

Guidelines to Freedom Part 4 - Holy Day or Holiday?

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg explores the significance of the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship, emphasizing its roots in creation and redemption while addressing contemporary misunderstandings and applications for believers today.

Duration: 39:00

Scripture: Isaiah 58:13

Topics: "Freedom"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of what we talk about before and after worship. He warns against engaging in conversations about worldly matters, as it can bring a negative impact on our souls. Instead, he encourages believers to make Christ the focus of their conversations, even if they don't have much to say. The speaker also highlights the significance of the fourth commandment and the need for a deep conviction and understanding of its divine warrant.

Transcript

Exodus chapter 20 and verse 8, remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Here we are at the fourth commandment, a command that, like the other nine, is clear and comprehensive. We saw that the principle was stated very clearly, and that unless we had a conviction as to the distinction of the day as God had set it apart, then all other considerations would be largely futile.

So we delabored that point, hoping that it would sink in for all of us. We then went on to recognize that God had established this pattern, and the pattern is observed in Scripture. The basis for the day itself and its sanction is provided for us in the 11th verse, 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. In other words, God himself as creator distinguished between the days. There was the stamp of his creative power in them all, and yet on this particular day, God determined that it should be marked by this distinction.

We then notice that this was something which was not only grounded in creation, but it was also grounded in what he had done in redemption. And if you return to Deuteronomy 5 for a moment, you find there that

as God reiterates his commandments in providing this call to the Lord's day, to the Sabbath day, beginning in verse 12 of Deuteronomy 5, he reminds his people that the holiness of this day is attached not simply to creation, but also to redemption. And in verse 15 he says, Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. Because, he says, of what I have done in creation, and because of what I have done in redemption, I have established this pattern which we are able to observe. Now, the transition from the Old Testament into the New Testament, and from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week, is grounded in this.

Namely, that the redemption from Egypt is seen always in Scripture in light of what it previewed. And what the redemption from Egypt previews is the redemption which has been secured by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So much so that in the Old Testament, the seventh day memorialized not only God's rest in creation, but also the redemption of Israel.

And in the New Testament, the Lord's day memorializes the completion of the work of redemption, signaled by the resurrection of Jesus. And it was this fact which marked out and gave to the first day of the week its distinctive religious significance. We might turn just to a couple of places to affirm this in our minds.

In the book of Acts we find this, going somewhat randomly to Acts chapter 20. We read there in verse 7, on the first day of the week, we came together to break bread. And on that occasion, Paul spoke to the people.

When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, and in chapter 16, in verse 2, he says, on the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, and he gives instructions for giving. And it is tied to this first day of the week, marked with the significance, not simply of the fact of God's creation, but also of the wonder of redemption. And it was on this first day of the week, if you like, almost stamping it in this way, that Jesus appeared to his followers after his resurrection.

Obviously, it was the resurrection day which gave to this first day of the week this new dimension and significance. And so, it is a short transition that allows the apostle John, in Revelation 1.10, to speak about being in the Spirit on the Lord's day. And the pattern which is established in the Old Testament is picked up and applied in the New Testament as the Lord's day memorializes Jesus' resurrection.

Just as the Lord's Supper memorializes Jesus' death. So, here it is. The deliverance from Egypt and from the bondage to slavery there gave sanction to the Sabbath institution under the old covenant.

And the resurrection, in its redemptive character, gives sanction to the sacredness of the first day of the week. So, the pattern is seen, not simply in looking back, but in looking forward. Redemption has three tenses to it.

There is a past, and a present, and a future element. And so, too, does the observance of God's day. We look back in the past and memorialize the fact of his resurrection.

We look forward to the day when we will enter into the fullness of the Sabbath rest prepared for the people of God. And in the present time, the significance of the Sabbath principle is found in the beneficent nature of why God has left it to us. And it is for this reason that we read in moments ago from Matthew chapter 12, because it is there as well as in Mark chapter 2, that we find the statements which are most often

misapplied and misquoted, the statements of Jesus underscoring the fact that the Sabbath was made for man rather than man for the Sabbath, and convincing his listeners of the fact that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

Jesus was not asserting his lordship over the Sabbath merely to prepare men for his abolishing of the Sabbath in just a matter of a very short time. It would be a strange and uncharacteristic action on the part of Jesus, and it would be in no sense in keeping or in accord with anything else that he ever did. Christ affirmed the place of the Lord's day.

He affirmed its abiding application. He is the Lord of the Sabbath, he says, guarding it against the distortion of the Pharisees and seeking to make sure that no one deprives men of that which has been given for his good. Indeed, when Jesus says, I am Lord over the Sabbath, he is affirming the fact that he desires that men and women enter into all the benefits that the Lord's day brings.

And as Lord, he speaks his authority in regulating the abiding law of a Sabbath day. Now, I've covered a great deal in that, and I need to, because I need to come to this area of the practice of the Lord's day being applied. The principle which is stated and the pattern which is observed, we can return to, I'm sure we will have occasion to.

But for the time that remains to us this evening, I would like to draw very heavily on the work of the late Professor John Murray and affirm for us the abiding application of the Sabbath in our day. This is very, very important because, as you know, it is a question of great confusion. I quoted this morning from a gentleman who had passed away in 1975, some 20 years ago almost now, and writing before his death, he said this, it is not too much to say that we owe most, if not all the blessings we enjoy, to the Lord's day.

It's a quite awesome statement. Without it, there is no true Christianity, and without Christianity, there is no real lasting spiritual blessing. That we in our generation, which is at least a generation ago, are in danger of losing this day altogether, few serious-minded men or women will dispute.

In our time, the Lord's day is not so much argued about anymore. People simply ignore it. We are living, he says, in perilous times.

A mock Christianity, with its wild breed of atheism, modernism, and immorality, is the religion of the vast majority of our people. If this mock Christianity continues to advance at its present alarming rate, the time may be near when, in Britain, the Lord's day as a divine institution will be nothing but a relic of history. Even now, literally millions of people turn their backs upon it and refuse to acknowledge it.

Many of these are, as T.S. Eliot describes them, quote, decent, godless people. Their only monument, the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls. Tens of thousands of others make a formal recognition of it, not the whole of it, but of 45 or 60 minutes of it, the rest of it they claim as their own.

So, millions disregard it completely, which is where our culture is, and thousands regard 45 or 60 minutes of it, the rest we tend to claim as our own. So, what then possible abiding significance is there in this Sabbath principle? Well, let's apply it, first of all, to society and to unbelievers in general. Most people, I think, would be tempted to say that there's no point in thinking of the application of the fourth commandment in relationship to a godless society.

After all, our friends and our neighbors largely reject God and reject his authority. They've got no commitment to the Lord or to his word. And so, we say to ourselves, in light of that, surely it is pretty futile

for us to confront our neighbors with the question of their desecration of the Lord's day.

Now, the fact of the matter is that when we plead with our neighbors and our friends concerning the distinctiveness of Christianity, obviously, we will have more to say than simply to plead with them the obligations of the Sabbath. It would be highly unlikely that most of us would use that as the starting point in most of our conversations. However, we dare not divorce it from our wider presentations of the gospel.

I don't believe that it is wrong to urge Sabbath observers on our unbelieving friends for the following reasons to which I'm indebted to Murray for. First of all, because we're presumably not going to say that it's wrong or futile or irrelevant to confront unbelievers with the law of God. We're not going to say that.

We're not going to say that it is a futile task to confront people with God's law, because after all, the word of God says that it is by God's law that our unbelieving friends become conscious of their sins. And so, it is going to be important for us to confront our unbelieving friends with the truth of Romans 6, 23, for the wages of sin is death. And one of the things that our neighbors and friends do is say, but you know, I'm quite a good person and I haven't really done very much that is wrong.

Well, one of the ways that we can ask them about how they're doing in relationship to God's standard is to say, how are you spending your Sundays? And the reason that we find ourselves unwilling to use that as a point of departure in our witnessing is grounded in the fact that there is a fallacy, namely, as we said this morning, that the fourth commandment is in a different category from all the others. This is a fallacy that we not only theoretically profess, but to which we have pragmatically succumbed. And the reason that most of us could not speak to our friends about breaking the law of God in relationship to the fourth commandment is because we are in such dreadful predicaments in relationship to it ourselves.

It would be like trying to induce in someone the rightness of giving up smoking, and while we're talking to them, we have a large cigar sticking out of the corner of our mouth. You know, I think you ought to give it up sometime. I said, I don't understand.

So, the reason that we can't go to our friends and say, hey, what about Sundays, is because we didn't say it because any finger that we point, that are four or five, pointed back at ourselves. We have no ground upon which to address the question. Also, since because by the law comes the awareness of sin, we must recognize that then sin can be made understandable in the minds of our unconverted friends when they see that this command remains in Scripture.

Indeed, we actually do a great disservice to men and women, to the gospel, and actually to their eternal destiny, when we exclude Sabbath desecration from the scope of God's condemnation. Because often our friends will say, well, I'm not an adulterer and I don't steal. And so we say, okay, well, we can't talk about that.

Let's find something else. Why don't we talk about the Sabbath? Also, a sustained emphasis upon the necessity of Sabbath observance is a restraining influence, which prevents other kinds of multiple transgressions. And when we confront our neighbors and our friends and our unbelieving society with the rightness of the law of God, with the abiding relevance of the law of God, what we're doing is, in some measure, at least checking their progress into further degradation and destruction.

Indeed, we could argue, and all we would do would argue, that when we gave up in this country and in Great Britain on the Fourth Commandment, we opened the door to a great exponential downward slide in

terms of the civil realm of our government and our country, because we gave up on something that was so clearly, manifestly mandated by God. We gave up the chance to call the people, if you like, to a point of contact along the journey, and we failed to prevent them from a further slide into trespasses and a further slide into the road that leads to destruction. The other reason that we would want to hold up the abiding principle of Sabbath for our unbelieving friends is because the observances which the Sabbath enjoins upon us are means of grace and they're channels of salvation.

Simply what we're saying is that if we can urge our neighbors and our friends, even from an external perspective, to cultivate these observances, then they will come within the sound of the word of God, right? And we know that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. So by calling them into Christ's way, they may come to know Christ. Fifthly, the outward observance of the Sabbath promotes public order, and it makes for the preservation of some of our most cherished rights and liberties.

Unrestrained violations of the economy of God's plan from all of creation destroys peace. And if you've been watching the scenes from Moscow, there is a direct correlation between atheism and the godless chaos which pervades that place. They gave up on any notion of God.

They chose to live without him. They taught generations under them that there was no God, there was no significance to the word of God, there were no implications in the power of God, and the state of their streets tonight testifies to the heritage which they have laid over the years. And in our own country here, in giving up on that which is a creation principle, namely the Sabbath purposes of God, we introduce disintegration into the civil and social order of our nation.

Think it out. Now, what about the application not simply to society in general, but to the church and particularly to believers? Well, let's say this. Our observance of this fourth commandment is relevant, not in isolation, but is relevant in the context of the whole plan and purpose of God.

Most of us know, if we have lived around any kind of Sabbatarianism at all, that observance of the Sabbath principle can so quickly become an instrument of self-righteousness. It can so easily become marked by legalism and by externalism. And it was that legalism and externalism which the Pharisees had championed and which Jesus addressed there in our reading in Matthew chapter 12.

You may want to turn to it just once again as I mention it. These Pharisees were experts at keeping the outside of the cup clean, remember Jesus said, when the inside they allowed to be dirty. They were, he said, like whited sepulchres.

On the outside they were fairly impressive, but in the inside they were full of dead men's bones. They had made the commands of God, rather than them being the paths of joy and of liberty, they had made them burdensome, they had added to them, and they had destroyed the enjoyment potential in them for so many who sought to be obedient. And so Jesus is making it clear here in this section in Matthew 12 that there are certain works which Jesus defended as happening on the Lord's day.

And this is a quite interesting context. For example, he says that in verse 5, in verses 3 and 4, sorry, there are works of necessity which are countenanced on the Sabbath. They're saying, you shouldn't be eating this corn and eating them.

And he says, haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for them to do,

but only for the priests. He says, you think my disciples are breaking the law because they're rubbing corn between their hands and eating it because they're hungry? He says, don't you remember the story in the Old Testament where David was eating the communion bread? In verse 5. Or haven't you read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? What does that mean? Well, it is the explanation as to what is happening when, in the role of pastor and teacher and pastors, we serve the people of God in the context of worship here. People say, well then, aren't you breaking the Sabbath yourself? Aren't you breaking the Sabbath that you're upholding? No.

Not in the ultimate sense, insofar as works of piety, such as that which was carried on by the priests, are where countenanced in the temple. And in verse 11, he points out that works of mercy are also defended within the framework of the Lord's day. What he was addressing and rebutting and defending his disciples against was censoriousness.

Or, if you like, the kind of sophistry which these Pharisees were using, taking their rabbinical teaching and their traditions and perverting the Sabbath institution. And by doing so, they had transformed it into an instrument of oppression and into an instrument of hypocrisy. So, they were hypocrites and they had made it something that it wasn't.

And so, Jesus says, in works of mercy, in works of necessity, and in works of piety, we still maintain the principle which God has established from all creation. So, we need to understand that the Sabbath commandment must never be isolated from God's law in its entirety, nor from the gospel in regenerating and in redeeming grace. At the same time, we need to realize that the relevance of the Sabbath is tied up with the fact that it is a positive requirement.

It is a positive requirement. Most of our reactions to the notion of the Sabbath are because we believe it to be negative. Now, there is no question that many have spoken of the Sabbath simply in those terms, and there is a danger of negativism in the soulless inactivity.

But as we tried to say this morning to understand, the rest of the Sabbath isn't idleness. The rest of the Sabbath is not simply rest from that which marks the other days, but it is rest to and rest in our worship and our contemplation and our prayer and our fellowship. When God's people understand this, then they will not see the services of the Lord's day as intrusions upon their day of rest, but they will go home and close their door and thank God that since the purpose of the Sabbath is for worship and for edification and for fellowship and for rest and for contemplation, they will thank God that they have been made part of a church family that has given itself to make sure that the people of God will be able to spend their Sabbath with the greatest promise.

For one day when we get to heaven and we enjoy in all of eternity the worship and the love and the praise and the adoration, we may just recall an evening communion service, and somehow our hearts were lifted up within us. Somehow or another a veil was pulled back as we sang, I cannot tell why he whom angels worship should set his love upon the sons of men, or why a shepherd he should seek the wanderers to bring them back. I know not how nor when.

And it is often in the singing of those hymns of praise, it is often in those moments of holy contemplation that we get just a glimpse of what heaven might be, but no participation, no worship, no glimpse. Now, let me give to you just a couple of quotes as we move towards a conclusion. Let me give you a little flavor of how traditionally people have taught their children and one another the nature of the fourth commandment.

This is the Westminster Confession of Faith. Speaking as to the nature of the Sabbath, it reads as follows. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe unholy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments 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.

The shorter Scottish Catechism question, how is the Sabbath to be kept holy or 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, and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in works of necessity and of mercy. The fourth commandment forbiddeth the omission or careless performance of the duties required, and the profaning of the day by idleness, or doing that which in itself is sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or works about our worldly employments or our recreations. Do you know how quickly after the benediction we manifest what's really on our hearts? It doesn't take five minutes, because out of the abundance of our hearts, our mouths speak.

And when we speak, we speak with our mouths, and when we speak, we speak with our hearts. When the worship is over, and the praise has ended, and the music has ceased to play, then we return how quickly to the considerations that God has intended we would leave beside on this of all days. It's simply an act of obedience.

It's simply an act of the will. It's simply a positive perspective on the wonder of the provision that God has made in this fourth commandment. Perhaps the greatest danger of all, says one minister, is the conversation before and after our worship.

Some talk of politics and of business, some of family circumstances, some of their cars or houses, some of the weather, and some of their neighbor. Such conversation is sure to bring a blight upon the soul. If we want to profit from public worship, let Christ be our one glorious theme before and after it.

Let us talk about him, even if we do not have much to say. Why would that close down many of our conversations, much of what we falsely refer to as fellowship? We so quickly return to the vain janglings that have preoccupied us, even on the day that God gave to us to be free of such preoccupations. Will you say to me, Alistair, is this not a lofty standard? Yes.

Is it an unattainable standard? I don't know. Is it possible for us really to enjoy the Lord's day? See, people think I was weird. I used to tell them I always go in the bathroom before I come to preach.

I did it for years when the call came to this church to come to America. The man who came to find me found me in the bathroom. The reason I was in the bathroom was not because I needed to make use of the facilities, but because it was the only place that I could be free from people talking about their cars, and their caravans, and the golf, and the soccer, and every other thing.

Not because I'm very pious, but because I find in my heart a great desire to talk about cars, and caravans, and golf, and soccer. So, it was an act of the will on my part to shut myself away that I might come, as it were, to the task at hand from the framework of that kind of positive perspective. You know, loved ones, if you would endeavor to do that on the Lord's day, our worship would be exponentially transformed.

I guarantee it. If you were to determine that in your preparation for the worship of the Lord's day, you would do as much as is in your strength to set aside every worldly concern, every recreational desire, every element of that which means so much on other days, simply because of the positive potential of what is about to be enjoyed, then I can guarantee you that things would be radically different. If we were to make our way post-worship into the company of one another, to speak about the greatness of God, and the truth of his word, and the wonder of his dealings with us, and the foretaste and glimpse of heaven, then we should begin to understand some of these one another passages in the New Testament about edifying one another, and encouraging one another, and speaking the truth to one another, and building one another up.

How in the world is that supposed to take place? We can't do it on any other day. We're not even together on any other day. And so, if on the one day that we have the opportunity to be together, we treat it as we would every other day, then it diminishes the potential of being together.

And it is because we do that we determine that there's really no validity to it. But you see, there is. This is what it will take.

If we're going to profit from the Lord's day, with this I conclude. I'm going to tell you four things. First, if we would really profit from the Lord's day, there must be a deep and unshakeable conviction of the divine warrant for the keeping of the Lord's day established in our minds.

That's where we began, and that's where we conclude. Until you as an individual come to that, all that I have said today, all that we have studied today, will appear either to be cultural, to be customary, or even to be legalistic. But once we come to an unshakeable internal conviction as to the divine warrant of the fourth commandment, then the door opens for profit on the Lord's day.

Richard Dabney, writing in an earlier century, said, all men who really fear God will begin to sanctify his day. And once that conviction is established, little more remains to be done. Little more needs to be said.

Little more needs to be expressed in terms of talking about the ifs and the buts and the maybes and the dos and the don'ts and the lists of things that are published by churches saying, this is this and this and this and this. We don't need to do that if once the conviction has been internalized in the lives of those who love Jesus. That's number one, a deep unshakeable conviction of the divine warrant of the fourth commandment.

Secondly, we must have a deep impression of the tremendous importance of the day for ourselves. We've got to come to the conviction that this is supremely important. This is important like no other day is important.

This is an opportunity like no other opportunity exists. Think about it. If it was given in creation before the fall, if in paradise, perfect men and women were to celebrate the Lord's day, if it was necessary for them to observe the Sabbath without sin in the pristine nature of God's creative order, there in their sinless state, to have a Sabbath for the development of their spiritual nature as sinless people, how much more necessary for us to have this day for the development of our spiritual nature.

Thirdly, if we are to benefit from it, it must be observed as a complete day of rest. There is no valid reason in scripture for professing Christians to work on the Lord's day except in cases of piety, necessity, and mercy. The only thing that legitimizes it at this point in history is the prevailing influence of our secular

culture.

Fourthly and finally, the Sabbath must be a day of spiritual improvement. That's what it's about--the improvement that comes in public worship, the improvement that comes in families having time not around the television, not around the local sporting event. For those things will come and go and will be of irrelevance in heaven, but time around the Lord Jesus, his word, and his purposes.

The spiritual improvement that comes from religious reading--many of us have never read the Bible through, ever. Do you know that you could read it through if you just determined to read--if you never read any other day in the week--if you determined to read five or six chapters at three points on the Lord's day, you would read through the Bible in a whole year if you never read it Monday through Saturday. And what of all those books? That we wanted to read.

When are you reading them? And what of secret prayer? And what of holy meditation? And what of anticipating the fact that one day the silver cord will break, and in an instant we will be in the presence of Christ? Isaiah chapter 58, where we began this morning, we conclude this evening. If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord. There's a direct correlation between joyful Christianity and the spending of the Lord's day.

And I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the Lord has spoken. Loved ones, I commend to your careful consideration the issues that we've addressed today.

As we gather around the Lord's table now, what a wonderful privilege that he has set apart one day in seven, when untrammled by the rest, we may give him our undevoted, totally devoted attention. This concludes the information on side two. If you'd like to contact Alistair Begg, he has a ministry's name is Truth for Life at P.O. Box 39800 in Cleveland, Ohio, zip code 44139.

His resource order line is 1-888-588-7884. He also has an excellent website and you can contact him at www.truthforlife.org. God bless you now. Goodbye.

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