

The Lord's Day, Its Privileges and Responsibilities

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

I wish to address you at this time on "The Lord's Day, Its Privileges and Responsibilities." I will ask you to turn with me to three passages of Scripture, not exactly as texts, but by way of introducing the subject.

First, in Exodus 20:8-11 we read: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it."

Next in Revelation 1:10: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day."

And the third reference is Romans 8:3,4: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

There are three things that I want to try to bring before you, as the Lord may enable me. First, I want to present what the Scripture teaches regarding the seventh-day sabbath, the sabbath of the law as a memorial of creation and a seal of the legal covenant made with Israel on Mount Sinai. Then I want to speak to you of the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, a memorial of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and a seal of the new covenant. And then I want to take up the Christian's responsibility to fulfil all the righteous requirements of the law, though he himself is not under law but under grace.

First, then, we speak of the sabbath of the law, or the sabbath of the Old Testament. In the second chapter of Genesis we are told that God finished the work of creation in six days and rested the seventh day, hallowing it and calling it the sabbath. That was God's rest, but it was soon broken by sin. We are not definitely told that God gave that sabbath to man to observe. It is possible He did, but we are not told that He did.

The next mention of a sabbath is found in Exodus 16, when thousands of years had elapsed and the people of Israel had been brought out of Egypt and led by Moses into the wilderness. They cried to God for bread and He gave them manna, and Moses explained that on the sixth day God would give a double quantity of manna, for the next day was the sabbath. There is no word between Genesis 2 and Exodus 16 of any observance of the sabbath until we come to the instance of the giving of the law on Sinai, when the sabbath commandment was included among the ten. Then the Lord said, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God" (Exodus 20:8-10).

Here we are distinctly told that the sabbath day was a memorial of creation and man was to observe it as punctiliously as possible. The Israelite was not only to turn aside from labors on that day, but he was not permitted to hire somebody else to do the work he was not allowed to do himself. Neither he nor his servants were permitted to work. Moreover, God ordained that that day should be the sabbath of rest even for the beasts of the field. He was not permitted to allow his cattle, his horses, or any of the stock on his farm, to do any work on that day. The sabbath was to be set apart for a time of rest, complete rest, both for man and beast.

When we turn over to the 31st chapter of this same book of Exodus we learn that the sabbath was given particularly to one people — Israel. In verse 13 we read: "Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you."

There were very stringent regulations in connection with it and a solemn warning of judgment if any violated it: "Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed" (Exodus 31:14-17).

Now, the important thing to notice is this: we are never told anywhere in the Old Testament that the legal sabbath was given to the Gentiles in the sense that it was given to God's earlier people, Israel, and it was to be

kept by them perpetually.

Let us turn to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, for we have something added there that is of great importance to a right understanding of that day: "Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee. Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates."

Any stranger sojourning in the land of Israel was obliged to recognize Israel's sabbath and refrain from any temporal employment of any kind even though he himself were not in actual covenant relationship with God. "that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day" (Deut. 5:14-15).

Now notice an additional reason given here for keeping the sabbath. He says to Israel, "The LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day." So in a very peculiar way the sabbath of old was a sign of God's deliverance of Israel from their bondage.

We might turn to a great many Old Testament scriptures in which the Lord stresses the importance of a right observance of this day, but I will content myself with just one other passage in the Old Testament before turning to any in the New. Isaiah 58:13,14 (and remember God is still speaking to the nation of Israel): "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it."

Israel's spiritual and temporal blessings were bound up with the recognition of the fact that one day in seven belonged to God, and they were not on any account to use that day for their own pleasure or for their own selfishness or for laboring in temporal things, but they were to devote it entirely to God and make it a day of rest and worship.

God never gave the sabbath in order that it might be a hardship to man to keep it, but He gave it because of His love for His people and because of the good it would bring to them; so when we turn to the Gospel of Mark we hear our Lord Jesus speaking of the sabbath in this way, in verses 27, 28 of the second chapter: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath."

He who stood among them, who came in grace to save them "the Lord Jesus Christ" declared Himself to be Lord even of the sabbath day. Now, that is a very significant expression, particularly when we find that after the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ another day comes little by little to the front and the seventh-day sabbath of Israel recedes more and more into the background. Why was that? Because the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath day, and under the new dispensation He had authority to set aside the seventh-day sabbath of Israel and bring in an altogether new day with an altogether different message. And in the first chapter of Revelation we hear John the Apostle, when he was banished to the Isle of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus, say, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day."

Now this term "the Lord's Day" is not the same thing, nor does it mean the same thing, as the sabbath of Israel. It is an altogether new day. It is a day that particularly speaks of our Lord's triumph over death. There are those who have imagined that the day of the Lord and the Lord's Day mean the same thing. Well, if the Lord's Day in the original was in the possessive case, that might be true, but that is not a fact. The term translated "Lord's" here is really an adjective form, Kuriakos, and if you would put it into literal English you would have to render it as the "Lordian" day, or as some would say, "Lordly" day...

"The day of the Lord" is a coming day when God is going to arise to judge the nations in righteousness, and it covers not only the actual pouring out of the judgments before the setting up of the kingdom, but the entire kingdom age, which we call the Millennium.

But "the Lord's Day," from the earliest days of the Christian Church, has been understood to mean the day after the Jewish sabbath. It is a very common thing to hear a certain class of teachers "I refer to those well-meaning people called Seventh-day Adventists" say that it was the Roman Catholic Church that

changed the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Or they say it was Constantine the Great who first changed the sabbath to the first day of the week. The Roman Catholic Church, as we know it today, had no existence in the days of Constantine. The first bishop of Rome to claim universal headship of the Church lived in the beginning of the seventh century, and Constantine lived and died in the fourth century. It is perfectly true that Constantine passed an edict commanding that Christian slaves and Christian servants were to be freed from their work on what he calls "the great and venerable day of the Sun," in order that they might be enabled to gather together for Christian worship. But Constantine was only recognizing something that had already been well-known for two and one-half centuries before.

I want to give you, just as briefly as I can, the testimonies of several of the early Christian writers. Ignatius, who lived and died just a few years after the death of the Apostle John, speaks of Christians as "no longer observing the Sabbath, but living according to the Lord's life, by which our life has sprung up again through Him." They were not observing Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, but the day they were observing was the day that spoke of the Lord's life coming forth from the grave.

There is a letter called "The Epistle of Barnabas," which was possibly not written by him, but at any rate was in circulation about A.D. 120, less than twenty-five years after the death of the Apostle John, and this letter says: "Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but that which I have made when giving rest to all things I shall make a beginning of the eighth day ... that is the beginning of another world. Wherefore also we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day on which Jesus rose again from the dead." This is the testimony of a Christian writer twenty-five years after the last of the apostles had left this scene, and it tells us what was customary then in the early Church.

Then there is a manuscript called "Teaching of the Apostles," which also dates back to 120 A.D., or, as some scholars think, even earlier than that. "But on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together, and break bread and give thanks." That is very significant, especially because in Acts 20:7 we read: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight." And this old writing, coming down from the very beginning of the Christian era, called that day "the Lord's own day," thus enabling us to understand what the early Church took John's words to mean in the first chapter of the book of The Revelation.

One might cite quite a number of other cases, such as Gregory, Nazianzen, Melito of Sardis — all of whom wrote before A.D. 170 — who used the expression "the Lord's Day" as referring to the first day of the week, and tell us that that was the day on which Christians met to glorify God and to worship the Lord Jesus Christ.

Justin Martyr, who lived from about A.D. 100-167, writing about A.D. 147, some fifty years after John's Gospel was written, says this: "On the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and as we said before, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings ... succors the orphans and widows ... and all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we hold our common Assembly, because it is the first day of the week on which God ... made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead."

These are sufficient to show that there is absolutely no truth in the statement that the early Church continued to keep the Jewish sabbath until, for instance, the days of Constantine the Great or until the Roman Catholic Church arose and changed the day. From the very beginning believers recognized the resurrection day of our Lord Jesus as the day which, in the Christian Church, took the place of the Jewish sabbath. This surely ought to speak to us, because we are told in that passage which I read from the Epistle to the Romans that "what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh [that is, the law could not compel the obedience of the human heart], God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin [as a sacrifice], condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3,4).

Under the law God recognized the fact that man needed one day of rest in seven for his body, and He recognized the fact that even the beast of the field needed to rest one day in seven; but more than that, He recognized the fact that man needed a period when he can turn aside from all temporal pursuits, from all earthly aims and objects, and occupy his soul with spiritual realities; so He said to Israel, "Now if you will be careful about keeping My holy day, if you will use this day in the way that I commanded, then refreshing and blessing will come to your souls, and I will prosper you in temporal things."

It would be a sad thing for us as Christians, because we are no longer under the law but under grace, if we should reason something like this: "Well, since the Jewish sabbath has been done away in the cross of Christ, and the Word of God says, 'Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days,' (Col. 2:16) that therefore Christians may be utterly indifferent as to how to use the day that has taken the place of the Jewish sabbath." If it pleased God of old to have His people occupied with spiritual verities one day in seven, we can thank Him that we have such a privilege under this new dispensation, and the righteousness of the law is thus being fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. This would imply not that we should now be careless as to the observance of the Lord's Day, but that we should gladly and gratefully give God one-seventh part of our time in this special way; that we should say on this day on which our Saviour triumphed over death: "This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalms 118:24).

You show me a Christian who plays fast and loose with the privileges of the Lord's Day, who uses the Lord's Day simply for his own selfish pleasures, who looks upon it as a day for outdoor excursions, a day for amusements, and a day for picnics (as so many do when they may choose to further a natural inclination of their own), and I will show you a Christian who is not growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who is not being used of God in winning precious souls to the Saviour.

You show me a Christian who is careful to use the hours of the first day of the week, so far as he possibly can, as God ordained, who seeks to use that time in obedience to the Word to gather together with his fellow-Christians for prayer and praise and testimony of the Word, and I will show you a growing Christian who is prospering spiritually, and a Christian whom God will prosper in temporal things as he seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

I know it is common for people to say today, "Oh, well, I don't know why we should have to gather together in church to worship God. Can't we worship Him in nature; can't we stay at home and worship Him while getting a physical rest, without meeting with the people of God?" But we forget that the Scripture has charged us: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching," (Heb. 10:25) that is, the day of our Saviour's coming.

I believe one of the outstanding evils of our day is the growing disregard for the Lord's Day. On every hand we find the world using that day just for pleasure and folly. And you here in America, who perhaps are tempted to be careless about cherishing its privileges, only need to take a trip across the sea to France, or any of the countries of Europe after you leave Great Britain, with the exception of Scandinavia and Holland, and see how men and women use the first day of the week in pleasure and folly with no recognition whatever of its sacred character, and I think you will realize then the privileges we have here. We can thank God that there is set aside, generally by rulers and authorities, one day as a day of rest, but it is up to us as Christians to make it a day of worship and a day of Christian service.

I am sure there are people who will read this who were brought up in Christian homes and taught the observance of the first day of the week, and the very beginning of a life of sin and a life of wandering from God came when they grew careless and indifferent as to the use of the first day of the week. Some of you can remember well when you first ventured to use the Lord's Day for perhaps a picnic or for getting out into the country for a good time. You remember how your conscience hurt you at first. But nothing seemed to happen, and the next time it was easier to use the day in that way, and by-and-by you began to lose all regard for everything holy and everything that had to do with the recognition of God in your life. Many of you have been saved since then, or brought back to God. Now see to it that the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in your life, as you walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

One other thought: The sabbath of old had a backward aspect. It looked back to creation and God's covenant on Mount Sinai, and to the deliverance of Israel from the land of Egypt; but it also had a forward aspect. The sabbath was typical. It was a type of that which now through grace has been brought in by the finished work of the Lord Jesus, for we read, "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Heb. 4:9) — a rest, or a sabbath-keeping. That sabbath of old came in after six days of toil. The Lord's Day is rest before you begin the week of toil. But man has been toiling, laboring, all down through the years, and now the Lord Jesus Christ comes to him and says, "I am the true Sabbath; do you want rest? Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." If you want to find real sabbath rest for your soul you can find it only in the Lord Jesus Christ. You have tried other things, you have turned aside to what the world had to offer, but you never found heart satisfaction, and you never will. No one has ever found it. This world has never satisfied any man or woman who lived for it, and you may be certain that it will never satisfy you. But if we could only

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call them together, we could get testimonies from literally millions of people who say that when they came to Jesus, when they trusted Him and received Him as Saviour, they entered into sabbath rest; they found peace of heart, they found a calmness of spirit, they found joy of soul, which they had never been able to find in the world. Yes, there remaineth a sabbath rest for the people of God.