

Remember the Sabbath Day

The Third Commandment

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.

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“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8)

“The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:28)

We read in the Writings for the New Church, “Among the Children of Israel, the Sabbath was the holiest of observances” (*True Christian Religion* 301). This is not meant to imply that your average ancient Israelite necessarily regarded it as “the holiest of observances”—undoubtedly some did and some didn’t. Rather the concepts behind the Sabbath were so critical, that the Lord commanded that it be the holiest of observances. Not only did it factor into the top ten—one of the Ten Commandments pronounced from Mt. Sinai—but it also had dire consequences associated with it for those who disobeyed. Scholars of the Bible note that the penalty for failing to observe the Sabbath law was death—a penalty that was in fact carried out on one man who engaged in an activity as simple as picking up sticks on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14, 35:2, Numbers 15:32-36). In the external religious culture of the ancient Israelites as recorded in the Old Testament, where tangible rewards were presented for obedience, and the consequences for disobedience came in the form of physical punishments, there could be no question among them that the Sabbath law was important.

Fast forward to today, and in many ways, most of us would agree that the Sabbath law has lost some of its punch. In some ways, it has been watered down over the decades. Lots of people work on the Sabbath. Stores that used to be closed are now open on Sundays. Going to church is optional. In fact, for many Sunday and spiritual practices are no longer linked. It’s a football day, a day of recreation, a day to sleep in, a day for children’s hockey or soccer programs, a day to get errands done that don’t fit during the week, and many other things besides.

All this is why, from time to time, those of us in church work like to bring up the Sabbath law in an effort to restore it to some place of significance—not in a guilt inducing way, but in an effort to demonstrate how the Sabbath law can, today, be every bit as significant as it was in ancient Israel.

On a basic level, Sabbath law is about Sunday. And Sunday is to be a day of remembrance—of the Lord and the things of spiritual life. It is a day to go to church. It is a day of prayer or reading or quiet reflection on the blessings the Lord has given. It is a day to be strengthened for the week ahead, to become more centered on spiritual duties to be carried out throughout the week. It is a day to do something different in the routine schedule that occupies the rest of the week. It is, usefully, a “family day” for many. It is a day of rest and remembrance.

All those things having been said, there’s actually SO MUCH MORE to the Sabbath law that deserves our attention. It’s not so much what we are or aren’t supposed to do on

a specific day of the week. It's about remembering some critical things about the Lord and the central covenant He places before us. It's about what leads to rest, spiritually understood. It's about the entire process of salvation. Like all of the Ten Commandments, the Third Commandment opens us up to concepts that go far beyond what happens on Sunday morning, important though that may be.

Remember. We turn, then, to a series of teachings given in the Writings for the New Church concerning the Sabbath law. We start with the concept of remembering: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

There's a concept of “life interrupted” here. How many of us have found value in the constant cycle of Sundays? It is ingenious, to say the least, that the Lord worked into the system one day a week every seven days, as “life interrupted” day. Whatever Sunday means to people in our hedonistic and worldly focused culture, it is still a day that most people take off. It is a day to do something different than normally happens Monday to Friday (or Saturday).

Now add back in the intended religious components of the Sabbath, and we see what can happen in our lives, if we simply allow ourselves to be interrupted with reminders of the things of spiritual life. We read in the Writings for the New Church, the Sabbath day “became a day for instruction in Divine matters, and also a day of rest from work, for meditation about matters conducive to salvation and everlasting life, and a day for love towards the neighbor” (*True Christian Religion* 301).

If we take that fact of a day of remembrance, and broaden it, most of us can easily see the challenge to find other ways of usefully interrupting our lives in an effort to “meditate on matters conducive to salvation and everlasting life.” How many of us believe that Sabbath law is about finding space in the day to day schedule to turn to the Lord? There truly is value in stopping—interrupting—and praying, or reading from the Word, or putting a small group experience into the schedule, or having that conversation about what really matters with a friend, or asking ourselves the simple question, “What would the Lord want me to be doing right now, in this situation?”

We know that frequency leads to habit, and habit becomes ingrained. If we have ingrained habits in our lives that lead us to focus more often on the Lord and the things of eternal life, then obviously we're going to make better spiritual choices in the day to day decisions of life.

“That which reigns universally.” Which leads to the second concept associated with Sabbath law. We read a passage earlier that talks about the concept of remembering in connection with things that should “reign universally” within us.

To “remember,” we read, “means what is perpetually in the thoughts” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8885). It continues, this is said “in connection with the kind of thing which must by no means be forgotten” (*Ibid.*). Should we ever forget that the Lord wants us to be useful? Is it ever okay to treat someone in ways we would not want to be treated? We know that there are certain things that the Lord wants us to have in mind always: I am here to prepare for heaven. My part in my salvation is to examine myself to see ways in which I am acting contrary to what the Word teaches, and then turn to the Lord for help to change that pattern. My role in this life is to use my gifts and time to be a blessing to others. The Word

has the Lord's answers to life's questions.... These are things that "must by no means be forgotten," because they are the building blocks of salvation.

We read again, "That reigns universally with human beings which is present perpetually in their thoughts, even when their minds are on other things or they are occupied with their work" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8885). "That which reigns universally within a person should be the Lord" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8865).

Peace vs. anxiety. But it's not all about "should's." There are benefits to remembering and working toward certain spiritual foundations that reign universally. These benefits are no more powerfully framed for us than in the concept of rest.

Again the Sabbath is called "a day of rest." We read in one teaching that, "A day of rest means a state of peace" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8494). Peace is the benefit. Anxiety, a kind of excessive concern for the future, an overbearing sense of guilt or unrest about how life is going—these are the things the Lord would lead us away from. The Sabbath law is about what leads to genuine and lasting peace.

Here's one way of thinking about it. When do human beings, even ourselves, feel most anxious? While there are many answers to that question, one fairly pervasive one is that we forget. It could be as simple as forgetting where we put the car keys. As we scrounge around, often spending precious time we don't have to give to this frustrating activity, our anxiety level can rise. So also with that realization that we have forgotten to do something for someone that we said we'd do. We are all familiar with that painful moment of realization, that sharp intake of breath, and the quickening of the pulse as our minds cry out, "Oh no!"

So it is with all forgetting. When we forget to think about another person's perspective before ploughing ahead with a judgmental or condescending statement, things can get tense, anxious. When we forget that the Lord is with us always, working constantly for our benefit by means of His providence, we can feel more alone and sad in the face of the hardships of life, and more anxious about how things are going to work out for us in the future. When we give in to a negative emotion, or give ourselves permission to indulge in forbidden ways—another form of forgetting—we open ourselves up to the influence of the hells in our lives, who spur us on to do or say terrible things. The result is the pangs of conscience for those who have it, and the painful sense of regret—another manifestation of unrest and anxiety.

On the other hand, if there is a habit...if there is a pattern of turning our minds to the things of spiritual life...if there is an effort to live by certain spiritual principles that are perpetually in our thoughts...if there is a living sense that the Lord is there, then the likelihood of a greater level of peace in our lives is huge. This peace is borne of an honest belief that we are doing what is supposed to be done, and that life is progressing more or less as it should. This is true in a profound sense, when we consider the Lord and the path of spiritual life that He lays before us. We read, "This commandment means being joined with the Lord, leading to peace as the result of protection from hell. The Sabbath means rest and, in this highest sense, peace" (*True Christian Religion* 304). We read further, "When a person is in [a state of rest or peace] he or she is free from all apprehensiveness, uneasiness, and anxiety, and when free from these, blessedness is his" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8890).

Regeneration. We know that salvation is a process. Habits don't form overnight. We need to work at remembering and not forgetting. We need to learn the Lord's teachings for our lives. We need to break bad patterns. We need to go through the steps of repentance at times, to make the changes necessary for spiritual growth.

All of this and much more is involved in what we call the process of regeneration, or being born anew by the Lord over time. Listen to this teaching concerning the Sabbath law:

In the spiritual sense this commandment means a person's reformation and regeneration by the Lord. 'Six days of work' means the fight against the flesh and its lusts, and at the same time against the evils and falsities which are implanted in one by hell. The seventh day means his being joined with the Lord, and his consequent regeneration. (*True Christian Religion* 302; cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 8888, *Apocalypse Explained* 965:3)

It makes sense, based on all that we've explored so far, that the Sabbath commandment is about regeneration and our process of salvation. After all, that's what we come to church to learn. That's what we are called to consider on this day of remembrance. It is one of those core spiritual concepts that must by no means be forgotten, but must be kept continually in the thoughts, so that it "reigns universally." It's not so much that the Lord needs us to take time out of our lives to worship Him for any benefit that might accrue to Him. Rather it is a reminder of our constant need, throughout our lives, to turn to Him so that He can give us eternal life.

The Lord. Finally we come to a consideration of the Lord Himself. If the Sabbath, seen internally, is all about our regeneration and salvation then it is also, even more interiorly, about the Regenerator and Savior. We read, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). We also read, "'The Sabbath' means conjunction of the Lord with heaven, the church, the angels of heaven, and the people of the church" (*Arcana Coelestia* 10360). It also draws attention to the Lord's work of redemption, with the six days of labor standing for the temptations He endured while on earth, even to the cross by means of which He fully conquered hell, glorified His Human, and established a new church on earth which could lead people to live the life that leads to heaven (*True Christian Religion* 301, 303). The upshot of this for us, is that the Lord is the one who today protects us from the hells, together with the anxieties that they can induce, and is immediately present in all aspects of our lives, leading us in His providence through our process of salvation. It is more true than we often consider that He is the source of peace, He is the one who calls us to remember, He is the one who established the pattern of Sundays to usefully interrupt our lives with time to reflect on the things of spiritual life, He is the one who leads us through any life change, and all the rest of the things that we've talked about with regard to Sabbath law.

Conclusion. Our goal then, is to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." That can mean time out on a Sunday to attend worship services, pray, contemplate spiritual life, and discuss spiritual subjects. It could mean reviewing the habits of our lives, to see which ones are healthy and which aren't. It could mean making a concerted effort in one area of our spiritual lives, that we believe the Lord is calling us to work on next. It could mean praying to the Lord that He strengthen our focus on spiritual life, and turn us to Him on a regular basis, so that He and the basics of salvation are perpetually in our thoughts and come to reign universally with us. It could be that we analyze our lives for things that cause

anxiety and upset, and ask ourselves if there are teachings of the Lord's Word that could lead to less turmoil. It could be a prayer to the Lord that He lead us to a place where we feel that our spiritual priorities are in order, and we have a greater trust in His providence.

Can we now see why the Lord would call the Sabbath law "the holiest of observances" (*True Christian Religion* 301)? And since we're now in the mode of thinking symbolically with regard to this command, can we see in a different way why a failure to obey the Sabbath law was punishable by death? It's not proscriptive so much as it is descriptive. The fact of the matter is, those who fail to "remember the Sabbath" in these deeper ways we've explored, don't receive eternal life or salvation, because they don't cooperate with the Lord of the Sabbath in the process of salvation. The opposite of salvation is spiritual death or damnation. This is, then, a life-and-death commandment when considered in all of its ramifications. It is our constant goal to choose life, not just on Sundays, but always. **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:23-28; *Arcana Coelestia* 8885, *True Christian Religion* 301.

Exodus 20

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but 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. ¹¹For 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.”

Mark 2

²³Now it happened that He went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. ²⁴And the Pharisees said to Him, “Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

²⁵But He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: ²⁶how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?”

²⁷And He said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.”

***Arcana Coelestia* 8885**

‘Remember’ means what is perpetually in the thoughts. This is clear from the meaning of ‘remembering’, when said in connection with the kind of thing which must by no means be forgotten, as what is perpetually in the power of thought. What is perpetually in the thoughts is that which reigns universally there; and that reigns universally with human beings which is present perpetually in their thoughts, even when their minds are on other things or they are occupied with their work.

***True Christian Religion* 301**

In the spiritual sense this commandment means a person’s reformation and regeneration by the Lord. ‘Six days of work’ means the fight against the flesh and its lusts, and at the same time against the evils and falsities which are implanted in one by hell. The seventh day means a person’s being joined with the Lord, and his consequent regeneration. So long as that fight continues, people are engaged in spiritual labor; but when they are regenerated, they have rest. The important points [to note regarding regeneration] are these:

- Regeneration is an exact replica of a person’s conception, gestation in the womb, birth and training.
- The first act of a new birth is called the reformation of the understanding, its second act is the regeneration of the will and hence of the understanding.

- The internal part must first be reformed, and the external part by means of the internal.
- At that time a struggle takes place between the internal and external parts; the one who wins becomes master over the other.
- A person's regeneration is having a new will and a new understanding.

The reason why this commandment in the spiritual sense means a person's reformation and regeneration is that it parallels the Lord's toils and battles with the hells, and His victory over them, followed by rest. For the way in which the Lord glorified His Human and made it Divine is the same as the way in which He reforms human beings, and regenerates them, making them spiritual.