

Evening sermon: 9th January

Thinking about time rightly: the Fourth Commandment

(Sermon Summary)

'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy' (Exodus 20:8)

This commandment has generated a lot of controversy, both in our Lord's Day and in our own. There are those who would dispense with it altogether, saying that every day is now holy, while others go to the opposite extreme, generating a new Pharisaism. If we get this day wrong, it shows that there is something wrong in our relationship with the Lord, and we will miss out on the benefits that the Lord intends us to have.

The Sabbath is a holy day, set apart at Creation. It gives us a structure and framework for our time. Keeping the Sabbath day helps us to keep the first commandment of putting God first in our lives. It should be a day to destroy idols. The fact that the Lord's Day is now the first day of the week (in honour of the Lord's resurrection) makes it more forward looking than the old Sabbath - we take the blessings of the first day into the week ahead.

Organising our time, organising our souls

Though we are designed to work, work (and money) can become our god. The fourth commandment curbs this tendency, freeing us to cultivate our relationship with God. Our souls are designed to worship Him. While it's true that all of life should be an act of worship, we can't really focus on prayer or God's Word while we are concentrating on our everyday tasks. God understands that we can't multi-task like this, so gives us a special day to concentrate on Him.

God wants us to know His love, consolation and comfort (2 Thess. 2:16). We are to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. By observing the Lord's Day we build this knowledge firmly into our lives and take it into the rest of the week. We don't want it to fade away in the heat of the day, like the manna in the wilderness.

While the Lord's Day is always a time for public worship, this does not mean we cannot meet for worship on other days such as Christmas and Easter, or midweek.

Do no work

Even before the Fall, Adam and Eve were commanded to rest on the seventh day, following God's example. Now that the ground grows thorns and thistles, we have a far greater need of this day of rest, but work so easily takes over. We may find it difficult to put work concerns aside, especially in today's 24/7 culture with its continual flow of information. There's always more work to do. Sometimes work intrudes unavoidably, for example if there's a crisis in the workplace (such as a flood).

There are circumstances under which it's not wrong to think about work on the Lord's Day. Something we hear or read from the Bible may help us with a problem at work. We may need to put things right with a colleague before returning to work on Monday.

We encourage our children to treat this day as different, but it's unwise to be too restrictive with non-Christian children. If we do not compromise, we could end up crushing or exasperating them.

So what exactly is 'work'? The Pharisees answered this question with a complex set of man-made rules. They carefully defined everything that might be seen as 'work', such as the distance you could walk. They condemned the Lord because he healed on the Sabbath. The Lord had no time for these traditions and pointed out that the Pharisees would pull their donkey out of a well on the Sabbath rather than leaving it to die.

We should not follow the Pharisees' example. We turn from work that can be safely left until Monday, but recognise that some people, such as doctors and those in the emergency services, have to work on a Sunday.

The Sabbath day is an act of faith

The Israelites in the wilderness were commanded not to gather manna on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:4-30). They had to trust that the manna from the sixth day would keep. Likewise, we must trust God to provide our daily bread. Students can trust God by putting aside their books. God has honoured Christian businesses who refuse to open on a Sunday.

May our Sabbath days become holier, not binding us with man-made rules but fulfilling the purpose that the Lord intended.