

Sabbath Observance And The 1980s.

Our newspapers reported recently the formation of a new government in Israel following upon the general election there. Because that election did not produce the results the ruling party obviously desired, it has had to call on the support of three minor religious parties who have made their support conditional on the enactment of a range of religious legislation. One of the most prominent issues to be taken up is the question of Sabbath observance which, in the eyes of conservatives and fundamentalists has become altogether too lax. It is said that it has already been agreed to cancel all flights by the national airline on the Jewish Sabbath, as well as close down Israeli ports. The strict, fundamentalist, approach is having its way already. Not every one is welcoming these developments.

By and large it surprises people in Australia that the matter of Sabbath observance is an issue at all in any country. (This, of course, is why its newsworthy here). It was an issue once but we have tended to think it ceased being one anywhere years ago. Slowly the restrictions and prohibitions which were in the past very much part of Sabbath observance have been lifted or abandoned. For the first time ever a cricket Test match between Australia and England, in England, was recently played on a Sunday. Reflecting a very secular Society, Sunday has become a very secular day when largely secular activities are pursued. The picture theatres are open on Sunday. Sport is played on Sunday. Shops trade on Sunday. The situation is, though, that relatively few restrictions now remain.

In his book, *'A Plain Man's Guide to Ethics'*, the Scottish theologian, lecturer and writer, the late Dr. William Barclay, wrote of the strict observance of the Sabbath in his home country little more than a century ago. Churchmen, for example, denounced the running of trains on Sunday as, and I quote (as in turn Dr. Barclay quotes), "a flagrant violation of the law of God... a grievous outrage on the religious feelings of the people of Scotland, a powerful temptation to the careless and indifferent to abandon the public ordinances of Grace, and most disastrous to the quiet of the rural parishes along the line of the railways".

We have so far as our own country is concerned, gone to the opposite extreme now. More or less anything goes. The issue is rarely debated here. The Churches, it could be thought, have largely given up the fight and accommodated themselves to the

realities which now exist. And certainly, Sabbath observance, or laws connected with Sabbath observance, would not be an issue where a coalition agreement between political parties is concerned. And yet, though we would not for one minute insist on the strict observance of the Sabbath, as was the practice of the ancient Jews and as, like we saw, some modern ones are insisting on, it comes as one of the Ten Commandments, this question of Sabbath observance, and must therefore have some importance for us somewhere. My intention is that we should together look at what this Commandment concerning the Sabbath day is saying to us and how it is to be understood in relation to this day and age in which you and I are living.

"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 alien 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." [Exodus 20: 8-11](#).

It is unbelievable the way in which, what with all the additional regulations and interpretations that had been foisted on it, the Sabbath was being observed at the time the Lord came on earth. Can you believe that it had been solemnly worked out that in the case of illness on the Sabbath day, steps could be taken to prevent the person getting worse but nothing must be done to help them get better: And then in the case of small children, it had finally been agreed that a man might lift his child on the Sabbath but not if the child had a stone in his hand because that would constitute work. No one was allowed to lift a stone on the Sabbath because that was working. And work, of course, was forbidden.

Against a background of this kind of absurdity we cannot be surprised that Jesus so frequently took issue with the leaders of the Jews on this matter of Sabbath observance. He wouldn't conform to the man made traditions and regulations which had completely obscured the essential point involved in the Commandment. They, the leaders of the Jews, tried very hard to back Him into a corner over the matter. They complained that His disciples plucked corn on the Sabbath ([Matthew 12:1](#)). And they were outraged that He dared to heal. Time and again there was confrontation over just this one issue. In Matthew Chapter 12, verses 9 to 14, we read of one of these occasions:

"Going on from that place, (Jesus) went into their synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked Him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.' Then He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."

As the Old Testament referred to it the Sabbath unquestionably meant Saturday and the Jews keep Saturday as their Sabbath to this day. At first, and most of them having been Jews, the early Christians kept the Jewish Sabbath. But, and as we look back, it was inevitable that Sunday, the first day of the week and the day of the Lord's resurrection, should come to assume a greater significance for them, which it did. There are some, it is true, who even now dispute and worry about the correctness of the day, Saturday or Sunday. Really though, that's unimportant. We miss the point in fact if all we can think of, or if we can only think in terms of rules and regulations, or if we feel it important enough (which it is not) to dispute this Saturday versus Sunday issue.

Everything the Lord commanded He commanded for our benefit. And it's important that we remember this. We tend to think of such things as the Ten Commandments as cold statements, regulating and ordering life, forbidding us things we would otherwise like to do. But they are an expression of the Lord's love for us. The Lord loves us and is concerned for our happiness and well being. From that concern and because of that love He commands that certain things are to be done while other things are not to be done. And one of those things is what is said here, about Sabbath observance.

Because He loves us; because He is concerned for us; because He wants our happiness; the Lord commands a day of rest. Six days are for making a living and seeing to the endless jobs that need doing and appointments that need to be kept. The seventh has another purpose. It's in our own best interests that it serves that other purpose. Life is better and richer and fuller when it is made to serve that purpose. We are the ones who benefit. Alternatively, we are the ones who suffer when its purpose and potential for us is ignored.

The Lord is not commanding here Church attendance two or three times each Sunday; a sombre, joyless, kind of day. What He is saying here is that it is very much in our interests to have a day apart; a day when we put on one side our worldly worries and everyday concerns; a day during which we have the opportunity to worship, to probe the deeper currents of our lives, and to spend time with and for people in a way that's not possible on other days or at other times.

If we're not careful; indeed, if we are not prepared to do something about it; the worldly interests, concerns and pre occupations that swirl around us, all clamouring for our attention, will take over. In the absence of any effort on our part, our minds come to function on just one, external level. Our interests, our goals, the things we talk about and which excite us will all be of one kind. It doesn't matter whether we are great readers, good students, have a love of music, or whatever. These are all on one level only. We need time out to sit on the side lines or better still, to climb up into the grandstands from where we can look down on the action of day to day living.

It is in everyone's interest to climb off the merry go round for a while; to switch off from worldly pursuits, interests, objectives and concerns; to have time to raise our thinking to a higher plane and to refocus on the essential purpose of life and the spiritual goals we should be pursuing. This is what Sabbath observance is all about. This is why the Commandment was given. We need that time. We need periods of worship and must be constantly reassessing our priorities which time out in this way gives us a chance to do. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy".

The Commandment concerning Sabbath observance has been trivialised in the past and can yet be trivialised again, now and in the future, by concentrating on external regulations and prohibitions. That was what Jesus was so much up against. But whilst we dismiss these let's not, at the same time, lose sight of the value and importance to ourselves of a day set apart, different, and used for the purposes talked about. As we saw earlier, here is one of the Commandments and we can be absolutely certain it was given for our benefit.

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