

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Jesus is Lord: The Lord's Day

To the young boy just turning two, it all made perfect sense. He could do just what he liked today because he was in charge. It was his birthday, his day, to do with as he pleased. At least until his mother put her foot down! In a sense though, my young son had the right idea. Because it was his special day, it seemed only right and proper that events should centre on him.

As we continue our series of studies into those things that belong to the Lord, we come to look at the Lord's Day. Even my young son's logic would recognise that it is only right that today, and all Sundays, all that I do should centre on Him. But then, isn't that true of all my life? Quite simply, we could wrap up our study now by saying that we should all do today only that which the Holy Spirit directs us to do, nothing more and nothing less.

But oh! How we like to have rules and regulations in our lives! Should a Christian do this on a Sunday? Can a Christian do that on a Sunday? And how come the day of rest seems to be the busiest day of the week? It is so much easier to have a rule for all circumstances rather than to seek direct guidance from the Lord for each day.

Let us begin then by going right back to the very beginning. There can be no better pattern in life than to follow the example of God Himself. So, in Genesis 2:2-3, we read: *"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."* I can imagine God sitting back and smiling, like any great artist would, as He viewed the canvas of creation. What He had done was absolutely perfect and, quite appropriately, He took time to appreciate His work. So He sets the seventh day apart to Himself. In the Bible, the idea of holiness (or sanctify, or saint, it is all the same thought) is to be separate from one thing, in order to dedicate yourself to another. So God stops His creatorial work in order to admire His handiwork. It would be quite wrong to think that God had a lie in that day, before leisurely reading the supplements of the daily newspapers. This day of rest was for worship and appreciation, not idleness. We must note, however, that this is part of our relationship to the Creator.

As such, it is foolish for us to believe that we can ignore His pattern and work seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, and not be the poorer for it. God created us in His image. We, too, need to make time to stop from our ordinary activities and to worship Him. We need to make time to realise how great He is, and how small we are if we are to be profitable citizens for the rest of the week. In all the busyness of 21st century living we have all but lost the ability to be awe struck, to simply wonder at the greatness of God and all that He has done. This is not unconnected to the fact that we have reduced the Lord's Day to just another day. In summary, then, we can learn that as a part of God's creatorial order, we need to make time to worship Him, and to refocus our eyes onto what He has done. If, as an individual, I make time to focus on what He has done for me, I will be a more useful member of society. If, as a family, we make time to focus on what He has done, then we will be more likely to remain a supportive unit.

As we move further into the Old Testament, then we next come to the formal provision of the Sabbath day, and its incorporation into the Ten Commandments. So we read, in Exodus 20:8-11: *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the stranger within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."* So important was the need to sanctify the time for the worship of God that one quarter of the space given to the Ten Commandments is given to this one alone. Knowing the fickleness of man's heart, God lays down, literally in tablets of stone, the need to set one day aside as special. This, the Jew was to do every seventh day, the Sabbath, from 6:00 pm on the Friday night, to 6:00 pm on the Saturday night. On the surface of it, this all seemed pretty straight forward. However, before we move into the New Testament, there are just two other passages that should be noted. Firstly, in 1 Samuel 21, we read about a time when David was on the run from Saul. He comes to Ahimelech the priest to beg for bread. The priest has no ordinary bread, but does give him some of the consecrated bread. Strictly speaking, David and his men should not have even touched this bread, and yet they do so without censure. Through this episode we see that the law was never meant to be so inflexible that it would condemn a man to die of hunger, rather than use what was available in an emergency. Secondly, as we read through the instructions given for the great feasts

of Jehovah, it is of interest that the feast of firstfruits, and the feast of weeks, were both celebrated on the day after the Sabbath, or on Sunday, if you like. You can read the details for yourself later, in Leviticus 23:9-21. Right at the heart of what we might consider to be the Jewish religious system, we find that the worship of God was not to be boxed in to just the Sabbath day. The worship of God was something that was to involve much more than just one day a week. In picture form, these two feasts speak to us of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and the formation of the church at Pentecost. So then we have seen that God had made formal provision of a Sabbath day in Judaism, but it was not to be all and end all of the worship of God.

As we move into the New Testament we find that the Sabbath had become legalised to stone coldness. What God had given as a rest, man had turned into a rod of judgement. Did Jesus deliberately perform His acts of healing on the Sabbath? I think He did. What God had given for the benefit of mankind, man had turned around and corrupted. So Jesus has to remind His listeners that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath! We shall return to this later to see how this may apply to us today.

We only find the term the Lord's Day once in the Bible, in Revelation 1:10: "*On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.*" Assuming that John wrote his prophetic finale to the Bible around AD 95 we can see then that, within about sixty years of the Church's formation, the term was in use and would have been generally understood. If we go back a little, to the beginning of the book of Acts, we see there that early church practice was to meet together daily (Acts 2:46). This is an extremely good pattern, and one that we should seek to emulate a little more. Frequently, the early disciples would use the Sabbath day itself, as they met in the synagogues to preach the Gospel to a readymade audience (Acts 16:13 and 17:2). However, even within the book of Acts, the first hints that Sunday became the normal day for meeting together, are given. So in Acts 20:7 we read, "*On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.*" Also when Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first epistle, around AD 56, he instructs them: "*On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*" (1 Corinthians 16:2). It appears likely then, that within as little as 30 years, a regular pattern of meeting together, particularly on the first day of the week had developed, and that within another 30 years, this day had become known as the Lord's Day amongst the early believers. The early church fathers, for example Ignatius (AD 107), and Justin Martyr (AD 148), confirm in their writings that Sunday had been adopted as the Lord's Day by the early church, and the edict of Laodicea (4th century AD) put the stamp of official approval upon an observance already long established in the early churches.

So how does all this affect us today? Is the Lord's Day only for church services? Can a Christian shop on the Lord's Day, or earn a living on the Lord's Day? Well, we certainly don't keep the Lord's Day special in response to the Ten Commandments. Nor is it the Christianising of the Sabbath. As a part of God's creation we must go back to the pattern of the Creator and, quite properly, make time each week to worship Him. For reasons of convenience, this quickly became the custom on the first day of the week, with its overtones of resurrection. But what is quite different from the Jewish observance of the Sabbath, as a matter of law, is the Christian observance of the first day of the week, as a matter of liberty. CI Scofield helpfully observes: "*The early churches were specifically warned against submitting themselves to the bondage of any legalistic observance of Sabbath days (Colossians 2:16; Galatians 4:9-11). On the other hand, in the exercise of their Christian liberty (Romans 14:4-6), these same churches voluntarily chose the first day of the week as an appropriate time for fellowship and worship, the day on which the Lord arose and repeatedly appeared to His disciples. It was a new day for a new people belonging to a new creation.*" It is important to realise that as believers we have no duty to observe any particular day, because every day belongs to Him who fills all things. However, keeping the Lord's Day special is a useful way of ensuring that proper time is set aside for God. It is worth just looking at the verses in Romans 14 together: "*Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord.*" Quite clearly, then, the observance of the Lord's Day as a special day is a matter for Christian conscience. One may feel it right and proper to abstain from activities associated with other days of the week. Good, do so and use the time profitably in His service. Another may view all seven days of the week alike. That too is fine. What is not negotiable is the fact that as those who belong to Him, we are to spend our time, and energy and resources in serving Him 24/7. To keep Sunday special as an excuse for not living for Jesus for the other six days of the week would be quite wrong. Similarly, to hold all days the same, and so never make time to worship Him would be wrong. As a matter of convenience, the Lord's Day still offers the best opportunities for His remembrance feast and the Gospel preaching. However, in an increasingly shift orientated world of work, where the traditional 9-5 day is no longer the norm, the church on a local basis must be sensitive to the needs of its members. If more people could attend the Lord's Supper on a Thursday evening, then that is the time to have it. If more unsaved people come to a coffee morning at 10:00 am than to a gospel preaching, on a Sunday at 6:30 pm, then we need to be flexible. It is not the fact that a particular service is on a Sunday that makes it special, but the promise that He is present, and that is given whenever two or three are gathered together.

How we organise our time is always a difficulty. For the student who has been at a Bible study on a Friday night, and then further meetings on the Saturday, the Lord's Day may be the only time left to complete some homework. To go

back to school on the Monday and say that some work remained undone because of keeping the previous day special would be a dreadful witness. However, all too often work is left, and left until the last minute, and then it has to be done, and attendance at church suffers. This is even worse! With careful planning and thought most of us can organise our lives to make enough time to be quieter before we attend a particular service, so that we can go with a clear head and a prepared heart. However, there will always be times when we may need to do things on a Sunday that normally we might rather not. That should not be a problem. Normally, I would not choose to mow the grass on Sunday. However, sometimes after a really busy week, Sunday afternoon seems to be the only time available. To leave it, out of a sense of not being allowed to do such a task on the Lord's Day, would only create a further sense of busyness later on in the week. We need to remember the spirit of the Lord's words that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. We need not live under the heavy weight of keeping one day special at the expense of the quality of the rest of the week.

Of course, many today do not have the luxury of being able not to work for their living on a Sunday. How we react in these circumstances is not easy, but vitally important. If I have to work on a Sunday, thereby missing a time of fellowship, then I have to work. Often, though, provision is made to allow an individual not to have to do so. In such cases then it must be right to absent myself from work to allow myself to be present at church. Some time ago the chance for overtime came up at work. It was well paid, but it was on a Sunday morning. I felt I had to decline – not to have done so would have meant that earning more money was more important than being at the Lord's Supper. But for those of us whose work involves time on a Sunday, we do need to be careful. Three years ago my work patterns were changed to a continuous 24 hour pattern. One Christian in the lab where I work stated that they would not work on a Sunday, period. This got quite a few people's backs up. After all, what to them was so different in going to church as opposed to going to a football game, or spending time with the family. The first draft of the proposals required us to work all day Sunday every six weeks or so. After praying about it, I did not feel that I could work when I should have been at the Lord's Supper – I have a commitment to that every Sunday and for the rest of my life! So I approached the boss and explained my position, suggesting, either working a bit earlier, so as to allow time off at 10:30, or allowing enough flexibility to allow me to swap all my Sunday shifts for an equivalent shift on a different day. Happily, this latter was adopted. Increasingly in the future, this conflict will become a part of many believers' lives. How much we need the grace and wisdom of God to be able to do what is right without offending others. Frequently, there may be a cost involved, either financial or in terms of promotion. It is then that the reality of what we say we believe is tested.

As we draw to a close, we do just need to highlight three dangers in the keep Sunday special view. Firstly, it is all very well keeping Sunday special, but if I am going to have a useful part to play in the worship of the Lord Jesus at His supper, then what I do all week, and particularly on a Saturday night, will need to be considered. It is no good believing that just because I do not do a whole list of things on the Lord's Day, I will be in a fit spiritual condition to be a benefit to others. Valuable worship at the remembrance of the Lord in His death is formed by my experience with Him throughout the week, and particularly on a Saturday night.

Secondly, for those with families, particularly young children, we need to be especially sensitive to their needs. We may want just to spend the day quietly, contemplating His glory. But after a week at school, that is the last thing a boisterous five-year-old will want to do with his spare time. I well remember as a child the sense of unfairness when it always seemed to be rainy on a Saturday but sunny on a Sunday! As parents we need to make the Lord's Day the best day of the week for our children, not the most boring! Keeping special games or making time for a family video may be ways to do this. Whilst we naturally want our children to adopt all our principles and behaviour patterns, we do need to allow them to develop their own convictions. To rigidly enforce our views on this matter, as on any other, may only serve to alienate them from the greater issues that really matter, such as a living relationship with Jesus.

Thirdly, we need to avoid the Pharisaical attitude of outwardly maintaining the Lord's Day, whilst inwardly having attitudes wholly inappropriate to His presence. It is possible to wash the car with a heart full of the Lord. Equally, it is possible to sit quietly with a heart full of bitterness and envy. After all, what makes the Lord's Day special? It is not its position in the week, nor the fact that for many it is a rest day. No, it is His day when, like my two-year-old son, He can do just what He wants to in my life. I have made time for Him, to consider what He has done for me. I have made time for Him, to bring to Him prepared praise and worship. I have made time for Him, so that I have time to serve His children, to support and encourage them. Surely, when my day lies like a blank page, for Him to fill as He pleases, then I have truly found the meaning of the Lord's Day, be it a Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday or Saturday.

May today be a day full of His presence in your life. May it be full of profitable service for Him, and may there be time to find out, in the quiet moments, how altogether lovely He is.

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