

Keeping the Sabbath Day Holy

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You might have heard in history class of General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. You might know that he was a brilliant Civil War general. But did you know that he loved God? Did you know that he sought to keep the sabbath day holy in thankfulness for his salvation? On Sundays during the war, he worshipped with his men, inviting local pastors to preach to them. Regarding what he did after the services, one historian says, “No place existed in his Sunday schedule for labor, newspapers, or secular conversation.”¹ He had so much he could be doing as a top general in the Civil War, but he wanted to think about Jesus on Sunday. Do we have the same view of the sabbath day?

To understand God’s commandment to keep the sabbath day holy, we have to understand the idea of the Sabbath. The word “Sabbath” means rest. When we think of rest, maybe the first thing that we think of is sleeping or watching TV. But this is not the idea of the Sabbath rest. The rest of the Sabbath is enjoying God’s saving work through Christ. Genesis 2:3 teaches that God rested on the first Sabbath by enjoying his finished work. God did not rest by doing nothing. He enjoyed his completed creation. Today, we “rest” by enjoying Christ’s saving work. Sabbath rest involves thinking upon Jesus’ work of removing our burden of sin and praising him for it.

God calls us to keep one day, the sabbath day, specially set apart for rest. He demands, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8). “Holy” literally means “set apart.” Do not make the sabbath day a common day, doing what you do on the other days. Set it apart to think upon what Jesus the Savior has done and to praise him for it.

The one day of the week that we are to set apart for rest is now the first day of the week, Sunday. For Old Testament Israel, the day that they were to set apart for rest was the seventh day, Saturday (Ex. 20:10). Why has there been a change? The Sabbath is now Sunday because Jesus arose on Sunday. Jesus realized rest for us with God through his death and then resurrection on the first day of the week. Christ’s Spirit then directed the apostles and apostolic church to begin gathering for worship on Sunday (see Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor. 16:1–2.). The New Testament church has done so ever since.

Now, how must we keep the sabbath day holy, or set apart, for rest? Negatively, do not do activities that keep you from resting. Stay away from ordinary work, like your job, on the sabbath day (Deut. 5:13–14). It is a temptation to make Sunday a “homework day.” We might think, “This is my day to catch up!” But we must say no to work because working does not allow us to rest. How can we focus on Christ if we are thinking about our work?

We say no to work on the sabbath, but properly keeping the sabbath also means that we say no to all activities that keep us from resting. We will not go into all the do’s and don’ts. Let us keep it simple. God calls us to enter into the enjoyment of Christ’s saving work, so let us avoid those activities that take our focus away from Christ. Before you do something, ask, “Will this help me devote the day to Christ and dwell upon what he has done for me?”

Keeping this day set apart for rest means that we avoid activities that keep us from resting, and positively that we do activities that help us rest. Go to church! (Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 103). Is there a better place to enjoy the salvation Christ has earned for us? No! When we hear the preaching, we meditate upon the truth that we are sinners washed in his blood. When we call

¹ James I. Robertson Jr., “Stonewall Jackson: Christian Soldier,” *Essential Civil War Curriculum*, <https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/stonewall-jackson-christian-soldier.html>.

upon the Lord in prayer and sing together, we rest as we focus on our Savior and enjoy his close fellowship. Even the time for collection gives us an opportunity to dwell upon the truth that Christ became poor spiritually that we might be rich spiritually.

In connection with our worship in God's house, understand why we do not spend the rest of the day hunting or watching the Minnesota Vikings. If you are giving yourself to hunting after the first service and your mind focuses on that, you are cutting off everything you heard concerning Christ in the first service. If you are giving yourself to cheering on the Vikings or Edmonton Oilers in the afternoon, how can you go back to God's house and focus on praising and thanking him in the afternoon? Your mind will be on the overtime goal. That is why we lay aside worldly cares on Sunday and go to God's house twice.

Throughout the whole day, let us do activities that help us rest. Remember, the command says, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy," not the sabbath hour. On Sunday, we can do activities with our family and church family that help us rest, such as going to Young People's Society and being present at family devotions. We can do many activities as individuals that help us rest, like going over our catechism or reading *Beacon Lights*. Sunday is not "nap day." Sunday is the "Lord's day." Do activities that help you focus on the Lord.

We understand that we fall short of meeting God's requirement. Look to God for forgiveness in Christ, the sinless one.

Also, seek to turn and keep this commandment in thankfulness. General Jackson was so thankful for the salvation that he had in Christ that he sought to keep Sunday set apart for rest. May we do the same by the power of our risen Savior.

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