

Sermon Notes
“The Lord’s Day”

Material for this message was drawn from a series of sermons by Dr. Calvin Wittman (2009)

Focal Scripture References: Romans 14:5-9; Colossians 2:16

Introduction

As we continue our study in the Foundations of our Faith series, we come to the topic of the Lord's Day. What is the Lord's Day? Is it really the Christian Sabbath or is it something entirely different? Are we as New Testament Christians bound to the Sabbath as were the Israelites under the Old Covenant? What does the Bible have to say about worship on the first day of the week and as Southern Baptists, what does our confessional statement say?

Article 8 of the Baptist Faith and Message deals with the Lord's Day.

"The first day of the week is the Lord's Day. It is a Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private. Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ."

The context here in both passages is Christian liberty. And that's the first thing I want us to address in this study, the Principle of Christian Liberty.

I. The Principle of Christian Liberty

It is important to remember the historical context into which the Church of Jesus Christ was born. In as much as Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and most of the first Christians were Jews, the early church was heavily influenced by the Old Testament, along with all of the customs and religious observances which were part and parcel of worship under the old covenant.

It is also important to recall the missionary strategy of Paul. Wherever he went to preach, the first place he usually went was to the Jewish Synagogue because that was where he would find people with whom he had the most in common. He would begin by preaching Jesus as the Messiah. This meant that among nearly all of the early churches, there were those within the church who came with their Jewish religious baggage. Some of their observances were perfectly acceptable, others, especially those which tended to teach a works-based salvation or to put people back under the yoke of legalism were dangerous, as was the case in Galatia.

In response to these tendencies to drift back into the legalism of their past, Paul preached a message of freedom in Christ. In Colossians 2, the apostle makes a case for our freedom in Christ, saying that we are not subject to how others may judge us in these areas but, because we are free in Christ; because He is the substance of our faith

and practice, we are to pursue our spiritual life in Him and not in the mere externals of observing religious rituals.

In **Romans 14** the argument is much the same, except here he is making a case for us to practice our Christian liberty in such a way that it demonstrates two things. One, a recognition that while we have freedom, we are each answerable to God for our actions, and two, a love for one another that seeks to build up the weaker believers among us.

Of particular importance to our discussion is the fact that some Jewish believers felt compelled to observe the Sabbath or other special days which were associated with their Jewish past whereas some of the gentile believers, who had once been pagans, wanted to get away from the observance of special days because in their past those were days where debauchery and immorality. The argument Paul makes, which is the Principle of Christian Liberty, is that in Christ we are free from such observances and are no longer obligated to keep the law. Thus the Sabbath, which was originally a day set aside for the Jews to remember their covenant with God, was no longer binding on Christians. Jesus was the fulfillment of the law. In effect, every day of our lives is a day that is to be lived unto the Lord Jesus Christ and under His Lordship.

Throughout the history of the Church, the teachings concerning the observance of the Lord's Day have varied from time to time and from place to place. It is evident from Revelation 1:10 that the concept of the Lord's Day, or the first day of the week, was firmly established in the early church, at least by the end of the first century. Church historians tell us that the first day of the week was a natural for Christians because it was the day which commemorated the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

It was not, however, until the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, that the first day of the week officially became a legal holiday for worship. Under Constantine, who ruled in the early part of the fourth century, work was set aside on the first day of the week in order to allow Christians a day of rest and plenty of time for worship. Again, behind the scenes was the concept of the Jewish Sabbath and the natural temptation to see the Lord's Day as a Christian substitute for the Sabbath, even though this is clearly not the teaching of scripture.

It was Augustine of Hippo who, perhaps more than any other theologian, influenced the early church to make this connection between the Sabbath and the Lord's Day by his strong emphasis upon the Ten Commandments. During the middle ages the Church's position was that the Lord's Day was to be treated as the Christian Sabbath and that mentality made its way into the puritan way of life so that in the early days of our country it was against the law even to talk a walk on the Lord's Day for fear that one might enjoy themselves and thus violate what they understood to be the sacred nature of the day.

So, the very legalism for which Jesus chided the Pharisees in Mark 2:27, found its way into the New Testament church and for many continues to be a source of controversy.

It seems that every time you broach this subject you run the risk of offending someone because even today many well-intentioned Christians have strong feelings about what someone should or not do on the Lord's Day. For some it is to be nothing but a day of rest and worship, consistent with the view that it is the Christian Sabbath. For others it is merely a day for corporate worship and private reflection but is not to be accompanied by the rigidity and legalistic burden which the Pharisees had imposed on the keeping of the Sabbath, while for others the observance of the day is strictly a matter of individual conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Theologians are quick to note that the 4th Commandment, the one concerning the Sabbath, is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the New Testament. Furthermore, they tell us, the day of rest prescribed in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ, who, according to Hebrews, is our rest. Thus, the Lord's Day, they would say, is not a New Testament Sabbath, but rather a time for corporate worship.

This is how the writers of our confessional statement have seen it. They say that it is a "Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of spiritual devotion, both public and private." And that any activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Simply put, this means that we are no longer under the law and that the Lord's Day is different from and not to be confused with the Sabbath. What it does not mean is that we can treat the Lord's Day like any other day of the week and disregarding the scriptural examples given us for worship on the Lord's Day.

So, what is the Lord's Day for and how are we to view it? This brings us to our second point, which is that the Lord's Day is a day for corporate worship.

II. The Priority of Corporate Worship

As we have mentioned, Revelation 1:10 clearly shows us that by as early as the end of the first century, when the apostle John was given the Revelation, Sunday, or the first day of the week, was seen as the Lord's day. It was a day when the church gathered together for corporate worship.

One of the marks of true Christianity is community. That is, authentic Christians are supposed to congregate for mutual edification and corporate worship. Jesus has promised to be present in our midst as we gather and throughout the history of the Church this has been the norm rather than the exception. Simply put this means we are supposed to gather together regularly for plenary worship services. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way in **Hebrews 10:23-25**, "**Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not**

staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day draw near."

Additionally, **Acts 20:7** tells us that the early church gathered on the first day of the week for fellowship and teaching, and if you read it carefully you'll find that Paul preached till midnight.

And **1 Corinthians 16:2** tells us that the Christians in Corinth gathered together regularly on the first day of the week, on the Lord's Day and worshiped through the giving of their financial resources.

The Psalmist said, in **Psalm 122:1**, **"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"**

You see, the normative behavior for people who are in love with God and who are in love with the people of God is to want to be around other Christians and to worship the Lord together. While I may have the freedom to worship God when and where I like, history tells us that those who are passionately in love with Jesus have normally been involved in their local church and attend it regularly. You find me a new Christian who hasn't had time to backslide or become overly familiar with that which is holy and I'll show you somebody who is excited about going to church and who has a hunger and a thirst for the things of God.

Folks, the reason people go to the house of the Lord is because they are in love with Him and want to join with others who are of like mind and Spirit and worship Him together. From the early days of the Christian Church, this priority of corporate worship on the Lord's Day has been a pattern, which was sanctioned by the apostles themselves as well as the various first century Christians. If you are in love with Jesus, if you are as excited about Him and His presence as you should be, corporate worship will become a priority in your life. It will come ahead of sports, ahead of work, and before your family. If you have a passionate love for the Lord, it will be reflected in how faithful you are to gather with others and worship the Lord together.

This may not go over with some today. The individualism which so permeates our society tells people that they can worship God on their own. I've actually heard people say, "I don't need to go to church to worship God, I can worship God in the forest or on the lake, in the midst of nature. I feel closer to God there." Say what you like but you cannot get away from **Hebrews 10:25** which tells us that we are not to forsake corporate worship. The Bible is clear, as Christians we are to gather regularly for worship through proclamation and praise, for encouragement, accountability and the building up of one another.

There are, of course, reasons people don't want to go to church. Some don't want to go to church because they don't want to have to face the truth about themselves. They don't want to hear that they are sinners and need to repent. Others don't want to go to church for good reasons, quite frankly, some churches don't teach and preach the truth

and others are downright boring. Some churches are so far stuck in the past, so steeped in tradition and ritual that most people cannot see any relevance in what they teach or preach. Other churches have forsaken the gospel of Jesus Christ in favor of a message that is more in line with the political correctness of the day. Those kinds of messages have no power to transform lives and sooner or later, they too pass away. Many people don't go to church because the churches they have been too had nothing real to offer and left them with more questions than answers.

But do you want to know the truth of the matter? Most people don't go to church because they've not seen any real difference in the lives of those who do! This is not an indictment on everyone who goes to church, but let's face it, if we lived like we ought to, if our lives were as transformed as God wants them to be, if we truly loved one another as we have been called to, others would be drawn to us in such a way that our services would always be overflowing.

Sunday is the Lord's Day, it is a day when we, as the redeemed, gather to worship the Redeemer. It is a day set aside for reflection, a day for worship and spiritual devotion. It is a day which should, in a very real sense, be something every born-again believer looks forward to each and every week.

This brings me to my final observation. That is that in the life of a Christian, everyday should be the Lord's Day, every day should be a day that we are careful to practice a consecrated life.

III. The Practice of Private Devotion

When Jesus instituted the New Covenant, He fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the Old Covenant and the way men worshiped God changed. No longer was the sacrifice of goats and bulls necessary, the blood of Jesus paid the price, once for all. No longer was God only resident over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, now God comes to dwell within every believer through the presence of the Holy Spirit. No longer do we have to go to a human priest to take our petitions to God, now there is only one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ the righteous. The New Covenant or New Testament changed things.

One of the things the New Testament changed was the observance of the Sabbath. Instead of one day being set aside for God every week, in a very real sense, now every day is a day which should be consecrated to the Lord. Now, instead of going into the temple to worship on the Sabbath, scripture tells us that our very bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and that the very way in which we live our lives should be an act of worship. All of this calls us to a consecrated life; a life of private devotion which is lived for Jesus 7 days a week, not just on Sunday.

That's what Paul is saying in **Romans 12:1-2**. Listen to how the Berkley Version puts it:

"Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. Do not

be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God."

While Christians should strive to order their lives in such a way so as not to neglect their regular participation in corporate worship, corporate worship is, in a sense, born out of personal and private worship. Coming to church on Sunday will not transform you unless you are being transformed in your personal walk with God throughout the week. Sunday should be the culmination of worship in which you have been involved in all week long. Can you imagine the kind of worship service that would be where everyone there has been busy worshipping all week long and they come together to pool their passion on Sunday. That would be exciting!

Allow me to suggest several things which I think will help you as you seek to live a consecrated life. There are no secrets here, just elementary practical suggestions which will help put feet to your faith. And when you hear these you're going to say, "so what's new about that?" the answer is nothing! This is basic stuff, but then most of our Christian walk is basic and most of us already know it, we simply need reminding.

A. Read the Word of God Daily

Boy this is basic isn't it, but you'd be surprised at how many Christians simply don't make time to read the word of God daily. Don't be legalistic about it, that is, if for some reason you miss a day don't begin to think you're a bad Christian. A better way to approach this is to look at it as a discipline, sort of like exercising or eating healthy food. It needs to be a regular part of your life. It needs to be one of the good habits you develop. I like to say that you cannot know the will of God if you are not conversant with the word of God.

B. Spend Time in Prayer Daily

I don't understand everything I read. The truth of the matter is I can hardly read the bible without going to God in prayer and asking Him to help me understand. Then, once I understand He usually convicts me and I must ask for forgiveness, either for something I've said or done, or for something I have not said or done. But prayer keeps me in right fellowship with God. Have you ever noticed that it's hard to talk to someone and allow anything to stand between you, sooner rather than later, if you stay in communication with them, the issue will come to the surface and you'll deal with it. The same is true in your relationship with God. If you'll spend time in prayer every day. And by the way, keeping a prayer journal may prove to be a very effective way of not only remembering what it is you've prayed for, but also of recording how and when God answers your prayers. Spend time each day in prayer.

C. Attend Church Regularly

You need to be in a church where the word of God is preached, and the love of God is demonstrated. You need to associate with others who love Jesus like you do, who will encourage and strengthen you in your faith. The devil wants to keep us from fellowship

with other Christians and thereby separate us from our support and our accountability. If he can get us away from the fold, he can attack us at our weakest point. Listen, two thousand years of unanimity within the body of Christ concerning the necessity of corporate worship can't be wrong. Our spiritual ancestors laid a solid path for us to follow. Devoted Christians who can, attend church regularly.

D. Share Your Faith Faithfully

You'll be amazed how God will speak to you and how you'll sense His working in your life when you get involved in telling others about His love.