

KEEPING THE SABBATH

Excerpts from a Sermon by Rev. Kurt Horigan Asplundh

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work....

Exodus 20:8-10

Unlike the other commandments against murder, adultery and theft, which are sustained by the civil laws of society, Sabbath observance is not compulsory for us as it originally was for the Jews. Traditionally, Sunday has been set apart in the Christian world as a day of worship rather than a working day. However, civil statutes and regulations, often called “blue laws,” instituted to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath, have been abolished for the most part. Public worship of the Lord is now, perhaps more than ever, in competition with a great variety of other activities, both occupational and recreational. The plain fact is, many people regard Sunday as just another day off, feeling little or no obligation to attend church services or to reflect on spiritual things.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches that the worship of the Lord should be by free choice rather than by compulsion (see *Heaven and Hell* 603). “Worship from freedom is pleasing to the Lord,” we are told, “but not worship from compulsion...” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9588). We believe this refers to adults who are capable of making a free and rational choice, not to children. Yet all, adults as well as children, should heed the Lord’s commandment. We cannot be compelled to worship against our will, but we can compel ourselves. True freedom is born of self-compulsion (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1947). And the Lord has said: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”

Yet, as with all the commandments of the Decalogue, there is so much more for us to learn about what is meant by keeping the Sabbath than its formal observance in public worship. What are the deeper implications of the third commandment?

We know that strict observance of the Sabbath had been carried to extremes in the Lord’s time on earth. Interpreters of the Law had added a proliferation of customs to its original intent. The legitimate forms of observance had been surrounded by man-made additions—to the extent that the mercy and purpose of the Lord’s laws were obscured. The Lord came to open their meaning. His acts on the Sabbath, seemingly contrary to Scripture, actually were in accord with its spiritual intent and revealed His eternal laws.

The meaning of the law of the Sabbath is simply this: that the Lord alone can save us by His teaching and His healing. This is the “work” of the Sabbath and He alone can do it. That is why we are taught that on this day we should do no work.

When the Lord came as the Son of Man into the world, He said He was “Lord also of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:5). He could work the works of God on that day, teaching and healing. And what more appropriate day could there be for His Divine work of saving souls? So He said, “it is lawful to do good on the sabbath days” (Matthew 12:12).

We are taught that when the Lord came into the world, “that day became a day of instruction in Divine things...and of meditation on such things as relate to salvation and eternal life, as also a day of love toward the neighbor” (*True Christian Religion* 301). The particular rituals of the Jewish law were annulled, but the Lord in no way abolished the commandment that the Sabbath was to be remembered and kept holy (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9394). Our need for this now is just as great as it was for the Children of Israel. And now we can know why.

We keep the Sabbath holy when, at any time, in any situation, we act from the Lord’s will instead of from our own. In essence, what is taught about the Sabbath has no relation to a day or to any time, but to a state of mind. To remember the Sabbath day is to acknowledge the goodness of the Lord, to recognize that the Lord alone is the source of all that is good and to trust that He is the way, the truth, and the life.

You see, the origin of all evil was to confirm in ourselves the appearance of self-life, the false appearance that life is our own. The remedy for evil must be the opposite: to acknowledge that life is not our own but the Lord’s gift to us. This is the inner message of the Sabbath day and the reason to keep it holy.

The true Sabbath is a spiritual state of peace. It is found in those fleeting but comforting moments when our confidence in the Lord is affirmed. For “peace has in it confidence in the Lord,” we are told, “that He directs all things, and provides all things, and that He leads to a good end.” And, wonderful to say, “When a person is in this faith, he is in peace, for he then fears nothing, and no anxiety about things to come disquiets him” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8455). It is noteworthy that self-confidence is what *takes away* this state of peace.

Although there is an inner meaning to the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, it is important, while in this world, to remember the Sabbath in external as well as internal worship. The reasons for this are first, “by external worship internal things are excited,” second, “by means of external worship external things are kept in holiness, so that internal things can flow in,” third, “a person is thus imbued with knowledges and is prepared for receiving celestial things,” and fourth, the person “is also gifted with states of holiness, although he is unaware of this, which...are preserved...by the Lord for the use of eternal life” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1618).

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches that there are certain external “signs of charity” that express our internal charity. These include attending services of worship, partaking of the Holy Supper, praying privately as well as joining in public prayer, holding conversation about spiritual things with others, and reading the Word along with other books of instruction and piety. Further signs include thought and meditation concerning spiritual things, self-examination, aversion of the mind from impious and obscene language, and the discipline of our natural affections (see *Charity* 174-175). *All of these external signs support internal worship.*

The worship of the Lord and the external observance of the Sabbath day should be a regular part of our life. We should respond in the spirit of the psalmist when invited to participate in the worship of the Lord: Can we say, as he did in Psalm 122, verse 1, “I was glad when they said to me, Let us go into the house of the Lord”? “I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy...” (Psalm 5:7). “Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 29:2).