

Remembering the Sabbath Day

By Rev. J. Slopsema

In Nehemiah 13:15-32 we read of the Sabbath day being profaned by the returned captives of Judah. The walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt and now it was business as usual on the Sabbath. Some were treading the wine presses. Others were gathering in the sheaves. Buying and selling flourished by the city gates. Hence, Nehemiah gathered the elders of the city together and warned them. It had been the profaning of the Sabbath day that had led to Judah's destruction at the hand of Babylon years ago. Now they have returned from captivity and were following again the same course. Would the people never learn? Would they again bring upon themselves the judgment of God?

The situation is essentially the same today in the church. The Sabbath day is openly and shamelessly profaned, even by professing Christians. It's business as usual on the Lord's day. If not that then recreation and worldly amusement fills the day. Also today those that profane the Sabbath bring upon themselves the wrath of God. We cannot afford to take lightly the command of God in the fourth commandment: remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

The Sabbath day is a holy day. This is evident from the fourth commandment itself which tells us that God hallowed the Sabbath day. This means that the Sabbath day is a special day, a day set aside by God for special use and celebration. This we are to remember! We are not to forget that the Sabbath day is a holy day so that we treat and observe it as any other day. Then we profane that which God has declared holy. We are rather to remember it so that we keep it as a holy and special day. This is the injunction of the fourth commandment.

We remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, first, by laying aside our daily labors. This is evident from the fourth commandment itself. After commanding us to remember the Sabbath, the commandment goes on to say, "in it thou shalt do no manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man servant, nor thy maid servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gate". The person who fills the Sabbath day with his daily labors is obviously forgetting the Sabbath. He treats it like any other day and thus profanes it.

This command of God however does not prohibit work of any kind on the Sabbath under every circumstance. Our Lord Jesus Himself allowed that if your ox falls into a ditch on the Sabbath you must certainly pull it out. Christ also performed many miracles of healing on the Sabbath day - all in harmony with the fourth commandment. On this basis we speak of works of necessity and works of charity. There are certain works that must be performed on the Sabbath. The farmer must tend to his animals. The sick must receive care. Neither is fasting required on the Sabbath. This requires the preparation of meals. There are many works which may become necessary on the Lord's day.

It is possible however to profane the Sabbath with works of necessity. This is done when we allow our Sabbath days to be filled with works of necessary works. The farmer who spends most of every Sunday doing chores profanes the Sabbath. The housewife who spends most of Sunday fixing meals, washing dishes and getting ready for company profanes the Sabbath. So too can the doctor or nurse profane the Lord's day with works of charity. The point is that if you have an ox that falls into the ditch every Sunday requiring that you pull it out, then you must either sell the ox or fill in the ditch lest you profane the Sabbath with all your necessary works.

The Sabbath day is also profaned through entertainment and recreation. For many Sunday afternoon and evening is a time for sleeping, visiting, watching television, picnicking, boating and any other entertainment you can possibly mention. Sunday is also a convenient day on which to return home from vacation. The world has made Sunday the recreation day of the week. Many in the church are following the lead of the world. It's once, perhaps twice, to church and the rest of the day is for leisure. To fill our Sabbath with earthly pleasure however is to profane it (cf. Isaiah 58:13, 14).

So far we have spoken only negatively. The laying aside of our daily work and recreation on the Sabbath is not an end in itself. Neither is it virtuous in itself. We are to lay aside our daily labors exactly so that we may fill our Sabbath with the pursuit of things spiritual. This then is also the positive demand of the fourth commandment. We remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy by busying ourselves with spiritual matters.

This means, first, that we go to church faithfully to worship God. To worship God in His house is the most spiritual thing we can do on the Sabbath. This is true because at the house of God we hear the preaching of God's Word, we partake of the sacraments, we call on the name of God in prayer and we give of our abundance for the support of God's kingdom. No one can neglect the house of God on the Sabbath and nor profane the Sabbath. Yet this neglect is very prevalent today even among professing Christians. The trend today is to go to the house of God only once on the Sabbath. There is of course no command of God in the Scriptures as to how often God's people must assemble in worship on the Lord's day. Yet the fact remains that in our day it is not only possible but very easy to assemble for worship at least twice in a Sunday. What a shame when God's people do not take advantage of this. It is still worse when the church caters to this lack of spirituality on the part of its members and only conducts one worship service on a Sunday. We remember the Sabbath day by frequenting the house of God.

Attending the house of God is not the only spiritual activity that ought to fill our Sabbath. Remembering the Sabbath means that we fill the day as much as possible with spiritual activities. This implies that in addition to the worship of God in His house we ought to spend time with His Word also in our homes. In like manner Sunday is the time for prayer, for singing spiritual songs, for reading good religious materials. This is something which must involve the whole family. The Sabbath day is just as much for children as it is for adults. Due in part to the hectic pace of our times families spend very little time together anymore, much less in the pursuit of spiritual things. What a golden opportunity there is for this on the Lord's Day. On Sunday parents ought to teach their children how to study God's Word, how to pray, how to sing God's praises. This is remembering the Sabbath day!

And it is important to remember the Sabbath day. It was a matter of God's wisdom that He hallowed the Sabbath day. We need one day out of seven as a day of spiritual rest. Through the pursuit of spiritual things on the Sabbath we receive the strength of God's grace to serve Him on the other six days of the week. In like manner, should we profane and neglect the Sabbath day with our daily works and recreation, we will find that we are too weak to fight the good fight of faith. This is exactly what happened to Israel and Judah in the Old Testament. Profaning the Sabbath day they became spiritually weak and consequently were led astray into great sin. This brought upon them the judgment of God. And it is no different today.

Let us therefore remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.