

Sexagesima Sunday

February 7, 2010

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXIV

THE COVENANT WORDS: IV. THE HOLY DAY

(EXODUS 20: 8-11)

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work: But the seventh is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it

I said several weeks ago that one of our goals in this series was to *unlearn* the 10 Commandments. Sometimes our knowledge gets in the way of our learning; sometimes what we think we understand prevents our understanding. We need always to remember that here in this world we see through a glass darkly, our understanding is partial and imperfect, and we are always pilgrims, always ‘on the way.’ But more than that, with the 10 Commandments, and I think in particular with this fourth one, popular misconceptions prevent us from grasping the true meaning as much as for people in Galileo’s time the misconception of a geocentric universe prevented a truer understand of our solar system.

This Fourth Word that sounded from the dark cloud on Mount Sinai is the first to be stated in the affirmative, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,” and yet I suspect that for many of us it is the extended negative elaboration of this Word that is definitive in our understanding: “In it thou *shalt not* do any work.” I think my earliest knowledge of anyone having special regard for the Sabbath, or Sunday for the Christian, was when my mother said that her maternal grandmother did all of her cooking for Sunday on the day before and then served it cold. They were northern Baptists. A number of conservative Presbyterians, heavily influenced by the 17th century Puritans, also had strict rules for Sunday. In a church in western Pennsylvania, where, as I always joked, there were more Presbyterians than people, I ran afoul of some of my congregants early on when in illustrating some point in a sermon (what it could

possibly have been, I haven't the foggiest!), I mentioned that when I was a boy after church in the hot summertime at Myrtle Beach (this was in pre-airconditioning days) I would run ahead of my parents back to the car and when they arrived I would be sitting there in my bathing suit which I had worn under my trousers. The idea that anyone would go swimming on Sunday was a shocker. One middle-aged woman, who lived at home and who did not have such strict sabbatarian views, told me that her mother would always kick the Sunday paper under the couch to prevent her from reading it. Joy Davidman, C. S. Lewis' wife, who wouldn't make it up, tells that in 17th century Scotland, "one poor wretch was haled into court for *smiling* on the Sabbath." She added, "Considering the state of Scotland in his day, he should have been congratulated for managing to smile at all."¹

Well, enough of that—and I would be the first to say that this is not a balanced picture at all and not a judgment of the genuine piety of any concerned. The only point I am making is that for many people, from the Pharisees in Jesus' day onward, this commandment has been turned into what Joy Davidman called "the whole iron prison of prohibitions."²

As always, to try to gain a deeper understanding, we need to go back to the text and its context. The Lord God, having delivered his people from the house of bondage, is binding them in covenant to himself that they might be his peculiar treasure, a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation. He warns them first that they are to have no other gods, that they must not imagine him to be like anything else in all creation, that they must not profane his holy name—and then, in this Fourth Word, that they must keep holy the sabbath day. So, in a nutshell, don't confuse God with any other god, his image with any created thing, his name with anything profane, or his day with any other day.

Rabbi Goldman rightly observes that

This fourth commandment is the longest and most elaborate, the first that is explicitly positive, and the only one that is concerned with a positive religious institution. Respecting circumcision, for example, the festivals, prayer or a house of worship, the Decalogue says nothing. Instead, it devotes nearly a third of its

¹ *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*, p. 56.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

space to order the observance of a day of rest. Little further is required to indicate that something unique is proposed and contemplated here.³

The proper observance of this day is to be a sign and seal of our covenant relationship with God, of the fact that he alone is our God and that we are his people. We are to honor him with one day in seven of our time as with one part in ten of our income. It is an acknowledgement of his lordship over us, and to repudiate it is to repudiate him.

But this does not yet get to the heart of it. How do we keep the Sabbath holy, and why? It is to tell us this that the Fourth Word goes on at such length. “Six days shalt thou labor and do all of thy work.” Did you realize that among other things this is a commandment to work? As Abraham Heschel put it, “The duty to work for six days is just as much a part of God’s covenant with man as the duty to abstain from work on the seventh day.”⁴ Work is necessary. Work is honorable. Work is fulfilling . . . and it is a major concern for all of us when those who wish to find jobs cannot, and our prayers are with all who find themselves in that situation. The biblical admonition is that we should do good and honorable work for six days, and to rest, to desist from labor, on the seventh. The reason for this as stated in Exodus (though it is put somewhat differently in Deuteronomy) is that “In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.”

This tells us a number of important things. It tells us first that the covenant God of Israel who delivered them from Egypt and brought them to himself is none other than the creator of all things—no tribal deity here. Second, it explicitly ties our work with God’s work. Our labor is modeled on his and in a sense shares in his. God made heaven and earth and all that is, and then set man to rule over it, to till the ground, tend the animals and harvest the fruit. Our work, if it is good work, is creative and nurturing and helpful to people, and caring and careful of this wonderful creation in which we were placed. God blesses the earth with the rhythm of day and night, the round of the seasons, the alternation of sunshine and rain, and we go about our tasks in dependence upon him, daily giving him thanks for every morsel we eat, every breath we breathe, every ounce of energy we possess.

³ *The Ten Commandments*, p. 160.

⁴ *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951), p. 28.

“In six days God made heaven and earth and all that in them is—and rested the seventh day.” The word ‘rested’ has connotations that are unfortunate, for the almighty doesn’t tire. ‘Stopped,’ ‘ceased,’ is what is meant. The same word is used in Genesis about Noah’s ark. When the flood waters subsided, the ark rested, stopped. “Therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.” After each of the six days of creation God saw what he had made and pronounced it ‘good,’ a work complete and fitted for its purpose, but having called the six days ‘good,’ he called the seventh ‘holy.’ Abraham Heschel said,

There is much that philosophy could learn from the Bible. To the philosopher the idea of the good is the most exalted idea. But to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate [next to the last]; it cannot exist without the holy. The good is the base, the holy is the summit. Things created in six days He considered *good*, the seventh day he made *holy*.⁵

The name of God is holy, as the preceding commandment teaches, and it is our central prayer that his name be hallowed. *The sabbath day is holy*, as this commandment teaches, and when we set it apart (which is the meaning of holy) all of our time and work is given meaning. And the people who strive to realize these things and to see all time in the light of God’s time and all work in the light of God’s work become *his holy people*. Without the Sabbath, one day runs into another in an endless string and all lose their meaning. On the sabbath one rests from his labors and looks back on the week, sees it as good, and gives thanks. Heschel again, in his wonderful book, *The Sabbath*,

Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.⁶

The Sabbath command directs our attention back to the moment of creation and thus back to God’s original purpose for humankind. Redemption from Egypt, redemption from sin, restores us to this purpose. It puts things back in proper perspective, not with the endless run of days devoted only to work, to time, to things, but with one in seven devoted to God and the things of God. And that day is not an interruption of the others, a break so we can go back to

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶ P. 13.

work. “The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.”⁷ Heschel observes,

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence from external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature—is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for man’s progress than the Sabbath.⁸

Again he says,

In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as of attachment to the spirit.⁹

The Sabbath directs our attention back to creation, as we said, and puts the present in proper perspective. But it also directs our attention to the future. The Sabbath is, as St. Augustine said, “a shadow of things to come.”¹⁰ The day of rest after the days of work points to the final rest when all work shall be finished. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the latter days in which the mountain of the Lord would be established above all mountains and all nations would stream to it, beating their swords into plowshares (2:2-4), a picture of the kind of total peace for man and beast suggested in the commandment. That was at the beginning of Isaiah’s prophecy. Again toward the end he spoke of God’s creating a new heaven and a new earth, where the wolf would lie down with lamb (65:17-25), and he refers to it again in the closing words of his book, saying, “For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord” (66:22-23). The New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews says, “So then there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter into that rest” (4:9-11). And of that final rest our blessed Saint

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁰ *ACCS*, p. 104.

John spoke in the oft quoted words from the Book of the Revelation, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them” (14:13-14).

John Henry Newman in a sermon on the text from Hebrews about “holiness without which no one shall see the Lord,” spoke at length about the fact that those who care not for the things of God would not be happy in heaven should they go there., so we must acquire a taste for heavenly things now. Somewhat to the same effect Heschel says,

Unless one learns how to relish the taste of the Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come. Sad is the lot of him who arrives inexperienced and when led to heaven has no power to perceive the beauty of the Sabbath.¹¹

The Sabbath command is not meant to deprive us, to cut us off from that which is good and true and beautiful. It is meant, rather, to be a time set apart for these wonderful things of God. Heschel says, “The Sabbath is the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God.”¹² We would not state it so strongly, knowing Him who came to open for us through his death and resurrection that true Sabbath rest. But even He taught us that the Sabbath was made for man, and is therefore good and precious. Joy Davidman, who had such strong words of criticism of those who turn this Fourth Word into “the whole iron prison of prohibitions,” entitled her chapter on the Fourth Commandment, “The Day of Rejoicing.” Now that’s the spirit!

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on Sexagesima Sunday, February 7, 2010. Copyright © 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 18.