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# OBSERVING THE SABBATH

## LORD OF THE SABBATH

*And it came about that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to Him, “See here, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and became hungry, he and his companions: how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he gave it also to those who were with him?” And He was saying to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:23–28)*

The problem which Jesus confronts in these two incidents is almost incomprehensible to us today. The fourth of the Ten Commandments instructs the people of God to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). All labor was to cease and His people were to enjoy the day as a time of worship and consecrated rest.

This essentially benevolent institution created for man’s spiritual as well as physical refreshment, was transformed by the Pharisees into a strict, rigid, merciless

Sabbatarianism. They had established 39 neatly defined subdivisions, adding up to 1,529 laws governing behavior on the Sabbath. Forbidden were such trivial activities as unfastening a button; leaving milk to curdle (lest the milk work); or lifting more weight than a single dried fig. One was not allowed to comfort the sick or cheer the sorrowful, or even wipe a wound. One might work to preserve the life of an Israelite, but not a pagan or Samaritan. Extra-biblical and unbiblical traditions had been allowed to multiply and tie Sabbath observance into a miserable knot. What was meant for good became a part of a whole works' righteousness legalism which squeezed the spark and joy out of life generally and out of the Sabbath in particular.

No such problem exists for us today! We have allowed the pendulum to swing from legalism right on over to libertinism, and have all but completely thrown out the Fourth Commandment. Methodist Bishop Arthur Moore observed that his grandfather's generation referred to Sunday as the "holy Sabbath," his father's to the "Sabbath," and his to "Sunday." Today we think of it as part of the "weekend." The "Michelob" mentality has won the day. This is probably the commandment most totally ignored and overtly violated by Bible-believing Christians today. Everywhere we look, the stores, the restaurants, the beaches, the stadiums, the golf courses, are open and full, and we are in them all.

We have fallen so far in recent years! When the first Edinburgh-Glasgow train ran on Sunday, March 13, 1842, it was greeted in Edinburgh by "a threatening battery" of angry Presbyterian clergymen warning detouring passengers that they had bought "tickets to hell!" The saintly Robert Murray McCheyne, among others, mourned

the loss of Scotland's Sabbath quiet and bitterly denounced the running of the trains. The Glasgow Presbytery called it "a grievous outrage on the religious feelings of the people of Scotland." Today we give such things no notice whatsoever.

Until I was a teenager all the stores in Southern California were closed on Sundays. Then a few opened. Then a few more. Finally all were open. The last to fall was Bullocks Department Store, which, before capitulating, ran full page ads in the L.A. Times lamenting Sunday openings and the loss of revenue to competitors which was forcing them to finally give up, and give in.

The 1982 Academy Award winning movie "Chariots of Fire" was built around the Sabbatarian convictions of Scottish sprinter Eric Liddell. Though the British record holder in the 100 yard dash, he refused to run the 100 meter event because its trials were being held on Sunday. Instead he switched events, training ten months for the 400 meter event, which he won, winning the Gold Medal and setting a world record of 47.6 seconds.

Christians all over the country loved the movie and admired Liddell's convictions, but his convictions had almost no impact on our own. A youth director in Dallas gave a special preview screening of "Chariots" when it first was released. He was so moved by the movie that he personally watched it fifteen times. After the sixteenth viewing he was asked if it might not be good to show it to the Dallas Cowboy football team and try to convince them to not play on Sunday. His response was, "Well, if you want to try to pursue that sort of sectarian position, go right ahead." That is the way we have viewed Sabbath

observance (when we have bothered to think about it at all)  
— it is a sectarian, legalistic issue.

One writer recalls how different it was just a few years ago. Her world was the world in which most of us were raised. She reminisced:

“One Sunday morning during Sunday School we talked about whether or not a farmer could walk around his farm on Sunday. Our elder-teacher thought it would be a risky thing to do, since the farmer would probably think about how he could improve his corn yield or what repairs he should make to his barn. That would be “working,” and it was sinful to work on Sunday. If the farmer could take a walk and think about how God created the earth, it would be alright. That’s the kind of discussion we had in 1959. Can you imagine that kind of discussion today, when churches have had to let out by noon sharp so members can get home in time for pro football on their T.V.’s? Would anybody today understand the spiritual wrestling we went through over the question of whether or not our children could go to birthday parties on Sunday? The newspaper was not opened until after evening service...

Around here our family is regarded as being somewhat quaint because we don’t watch T.V., shop, or eat in restaurants on Sunday. I have learned to say, “I don’t believe it’s right for me,” so I do not impose my Sabbath-keeping on anyone else. Such imposition is wrong, I have been told, since each Christian must be led by the Holy Spirit to keep the

fourth Commandment in his and her own way. Since we cannot accuse the Holy Spirit of being inconsistent, we deduce that He likes variety! Anyway, the argument goes, it is not what we do not do that keeps the Sabbath, but what is in our hearts, and only God can see the heart. Dare I judge the man who goes to a baseball game on Sunday is not loving God while he eats his hot dog and drinks his beer?...

It's all so confusing! The rules keep changing, and I end up being either legalistic or old-fashioned, but never right." (Jean Shaw, "Six Flags Instead of Sunday School," *Presbyterian Journal*, May 24, 1984)

Surely there is a balance to these two extremes. I believe we find that balance here in Jesus' words. There are many Christians who tragically have misconstrued what Jesus is teaching here. Is He abolishing the Fourth Commandment? Of course not. He "did not come to abolish, but to fulfill" God's Law, and promote its teaching and observance (Matthew 5:18ff.). What He did do throughout His ministry was correct distortions and misunderstandings of the Law, and then deepen and extend their correct application. This is what we see here too. He does not abolish the Sabbath. Rather, He uses these incidents to cut through Pharisaic distortions and draw out the two fundamental principles for a God honoring and pleasing Sabbath observance:

1. Our observance is to benefit humanity;
2. Yet it is still subject to Christ's Lordship.

## **The Sabbath is For Man (2:27)**

The Sabbath was instituted by God prior to Moses, prior to the fall, and “built into the very structure of the universe,” says Yale Divinity School professor, Brevard Childs (*Exodus*, 416). God created six days and rested on the seventh (Genesis 2:3). Why did He rest? He rested, not because He was tired or needed rest, but in order to provide a pattern for humanity.

What Jesus says is that “The Sabbath was made for *anthropon*,” (from which we get our word anthropology) for “man,” not just for Israel or even the whole people of God, but for all humanity (the use of *dia*, “for” plus the *accusative* of “man” means “on account of” or “for the sake of”). In other words, the purpose of the Sabbath is to benefit and bless the human race universally. It is for us all.

***First, it is for our physical good.*** Exodus 20:9 unfolds Sabbath observance in terms of physical rest and refreshment. This is a wonderful provision God is making for humanity. All labor was to cease. A holy rest was to be observed. “You shall not do any work” (Exodus 20:10).

I can remember in grade school being told that Christmas vacation was two weeks away. Anticipation made the two weeks seem like an eternity. Scores of us literally skipped home with joy when summer vacation finally came. This is what the Sabbath is about. God is mandating that we take a vacation once every seven days. One day in seven in wholly devoted to rest and refreshment for the health, happiness, and blessing of mankind.

In other words, God is insisting that we take a break: that businessmen and professionals close their briefcases and

Day-timers; that laborers put down their tools; that students close their books; that cooks put down their pans. “You shall not do any work” (Exodus 20:10). Yard work, house work, school work, office work can all wait for Monday.

When I began to do this as a student it was amazing what a difference it made. Students generally never escape the pressure of studying. They can always be doing something more. Guilt follows them whatever they do. A voice constantly whispers, “you should be studying.” Nothing ever silenced that voice for me except the command of God “you must rest!” I would work until late Saturday night and then put down my books and would not pick them up until Monday. It forced me to become more efficient in my use of the six days designated for labor, and I found that I was able to do in six days what previously was spread over seven days. And Sunday? Sunday was a day of total peace and relaxation and long naps. I experienced complete relief from study, psychological, physical, and spiritual! I was refreshed on Monday! This is the joy of the Sabbath. God gave it to liberate us from the tyranny of all our busy labors, whether those of a student, a businessman, or shopkeeper, or whatever. It can all wait, and God insists that it does. “You shall not do any work.”

But also, because the Sabbath rest is for “man,” that is, all humanity, not just Christians, God is insisting that we allow others to take a break as well. “You shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant” (Exodus 20:10). We are not to employ or hire others (even our children) to serve us on Sunday. All our economic transactions are to cease. If we shop, buy gasoline, frequent restaurants, watch professional sports, we are hiring people to serve us, wait on us, or entertain us,

and thereby robbing them of their Sabbath. Whether they want to rest or not is irrelevant. Our obligation is not to hire them, and not to tempt them with the opportunity to work.

Several years ago, I preached at a small Presbyterian church in Venice, Florida. Afterward, two couples took me out to eat. They asked if I was fasting and I said no and that I would explain later. After they ate, I explained that I didn't want to impose my convictions on them but that I just didn't believe in eating out on Sunday. I wanted to spend time with them, so I was willing to go in, but couldn't go further and eat as well.

Two years later I met with one of the couples again and the husband excitedly shook my hand and said, "I just want you to know that you saved my life," He then went on to tell me about how he had been working 16 to 20 hours a day, seven days a week and had developed bleeding stomach ulcers, was ruining his family, and literally was working himself to death. After our meeting, he began to take Sunday off and it made all the difference in the world. His health improved, his family began to have time together, and most importantly, the Lordship of Christ in this one area established the principle of Lordship in his heart and extended to every area.

This is what the Sabbath is all about. It forces us to slow down, and rest, and recuperate. It helps us establish a pattern of work and rest, to work efficiently, and to sort through our priorities. It is for our physical good.

***Second, it is for our spiritual good.*** The Sabbath was the day of the "holy convocation" (e.g. Leviticus 23:3) in Israel, and because of the resurrection, Sunday became the

Christian Sabbath, the day on which the early church met (e.g. 2 Corinthians 16:1, 2), also known as the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). The Sabbath was not just for rest; it was also to be "hallowed" or set apart from the rest of the week for godly ends. It is preeminently the day in which God's people assemble for worship and receive the refreshment that they need spiritually. It is set apart from all the other days of the week. It is the day for worship, and all else is to be set aside in order to fulfill this one end.

The students in my youth group in Coral Gables used to ask, "So what do we do, go to church and then sit around and rest all day?" The answer is no. But it is the Lord's day and is to be kept holy by participating in the worship services, but also by focusing our attention on the things of God throughout the rest of the day as well.

People often complain that they don't have time to do the things that will help them grow spiritually. They are so busy. They don't have time to pray as they should, or read as they should. This is what Sunday is all about. Sunday is set apart from the rest of the week for "holy rest," as the *Westminster Confession* calls it, and for God's Word, God's people, and God's world.

The question that I should ask of my activities is this: do they enhance my appreciation of God and His work? Certainly attending the morning and evening services do. So also does Sunday School. Likewise reading Christian books, reading the Bible, and listening to Christian tapes. As families we can enjoy times of singing and prayer and fellowship.

Certain leisure activities also can promote an appreciation of God's creation. Walks in the park, and along the seashore, sailing, picnics in the park, and other similar activities can promote love and appreciation for God and His works. There is considerable room for freedom here, but within these parameters.

### **Jesus Christ is Lord of the Sabbath (2:28)**

What we are saying is that though the Sabbath is "for man," it is not up to man to decide what he will do or won't do on it. It is "for man," but the Son of Man is its Lord. It is His day. Some people like to think Sunday is their "family day," but it is not. It is His day. Therefore He regulates its activities.

Rest is not an option. I must quit working on Sundays. If I don't quit working, I am guilty of breaking His command.

Similarly, I must quit hiring others. Every time I employ someone to serve me I violate the Sabbath over which Jesus Christ is Lord.

Similarly, when I allow myself to get caught up in worldly or secular concerns and am taken away from the things of God, I violate the Sabbath. I must never allow myself to miss Sunday worship because of worldly concerns. Our family does not take a Sunday paper or watch T.V. (and that includes Sunday football) because it undermines the purpose of the Lord's day and the reason it is set apart. If some of this sounds legalistic, I hope to show us that it isn't. But in the meantime, I would just remind us that it is not legalism to obey God, whether we are dealing with the Fourth Commandment or the Sixth. Because the Sabbath is "for man" does not make it a free-for-all, each one doing

what is right in his or her own eyes. I am free to “do good” and “save life,” but it is still uniquely His day and He its Lord. Unless one is willing to argue that He is Lord of an institution which no longer exists, it necessarily means that He is uniquely Lord of my Sunday. It is not mine. It is His. I must do and not do what He says, no more and no less.

So while there is room for leisure activity, the leisure of Sunday is not the leisure of Monday through Saturday. Sunday’s leisure is to directly, consciously, even obviously promote my love for God and His works. Sunday leisure is engaged in with what a previous generation called “Sabbath restraint.” Our generation has made an idol of recreation to the great detriment of the public ministry of the Church. Scores of our people are missing from services each Sunday because of the god of leisure. This is wrong. Sunday is not *my* day. It is the Lord’s day, which He regulates for our benefit both physically and spiritually. We are not to take this good thing which He has given to us and create our own rules and twist it to our own ends. Our rest is to be a holy rest. Our worship is to be a holy worship. Our leisure is to be a holy leisure. All Sunday activity is to promote my love and appreciation for God and His works because it is His day, and He commands that we keep it holy.

Let us conclude with a warning, an exhortation, and a promise.

***First, a Warning*** — Regarding the Christian Sabbath, we are our own worst enemies. For generations our nation observed a Sabbath cycle of work and rest. Everyone, Christians and non-Christians, worked six days and rested on Sunday. This arrangement was greatly to our advantage!

It was at least theoretically possible for our entire congregation to meet together on Sunday. Everyone had the day off.

Today a significant percentage of our people cannot meet with us because of work requirements. Either regularly or periodically they must work. Every year it becomes increasingly difficult for us to gather together. Every year an increasing percentage of the national work force must work on Sunday. I say we are our own worst enemies because every time we buy or sell on Sunday we contribute to an employment chain which is becoming longer and larger. When we buy food, someone must sell it, another must serve it, another must prepare it, another must deliver it, etc.

I know of one Southern town where the churches banded together to crusade against Sunday openings. They managed to persuade every shop to close except one. The final discussion with the final store owner went like this: the leader of the religious groups persuaded the store owner to close his store all day with the exception of one hour, which he steadfastly refused to give up. "I don't understand." "Why not close all day?," asked the religious leader. "Just let me stay open from 12:00 to 1:00," said the store owner. The religious leader nodded, and walked out in defeated. Between 12:00 and 1:00 his congregation left church and went to the man's store and made the purchases which made it profitable for him to remain open.

If we find our loved ones taking jobs that require Sunday work, we have only ourselves to blame. Fewer and fewer jobs do not require it. Frequently we are contributing to the breakdown. The one positive step that we all can take to

slow down or even reverse this trend is to stop employing others on Sunday, and stop making purchases. If everyone who calls himself a Christian in this country would do so, it would not be profitable for the stores to remain open and they would close, and a non-commercial Sunday would become universal again.

***Second, the Exhortation*** — I would urge us not to make light of this command. There is a subtlety to Sabbath observance. When we think of the Olympic hero and missionary, Eric Liddell, do we think of a legalist, or a solid, deeply devoted man of God, the kind of man we might want our sons to grow up to be? Surely it is the latter.

The willingness to give the Lord this one day spoke of a life in which all seven days were His. Liddell, in fact, went on to be a missionary in China, and died at the age of 43 in a Japanese prison camp, a martyr for the faith.

The subtlety is this — he was willing to give one day in seven because all seven were the Lord's. Sabbath observance is a sort of litmus test. In fact, the Old Testament can at times speak of any act of disobedience as a “profaning” of the Sabbath because Sabbath observance had come to stand for the totality of which God requires of His people (cf. Jeremiah 17:24; Ezekiel 20:21, 22:28, 23:38). Disobedience here reveals a rebelliousness against God's authority still present in one's heart.

Is Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives? If He is, there will be a willingness to observe the day of which He is uniquely Lord, regardless of what one may have to give up and regardless of what anyone says, whether the Prince of Wales (as in the film's depiction of Liddell's case) or

anyone else. Surrender to Christ in this area. Giving up one's own pursuits in order to submit to His marks a milestone in one's Christian commitment. He is our Lord, and in observing the Sabbath we can prove it with something more than words.

This is the “muscular Christianity” of which Liddell spoke and the only sort that can conquer our foes in this generation — a Christianity that won't compromise, that defies pragmatic considerations, that denies self, that makes tough, costly decisions.

**Third, the Promise** — Finally, we read this promise in Isaiah:

*“If because of the Sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*  
(Isaiah 58:13, 14)

God promises to bless us, and bless our families, and bless our church if we will observe His Sabbath. *Physically*, we will find rest for our weary souls. We will find ourselves with more energy, more life, and more vigor. *Spiritually*, we will experience a greater exposure to spiritual things, become more attuned and aware of the things of God, and

deepen our love and appreciation for Him and His kingdom. It is for our good; and our good is to be found in observing it in the manner in which He prescribes for us.



## DOING GOOD ON THE SABBATH

*And He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there with a withered hand. And they were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, in order that they might accuse Him. And He said to the man with the withered hand, "Rise and come forward!" And He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" But they kept silent. And after looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. And the Pharisees went out and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (Mark 3:1–6)*

So far we have seen that Jesus taught that there are two fundamental principles governing Sabbath observance:

1. It is "for man," and therefore designed for and restricted to activity which promotes humanity's spiritual and physical benefit.
2. He is "Lord of the Sabbath," and therefore our Sabbath activity is to be governed by His Word.

Those who encounter this teaching for the first time will say, typically, "We have never thought about it before." This generally seems to be the case. We have allowed

concern for the Lord's day to just slip away. We don't think about it.

When I was in college I discovered a wonderful Christian book store where, as an eager, growing Christian, I used to spend hours browsing. One Saturday I called to see if they had a particular book (and they did) and if I could drop in on Sunday and purchase it. They explained that they were closed on Sunday and then added this question, "Don't you think we need to rest on the Lord's Day as well?" I was startled by the question, and then offended. My first thought was, "what a bunch of legalists." The truth of the matter was I had never even given a thought to resting on Sunday. Once I got over their affront to my imagined "mature" Christian practice (of non-resting), I forgot all about it again for about a year.

Not until I was in England as a seminary student did I begin to seriously consider what was appropriate activity on Sunday. To my amazement almost everyone in England rested on Sunday. Even university students did not study. The Christian customs of previous generations continued to influence the now pagan British masses. Prompted by their example, I began to examine the question for myself. What was I to do on Sunday? I was to put down my books and enjoy a Sabbath rest; attend morning and evening worship services; and spend the rest of the day doing what further enhanced my love and appreciation for God and His works. I read Christian books, the Bible, went out for nature walks, prayed, and had discussions concerning the things of God. These are the kinds of things for which the Sabbath is designed to provide us time to do. It is for us, as regulated by His word.

This raises several questions. Is there no work that is allowed on Sunday? None at all? Can I drive my car? hang up my clothes? tie my shoes? nothing?

If you have asked such questions then you've begun to bridge the gap between the first century and our own. These were the kinds of questions with which the First Century Jews were obsessed. The closer they got to nothing being truly nothing the happier they were. If that meant suffering, so be it. Woe to the person who was in need on the Sabbath. Not a finger would be lifted to help them. Thus what was created after man and was "for man" became a curse, rather than a blessing, whenever human need was present. The Pharisees with their 1,529 rules had become lords of the Sabbath, to the detriment of man.

More often than not these questions were posed today by people who wish not so much to find answers to their questions as to find loopholes to exploit. They wish to evade Sabbath observance altogether. The reasoning seems to be that if I have to drive, cook, or use electricity (thereby employing workers at the power plant), then work is inevitable and I may as well give up. What difference does it make? The same "hard case" reasoning used by the Pharisees to eliminate labor is used by some Christians to justify all labor!

But twenty-first century non-practice and libertinism is equally as merciless as first century legalism. Today we are tyrannized by our labors. Today we never escape business and work. Today we are weary and haggard and even exhausted because we never stop. Man, in our case, also orders his own Sabbath (and has become its lord) and is deprived of the blessing of God's Sabbath.

Surely the balance is here in Jesus' words. When we obey Christ's commands, it becomes a day of physical and spiritual refreshment and rest. As one man put it, "If God had not made a Sabbath, I would have created my own for the sake of my sanity." We need the rest.

Yet as we shall see, this is not to be pursued in such a way as to be detrimental to us. To answer our question, there *are* accepted works on the Sabbath and, as its Lord, Jesus can declare what they are.

There are circumstances when it's permissible to work. Ordinarily it is not. But there are times when certain kinds of work are not only permissible, but required, if the purpose of the law is to be fulfilled. Since it is designed for humanity's physical and spiritual good, works which promote that end are expected, and a refusal to allow such marks the fatal transition from obedience to legalism, and that of the worst sort. We are always free to "do good" and "save a life" (Mark 3:4).

Jesus is "angered" and "grieved" (3:5) because He sees in Pharisees the legalistic spirit at work. They would rather see folks go hungry (2:23–28) and, worse yet, see suffering and pain continue than the principle of not "working" violated. The purpose and the end of the law (humanity's benefit) has been confused with the means to that end (rest). There are times when the normal means must be set aside in order to maintain the end. Sometimes we must "work" and "do good" if we are to continue to promote humanity's blessing. We can deduce from Jesus' actions three principles.

## **Works of Necessity are Permitted (2:23–26)**

When there is a particular human need which is crying out to be met, we should meet it. The Sabbath *blessing* is not to become a *curse* by the refusal to do certain necessary works, or meet certain basic needs.

The disciples are walking though the grain fields. They are hungry. The law permits them to pluck grain by hand from one's neighbor's fields (Deuteronomy 23:25). However, it does not allow one to reap on the Sabbath (Exodus 34:21). That would be work. Is plucking by hand for personal needs the same as reaping? Is it work and a violation of the Fourth Commandment?

Jesus answers by citing the example of David in 1 Samuel 21:1–6. Twelve fresh loaves of bread were placed on a table before the Holy of Holies each day. Only the priests were allowed to eat them after they were removed (Leviticus 24:19). But Jesus demonstrates that this restriction only applied under normal circumstances. David and his men ate the bread when they were hungry and there was no other bread available to them, and they were “innocent” (Mt. 12:5). Why? Because human needs take precedence over ceremonial design. The bread was for the priests' benefit. However, they may forfeit that blessing when a human need is involved. Similarly we not only may, but must, forfeit our blessing of rest when a human need is involved.

Let me give you some examples. May soldiers work (fight) on Sunday? Pompey was able to conquer Jerusalem on a Sabbath day because the Jews refused to fight, lest they desecrate it. This seems to me to be a necessary work, the refusal of which could subject a national population to

enormous suffering. Similarly, the police may work. To allow Sunday to be a day of unrestrained criminal activity would not be “good for man.” Power company employees may work also and spare the populace needless suffering. So may those who make provision for the needs of travelers. Guests in our community need not sleep in their cars or on the streets. We may prepare and serve meals. One need not be subjected to hunger pains because it is Sunday. Cows may even be milked, livestock may be fed, diapers may be changed. There are a number of these sorts of works which are necessary for the orderly living of life, and cannot be avoided and should not be avoided. One may make the bed, wash and groom oneself, hang up one’s clothing, turn off the lights, drive the car, defend oneself and one’s family from harm, and discipline the children.

I list these mainly because of the kinds of objections or alleged inconsistencies that are raised to Sabbath observance. As we have seen, some take an area of gray as a rationale to give up the whole endeavor. This is foolish. The Sabbath is a day of rest, but *only* from those works which are *not* necessary. As much as I may wish to skip shaving, I should still “work” to get myself clean-faced on Sunday morning. One might think, well, if I still have to care for the children and prepare meals, it’s not much of a rest. That may be true, but it is better than no rest at all, and we are not to despise the day of small things, or despise the rest we do get because of the rest we don’t. Even so, these “necessary” works should be reduced to a minimum. The house does not need to be spotless, just neat. Meals can be prepared the day before and should be as simple as possible. One who is in the kitchen daily cooking and cleaning needs a sandwich and a paper plate break!

We should be careful not to interpret the category of “necessity” too broadly. Often what we think is necessity really isn’t. The United States has been without a President for a full day twice in our history. First in 1849 because James Polk left office on Saturday and Zachary Taylor refused to be installed on Sunday, and the same again when U.S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes were the players. Observing the Lord’s Day was more important to Taylor and Hayes than assuming the office of the Presidency. It could wait for Monday! In a word, it is “lawful on the Sabbath to do good” (3:4). We may do those things which are necessary, truly necessary, for the orderly living of life and the neglect of which would cause unnecessary hardship.

### **Works of Mercy Are Permitted (3:1-6)**

Jesus heals on the Sabbath because it is lawful to do good and save life (3:4). The Pharisees would allow medical care only if the life was truly endangered. They would not, for example, allow a fracture or sprain to be treated. If a finger was cut, it could be bandaged, but no ointment could be applied. One was only to do so much work as was necessary to keep an injury from getting worse, and no more. The legislation was quite explicit.

Jesus is angered and “grieved,” the latter word indicating deep eternal grief and anguish, because of the complete insensitivity and hardness of the Pharisees. They seek to trap Him when the issue is not some great moral issue, but whether or not He will help this poor handicapped man! In Matthew’s parallel, Jesus asks them if they wouldn’t do as much for a sheep it fell in a pit, and yet they object if it’s a man (Mt. 12:12)!

Sabbath rest is not the ultimate goal of the Sabbath day. Man's benefit normally comes through rest, but not if it means that medical needs go unattended. Disaster would ensue if doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and all other medical personnel insisted on Sunday rest. What a curse Sunday would be for so many. It is lawful for all medical personnel to do good and relieve human suffering. Medical needs take precedence over our rest.

We should include in the "mercy" category those who respond to emergency needs, whether professionals or not. I need not ever worry about whether or not to help a stranded motorist on Sunday. Such help would be a work of mercy. Whenever we confront hurting, suffering, needful people, we are obliged to help, whether is Sunday or not.

Our duties in this regard are not just passive (i.e., if a stranded motorist should cross our path), but active. Sunday is a day for seeking out works of mercy, of visiting shut-ins, nursing homes, and hospitals. It is a day for helping the poor, working in soup kitchens, and crisis pregnancy centers. It is lawful to do good!

### **Works of Piety Are Permitted (Mt. 12:5-7)**

In Matthew's parallel Jesus elaborates what we might have guessed was the case. The priests in the temple "break the Sabbath and are innocent" (Mt. 12:5-7). Ministers, Sunday School teachers, elders, deacons, and all those connected with the services of the church such as nursery workers and kitchen and custodial help, are permitted to work.

One can see even in our discussion an evolving definition of rest. It is not so much “inactivity.” Rather it is the cessation of our labors so that we may take up the Lord’s. We are to take up that which is for the good and benefit of ourselves and others. This means worship and rest and relaxation. But it also means visiting the sick, helping the needy, doing whatever the Lord gives us to do that will promote man’s physical and spiritual well being.

### **Conclusions**

All of this adds up to a marvelous institution for the church and society, the loss of which has hurt us all. It has hurt us physically and spiritually. It has distracted us further from taking up works of mercy and piety. Society has been impoverished by the loss of its Sabbath rest, and this is perhaps the best argument against those who maintain that the Fourth Commandment is abolished by Christ. To have done so would have been to rob our era of a great blessing, and made it inferior to the Old Testament in that respect. It would have been a “diminution, not an increase of the blessing given to the Jewish Church,” said Timothy Dwight (Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 84).

What can we do to bring Sabbatarianism, biblical observance of the Sabbath, as it was meant to be observed, avoiding on the one hand the pitfalls of the legalists, and on the other, of the libertines? Let me make the following suggestions which I hope you’ll find helpful.

*First, spiritually prepare* - Begin to prepare for the day on Saturday night. Gather the family together for prayers in the latter part of the evening, asking God to prepare your hearts to meet with Him. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* urges a “due Preparing” of the heart (XXIII.8).

Develop a sense of anticipation and excitement for this greatest of times on the greatest of days! Sunday is the day that we meet with God. Sunday is the day when He walks in the midst of His worshiping people. Prepare for this by spending time in prayer, confessing sin, reading His word, asking God to bless the day, its services, and the preaching.

The time outside of corporate worship is given to consecrated rest, which as we have seen means anything from naps to Bible reading to hospital visits to walks in the park. However, if preparation is not made, one may end up doing none of these things and instead doing nothing or succumbing to the temptation to take up worldly activities. Plan Sunday afternoons and evenings. Plan for a nap. Plan for a visit to a nursing home. Plan for family interaction. Think of other appropriate activity, but the point is that we must prepare.

*Second, physically prepare* - If we are able to give ourselves to these things we must be physically prepared. We must learn to get all of our work done in six days. Impossible? I have found that work tends to expand to fill whatever space and time we allow. This is true of every kind of work. Eliminating a day forces us to plan better and rest better. So we must be diligent, “to dispose and dispatch our worldly business,” says the Larger Catechism, “that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of the day” (#117). We also may physically prepare by getting to bed early Saturday night. Wind down by 10:00 p.m. and be in bed by 11:00. The rest of the world may be out all night Saturday, but we should not be. We’re going to meet with God, and for this we must be rested and alert.

*Third, materially prepare* - In order to avoid working, and employing others, shopping needs to be completed by Saturday, the house cleaned, the gas tank filled, and even the meals prepared the night before. Get all everyday activity out of the way so that the rest may be as full as possible. This is what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* means by an “ordering” of our “common affairs beforehand” (XXIII.8). Make all purchases and complete all material preparation, with a little extra for potential guests, before Sunday. With a little effort and forethought, this can be easily accomplished.

*Forth, prepare to persevere* - Admit that some of this (maybe most) sounds as dull as ditchwater. We are so accustomed to carnal attractions that a slower, more serene, contemplative day sounds completely unappealing. However, if we’ll begin to observe the Sabbath, we’ll find that our tastes will begin to alter. We’ll begin to experience what it means to rest, relax, and find refreshment in the Lord. We’ll find that we and our families are experiencing God’s blessing upon them. Before long, we’ll find ourselves loving it, and loving Him.

Does it enhance my appreciation and love for God and His works? Does it arise out of situations of necessity, mercy, or piety? If not, eliminate it, or save it for Monday. If so, then let it be embraced as a God-pleasing way to remember and hallow His Sabbath.



## APPENDIX: SUNDAY & SPORTS

*“If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 58:13,14)*

When Rick Reilly, the gifted *Sports Illustrated* columnist, writes an article entitled “Let us ~~Pray~~ Play,” you can know that things have come to a “pretty pass,” as the Brits used to say. Holding the Masters final on Sunday seems to have been the last straw. Pros, college, and youth sports have all moved onto Sundays. High schools are probably next. Sports are an idol in America. The Johnson family knows well how all-consuming athletics can become. With five children playing volleyball, soccer, basketball, football, running track, and dancing ballet, we have peaked at 40 games in a single month, not to mention practices. Is this overboard? Yes. Do I know where to cut? No, with one exception. The one absolute line that we draw is on Sunday. We will not allow our children to participate in any practices, meetings, or games on Sunday, period. This stand has cost us some opportunities. We have not allowed our children to participate on any “select” or traveling teams. We have not been able to play on desirable local teams that hold Sunday practices or for whom our refusal to participate on Sundays was not an acceptable condition

(this only happened once). But our “no sports on Sunday” rule has served as a weekly reminder, a billboard in the Johnson family life, that God is first, and sports ranks any number of rings lower on the ladder of priorities.

“Sports has nearly swallowed Sunday whole,” says Reilly. Who is to blame? “The first people (we) might want to crack down on are the Christians themselves,” he says. He quotes Rich Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals, who told his son’s coach that he would not be available to play on Sundays. The coach looked shocked. Cizik said, “You act like nobody’s ever said that to you before.” He answered, “Honestly? They haven’t.”

Savannah has a large Christian community. It is time for us to collectively put our foot down and say no to Sunday sports. As for the “they’ll get behind” argument, I am unimpressed. As long as they are playing on local teams, school teams, and pick-up games, *it doesn’t matter*. They’ll get more out of an afternoon of basketball at the Jenkins Boys Club than they will from an out-of-town tournament. Spare your children the pressure, spare your family the time and expense, and spare your soul the compromise with the Lord’s Day. Here’s how Reilly concluded his article:

“I’m with the holy men . . . I just feel sorry for these kids who get nothing but organized sports crammed down their gullets 24/7. Even God took a day off.

“Kids might weep with joy to get a day off from sports. If they don’t spend it at church, maybe they’ll spend it getting to know their siblings’ names again. Or swing in a hammock without a coach screaming, ‘Get your hips into it, Samantha!’

“Hey, you do what you want. Just remember, when little Shaniqua has two free throws to win or lose a game on some Sunday morning, good luck finding somebody who’ll answer your prayers.”

*(Edited March 2013)*

