

Do I Keep the Sabbath Day Holy? – Exodus 20:8-11

INTRODUCTION -- COMMANDMENT # 4 -- *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.* (Exodus 20:8-11; cf. Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Sabbath means “rest”. It could refer to a day of rest, hence the Sabbath day; or a year of rest, hence the Sabbath year.

I. 4th Commandment explained – 20:8

The explanation is quite straightforward. Six days the Israelites may work but on the seventh day they rest from their labour that makes money. They must stop all regular work; the farmer his farming, the tailor his tailoring and the shepherd his shepherding, etc. This includes all who live in the Land of Promise. It will be a time when they commune with God and spend time with family worshipping and serving the LORD. This is important as this will help the believer to refocus and review his life's priorities and perspective. It is also a time when he reflects on his life on earth and the future life he will have in heaven. He is reminded that this world is more than meat and it is definitely not his home. His home is in heaven. His God is more important to him than life and earthly substance.

Not tired so work on Sunday? – There are people who argue that they are not tired so why can't they work on the Sabbath day? The point is not one of tiredness. God used Himself as the example par excellence. He created the world in six days and He rested on the seventh day. God definitely never feels tired all but he stopped work. This was the example He used to drive home the point that all His faithful children must observe the Sabbath Day. God was the One who declared this day holy, and not the church or government. This means that every child of God must be found in God's house every Lord's Day. It is not an option but a commandment. If the believer is able but does not go to church on the Lord's Day, it is a sin. If he does not attend the Easter sunrise service or the Christmas Eve service or the Watch-night Service, it is not a sin as long as what he does instead is pleasing in God's sight. For example, if he does not wish to attend any of these services because of a TV programme or a live football match, then it would be a sin.

Legalistic observance? -- Do not observe the Lord's Day ritualistically with a list of do's and don'ts. It is more than following a list that is arbitrarily determined by the pastor of the church. Such pharisaical practices must be condemned. In churches like these, very often it is the pastor who decides what constitutes acts of mercy and what does not. But the problem is that the pastor has no biblical basis to decide! The list he comes up with will be very arbitrary to say the least. Keeping the Lord's Day holy is not based upon the pastor's or a group of leaders' subjective whims and fancies that describe what the Christian can and cannot do on the Sabbath Day. It all boils down to the heart. The general guideline is: no regular work, which includes sports and other activities like tuition on the Lord's Day. This means that if a Christian owns a shop, it must

not be open on Sunday as the command is that all personnel who works for the Christian must also observe the rest regardless of whether they are believers or not.

Cannot buy lunch? -- Some church leaders believe that Christians are not allowed to buy lunch because to do so would cause the seller (unbeliever) to open his shop. This would cause him to break the 4th Commandment. To buy from his stall would make them a partaker of his sin! Does this line of argument sound convincing? The problem with this is that it is unbiblical! We are not living in a Christian nation. Many have not even heard of the Decalogue. The Ten Commandments are for God's people only. That is why on the day of Judgement, God will not use the Decalogue (special revelation) to condemn but general revelation which is His creation (see Romans 1). In the case of Israel, they have to obey the Ten Commandments as a nation because it was a national witness in OT times. In NT times, there is no longer a national witness but a church or ecclesiastical witness. Therefore, the Ten Commandments are applicable to all who call themselves believers. Of course, the believer can refer to the Ten Commandments when the gospel is shared or preached. But it is unfair and definitely not biblical to condemn the unbelievers who have not been given the Ten Commandments.

II. Day Replaced, Principle Retained –

The 7th Day replaced by the 1st Day – The Sabbath Day was kept on the seventh day in the Jewish calendar. The day for the Jews begins from 6 pm to 6 pm the following day. Therefore the Jewish Sabbath was from 6 pm Saturday to 6 pm Sunday according to our solar calendar. But the Jews operate by the lunar calendar and hence they have only 360 days a year whereby all their months have 30 days.

The resurrection of Christ was on the first day (Sunday) of the week. **Mark 16:9** says, *“Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.”* Since then, the early church, including churches today, keep the Sabbath Day not on the last day of the week (Saturday) but the first day of the week. **Acts 20:7** says, *“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 **1 Corinthians 16:2** says, *“Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”* That the seventh day has been replaced by the first day does not mean that the Sabbath Day rest has been abrogated. The principle of keeping the Sabbath Day on the seventh day applies now to the first day of the week, which is also called the Lord's Day.

III. Sabbath Day Applied –

A life of faith on a daily basis -- This commandment was practised even before it was included in the Decalogue given to Moses by God up in Mount Sinai. The passage that teaches us this is Exodus 16 where we can see both the application and importance of the 4th Commandment. In this account, the Israelites were told to collect the manna [which means “what is it?”] that God would provide from heaven. They were not allowed to collect and keep more than they could consume because the manna would turn bad and stink if kept overnight. Therefore, they were to go out and collect just enough every day for that day only. However, on the sixth day the

Israelites were to collect enough for two days. God said that manna would not fall from heaven on the seventh day. It was only on the seventh day that the manna would remain good and would not rot and stink. There would not be any manna on the seventh day, so they were not to go out to collect, i.e. work. God did this for Israel for the next 40 years of their wilderness wandering.

The lesson from this incident is that they had to walk by faith on a daily basis. They had to learn to trust God on a daily basis, not weekly or monthly as that would be too difficult a directive for them to obey. But if Israel were to look to God by faith on a daily basis, very soon they would trust God on a weekly and then a monthly basis, followed by a year of walking by faith. More often than not, large ambitions will end up in failure and hearts will be discouraged. Walking by faith would become a chore and a burden. The Christian's life is meant to be a joyous life filled with happiness, peace and trust. It is the best life or, as Christ calls it, the abundant life, i.e. a life that is exceedingly rich (cf. John 10:10).

A life of faith is the only life that pleases God – There is no way the Christian can please God without faith! The Bible says in **Hebrews 11:6**, *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."* Impossible means impossible! Why is this faith element so important? It is very important to the believer because not to have faith is to call God a liar! It is to say to God that His Word is not true and he does not believe what God says in His perfect Word.

The definition of faith is found in **Hebrews 11:1**, *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."* Faith is not defined as a feeling or a belief that we have in our heads. This definition is not in God's word. It is not having faith that a chair will be strong enough to take our weight and so we sit on it. This is not the Bible's idea of faith. It is not belief in belief! The Bible's "faith" is always with reference to God's holy and perfect Word. Faith is what the physical eyes did not see but the spiritual eyes of faith saw very clearly because God said so in His holy and perfect Word. This means that the believer will live his life on earth in light of what God says in His Holy Word. Head knowledge or mental agreement does not equal faith. Faith is knowing God's Word and living a life that is lived in accordance with God's revealed truth one day at a time!

Reminder of Heaven! – Keeping the Sabbath Day holy is also a reminder of the believer's home in heaven, his eternal rest. **Hebrews 4:3-4, 9-10** (KJV), *"For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works. . . . 9 There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. 10 For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his."* The weekly work days remind the believer that his life on earth is a life of service unto the LORD. The Sabbath Day reminds him that one day his life of service unto the Lord will be over and he will return home to enjoy his well deserved rest. This perspective of his weekly life on earth will sustain him week after week as he exercises faith on a

daily basis. He will not be swayed by the temptations of this world. When he loses sight of this, it will be a matter of time before he falls and backslides and loves the things of the world.

IV. Sabbath Day Broken –

No life of faith daily, not able to keep the Sabbath Day holy – The believer who does not live a life of faith daily during the six days of the week will find it impossible to keep the Sabbath Day or the Lord's Day in a way that is pleasing in God's sight! The first six days of the week determine our ability to keep the Sabbath Day! If we live each day by faith walking and trusting in God to help us through our daily duties and activities, then keeping the Sabbath Day or the Lord's Day holy would be a joy and the high point of the week. When we fail to live by faith daily, we will be dragging our feet to church and the Sabbath Day is reduced to a routine and a ritual. Very soon we will break it entirely by not going to church at all! The believer who keeps the Sabbath Day holy is also one who lives a life of faith daily. The two are one and cannot be separated. That is precisely what God means when he says in **Ezekiel 20:12**, *"Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them."*

Christians should not open their businesses on the Lord's Day. They must trust God to provide for all their needs even though common business sense might be that the Lord's Day is the best day to do business since families would be out eating and buying. God will provide for the believer what God knows his faith is able to endure. If he has too much he will forget God and love mammon. If he has too little he will murmur and complain. God will give to him enough for six days of the week to keep him contented and in godliness. The life of faith will convict the Christian to not open his business on the Lord's Day. This is the reason why the Christian who trusts God to provide six days of the week will also trust Him to provide for just one day, the Lord's Day. Remember the manna?

The penalty for breaking the Sabbath Day is death – At the end of the LORD's communion with Moses up on Mount Sinai, the LORD gave to Moses the penalty for breaking the Sabbath Day. The Bible says in **Exodus 31:12-18**, *"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 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. 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. And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God."*

The emphasis on the death penalty reveals to us the serious danger of breaking the Sabbath Day. Why is it so serious when it is taken so lightly by God's people today? The reason is that it is a

very contagious sin. If one person breaks the Sabbath Day and opens his shop, then his neighbour would do the same. That little spark would light the flame of disobedience throughout the land of Israel and all would break the Sabbath Day and no one would keep it at all. The life of faith would be destroyed and the lives of the people of Israel would not please God even though they may come and offer all sorts of sacrifices!

The abuse of the Sabbath Day reveals spiritual depravity and waywardness in the believer's life. He is probably living a life of sin and faithlessness. If he "keeps" the Sabbath Day "holy" (i.e. externally only) on Sundays only and lives a life of faithlessness during the other six days, then he is nothing but a self-deluded hypocrite. He is legalistic and the Christian faith to him is nothing but head knowledge and the living out of it a façade to "pull the wool" over the eyes of the gullible and naïve.

The keeping of the Sabbath Day was a sign of the covenant that Israel has with her God. It is eternal. It was also a most visible sign where the entire land of Israel would be silent while the rest of the surrounding nations would be noisy and busy doing business. Israel was to trust God to defend and protect His people as well as to provide for their needs while they kept the Sabbath. It was to be a life of trust and obey. On the other hand, if Israel disobeyed and did not keep the Sabbath Day, the penalty was death.

When Israel did not observe the seventh Sabbath year, she paid the price of 70 years of exile. The Bible had already warned Israel in the book of Leviticus that it would take place if Israel lived in sin and would not keep the sabbaths. **Leviticus 26:33-35**, *"And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. Then shall the land enjoy her sabbaths, as long as it lieth desolate, and ye be in your enemies' land; even then shall the land rest, and enjoy her sabbaths. As long as it lieth desolate it shall rest; because it did not rest in your sabbaths, when ye dwelt upon it."*

Jeremiah prophesied about it after Israel failed to keep the Sabbaths in her years of idolatry. **Jeremiah 25:8-12**, *"Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words, Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle. And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations."* **2 Chronicles 36:21-22**, *"To fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred*

up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,"

V. Other Sabbaths –

Different Types of Sabbaths -- Leviticus 25 teaches us that there were other Sabbaths to observe, not just the weekly Sabbath:

- a. **Seventh Year Sabbath** – If a believer could keep the Sabbath Day holy unto the LORD, he would definitely keep the sabbath year holy as well. He that is faithful in little will also be faithful in much. **Leviticus 25:1-7**, *"And the LORD spake unto Moses in mount Sinai, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the LORD. Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof; But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the LORD: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed: for it is a year of rest unto the land. And the sabbath of the land shall be meat for you; for thee, and for thy servant, and for thy maid, and for thy hired servant, and for thy stranger that sojourneth with thee, And for thy cattle, and for the beast that are in thy land, shall all the increase thereof be meat."*
- b. **Fiftieth Year Sabbath or Jubilee** – The believer who could keep the sabbath year holy would definitely be able to keep the jubilee year as well. In the 49th and 50th years he would leave his land vacant, trusting in the LORD to provide enough in the sixth year or rather the 48th year to tie the family over till the 51st year! **Leviticus 25:8-22**, *"And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years. Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the jubile to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement shall ye make the trumpet sound throughout all your land. And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. A jubile shall that fiftieth year be unto you: ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of thy vine undressed. For it is the jubile; it shall be holy unto you: ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field. In the year of this jubile ye shall return every man unto his possession. And if thou sell ought unto thy neighbour, or buyest ought of thy neighbour's hand, ye shall not oppress one another: According to the number of years after the jubile thou shalt buy of thy neighbour, and according unto the number of years of the fruits he shall sell unto thee: According to the multitude of years thou shalt increase the price thereof, and according to the fewness of years thou shalt diminish the price of it: for according to the number of the years of the fruits doth he sell unto thee. Ye shall not therefore oppress one another; but thou shalt fear thy God: for I am the LORD your God. Wherefore ye shall do my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and ye shall dwell in the land in safety. And the land shall yield her fruit, and ye shall eat your fill, and dwell therein in safety. **And if ye shall say, What shall we eat the seventh year? behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our increase: Then I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years. And ye shall sow the eighth year, and eat yet of old fruit until the ninth year; until her fruits come in ye shall eat of the old store.**" [emphasis added]*

APPLICATION

The Sabbath Day is for man's enjoyment and spiritual blessing – God created the Sabbath day for man and not man for the Sabbath. **Mark 2:27-28**, *“And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.”* This understanding of the Sabbath Day must not be lost to the Christian. Because Israel failed to keep the Sabbaths she paid the price, which was exile. Do not turn the happy and blessed Day of the Lord into a day of chore and sadness. The Sabbath Day is for our good always. It is a foretaste of our heavenly and eternal time together as God's children. The difference is in the locality of service; now it is on earth but then it will be in heaven. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that it is more difficult to keep the Sabbath Day today as a church or as a nation of Israel in OT times? Please elaborate.
2. If a parent plans to have regular tuition or other sporting activities for his child on the Lord's Day, would he be charged with breaking the Sabbath Day?

If a parent who does not require his child to study on Sundays asks the child to study after service one Sunday because the child was not able to study during the past week due to sickness and the exam is on Monday, would he be charged with breaking the Sabbath Day? Give reasons.
3. If a believer works regularly on Sunday, like a professional sportsman or a soldier or hospital attendant or a fireman, and misses the morning service but is able to attend SGH only and he feels bad about it and asks you if he has broken the Sabbath day, what would your reply be to help him out of this dilemma?
4. The believer's parents who are not Christians have a hawker stall. Before his conversion he helped out on Sundays. He wants to ask them for permission to stop helping them on Sunday, the busiest day of the week. If they say no to his request, what should be the biblical response?
5. A believer wants to set up business in a shopping centre where the management insists that his shop must be open on Sunday, otherwise he cannot rent from them. He goes ahead anyway and on Sunday he does not go to the shop but hires unbelievers to man the shop for him. Is this acceptable? Give reasons. If it is wrong, then what is the best solution?