

The purpose of the Sabbath day

In the Victorian classic, *Black Beauty* spent his declining years working as a cabman's horse in London. The name of the cabby was Jerry Barker. At one point in the story Jerry is talking to a colleague, Larry, about Sunday cabmen who claimed that they could not afford to leave off Sunday work and, besides that, they were needed to take the church-goers 'to hear their favourite preachers.' Jerry Barker's high principle is illustrated in his vigorous defence of Sunday: 'If a thing is right it can be done and if it's wrong it can be done without, and a good man will find a way and that is as true for us cabmen as it is for the church-goers.' That is an excellent principle in this context: 'If a thing is right it can be done, and if it is wrong it can be done without.'

One reason why the fourth Commandment is under attack today, especially by those who ought to be its friends and therefore should find the greatest enjoyment from it, is that too much of the debate centres around what we must not do on Sunday. For those who are agreed on the conclusions of the previous chapter there is little more that needs to be said. Most of the discussion on do and don't, how and why, will be resolved by the wisdom of Jerry Barker: 'If a thing is right it can be done, and if it is wrong it can be done without.' Although there are certainly difficulties in applying this Commandment in a modern, fast-moving, leisure-orientated, and profit-controlled society, I want to focus in this chapter on the positive value of the day.

I suspect the traditionally negative attitude that so many have had toward the use of this special day, plus the complexity of applying the Commandment in a modern age, have both contributed to a felt need of finding a way to avoid its clear implications. This is understandable, but neither wise nor right. After all, which of the Commandments has ever been easy to obey? And in our twenty-first century culture they are all becoming ever harder to keep. I am so convinced of the privileges of this

special day that we might even have started at this point. If a trusted friend offers you a good gift, you hardly respond by presenting all the reasons why you should *not* accept it! That would be discourteous and foolish—to say the least. So let's now consider the privileges of keeping Sunday special.

It is a rest day

For many at the end of a hard-working week this may be the most encouraging aspect of the Commandment. Exodus 23:12 elaborates God's plan for the nation; it is an interesting and very full verse: 'Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that you and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.' One Hebrew word is used for the phrase 'Do not work', but a different word is used for the reference to the 'rest' of the ox and donkey, and a third word is translated by the slave and alien being 'refreshed'. Three different words are therefore used to describe what happens on the Sabbath day.

The master is not to do any work. The verb forms the root of our noun 'Sabbath', and the word Sabbath means 'rest'. The estate owner must rest presumably for three reasons: in doing so he can fulfil the purpose of the Commandment in his own life; he will also set a good example to those who work for him; and thirdly, there will be no need for his servants to work since if he worked, they would have to as well.

The animals are also to 'rest'. This is not the word for Sabbath but a different word which means they are to settle down and be quiet. Animals used for carrying burdens or hauling a plough are to be set free simply to spend one whole day grazing. When God placed mankind in charge of creation he did not expect this to result in abuse and cruelty: 'A righteous man cares for the needs of his animals' (Proverbs 12:10). There is a significant principle involved in this instruction regarding the animals. Their inclusion in this part of the Sabbath day purpose shows how all-embracing God intended the 'rest' to be. Certainly the animals would not benefit from a reminder of the spiritual purposes of the day, but the wise Creator indicates that the principle of rest is vital for every living creature under the control of man. The 'beasts of burden' were not simply to be left

tethered and waiting for the next day. The word implies that they are allowed to settle and be quiet; it carries the idea of grazing at leisure.

The servants and the visitor are to be ‘refreshed’. The word used here is the strongest of all. It comes from a root meaning breath, life or soul. It is as if God is saying, ‘Let your servants take a breath; let them be rejuvenated; let them rest on that day so that new life comes into their body and they are ready for the next six days of hard work.’ Once again, it is a demand that is intended for our good.

The cycle of one rest-day in seven has a physical benefit that is of value for its own sake. This is one reason why Christians should insist that governments allow for a national day of rest, so that even those who have no intention of using the day for worship will at least benefit from one part of God’s good plan for mankind. This day has social as well as religious benefits.

Sadly, a society which could benefit so much by observing this Commandment has squandered the opportunity by insisting upon its right to work a seven-day week. That is not freedom but slavery, and governments would be well advised not to ignore the wisdom of God by violating his beneficial laws. Four hundred years before Christ was born, Nehemiah took strong action to close down the Sabbath market in Jerusalem. In guarding the Jews against a violation of the fourth Commandment, he also forced a day of rest on the non-Jewish traders and their animals (Nehemiah 13).

It is a memorial day

For the Jew in the Old Testament the Sabbath was a day to call to mind two particular acts of God. The first was creation and the second was redemption. In Exodus 20:11 the people were told to observe this day: ‘For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them.’ This was reinforced in Exodus 31:16–17.

A Sunday ought never to pass without the Christian acknowledging God as Creator, both in private and, where possible, in public worship. This is probably more relevant today than ever before, in a society of advanced technology. In our bid to elevate man’s achievements and self-sufficiency, we are in danger of forgetting the simplicity of creation and our total

dependence upon the Creator. The warning in Deuteronomy 8:11,17 stands for both Jew and Gentile: ‘Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees... You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.”’

If a reminder of creation was necessary for a people wandering under the desert stars and wholly dependant upon God for their necessities of life, how much more is it necessary today. As we have drifted from bothering with ‘the Lord’s day’, so we have lost a vital weekly reminder of our total dependence and significant insignificance.

Much of modern worship is focused upon personal experience and expressions of affection for Christ. These are good themes and should never be absent in our approach to God, but our concern for God’s presence *now*, often overlooks the fact that he is beyond us; our desire for an experience of his immanence has sadly blocked our appreciation of his transcendence. Christian worship should always be grounded in the adoration of an awesome and holy Creator. Our songs and psalms should reflect this as a prelude to any focus upon redemption and the response of love. We are in danger of forgetting that the Christian’s privilege is not only to know Christ, however glorious that is, but to know the Father. That, after all, is why Christ came. Our Lord taught his disciples to begin their prayers by addressing, ‘Our Father in heaven’ (Matthew 6:9), and he himself prayed, ‘This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (John 17:3).

The Sabbath was also a day in which to remember that God had redeemed his people. When the law was repeated in Deuteronomy, a significant addition was made to this particular Commandment: ‘Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm’ (Deuteronomy 5:15). On this day we should focus on the God of creation and on the God of redemption—in that order. Redemption is never understood in its full glory unless we appreciate the character of the God who hates sin, yet becomes the friend of the sinner.

Deliverance from Egypt was gained at the blood cost of the first-born throughout the land, and God set aside one special day for the people to

remember this. Of course it was possible for them to remember the mercy of God on any day and at any time, but knowing human weakness God set aside a particular day for his people to be in ‘recall mode’. In the same way we can remember the cross at any time, but our Lord established a simple supper to put us in mind of his sacrifice of redemption. So, does the Lord’s Supper take the place of the Sabbath? Of course not. Both the Day of Atonement and the Passover sacrifice reminded the Israelite of his redemption from Egypt and from sin, but in addition God used the Sabbath as a memory aid. When the master set his animals out to graze and his servants free from work, he was to recall that that is exactly what God had done for him.

We discussed in the previous chapter the reasons for the Christian change from the Jewish Sabbath to the ‘Lord’s day’. On this day the Christian is reminded that our God is the God of the resurrection. On the Lord’s day Christ rose again from the dead; he is therefore the powerful Lord and Sovereign over death and hell and sin. Because God intended that it should be a day of rest and a day of recall we should spend almost no time arguing about what we should and should not do on this day, and most time using the day for its great purpose of remembering the God of creation and of redemption. The first day of the week was also the day on which the Holy Spirit was given to the church. Pentecost, according to Leviticus 23:15–16, fell on ‘the day after the Sabbath’—the first day of the week. God had planned a special celebration day for the Christian church back in the early days of Israel’s history.

It is a worship day

The purpose of this day is both for rest and worship; but the Jew saw no real distinction between those two activities. Rest enabled the day to be set aside as a special day for worship.

We saw in the previous chapter that this day also points us to the ultimate eternal rest in heaven (Hebrews 4:9)—the glorious rest that awaits those who are trusting in Christ. Therefore, like one aspect of the Lord’s Supper, this day is pointing forward. It reminds us that there is going to be an eternal rest in heaven, but not just a sitting at ease; the Sabbath, like eternal heaven, is primarily for the worship of God.

On this day, through our memory we can aid our soul. Numbers 28:9–10 reveals specific requirements for the Sabbath day. The normal daily offering is given in verse 3, ‘two lambs a year old and without defect’ but in verse 9 we are told of the Sabbath offering: ‘On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old without defect, together with its drink offering and a grain offering... *in addition* to the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.’ In other words, on the Sabbath the Israelites doubled their worship. This meant, of course, that the Levites and the priests had to work double-time on the Lord’s day. Incidentally, there is no command in the Old Testament that the priests should have another day off in lieu! The reason for this is that God considered true worship to be rejuvenating not enervating.

We must not miss the important principle here that worship was to be based upon the response of an active mind. When God called his people to ‘remember’ and then turned their minds back to creation and redemption his purpose was clear: he intended his people to worship, but not in the mindless ecstasy ‘enjoyed’ by the religions of the surrounding nations; rather his people were to worship with a mind that was alert and constantly recalling the character of the God they approached. To lay aside our mind in worship is never acceptable to God; true worship should always begin with the mind and flow into the heart. To be encouraged to ‘empty our mind’ is wholly unbiblical. Our Lord defined worship as ‘in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24). True worship in both the Old and New Testaments is the intelligent response of an active mind to the character of a holy God.

Since worship is such a great privilege, it is hard to understand why some Christians struggle to edge their way out of the ‘restrictions’ of this fourth Commandment. If God has given us a command that is intended to allow us more time to spend in worship, why should we ever want to take less time? The Israelite whose heart was right counted the day as one of great joy, and only those who wanted to do as they pleased considered the whole thing an intolerable burden (Isaiah 58:13–14). Finding our ‘joy in the LORD’, riding ‘on the heights of the land’, and feasting ‘on the inheritance of your father Jacob’ is surely Isaiah’s Old Testament language for the privilege of enjoying God in friendship through adoration and worship. However busy

we may be during the week, and however diligently we bring our ‘daily offerings’ to him, on the Lord’s day we have more time to worship.

Shortly before he was posted to the Crimea in 1854, Captain Hedley Vicars of the 97th Regiment wrote a letter to a friend expressing his enjoyment of Sunday. The language may be ‘quaint’ for a modern reader but the sentiment is real: ‘I remember, alas! too well, the time when I dreaded the return of Sunday and considered it both dull and tedious, but now surely no day is so cheering and delightful; and there is none that passes away so quickly. I recollect that for several months the only inward sanctifying proof I could, on examination, bring to assure myself that I had indeed been made an “heir of Christ”, was this longing desire for the Lord’s day.’ Vicars, who died in his first battle, wrote the same way from the mud-filled trenches before Sebastapol. Something has happened to our life with God and his people, or to our understanding of the purpose of this day, when we do not feel like this soldier did.

For the Israelite then, the day was a day of rest, a memory aid, and a day of worship. It included his body, mind and soul. But it was never allowed to be just one of these three; it had to be all of them together. Each one is inter-related to the others.

Never say ‘ought’?

Some Christians say that we shouldn’t do anything simply because we must, but only as the Spirit leads us; in other words, we ought never to say ‘ought’. Is that how we get out of bed in the morning? Is it never because it is the right thing to do—or because of what the boss will say if we are three hours late? That is a disciplined habit. It is unquestionably right for Christians to do things because they are right—whether they feel like it or not. For the Christian there is both an obligation and an opportunity in keeping the Lord’s day special. The obligation comes from the Commandment. We cannot escape it. It is there in the Scripture from the pattern at Creation to ‘the Lord’s day’ in Revelation. It was reinforced at Sinai.

But the fourth Commandment is also an opportunity. If the obligation comes from law, the opportunity comes from grace. It is a day to refresh ourselves, not in idleness but in worship: worshipping the Creator for the covenant and his salvation, meeting together with God’s people and gaining

all the benefits that we ought to find in that. Just as the Israelite remembered Egypt and the Passover and their deliverance from slavery, so the Christian remembers the Saviour dying on Calvary, rising again from the dead, giving us new life and salvation through his Holy Spirit. Never should a Sunday pass by without our minds turning to Christ and the cross and our hearts responding with a deep sense of indebtedness to him for all that he achieved on Calvary in order to bring us into fellowship with the Father.

That is our privilege on Sunday. It is a day specially set apart. How many times do we consciously stop from Monday to Saturday and thank God and worship him as the Creator and Saviour? How often do we think of Calvary and worship Christ for what he did on the cross? We have to admit to being often so hassled, busy and distracted that we hardly have a moment to think about God's word, and there is little time to pray.

In this fast-moving world when the demand of our employment daily sucks us into the frustration of our journey into the office, classroom or factory as part of the earth's digestive commuter system, we never seem to be able to accomplish the things we set out to do. We enter each new week with a backlog from the previous week. Any talk about spending time worshipping the Creator, approaching Calvary and pouring out our heart in indebtedness to him seems to be so far away from the realities of Monday to Friday. This is precisely why God has given us this special day. Thank God for Sunday because if nothing else it should make us stop and worship. That is why the day is as necessary now as it ever was.

But for the Christian alone?

We have already seen in chapter two that the law of God was intended for both the law-keepers and the law-breakers; for both Israel and the nations. To imagine that the Sabbath was simply part of the special covenant with Israel intended to mark them out as different from the surrounding nations, fails to appreciate that God has a claim upon the worship of all men and women everywhere, and that in his grace he has included in his moral law a facility to encourage this. The Sabbath was a recognition not only that Israel was to be different—though they were—but that the whole human race needs this special provision designed to call society to remember and worship.

The nations may ignore this Commandment just as they do many of the others. They may even legislate against it, but the fact remains that it is part of God's general grace to the whole of fallen humanity. Are Christians alone in living under an obligation and privilege to remember their Creator, to recall his mercy in the offer of redemption, to worship him in sincerity, and to take time out to do all this? And if they are not, how can we suggest that this great gift of the Sabbath was not intended for the benefit of the nations beyond Israel—just as the other Commandments certainly were.

Using the day wisely

How then are we going to use this day properly? John Wesley, the powerful 18th century evangelist, was once asked by a lady whether or not she should go to the theatre on Sunday. Wesley avoided a direct answer and instead turned her attention to the greater issue: 'Madam, you need only ask, "What is the purpose of the Sabbath?"' So long as we fulfil the whole purpose of the Lord's day we can surely do anything! The reason why some are against observing the fourth Commandment is because they have a false view of the Christian's relationship to the law of God. This day should be a joy to us. None of these commands are made for our misery, but for our freedom and encouragement.

It is only the disobedient Christian who tries to reason a way out of the seventh Commandment—and isn't the same true of the fourth? Remember that God not only set apart the seventh day but he 'made it holy' (Genesis 2:3 and Exodus 20:11); that word 'holy' means separate and different from the commonplace, and that surely cannot be a bad thing. It means that God intended something special for this day and he promised that those who keep it special would benefit from it. If we constantly keep in mind the purpose of this wonderful day then we will know how to celebrate it and how to use it. It is a day for rest, memory and worship, for body, mind and soul.

So, how can we be careful to keep this day special?

First of all, by careful preparation.

Before any important event—a wedding, a social occasion or a job interview—most people spend time getting ready, and they leave sufficient time not to arrive late. If this day is so important should we not prepare for

it? It is significant that the Jewish Sabbath actually started at six o'clock on Friday evening and ran through to six o'clock on Saturday evening. For us, Saturday evening ought as far as possible to be a preparation evening; we should do whatever work is reasonable in order to avoid all unnecessary work on the special day. Without running into the Pharisaic danger of a ridiculous slavery to legalism, there are surely many things we can do on Saturday to leave us free from the clutter of the world on Sunday.

We should not keep Sunday free so that we can smugly tick off the rules we have obeyed and list the things we are not doing, but so that, as far as is possible in our modern society, we can spend a day apart from our regular involvement in the world; this will give us time for resting, remembering and worshipping. This is why we may choose to prepare our meals on Saturday, and refrain from the household chores and shopping that have occupied us during the week; and why the student will finish revision and write-up the assignment by Saturday evening.

John Paton was a missionary to the indians on the island of Aniwa in the Pacific in the middle of the nineteenth century. When some of them were converted to Christ, Paton commented that life on the island was changed as the people's lives and habits were transformed. Among the changes he observed was that Saturday became known by the tribes-people as 'cooking day' because all the cooking was done on Saturday so that when Sunday dawned they could spend more time in the place of worship. There was nothing new in this; God had made provision for the Israelites in the wilderness by providing double the quantity of manna on the day before the Sabbath, and by prohibiting cooking on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:22-23). Cooking for them would have been more of a 'chore' than it is for us with our microwaves and ovens, but we can still prepare in every way possible so that there is less for us to do on Sunday.

We prepare for Sunday by a reasonable night's rest. To be up until the early hours of Sunday morning means that we will never be fit for the worship of God later in the day. We will prepare also by getting up on Sunday morning at a sensible time and by an unhurried and early arrival at church. To rush into a congregation five minutes late is hardly preparation for the benefits of this special day. The day is not intended to be one of idleness but of rest; there is a world of difference between the two. Rest

rejuvenates and recreates, whereas lying in bed for half the day achieves nothing positive for the mind, soul or body.

A disciplined mind is needed to use the day as God intended. We may not actually go to work on Sunday, but to spend the day with our mind poring over the problems of the coming week is no more obedient to the command of God than if we had gone to work; our minds are muddled and busy about other things. Surely the best preparation is to pray *before* we arrive at church so that we are ready to hear what God has to say through his word.

Secondly, by disciplined habits

Our Lord went to the synagogue on a Sabbath day ‘as was his custom’ (Luke 4:16). A good individual and family habit is to be regularly at the house of God when God’s people meet together. Only illness should be allowed to interrupt it. Not tiredness or business, or pleasure and leisure. Some Christians have more grit than others, but if we absent ourselves because we are too tired then we should go to bed at a reasonable hour. Otherwise we are robbing both God and his people.

I have met Christians who, strangely, do not go to church when they are on holiday or when relatives or friends call unexpectedly. Far from exercising their Christian ‘freedom’ they are revealing that Sunday is a great bore and that it is good to have an excuse for a ‘day off’. I wonder if these Christians were intending to watch their team playing on Saturday afternoon when friends arrived, whether those friends would either join them at the match or be hurried on their way!

Henry Martyn went out to serve God in India during the middle of the nineteenth century and he died on his way home, alone and somewhere in Persia. Martyn penned these words in his diary: ‘We may judge by our regard for the Sabbath whether eternity will be forced upon us or not.’ He is right. Christians who long for eternity want to be as near eternity as they can be and as often as they can be; whatever will help them to think about eternity—they want to be part of it. The opposite is also true; those who see nothing of value in eternity will not want to be near to eternity here on earth. Surely anything that can distract the mind from being constantly absorbed with this world and can direct it to the realities of heaven must be

very attractive to those whose citizenship is in heaven. For this reason the response of the Israelites in the Old Testament to the fourth Commandment was a barometer of the people's love for God. It still is. The regular meeting together is a good habit (Hebrews 10:25).

Thirdly, by wise use

We must not legislate for each other. God has given us the law, and both our Lord and the apostle Paul warned against adding human regulations to that. Each person must be persuaded before God on the detail. Some will not answer the telephone on Sunday, use electricity, travel in a car, kick a ball, go for a walk or swim in the sea. We should never mock those who have strong personal convictions concerning what they should and should not do on the Lord's day. However, they must not make laws about these things for others. We must all ensure that the day is used for the purpose of resting, remembering and worshipping in such a way that it becomes a day to delight in the Lord. Clearly as far as possible we should put aside all our daily work. To immerse ourselves in reports, newspapers and videos that fill our minds with the business or values of this world will not be using the day as God intended. These things may not be wrong, and many of them will occupy us from Monday through the week, but our purpose must surely be to clear our minds for God on this day. It is the purpose that is all important, not the obedience to regulations.

The Puritan Thomas Watson urged his readers in their preparation for Sunday, 'Having dressed your bodies, you must dress your souls for hearing the word of God'. Some Christians choose to have a 'no television day', not only because studies have demonstrated that television is a poor way to relax, but because to have a mind filled with TV ads and media images is hardly the way to approach a holy God and to hear him speaking through his word. To make that kind of personal decision is not 'narrow-minded legalism' but the refreshing liberty of a heart in search of God.

In many evangelical churches family life is disrupted on Sunday and children actually see less of their parents—particularly their father—than they do during the week. This cannot be right and is certainly a violation of the purpose of the law of God. He has kindly planned for a rest that is both

refreshing and allows the family to be together. Families should make every effort to ensure that this is a special day.

If Sunday is boring for our children it is generally not the church that is to blame—that may take up less than three hours of the day. But how do we spend the remainder of our time? It is not hard to make Sunday a different day for the family and to do things together for a change. Certainly many evangelical churches would do well to reassess their programme of Sunday activities to make sure that families do have time to be together and not to so overload the day with ‘spiritual’ activities that the three-fold purpose is lost under the heavyweight of Christian busyness. A little imagination and freedom from traditional, but unbiblical, taboos will both guard the day and treat it as a delight (Isaiah 58:13–14). However, neither sport nor any other recreation should interfere with the primary purpose of a day of seeking and finding God.

We should not make others work unnecessarily either. No Christian has to shop on Sunday. That is wholly unfair to those who have to serve us; whether they recognise that or not doesn’t matter. Far from it being an expression of Christian ‘freedom’, it is a mark of being enslaved by the values and mindset of our post-Christian world. Business can cease for one day. Many have proved this: a modern nation like Germany, and others across Europe, have found little hardship in closing all shops from midday on Saturday. Driving through the Czech Republic a few years ago we stopped at a fair sized country town and were amazed to discover the neat and clean shopping centre almost deserted; then we realised it was Saturday afternoon—it was as if Sunday had already begun. Centuries earlier the prophet Jeremiah and the governor Nehemiah both insisted that the best use of the Sabbath was to stop the daily round of business (Jeremiah 17:19–27 and Nehemiah 13:15–22).

Pastoral dilemmas

We have to come to terms with the fact that the option of refusing to take a job that demands some Sunday working is gradually coming to an end. Already the retail trade has virtually locked out the Christian who refuses ever to work on Sunday. For a long time industries have worked a seven-day rota, in some cases unavoidably because of the nature of the equipment used.

Our Lord sanctioned necessary labour. In our pagan, post-Christian society the edges are often blurred and we are compelled to do things that we would not do from preference. There are times when in our employment we have no option but to work on the Lord's day. We are not living in the 'theocracy' of Moses' day when God's laws were the only ones for society. The first century Christians were not in this privileged position either. The Christian slave was not able to say to his master: 'Excuse me boss, but I am a Christian now, so you will need to roster someone else for Sundays. I will be in the catacombs for worship.' As a matter of fact Christians *are* often still able to make that sort of demand—and where they can, they should—but how long this freedom will last is debatable. We must be prepared for the dilemma that forces us to choose between occasional Sunday work and no work at all. As we have seen, the first century Christians met early in the morning—before work—and continued this way until the Sunday laws of Constantine in AD 321.

The newsletter of an evangelical pastor included this item: 'We still have many of our men who have to travel abroad on business regularly. A few Sundays ago we had five of them away (in four different continents of the world). Not only do they miss out on continuity of the teaching, but their wives cannot attend the evening service or the mid-week meetings when they are away. Our two policemen still only have one whole Sunday off a month; and other people have to work either on Sundays or all night on Saturday.' That is becoming typical. Businessmen are not infrequently expected to travel on Sunday in order to be ready for an early appointment on Monday, and few companies will be prepared to pay for a hotel room for the Saturday as well. Besides, airline and hotel staff work on Sunday for Christians in business or on holiday.

These are pastoral issues that compel us to face, not the principle of the abiding obligation of the fourth Commandment—that is clear as we have seen—but the application of that principle in a modern society.

When we have the choice of working on Sunday or not, then our duty is clear, but many are faced with the choice of accepting employment that demands Sunday working, or of remaining unemployed and therefore expecting the state to support their family. In some countries the option is even more stark since there will be no state aid as an alternative. We cannot

be the conscience of another man or woman in these dilemmas. Remember the first century slaves and the fact that our Lord softened the law with grace. But remember too the advice of Jerry Barker: ‘If a thing is right it can be done, and if it is wrong it can be done without.’ Balancing these two perspectives is often hard. But this is not the only Commandment that presents dilemmas in a modern world. The Christian child ordered to shop on a Sunday by unbelieving parents may consider that it is faced with the straight decision of choosing between Commandments four and five!

‘Call the Sabbath a delight’

John Paton tells us that on the island of Aniwa he used to call Sunday ‘the day for Jehovah’. This day is still ‘The Lord’s day’ and the fourth Commandment is no less for our good than any one of the other nine. It is not a day on which we can do just as we please, and yet we *can* do as we please providing that all we do fulfils the triple purpose of rest, remembering and worship. It is an ‘honourable day’ (Isaiah 58:13), a day to be honoured; it is also a ‘holy’ day, set apart as different and special; and it is a ‘delight’—a day to be delightfully enjoyed. Isaiah 58:13 reflects the New Testament approach to this day. With all the stern warnings of God to his people concerning this day, he never intended them to keep it just because of the penalties incurred for failure, but because of the benefit to be harvested by its observance. In that sense God’s concern for the day and his plan for the day has not changed. It is the day to follow the Creator’s good example. On this day he enjoyed the fruit of his creation—and it was very good. It is not the day to dig the garden, clean the car, paint the house or work for the family—rather it is the day to enjoy all these good things.

Stripped of unnecessary labour and excessive leisure, the Lord’s day is ready to be employed for the maximum benefit. The ideal use of this day is to spend time with God’s people in worship and ministry so that we have turned our hearts towards our Creator and Redeemer; and our minds towards his word so that we have listened to his voice and have stored up truth and practice for another week ahead. We will also have time to relax and refresh our bodies whether alone or with a family. But we cannot be one another’s conscience in the detail of this. Anything is legitimate, providing that it is governed by the purpose of this day, and that we do not expect

others to work unnecessarily for our leisure. It must surely also be a day for good works whether in evangelism or visiting the sick and needy.

Like all of God's Commandments, the fourth is intended for our freedom and joy. Freedom is not necessarily freedom to do what we want, but freedom to do what we were created to do and freedom to be what we are meant to be. Those who destroy this day by ignoring it altogether, or who blunt the force of the Commandment by softening its relevance, are no better than those who destroy it by the addition of human regulations. Rebellion and legalism are incompatible twins. To embrace this fourth Commandment equally with all the others and call its observance our joy and delight, *that* is truly Christian.