God and his creation.

The Sabbath...that's paradise.

And to rest means to live in Paradise, with the creator in his creation.

When someone works through winter building a swimming pool in his backyard...

Sabbath arrives on the day he and his friends swim in the pool!

The work is finished and it is very good.

And when God's work had finished he rested.

However, after the fall into sin the way into the garden was barred...

there was no more rest.

Adam sweated between thorns and thistles as if he were a slave of the land.

Eve moaned in pain because life was lived amid tears and sorrow.

The only hope for humanity at this point was God's promise that someday the poison would be removed and the Sabbath reinstated.

With sin alienating people from God, God taught his covenant people to count their days and the seventh one is holy and blessed.

God was strict and insistent that this day be kept holy.

The Sabbath was the Hebrew's sign of health and wholeness,

and Israel proved it wanted to keep the covenant by observing the seventh day.

But the people disobeyed...they changed the observance, let the day go, they carried their loads to the gates of Jerusalem for trade...God destroyed the gates!

Then comes Jesus...born under the law, to redeem those under the law (Gal 4:4-5).

So he kept the laws of the Sabbath, as directed by God, not man.

He taught their true meaning.

In numerous conflicts with the leaders of the day Jesus taught that the Sabbath laws can never be quoted against the true well-being of people.

The Sabbath was made for man, not the man for the Sabbath.

And so he healed on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a sign of the paradise, the Shalom of God.

In and through Christ, that day is here.

Christ gathers and preserves his community.
He gathers, so we must congregate.

Since the first Sunday after Easter the assembling of Jesus' followers has not only been an accepted pattern but a life condition.

The survival of the church does not depend on a day (one in seven) or a place (the building).

But the church cannot exist without assembly.

Sometimes the enemies of the church understand this better than the members do. To crack down on Christians, governments will always first ban the assembly of the people.

Every book of the Bible mentions, or implies, the value of assembly.

As it says in Matthew 18, 'when you gather, I am there.'

No child of God lives apart from the people of God.

No member of the body of Christ lives apart from the body.

The meeting, the praise of God, the exhortation, the communion, are essentials of Christian faith.

To abandon assembly, is to forsake God.

Our Sunday is not a modern-day Sabbath, and it is not yet the eternal Sabbath.

We live between the times.

We are freed by the gospel from the penalty of the law.

We have begun the eternal Sabbath.

We value the day called Sunday.

We cannot say that God prescribed one particular day...

But God in his wisdom in the OT laws has given the rhythm of one in seven as a principle for today.

Every Day and Sunday

But notice how God's will for our lives in the fourth commandment is expressed as more than regular attendance at worship in the Catechism.

It also adds that the fourth commandment has something to say about every day of our life.

The fourth commandment means,
that every day of my life
I rest from my evil ways,
let the Lord work in me through his Spirit,

and so begin already in this life
the eternal Sabbath.

Do you realize what the Catechism teaches us here?
It teaches that it is impossible to be a Sunday Christian without also being a Monday Christian.

You can't live one way on Sunday and another way throughout the week.
Or, to put it another way, the Lord must be worshiped not just on Sunday but on Monday as well.

God will not accept our Sunday worship unless we live for Him and according to His will throughout the entire week.

Conclusion

"What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?"

How are we to thank God for salvation?

When we, out of gratitude, obey the fourth commandment, we "begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath." Wow!

Sunday is a foretaste of heaven.

Sunday is a foretaste of life in the new heaven and earth.

Sunday prepares us for the future.

Sunday is meant to be the one day that lifts you above and beyond your daily routine, and provides you with an understanding of what life is all about.

On Sunday, you are brought into contact with another realm, a different kind of realm, a higher realm than this earth and the things of this earth.

We fight against the tyranny of work, and the dollar, of any god

We strive to keep a day free for everyone...so we can rest.

On Sunday's we come close to the eternal Sabbath

On that day, in our assemblies and in the works of mercy and mutual exhortation we share in the Holy Spirit and taste the goodness of the Word of God.

If you are a Christian, Sunday should be the best day of the week.