

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
August 25, 2013

Holy Day or Holiday?

Read Nehemiah 13:10-22

Key verse: “And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy” (Nehemiah 13:22a).

Churches struggle to do the work of the Lord because of inadequate financial resources. The Sabbath day is less and less a holy day and more and more a holiday. Most contemporary Christians are familiar with these problems. It is interesting that these two problems go back at least as far as the time of Nehemiah.

When Nehemiah returned from Persia to Jerusalem, he discovered that God’s people were not tithing, as God had commanded. So, the Levites, who were in charge of temple worship, had to go back to work in the fields in order to support themselves and their families (Nehemiah 13:10). As a result, “the house of God” was being “forsaken” (v. 11). Nehemiah led the effort to restore tithing (vv. 11-14).

How many churches struggle unnecessarily because Christians do not tithe?

Rev. Jeff Greenway, a United Methodist pastor in Ohio, answered some of the objections people have when challenged to tithe or give proportionately:

“This is none of your business.” Answer: You are right, but it is God’s business. This is between you and God. After all, God owns everything, and has called us to be good stewards of what he has entrusted to us. We are God’s instruments to accomplish his will in the world.

“I have too many bills. I can’t afford to give.” Answer: You may have too many bills, but that is not an excuse for not being a good steward. Perhaps it is a call to refocus our priorities and put God first.

“I worked for it. I earned it. I can spend it any way I want.” God celebrates a good work ethic. But we do not even work for ourselves. If we are followers of Jesus, we work for an audience of One. And the way we use what we have earned is a reflection of our faith and trust in Him.

The second problem that Nehemiah discovered when he returned from Persia was that God’s people were not honoring the Sabbath. Again,

Nehemiah led the effort to restore Sabbath-keeping, as commanded by God (vv. 15-22).

There is perhaps no more glaring example of the secularization of our culture and of the Church than our neglect of the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” Our great-grandfathers called it the “holy Sabbath.” Our grandfathers called “the Sabbath.” Our fathers called it “Sunday.” But today we call it “the weekend.”

The Bible’s teaching about the Sabbath might be summarized by these four principles:

1. “Remember”

The fourth commandment begins with this word. In the Old Testament, this involved remembering God’s mighty acts—especially the creation and the exodus. Sabbath remembrance for Christians also focuses on God’s mighty acts in Jesus Christ, especially his death and resurrection. The early Church changed their Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday as a way of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on “the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1-2).

2. Rest

God has made us so that we need at least one day in seven to rest from our labors in order to be refreshed and renewed both physically and spiritually. The Sabbath is meant to be a day of worship and of rest.

3. Blessing

In Jesus’ time, many rabbis were ridiculously legalistic about Sabbath observance. For example, some rabbis taught that eggs laid on the Sabbath could not be eaten because the hens had to work to lay them. Some rabbis taught that if a flea bit a man on the Sabbath, the man must not scratch the bite (that would involve work).

Jesus corrected this legalistic approach to Sabbath-keeping when he said: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” When we keep a Sabbath day for worship, rest, and re-creation, it becomes a wonderful blessing in our lives!

4. Keep it holy.

Still today, God calls us to keep the Sabbath a holy day. For most Christians, most of the time, this will mean keeping Sunday as our day of worship, rest, and re-creation. In those rare cases when it becomes impossible to make Sunday one’s Sabbath, he would do well to make another day a Sabbath day.

God knows our hearts, and we need not fall into legalism about this matter. But we should be careful not to let the secularization of our culture lead us to forget God’s command: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”

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