

### **The Ten Commandments - 3**

Continuing this series of talks on the Commandments we come to the third, a subject of "much dispute and controversy" (Barclay), "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy". I refer to it as the third Commandment and some of you, I know may be puzzled by this. In many listings it comes as the fourth due to the fact that at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century the first Commandment was separated into two in order to give added emphasis to image making and idol worship. But it doesn't seem to me to matter greatly whether you regard it as the third or the fourth Commandment. The important thing is what it says.

I mentioned dispute and controversy and did so for several reasons. Some people reason that since the Lord did not specifically name Sunday as the new Sabbath, we should continue as before and observe Saturday to really obey the Commandment. And we must look at this. Our reading of the Gospels soon makes it clear, there are few things the Lord more strenuously disputed than the narrow and legalistic observance of the Sabbath amongst the Jews. And yet such extreme observance has been known amongst Christians and in our own time, there are widely differing attitudes as to what is involved.

I am reminded here of the controversy which surrounded the running of the first Sunday train from Glasgow to Edinburgh on March the 13th 1842. Leaders of the Church of Scotland in Glasgow denounced the move as "a grievous outrage on the religious feelings of the people of Scotland, a powerful temptation to the careless and indifferent to abandon the public ordinances of Grace, and most disastrous to the quiet of the rural parishes along the line of the railways." Passengers were met in Edinburgh and solemnly warned that they had bought tickets to hell, (Barclay, p 38) And though we might smile at this, I think we are obliged to sit down and ask ourselves whether in fact we have a clear understanding of precisely what the Commandment is getting at. What are the duties and responsibilities of modern day Sabbath observance? The thing is, God saw fit to include this Commandment in what has been described as "the most relevant document in the world today". What, then is it asking of us?

There can be no question that for the Jews Saturday was singled out and set apart as a holy day. For them it was inextricably connected with the creation story and, above

all else, commemorated God's rest after it. As in Genesis 2: 2-3 "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done". From the beginning observance of the Sabbath was hedged round with regulations, but these were multiplied to the point of absurdity as the years went by. At the time of the Lord's Advent it was forbidden to tie a knot, to light a fire, to move a lamp, to go on a journey, to prepare a meal or to heal those who were sick. "In the case of an illness or injury steps could be taken to keep a man from getting worse, but not to cure him or make him better". (Barclay)

Is it then any wonder that the Lord was constantly at variance with the leaders of the Jews over this issue? There are numerous instances of dispute recorded in the Gospels, and here is just one of them: Matthew 12: 10-13: "and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

Even though the early Christians, most of whom were Jews anyway, continued observance of the Jewish Sabbath, it was inevitable that the first day of the week, the day of the Lord's resurrection, should assume an increasing significance for them. And it did. For them it was a day of victory and hope which they would commemorate and right from the earliest times it became the focal point of their religious observances. Hence it was on the first day of the week that the congregation met to break bread at Troas (Acts 20: 7). We read of that occasion, "Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight". It was also on the first day of the week that the Corinthians were to put something aside for the collection for the Jerusalem Church. (1 Corinthians 16:2)

Even though we can trace the beginnings of the Christian observance of Sunday as a day set apart and to be kept holy, the pity is that it became a matter of dispute at all. For all that Sunday reminds us of the Lord's resurrection and final victory "it is inessential whether one day or another be declared the Sabbath" (Ohdner) . The important thing here is that the Lord is telling us how necessary it is to have a day

apart; a day when we can cut ourselves clean away from worldly worries and external concerns; a day during which we have the opportunity to worship, to probe the deeper currents of our lives, and to spend time with and for people in a way that's not possible on other days. In "True Christian Religion" paragraph 301, Swedenborg writes of it as "a day of instruction in Divine things, and thus also a day of rest from labours and of meditation on such things as are of salvation and eternal life, as also a day of love towards the neighbour."

This does not mean something sombre and cheerless. It does not ask of us Church attendance two or three times every Sunday. It simply asks of us time for the Lord and for the things of religion. God didn't give us this Commandment to spoil our Sundays. Rather He did and does know that it is without question in our own best interests to spend time once each week in this way. We need to remember because we are so inclined to forget the Sabbath and what it stands for. We are so easily diverted and side tracked; so many things press upon us. In any case we naturally incline to what is external and superficial and have to be brought back to a contemplation of what is real in life and of the deeper values upon which worthwhile and deeply satisfying living is based.

So far we have talked of this Commandment concerning the Sabbath Day in terms of the obvious, surface meaning that it carried for us. But I want us now to go a little more deeply into it. Just as in dealing with the second Commandment I showed that the Lord's name has a far deeper significance than just those series of titles by which we know and refer to Him, so too with this Commandment. There are deeper implications in it for us.

As I think we can all see, the implantation and establishment of any truth in our lives is never without a certain toil and struggle. As we try to hold on to a truth we know and to live by it, temptations come upon us to abandon it. Inevitably there is conflict and torment. We feel ourselves drawn in two directions. However in the end and if we have held on, the conflict dies down. The truth itself begins to become part of our nature. We no longer think of acting otherwise. So far as that particular truth is concerned we come into a state of spiritual rest and peace. And this, in a deeper sense, is what the Sabbath represents.

Let us look again at the Commandment. We are to remember the Sabbath Day to

keep it holy, the Sabbath, in a deeper sense, representing the rest and peace that comes after the successful establishment of a truth in our lives. And that state, that peace of mind, is not to be violated or intruded upon in any way. We are to do nothing that would harm it. We are not to let ourselves slip back and fall away.

We remember the Sabbath Day when we bring to mind the rest and peace which inwardly the Lord wishes to give us, and when we cooperate with Him that it may come about. And that can be any day of the week and any time of the day. The Sabbath Day represents a state of mind; a state of peace and well being which can be ours, for the Lord wishes to bless us with it. Let us always 'Remember the Sabbath Day'; for in remembering it we can be spurred on to make it more of a reality.

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 117.

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