

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Session V

The Fourth Commandment

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...” (Exodus 20:8-11 = Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

I. The Old Testament Meaning

1. The Sabbath is neither simply a day of the week (the second day of the “weekend”) nor simply a time of refraining from work. Abraham Joshua Heschel explains the deeper meaning of the Sabbath: “For the biblical mind, however, labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one’s lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a best of burden and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work...The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath.”

2. Heschel again: “To observe the seventh day does not mean merely to obey or to conform to the stricture of a divine command. To observe is to celebrate the creation of the world and to create the seventh day all over again, the mystery of holiness in time.”

3. Genesis 2:2: What is created on the seventh day is, according to Jewish thinking, was *menuha* (usually rendered as “rest”) which Heschel defines like this: “It is a state in which there is no strife and no fighting, no fear and no distrust. The essence of a good life is *menuha*”.

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

1. The Sabbath is a sign first of the world’s creation and second of the world’s re-creation. Creation through Christ (Colossians 1:15-20) and recreation through Christ’s resurrection (Romans 8) are organically connected.

2. In keeping the Sabbath we renew our faith in the fulfillment of the rest it promises—rest from the labor of this life, rest from the struggle of temptation, rest from servitude to the devil (Matthew 11:28-30).

3. Our natural tendency is to love earthly things; keeping the Sabbath re-awakens our love for God (Isaiah 58:13-14).

4. What should be done on the Sabbath? Three things, including:

a. Sacrifice (Numbers 28:3-4, 9): Offering the soul to God, being sorry for sins and offering prayers. Presenting our very selves as a sacrifice: Romans 12:21. Presenting possessions as a sacrifice: alms (Hebrews 13:16).

b. Hearing God’s Word

c. Contemplating divine things (Hebrews 4:9-10). This requires rest from the turmoil of sin, rest from the passions of the flesh and rest from the occupations of the world.

III. John Calvin

1. "The general purpose of this commandment is that, being dead to our own inclinations and works, we should meditate on the Kingdom of God, and that we should practice that meditation in the way established by him" (*Institutes*, II.viii.28).

2. Exodus 31:13-14: The Sabbath is a sign that God is the one who sanctifies Israel: "...we must rest from all activities of our own contriving so that, having God working in us, we may repose in him..." (*Institutes*, II.viii.28).

3. The Sabbath is a promise of the perfection that shall come on the last day. Its purpose is to allow God's people to meditate on this perfection.

4. Isaiah 58:13-14: In Christ what the Sabbath points toward has become a reality (cf. Hebrews 4:1-13). The Sabbath regulations have been abrogated (since they come to their fulfillment in Christ) but the Church needs a day of regular worship (I Corinthians 14:40). The rest prefigured by the Sabbath is completely fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus.

5. "First, we are to meditate throughout life upon and everlasting Sabbath rest from all our works, that the Lord may work in us through his Spirit...Second, each one of us privately, whenever he has leisure, is to exercise himself diligently in pious meditation upon God's work" (*Institutes*, II.viii.34). For Calvin, we should keep to time set aside by the Church for the hearing of God's Word, the sacraments and public prayer.

6. For Calvin, the Sabbath no longer refers to a specific day—the gathering of the Church might take place on any day but the first day of the week (Sunday) is day chosen by the Church.

7. Colossians 2:17, 20: The purpose of the Sabbath was to put forth in figure what was to come in Christ: "...we cannot worship him in purity, unless we separate ourselves from opposing pollutions" (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Five). This has happened in Christ (Romans 6:5). Because of this "we can renounce the world and even ourselves to the extent that our normal affections no longer dominate us. And although we are full of rebellion, nevertheless, the Spirit of God will rule over them and conquer them..." (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Five).

7. "...now we are no longer subject to the ancient servitude of observing the Sabbath day..." (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Five).

IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

1. Luther's view of the Sabbath is quite similar to Calvin's and is heavily influence by his negative view of the Law: "As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone...Therefore, according to its literal, outward sense, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely an external matter."

2. For Luther, the keeping of the Sabbath and other holy days is largely a pragmatic matter: "we keep holy days so that people may have time and opportunity, which otherwise would not be

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available, to participate in public worship...This, then, is the plain meaning of this commandment : Since we observe holidays anyhow, we should devote their observance to learning God's Word."

3. The keeping of the Sabbath can not be simply a matter of not doing things: "Not when we sit behind the stove and refrain from external work, or deck ourselves with garlands and dress up in our best clothes, but, as has been said, when we occupy ourselves with God's Word and exercise ourselves in it."

4. The Sabbath is the day when the Church publically acknowledges the power of God in the presence of his Word and Sacraments.

5. "Therefore this commandment is violated not only by those who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day, like those who in their greed or frivolity neglect to hear God's Word or lie around in taverns dead drunk like swine, but also by that multitude of others who listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear preaching and depart again with as little knowledge of the Word at the end of the year as at the beginning."

V. Reflection

1. For Christians, the Sabbath took on a new meaning in at least two ways. In terms of day, it shifted to the first day of the week, the day of Resurrection. The Resurrection took place "on the first day of the week" (Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19) and came to be known as "the Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10). Acts 2:46-47 suggests that the first Jewish Christians kept both the Jewish Sabbath and observed the Lord's Day. As the number of Gentile Christians grew this practice eventually disappeared.

2. One of the earliest accounts of Christian worship is found in St. Justin Martyr's (110-165 AD) *First Apology* which notes that "Sunday is the day on which we hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead."

3. For American Christians, the spiritual danger is that we have come to see the Lord's Day as an intrusion upon our schedules, yet another day in which we are trying to cram in as much as possible.

4. Thinking about the Sabbath must go beyond the view that we must simply cease to work and its opposite, the view that the keeping such a day is not longer a matter of Christian discipleship. For many Christians, the Sabbath is over after church. Our point of departure needs to be that of St. Ignatius of Antioch: "We have seen how former adherents of this ancient custom have since attained to a new hope; so that they have given up keeping the sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's Day instead (the day when life first dawned for us, thanks to Him and His death...)"

5. The question of how Sunday is to be kept is finally a question of what the Resurrection means for us.

6. "The Sabbath is the anticipation of the messianic hour, not only in thought and desire but in concrete action. Only by living according the form of the messianic age do we open the doors of the world for the time of the Messiah" (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord*). In this sense, the act of keeping Sunday is an act of testimony.