

### **The Lord Desires True Righteousness in His People; Principles and Practice in keeping the Christian Sabbath**

Last Lord's Day we gave our attention to Isaiah 57. The message of that chapter was directed specifically to the Jewish people who had returned to their homeland from the Babylonian exile of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. They were to live in faith and obedience to their covenantal obligations as they waited for the promised Messiah who would remove their sin from them and restore them to a true relationship with God when He established the promised Kingdom of God. We read in that chapter that God had called upon the people to repent of their sins. God's blessing would come to those who do repent, but judgment would come upon those who did not. God had declared to them:

- <sup>15</sup>For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,  
    who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:  
“I dwell in the high and holy place,  
    and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,  
to revive the spirit of the lowly,  
    and to revive the heart of the contrite.  
<sup>16</sup>For I will not contend forever,  
    nor will I always be angry;  
for the spirit would grow faint before me,  
    and the breath of life that I made.  
<sup>17</sup>Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry,  
    I struck him; I hid my face and was angry,  
    but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart.  
<sup>18</sup>I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;  
    I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners,  
<sup>19</sup>creating the fruit of the lips.  
    Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,” says the LORD,  
    “and I will heal him.  
<sup>20</sup>But the wicked are like the tossing sea;  
    for it cannot be quiet,  
    and its waters toss up mire and dirt.  
<sup>21</sup>There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.” (Isa. 57:15-21)

In the chapter before us today, Isaiah 58, the prophet sets forth what constitutes true righteousness which would result in God's blessing upon them. As in the previous chapter, these words had specific application to the Jewish remnant who had returned from exile in Babylon, who were hoping and looking for God to visit them with salvation. It eventually came when the Lord Jesus was sent among them.

We read that these people who were in need of repentance were not unreligious in their thinking and their behavior. They observed ritual and practice that they thought commended them to God. But they lacked true righteousness. God called upon them to repent and do what He required of them.

The message set before the people is in the form of teaching regarding the practice of fasting. Again, these were religious people. They fasted frequently, but they failed to practice true righteousness even in their religious devotion, which was shallow and self-righteous in practice.

In **verse 1** we read of God instructing His prophet to declare His Word boldly and clearly to His people.

*“Cry aloud; do not hold back;  
lift up your voice like a trumpet;  
declare to my people their transgression,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.*

God instructed His prophet to speak loudly and clearly to the people. He was to make known to them the specific sins that the people had committed against their God.

This is always the call of God upon His spokesmen. They have a message to confront people with their sin and to call them to repentance. In the days that we are living there is little willingness to speak clearly about sin. And I would assume that because God had to give this word of exhortation to His prophet that there was also a timidity then in men that needed to be overcome in order to speak rightly for God.

Here it is made clear that the people of God were to be addressed about their sins. But the people thought all was well with them. They did not see that they had transgressed His Law. They thought they had been serving God, seeking God, sincerely delighting in Him. They thought their whole nation was right with God and not to be justly blamed for any major infraction. They sought His will, or so they thought. They claimed to worship Him and delight in His presence, but in reality they had forsaken His Law. The prophet would need to speak to them directly about their sins. This is what men of God are to do.

**Charles Spurgeon** described the ministry of **John the Baptist**, who so clearly proclaimed this message of sin to the people before whom he stood.

We will first consider the question of John the Baptist: “When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” I have no doubt that the Pharisees and Sadducees were very much surprised to hear John addressing them in that way; for men who wish to win disciples, ordinarily adopt milder language than that, and choose more attractive themes, for they fear that they will drive their hearers from them if they are too personal, and speak too sharply. There is not much danger of that nowadays, for the current notion abroad now is that gospel ministers can sew with silk without using a sharp needle; and that, instead of piercing men with the sword of the Spirit, they should show them only the hilt of it; let them see the bright diamonds on the scabbard, but never let them feel the sharpness of the two-edged blade. They should always comfort, and console, and cheer, but never allude to the terror of the Lord. That appears to be the common interpretation of our commission; but John the Baptist was of quite another mind. There came to him a Pharisee, a very religious man, one who observed all the details of external worship, and were very careful even about trifles, a firm believer in the resurrection, and in angels and spirits, and in all that was written in the Book of the law, and also in all the traditions of his fathers, a man who was overdone with external religiousness, a Ritualist of the first order, who felt that, if there was a righteous man in the world, he certainly was that one. He must have been greatly taken aback when John talked to him about the wrath of God, and plainly told him that that wrath was as much for him as for other people. Those phylacteries and the broad borders of his garment, of which he was so proud, would not screen him from the anger of God against injustice and transgression; but, just like any common sinner, he would need to “flee from the wrath to come.” I daresay that the Sadducee was equally taken aback by John’s stern language. He, too, was a religious man, but he combined with his religion greater thoughtfulness than the Pharisee did; — at least, so He said. He did not believe in traditions, he was too large-minded to care about the little details and externals of religion. He observed the law of Moses, but he clung rather to the letter of it than to its spirit, and he did not accept all that was revealed, for he denied that there was such a thing as an angel or a spirit. He was a Broad Church-man a man of liberal ideas, fully abreast of the age. He professed to be a Hebrew of the Hebrews; yet, at the same time, the yoke of religion rested very lightly upon his shoulders. Still, he was not irreligious; yet here is John the Baptist talking to him, as well as to the Pharisee, about “the wrath to come.” They would both have liked to have a little argument with him, but he talked to them about fleeing from the wrath to come. They would both have been pleased to discuss with him some theological questions, and to bring up the differences between their two sects, just to hear how John would handle them, and to let them see which way he would lean. But he did not waste a moment over the matters in dispute between Pharisees and Sadducees; the one point he had to deal with

was the one of which he would have spoken to a congregation of publicans and harlots, and he spoke of it in just the same way to these nominally religious people. They must “flee from the wrath to come;” or else, as surely as they were living men, that wrath would come upon them, and they would perish under it. So John just kept to that one topic; he laid the axe to the root of the trees as he warned these hypocritical professors to escape for their lives, else they would perish in the common destruction which will overwhelm all ungodly men. This was not the style of preaching that John’s hearers liked; but John did not think of that. He did not come to say what men wished him to say, but to discharge the burden of the Lord, and to speak out plainly what was best for men’s eternal and immortal interests, He spoke, therefore, first, concerning the wrath of God; and, next, he spoke concerning the way of escape from that wrath.

But these people thought that they had been living in a manner that would secure God’s favour toward them. We read in **verse 2** of their self-righteous, yet religious fervour and devotion.

***<sup>2</sup>Yet they seek me daily  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that did righteousness  
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments;  
they delight to draw near to God.***

The people addressed by the prophet Isaiah could not understand why they had not experienced God’s blessing upon them. But God reveals to them that their religious practices were not in accordance with God’s will and ways. They were in reality serving their own interests, seeking to please or appease God in their own ways. We read in **verse 3a** what they thought of themselves as they addressed God who they thought had been unresponsive toward them. They had fasted and yet they had not received God’s favour. These ones had returned from the exile but had not yet experienced the great restoration which they had anticipated. They had sought God, or so they thought. They had fasted (while praying) but nothing about their situation had changed. They had put forth all the effort they could but it did not have the blessing of God upon it. And so they complained to God:

***‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not?  
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’***

But then God responded to them, declaring that their religious practice was a sham.

***Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,  
and oppress all your workers.***

The context suggests that “the day of your fast” was their observance of the Sabbath Day, the sign of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel, the covenant that God made with the nation through Moses. God declared that although they rested, or observed a Sabbath rest in order to fast, they were making others work. In reality they were only concerned for themselves. God declared that their behavior would in no way move God to be favourable toward them. God declared to them in **verse 4**:

***<sup>4</sup>Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to hit with a wicked fist.  
Fasting like yours this day  
will not make your voice to be heard on high.***

We see that their fasting was in vain because their hearts were not humble. It would seem that they viewed their fasts as meritorious, they were, therefore, fasting with wrong motives. Their fasting caused them to become irritable toward one another resulting in bickering and fighting between them. They were not

fasting with the right motives. They really were not attempting to pray to God so that He would hear and respond to their pleas. It would seem that they were only alleviating a sense of obligation, perhaps soothing their consciences through their fasting.

God reasoned with them in **verse 5**:

***<sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day for a person to humble himself?  
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,  
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?  
Will you call this a fast,  
and a day acceptable to the LORD?***

God speaks to them with sarcasm, “you call this a fast?” Apparently they were attempting to appear outwardly as broken and humble, but it was not from the heart. The Lord has contempt for this kind of thing. He does not accept just any efforts to serve Him.

There are many who believe that they are right with God. They attend “church” weekly. They observe religious practices, but those practices are not in accordance with the Word of God. God has prescribed how He is to be worshipped, how He is to be served. When people attempt to worship God according to their own devising, they not only offend God but they cannot be righteous in their observance. Paul wrote of “These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23).

God then declared the kind of fast that He acknowledges. We read in **verse 6**:

***“Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?”***

The fast that God desires for His people is that they cease from sin.

What is fasting? ***Fasting is the voluntary refusal to eat food or sometimes to drink for a period of time in order to give one’s full attention and concentration to the Lord in prayer or devotion.*** Sometimes fasting is limited to avoiding only some kinds of foods or drink. Often times fasting involved the total abstinence of food and drink for a specified period of time. The time of a fast may vary greatly. A fast may be only the abstaining of one meal, or of eating on an entire day or for several days.

Fasting is a common practice among many different people in many different religious cultures.

Nearly all religions promote or sanction fasting in some form or another. In primal religions it is often a means to control or appease the gods, a way to produce virility, or preparation for a ceremonial observance—such as initiation or mourning. The fast was used by the ancient Greeks when consulting oracles, by the American Indians to acquire their private totem, and by African shamans to make contact with spirits. Many Eastern religions use it to gain clarity of vision and mystical insight. Judaism, several branches of Christianity, and Islam all have fixed fast days, and usually associate fasting with the discipline of the flesh or with repentance for sin. Islam undertakes the annual fast of Ramadan, an entire month when Muslims are obliged to abstain from all food and water from sunrise to sunset.<sup>1</sup>

Fasting, the voluntary denial of food, will enable one to be able to deny sins. There is something about exercising self-control in one area that carries over into other areas of life. The loosing of “bonds” here and “straps of the yoke” carry the idea of releasing oppressed ones from their slavery.

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<sup>1</sup> R. D. Linder, “Fast, Fasting” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Baker, 1984), p. 406.

God declared that their religious duty involved not merely denying yourself of food, but to feed those who were hungry. **Verse 7** reads:

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

True repentance that results in true righteousness will be seen in assisting those in need. It is loving one's neighbor as oneself, doing to others as the good Samaritan did our Lord's parable. We are to be setting people free of bondage of sin, rendering justice to the oppressed. God promised to bless those who lives in this manner.

*<sup>8</sup>Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you;  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

When they had repented in this fashion, then they could expect to see God's kingdom manifested among them. Note, the bringing forth of true repentance in preparation for the coming kingdom is what John the Baptist preached during his preparatory ministry. When "all" the people had repented and been baptized, the Lord Jesus came on the scene and began to manifest God's salvation among the people.

The imagery in **verse 8** is of the people being led by God through the wilderness. The glory of God led them. They will be led, blessed, and protected by God, in other words they would enjoy the blessings of a covenant relationship with God if they would repent of their sins and do justice.

*<sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'  
If you take away the yoke from your midst,  
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*

Then God will answer prayer. He will be found. He will hear and will be heard, if, that is, they cease to act wickedly toward one another.

*<sup>10</sup>if you pour yourself out for the hungry  
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
then shall your light rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be as the noonday.*

God blesses those who are blessing others. God serves those who serve others. He will meet the needs of those who attempt to meet the needs of others. They will experience the glory and blessing of God.

All of these terms in these verses speak of the glory of the kingdom, the age of salvation which the people were waiting, but would not enjoy, until they repented in this manner.

*<sup>11</sup>And the LORD will guide you continually  
and satisfy your desire in scorched places  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters do not fail.*

The language is of a people in desert regions, who are wandering and suffering thirst. They have a longing, but no fulfilment, no relief. God declared that if they repent and love (serve) one another He will see to it that they are strengthened, receive refreshing, as though in those desert regions they came across a bubbling flowing spring with an unlimited supply of fresh, cool water.

**<sup>12</sup>And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to dwell in.**

Then the former glory of the kingdom would be realized. There would be blessing and security among the peoples.

**<sup>13</sup>*“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,  
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,  
and call the Sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;***

They are called upon to observe the Sabbath rightly. As we have pointed out earlier, the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant with Israel. On this day, which was each seventh day of the week--Saturday, they were to cease from all their work. They were to dedicate themselves and the day to the Lord. They were to purpose to honor God, do the things that please Him or further His cause. They were to speak words that sought to glorify Him, as they expressed His will before one another.

**<sup>14</sup>*then you shall take delight in the LORD,  
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”***

If they kept the sign of the covenant, observing the Sabbath Day, then God would bless them with the promises of the covenant: God would be to them as He had been to their fathers. He seals His words with a sure word: “For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

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### **Some Principles Respecting Observance of the Christian Sabbath**

Let us consider in more detail the manner in which we are to observe the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath. Several weeks ago in our “Devotion & Doctrine” handout, we read of The Westminster Catechism question and answer regarding the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath.

**Question #59: Which day has God appointed to be the weekly Sabbath?**

**Answer: From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly Sabbath(a), and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian Sabbath(b). (a) Gen. 2:2, 3; Exo. 20:11; (b) Mark 2:27, 28; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10.**

The next two questions described the manner in which Christians should observe the Christian Sabbath:

**Question #60:** How is the Sabbath to be sanctified?

**Answer:** The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days(a); and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship(b), except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy(c). (a) Exo. 20:10; Neh. 13:15-22; Isa. 58:13, 14. (b) Exo. 20:8; Lev. 23:3; Luke 4:16; Acts 20:7; (c) Matt. 12:1-13.

**Question #61:** What is forbidden in the fourth commandment?

**Answer:** The fourth commandment forbids the omission, or careless performance, of the duties required, and the profaning the day by idleness, or doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or works, about our worldly employments or recreations. (Neh. 13:15-22; Isa. 58:13, 14; Amos 8:4-6.)

These questions and answers are from *The Westminster Catechism* (1646), which reflect the common practice of the Christian Sabbath by English Puritans. What distinguishes his teaching is the Christian’s responsibility to refrain from worldly “employments” but also from worldly “recreations.”

Interestingly, the Protestants on the European continent set forth the observance of the Christian Sabbath as only refraining from worldly “employments.” The exclusion of “recreations” from Sabbath Day observance was not advocated. For example, we may read in *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) this statement about observance of the Christian Sabbath:

**Question #103. What does God require in the fourth commandment?**

**Answer.** First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained[1] and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God[2] to hear God’s Word,[3] to use the sacraments,[4] to call publicly upon the LORD,[5] and to give Christian offerings for the poor.[6] Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.[7]

[1] Deut. 6:4-9; 20-25; 1 Cor. 9:13, 14; 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:13-17; Tit. 1:5. [2] Deut. 12:5-12; Psa. 40:9, 10; 68:26; Acts 2:42-47; Heb. 10:23-25. [3] Rom. 10:14-17; 1 Cor. 14:26-33; 1 Tim. 4:13. [4] 1 Cor. 11:23, 24. [5] Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:1. [6] Psa. 50:14; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8 and 9. [7] Isa. 66:23; Heb. 4:9-11.

If you read carefully these questions and answers, you will see that the Heidelberg Catechism does not forbid world “recreations” as did the Westminster Catechism. Why is there this difference? Which one best reflects the biblical teaching about Sabbath observance?

The answer is that the Westminster Catechism, which is the teaching of the English Puritans, use the passage before us, Isaiah 58, to argue their point. We again read **verses 13 and 14:**

“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, *from doing your pleasure* on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or *seeking your own pleasure*, or talking idly; <sup>14</sup>then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa. 58:13)

The English Puritans interpreted the words, “*your pleasure*”, to mean one’s own “*recreations.*” But they were wrong in their understanding. Here the prophet was addressing those who did their own “*pleasure*” on the Sabbath in that they were doing their own *worldly business*, rather than abstaining from work as God had commanded them.

**R. C. Sproul** addressed this matter of the Christian Sabbath in an article entitled:

## **Defining the Debate**

By R. C. Sproul

The question of Sabbath observation, historically, has provoked many debates and controversies involving separate issues. The first great debate about the Sabbath is whether, as an Old Testament ordinance particularly emphasized in the Mosaic covenant, it is still obligatory in the context of new covenant Christianity. Augustine, for example, believed that nine of the Ten Commandments (the so-called “moral law” of the Old Testament) were still intact and imposed obligations upon the Christian church. His lone exception with the commandment with respect to the Sabbath day. Since Paul spoke about keeping Sabbaths or not keeping Sabbaths as a matter adiaphorous (indifferent), Augustine was persuaded that the Old Testament Sabbath law had been abrogated. Others have argued that because the Sabbath was instituted originally not in the Mosaic economy but in creation, it maintains its status of moral law as long as the creation is intact.

The second major controversy is the question about the day of the week on which the Sabbath is to be observed. Some insist that since the Sabbath was instituted on the seventh day of creation, when God rested from His labors, and since the Old Testament Israelites celebrated the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week, which would be Saturday, we should follow that pattern. Others have insisted that the New Testament changed the Sabbath to the first day of the week because of the significance of the resurrection of Jesus on that day. They also point to the New Testament practice of Christians coming together on Sunday as the Lord’s Day for worship. The argument focuses on whether the Sabbath is a cyclical command that requires worship and rest on every seventh day or whether it is specified to a particular day of the week. John Calvin argued that it would be legitimate to have the Sabbath day on any day if all of the churches would agree, because the principle in view was the regular assembling of the saints for corporate worship and for the observation of rest.

Within the Reformed tradition, the most significant controversy that has appeared through the ages is the question of how the Sabbath is to be observed. There are two major positions within the Reformed tradition on this question. To make matters simple, we will refer to them as the Continental view of the Sabbath and the Puritan view of the Sabbath. Both views acknowledge that the Sabbath is still in effect. Both views agree that the Sabbath is a time for corporate worship. Both agree that the Sabbath is a day of rest when believers are to abstain from unnecessary commerce. But two areas are in dispute between the two schools and the most important of these is the question of recreation. Is recreation a legitimate form of rest-taking, or is recreation something that mars a sacred observation of the Sabbath day?

The Puritan view argues against the acceptability of recreation on the Sabbath day. The text most often cited to support this view is Isaiah 58:13-14 and following: “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

The crux of the matter in this passage is the prophetic critique of people doing their own pleasure on the Sabbath day. The assumption that many make with respect to this text is that doing one’s own pleasure must refer to recreation. If this is the case, the prophet Isaiah was adding new dimensions to the Old Testament law with respect to Sabbath-keeping. Whereas the rest of the Old Testament law is virtually silent with respect to recreation, this text in Isaiah is cited to indicate a further revelation from God about Sabbath observance — a prohibition of recreation.

There is another way to understand Isaiah 58, however, following the thinking of those who hold the Continental view of the Sabbath. The distinction in Isaiah 58 is between doing what is pleasing to God and doing what is pleasing to ourselves in opposition to what is pleasing to God. Presumably, what is in view in the prophetic critique is God’s judgment against the Israelites for violating the Mosaic Law with respect to the Sabbath day, particularly regarding involvement in commerce. There were Israelites who wanted to be able to buy and sell seven days a week, not simply six days a week. Therefore, they violated

the Sabbath commandment by seeking their own pleasure, which was to do business on the Sabbath rather than to do that which was pleasing to God. According to this view, the text has nothing to say directly or indirectly about recreation on the Sabbath day.

There is an old story, which may be apocryphal, that when John Knox came to Geneva to visit John Calvin at his home on the Sabbath, he was shocked to find Calvin engaged in lawn bowling. If the story is true, it may indicate that the theologian most devoted to Sabbath-keeping in history, Calvin, did not see recreation as a violation of the Lord's Day, but as a part of the rest-taking or recreation that is to be part of this day. Recreation would never have been acceptable to Calvin if it had interrupted or supplanted the time devoted to worship on the Sabbath.

One other point of debate remains between the two sides on this issue. It has to do with works of mercy performed on the Sabbath. The example of Jesus is cited, that on the Sabbath He engaged not only in worship and rest but also in works of mercy. Such works brought Him into conflict with the Pharisees over the question of Sabbath-keeping. Some have drawn the conclusion that since Jesus performed works of mercy on the Sabbath, the Christian is obligated to do the same. However, the fact that Jesus did works of mercy on the Sabbath, though it clearly reveals that it is lawful to do so on the Sabbath, does not obligate us to do such works on the Sabbath. That is to say, Jesus' example teaches us that we may do works of mercy on the Sabbath but not that we must do such works on the Sabbath.

All of these issues continue to be examined and debated as the church seeks to understand how God is best honored on this day.<sup>2</sup>

The point that we desire to underscore is that the observance of the Christian Sabbath involves chiefly the abstaining from worldly *employments*. It is quite straightforward in the declaration of the Fourth Commandment:

<sup>8</sup>Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall *labor* and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do *no work*: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exo. 20:8-11)

Our Lord Jesus declared this regarding the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The people of God are to give themselves to physical and spiritual rejuvenation as well as enhancing their relationships with God and His people.

Our own Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 reflects the English Puritan view of the Christian Sabbath. After all, the title by which our confession has been known in the past is "The Second London Confession of 1689." It is an English Baptist confession of faith. Here is the statement on the Christian's duty on the Christian Sabbath:

The sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering their common affairs aforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all day, from their own works, words and thoughts, about *their worldly employment and recreations*, but are also taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy. (Isaiah 58:13; Nehemiah 13:15-22; Matthew 12:1-13) [Article 22, Paragraph 8; The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689]

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Here you can see that the Reformed Baptists of 17<sup>th</sup> century London adopted the language of the Westminster Confession and Catechism. It includes the prohibition of “worldly employment *and recreations.*” This is one of the minor points with which I would take issue with the confession, as I believe that the “continental” (European Protestant) understanding better reflects biblical teaching and practice.

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Here is another word from R. C. Sproul regarding his view of the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath and how it is to be observed. I do not agree with all that he has said here, particularly with respect to the diminishment of an elevated view of the Lord’s Day. And of course we disagree with his association of physical circumcision of the Old Testament with baptism under the new covenant. But he makes some valid arguments and provides reasonable principles for Christian practice on the Christian Sabbath.

**Ask RC: Are we still required to keep the Sabbath?  
Does it matter what day? What does keeping the Sabbath look like?**

by R. C. Sproul  
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This particular issue is faithful fodder for those who love to play armchair theologian. It has all the necessary ingredients- a long struggle over the issue in the history of the church, subcultures in the church with strong feelings on the matter, worldliness likely playing into the equation, and to be fair, some level of ambiguity on the issues themselves. Just as I am puzzled as to why God didn’t provide us with a book of church order in the Bible, in like manner, I am surprised that this isn’t one of the more perspicuous issues in the Bible, seeing as how it comes up right there in the Ten Commandments. What follows is not designed to be a compelling case on any count. It is instead a broad overview of how I look at the matter.

First, I believe that Christians and even unbelievers are commanded to keep the Sabbath, though they will do so in different ways. One could argue that the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment would belong under the heading of ceremonial laws. (The distinctions we make between the moral law, the ceremonial law and the civil law in the Old Covenant are important. Deny the abiding validity of the first, and you are an antinomian. Affirm the validity of the second and you are a Judaizer. How you view the third will determine whether or not you are a theonomist. While the distinctions are important, remember that the laws do not come to us color coded so we can know which fits in what category.) If one were to argue that the fourth commandment is ceremonial, we still haven’t determined we need not keep it.

Even if God’s direction to Moses for observing the Sabbath were ceremonial, the principle of resting one day in seven was well established before Sinai. It might rightly be understood as a “creation ordinance” since it was at least alluded to in the garden. Second, even when we affirm that Christ fulfills the law, that doesn’t mean He makes it disappear. Passover hasn’t left us- it is “kept” in the New Covenant through the Lord’s Supper. The principle of circumcision hasn’t been “abolished” but is instead “kept” in the New covenant through baptism. In like manner, Jesus didn’t abolish the Sabbath. Instead He is our Sabbath. At the end of the day my basic conclusion is this- we keep Sabbath by resting in the finished work of Christ alone. Our rest is our trust that He has already accomplished all that we need or could hope for.

As such, my view is that we do keep the creation ordinance. It is important, and fitting with God’s design of the very nature of creation that we ought to rest one day in seven, even as we ought to rest our fields one year in seven.

What about the when? Does the day matter? I don’t believe that the day matters. There are some strong arguments made by my “seventh day” friends that have some weight with me. That said, in the end, I don’t believe at creation God set apart a particular day. It is desirable and wise, it seems to me, that

the church ought, as much as is possible, share a common day of rest. It is fitting that in our rest we would gather to renew covenant through Lord's Day worship. It is fitting as well that the church should have chosen the day of resurrection as its day. With the coming of Jesus we do not work through the week to earn our rest. Instead we are blessed with rest as the week begins, and in gratitude go and work. I am willing to concede that we have no proof-text for this. I don't think we need one.

What about how? The Westminster Standards affirm what we call the Puritan view of Sabbath keeping. Calvin and others upheld what is called the Continental View. The principle difference is over whether recreation is permitted during the Lord's Day. I opt for the Continental view, though with perhaps a touch of the Puritan view. That is, I am perfectly comfortable with godly, peaceful, restful recreation. A game of cards, a toss of the football with my children I think are fine. A three hour game of full contact rugby doesn't fit into my understanding of rest.

The reason I am comfortable with this kind of recreation, however, is because I am uncomfortable drawing too clear a line between that which is sacred and that which is secular. That is, if in playing catch with my children I am not rejoicing in the grace of God for the blessing of children, for the beauty of games, for the revelation of His glory in creation, then I not only not ought to do it on Sunday, I ought never to do it.

Having offended, one way or another all my readers, let me finish with three important affirmations. First, there is a right answer. God's law, however hard a time we might have in seeing it, is in the end clear. The failure to see it is our own. On the other hand, when we have an issue over which good men that I respect have over the years differed, I tend to at least hold a broad view in terms of judgment. That is, though I of course believe I am right in how I look at this, I am not angry or frustrated that others take a different view. I don't look down my nose at them for their failure to embrace my obvious and compelling wisdom. This also is one of those areas where I desire to practice a rule of thumb that I hold dear- never attack my friends who are to my right. If your idea of a great way to spend the Lord's Day is to have a private devotional on your way to the mall, you likely need to repent. If, however, you have a more conservative view than me on this, more power to you. Third, if that does describe you, be careful to check yourself often to be certain in "keeping the Sabbath" you aren't breaking it. That is, beware the temptation to think that your ability to keep the Sabbath is what earns God's favor. Let your resting rest on the finished work of Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath.

One final word is in order. New Testament faith and practice places great importance on maintaining a clear conscience before the Lord in all that we do. There are some Christians that have been so "conditioned", for lack of a better word, to observe the Lord's Day in a certain manner, that to change might not enable them to live before God with a clear conscience. We read in Romans 14 these words:

<sup>22</sup>Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. <sup>23</sup>But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin. (Rom. 14:22-23)

We are to respect and show deference to other people and their convictions about some of these less than essential matters of the faith. This is what it is to walk in love.

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Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith--to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen. (Rom. 16:25-27)