

Resting in the Lord

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“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20.8).

The Ten Commandments, like all of the Lord’s Word, were given for one purpose: to save us from hell and lead us to heaven; or, to say the same thing another way, to make us happy.

Most of them are framed in a negative way: “You shall not.” This is because our natural heredity is such that, if it were not restrained, we would make ourselves most unhappy. The very effort to find happiness on our own terms would lead us further and further from heaven. We have to *learn* how to find happiness; our natural tendency is to seek it where it cannot be found.

But, of course, there is a positive side even to the “You shall not” commandments. The Lord says, “Do not steal,” for instance, rather than “Be honest,” but there is an implicit promise that if we obey that commandment then we will be honest. There is no spiritual vacuum: when evil departs, good flows in. When an infirmity or disorder is corrected, then there is health and order, and all the peace and happiness that order brings.

The commandment we’re considering today, though, is positive in form. Instead of telling us something we must not do, it tells us something we should do. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

We need to make a conscious effort to remember the Sabbath because we have a natural tendency to become so caught up in the life of the world that we forget about spiritual things. And when deprived of the spiritual, natural life loses its meaning and joy. Without a sense of the holy, our humanity is incomplete.

It might seem that failing to observe the Sabbath is a fairly minor oversight—compared with killing or stealing, for instance. But in a way, that makes this commandment all the more important and compelling. It takes more of a deliberate and sustained effort to obey it than it does to obey the ones against killing and stealing, because those laws are supported by civil law and natural charity, whereas there is much less external pressure to keep the Sabbath holy, and failing to do so doesn’t seem to harm anyone. Even most people without any religious scruples resist an impulse to murder or steal; only people of faith worry about keeping the Sabbath holy.

The very structure of our society tends to weaken the observance of the Sabbath. For one thing, people are so busy, that the weekend is needed for shopping and other activities, including recreation, for which there just isn’t time during the week. A certain percentage of the population goes to church, but most stores are open on Sunday, and to a great extent it is business as usual. It takes a real effort not to become so caught up in the natural activities which go on without a break in the world around us that we forget all about the need to set aside a time for worship.

Some psychologists have lamented the loss of the Sabbath. They have noted that even just from the standpoint of people’s mental health, a day of rest, a break in routine, is very important. The Lord Himself said: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). It is for our sake that a day of rest was declared (*cf. Arcana Coelestia* 2405). A break from our

natural activities can be the occasion for increasing and strengthening the spiritual activity of the mind.

In order to illustrate how neglecting the Sabbath hurts us, we might compare the absence of worship in a person's life to a vitamin deficiency in the body. It may seem to make no difference, there may be no symptoms for quite a while, but in the long run serious harm will result. Or, to change the illustration slightly, it is said that many people have Type II diabetes (adult onset) and do not know it. Yet that dysfunction and the imbalance it causes takes a toll on the body. Similarly, when that part of our spiritual being devoted to worship is inactive, it takes a toll on the spirit.

To continue the illustration a little further, consider how easy it is to fall into an unhealthy lifestyle—eating too much sugar and not getting enough exercise. Consuming a huge amount of sugar can seem perfectly normal; in fact, in our society it takes considerable care and effort to avoid doing this. Dietary imbalance is built into our culture, you might say; it is all around us, and hard to avoid.

It is similar in regard to spiritual health and balance—it takes a real effort to establish in our lives what actually should be the norm. But if we don't, an essential part of our very makeup as human beings will be stunted, and we will suffer a spiritual imbalance.

The Sabbath, therefore, involves more than rest from our natural labors and a break in the fast pace of modern life. We are commanded to “keep it holy.” This is done by worship and instruction in the Divine truths of the Word. “Holiness” exists wherever the Divine is present, and the truths of the Word are designed to bring that presence into our lives.

A life which is purified and guided by the Word has holiness in it. When we “remember the Sabbath” by worshiping and listening to the Word then our minds are turned to the Lord and to eternal things. Affections and thoughts in the higher regions of the mind which would otherwise remain dormant, are stirred up and made active. They then enter into and influence the quality of our more external affections and thoughts. Our lives are touched by holiness.

Even the state of the body is improved when love and trust and peace and joy affect the mind. Blood pressure may go down, for instance. But it would be a terrible perversion of that truth to make these benefits the purpose for worship, or to reduce the worship of the Lord to a kind of self-help program. So although the Sabbath was established for our sake, we must keep it holy for the Lord's sake. Only in this way will its most important benefits for us be realized.

For example, meditation and prayer are very similar, and probably have a similar physical beneficial effect on the person who engages in either activity; but prayer specifically looks to the Lord, and is aimed, not just at relaxing or focusing the mind, but at bringing us into conjunction with the Lord. The aim of worship is not just to make us feel better, but to actually become better; and “better” in a very special way—less motivated by the loves of self and the world, and more motivated by love of the Lord and the neighbor.

There is a strange and beautiful teaching in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church which

says that heaven consists in the angels being withheld from what is their own (*Heaven and Hell* 158, 160, 591). This is something worth thinking about. The reason is that the “own,” or “self,” is only an appearance; it is entirely derived from the Lord, who alone possesses being and life and humanity in Himself. Attachment to the appearance of self-life is the source of all human misery. It is what is represented by Adam and Eve’s eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see *Divine Providence* 313).

But heaven is more than the “annihilation of self,” as a mystic might speak of it. When the angels are withheld from their “own,” they are held in the Lord’s “Own.” They are embraced by the peace and joy of heaven.

Being conjoined with the Lord is spoken of in the Word as a marriage, and indeed it is the essence of all marriage. It comes from the perfect union of Love and Wisdom in the Lord Himself. From that Divine marriage in Him (which is infinite, and really beyond our understanding), there is a sphere of conjugal love that flows down from the highest heaven and pervades all creation.

That sphere lifts the angels out of themselves, or their “own,” and brings them into a state that can best be described as a heavenly marriage. The goodness and truth from the Lord, which were separated (or “put asunder”) by their own natural self-love and self-intelligence, are then united. And the amazing thing is that, far from obliterating their sense of self-life, that sense is greatly enhanced. In being withheld from their (natural) “own,” they are brought into the heavenly “own” or true self for which the Lord created them in the first place. As He said to His disciples: in losing their life for His sake they find it (Matthew 16:24-25).

Our true self is derived from the Lord alone. He is the only Source of it. We enter into it to the degree that the love and wisdom which are One in Him are joined together in us. This conjunction, this marriage, is what is meant by the “Sabbath.”

It is said that the Lord “rested” on the Sabbath day because it is He alone who does the work of regeneration in us. The “six days of labor” are the stages of our regeneration, or spiritual creation. Each stage involves temptation, combat, a struggle with our lower nature; this is the “labor” of regeneration. We have to cooperate, but only the Lord can do this work in us; so it is said that on the seventh day He “rested.” The Lord “rests” when we rest in Him.

In one sense, our regeneration must be completed during our lives in this world, but in another sense we are never fully regenerated, in that to all eternity we can progress into ever more perfect states of peace and joy as we are withdrawn more and more from what is our “own” and into an ever more perfect union of goodness and truth from the Lord.

This is the promise contained in our text: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” We will “remember” it, because we will experience it anew—in a fresh, deeper, more living, more beautiful and powerful way—with each new step we take on the path of life to all eternity. This remembrance will not be just a recalling of something from the past, but a new knowledge of that same thing on a deeper level, just as heaven itself is a re-acquaintance with the innocence we knew in childhood but on a deeper level.

The regular observance of the Sabbath is one of the means by which the Lord keeps us moving along the path to heaven. Ideally, it should not be a burden, but a joy. Because of our natural condition, “going to church” does sometimes seem to be a burden, but as the Lord said, “My burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). If we come genuinely seeking a closer relationship with the Lord, surely we will find what we are seeking, and (in the words of the Psalm) we will “give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness” (Psalm 30:4).

In the highest sense, the Lord Himself is the Sabbath. Remembering the Sabbath means remembering Him. Worship opens the mind to the influence of His Holy Spirit, which blesses us with a sense of purpose, with the strength we need to overcome the obstacles to heavenly life, and with hope that makes our earthly cares bearable. The Sabbath will then be, not just one day in seven, but the very heart of every day, a source of inner peace and tranquility in a noisy world, a perpetual reminder of holiness.

The word “worship” does not just refer to a formal ritual, but to a state of mind filled with wonder, praise and gratitude for the goodness of the Lord. It is an exalted and joyful state, in which the abundance of life flowing from the Lord is sensed. It is for the sake of giving us this blessing that the Lord commands us to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.”

Amen.