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by Dr. J. Vernon McGee

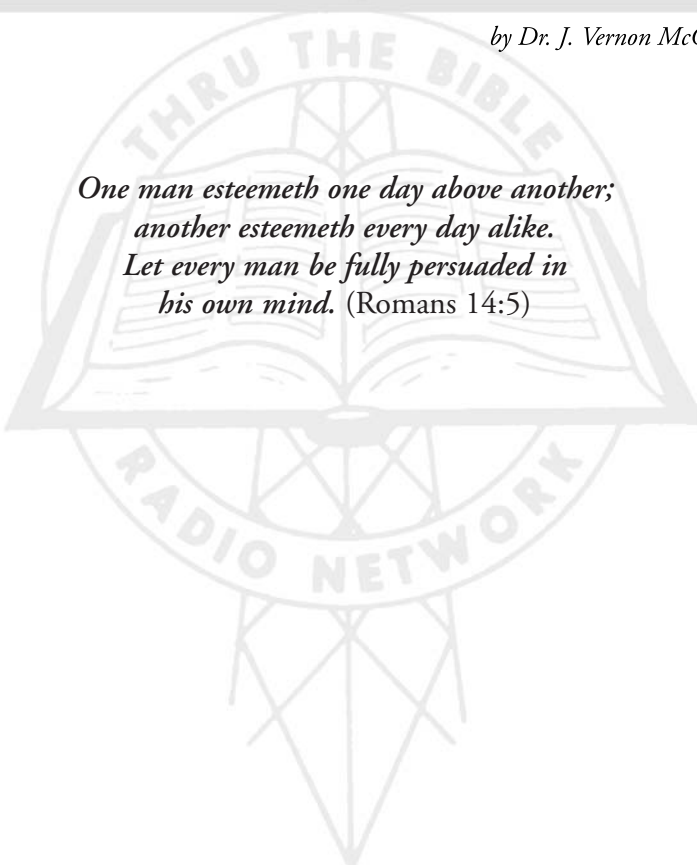


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another esteemeth every day alike.
Let every man be fully persuaded in
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The Sabbath Day or the Lord's Day – Which?

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:8-11)

The Sabbath day is Saturday. It is the seventh day of the week according to our calendar. Furthermore, the Sabbath day has never been changed to Sunday.

The present-day controversy over which day of the week Christians should observe hinges upon a false premise, which resulted in a warped and distorted viewpoint of the real meaning of the Sabbath day as found in the Word of God. Many Christians have a woeful misconception of why the church has always observed the first day of the week. Nothing but abysmal ignorance has permitted the protagonists of the Sabbath day to traffic in their legalistic system.

The question, “When was the Sabbath changed to Sunday?” is like the old chestnut asked of the man who was very much a Mr. Milquetoast: “Do you still beat your wife?” You cannot answer that question without getting into a peck of trouble. If you say, “Yes,” you are wrong. If you say, “No,” you are wrong, and you are immediately in difficulty. For the same reason, “When was the Sabbath day changed to Sunday?” is one of those questions that cannot be answered in a word or two since it is based upon a false premise.

I am going to ask that you think with me as I deal with this subject, for I believe this to be one of the most important of the commandments, and it is essential that we understand what it means.

The Ten Commandments are given first in Exodus 20. They are repeated in Deuteronomy 5, but it is interesting to note that in no instance is this a repetition of the Law – it is rather an interpretation of the Law in the lives of the people and nation after forty years of experience with it in the wilderness. Therefore, all the commandments that we find given in Deuteronomy are identical to those given in Exodus with one exception: The fourth commandment, the one that has to do with the Sabbath day. Thereby hangs a tale, and this is something our legalistic friends never call to our attention.

Basis in Exodus – Ceremonial

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:11)

The reason given in Exodus for the observance of the Sabbath day is that God in creating did all the work in six days, and He rested on the seventh and hallowed that day. Therefore, in Exodus the basis is ceremonial or, as we could say today, theological or religious. It is founded upon the fact that God rested on the seventh day.

After Christ had healed the man at the Pool of Bethesda, the religious rulers accused Him of breaking the Mosaic Law because He had done it on the Sabbath day. He said, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work” (John 5:17). In other words, “We are not observing a Sabbath day any longer; we are working!”

Basis in Deuteronomy – Humanitarian

When we turn to Deuteronomy we find an altogether different reason given for the observance of the Sabbath day. Note this passage:

And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out from there through a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:15)

Back in Exodus, the basis is that God rested on the Sabbath – the seventh day – and that basis is theological, ceremonial. But in Deuteronomy we learn that God brought them out of bondage from the land of Egypt, and because of this they were to observe the Sabbath day. They had worked as slaves in hard labor seven days a week, from sunup till sunset, without respite from sorrow or weariness. Now God tells them that, because He has delivered them out of the land of Egypt and permitted them to keep one day of rest, He wants them to be equally considerate of their servants and all their animals. Man and beast must rest one day out of each week. That is humanitarian.

You will recall that our Lord had this in mind when His disciples were plucking the ears of grain on the Sabbath and the rulers challenged Him because of this. He said to the religious rulers:

The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

This is a flat statement of the humanitarian aspect of the question. These two reasons are tremendous, and we would do well to keep them in mind.

The Sabbath Belongs to the Hebrews

Since the Sabbath day actually originated in creation – “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day...” (Genesis 2:2) – one would think that all the primitive nations of the world would have observed it in some form and at some time. They all did have a garbled account of the Flood and a garbled account of creation, which reveals that there was one reliable source for these. But the interesting thing is that this very important matter of the Sabbath day is not found to be observed by the other nations.

A similar observance in Babylon led liberal scholars to try to trace the Hebrews’ observance of the Sabbath back to Babylon. The Babylonians observed the new moon, and there were four quarters in their month. That would work out to seven and sometimes eight days to a week, but it was never Sabbath to them. Dr. R. H. Charles followed the findings of the liberals and their subsequent teachings and made this statement: “The Sabbath belongs to the Hebrews.” Isn’t that interesting! God had said when He first gave the Law to His people that He wanted them to observe the Sabbath because He had delivered them out of the land of Egypt. Well, who were God’s chosen people? I dare say that there are very few reading this message whose ancestors were slaves in Egypt. And even if they were, I have a notion very few of you have ancestors delivered out of the land of Egypt by a mighty act of redemption on God’s part. Obviously this applies to a certain group of people who are easily recognized as the nation Israel.

Proofs Pertaining to Israel and the Sabbath

I turn now to several significant verses in the Word of God. First notice Exodus 31:13:

Speak thou also unto the children of Israel [now we know to whom He is speaking], saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep; for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations....

Here God marked the Sabbath day as a peculiar sign between Himself and the children of Israel. Then in the next verse God cautioned them further:

Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death....
(Exodus 31:14)

That was very serious, was it not? They were to forfeit their very lives for defiling or profaning the Sabbath day. They were to be dealt with as if they had murdered someone in cold blood.

Then following through with verses 16 and 17:

Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever....

It is a sign between God and the people of Israel. That is clear, is it not?

Like the rite of circumcision, the Sabbath belongs to the old creation, for the Sabbath was built primarily on the old creation. After God had created during the six days, He rested on the seventh day. Israel, an earthly people, belonged to an old creation, and the Sabbath was given to them as a peculiar sign.

Now if you are not convinced that God meant business about this, turn to another portion in the Book of Numbers. If you are one who feels that you *can* keep the Sabbath day and you *do* keep it, the penalty for breaking it should make your hair stand on end.

Numbers 15 includes an example of one who broke the Sabbath law:

And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man who gathered sticks upon the sabbath day. (Numbers 15:32)

Now I may be wrong, but I have a notion that any one of you readers does more work on the Sabbath or seventh day than this man did. He only picked up a few sticks. Do you want to go under Sabbath day restrictions? Let's read further and learn what happened:

And they who found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in prison, because it was not declared what should be done to him. (Numbers 15:33, 34)

We have come now to God's verdict, and it is harsh:

And the LORD said unto Moses, The man shall be surely put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp. And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the LORD commanded Moses. (Numbers 15:35, 36)

Do you want to be under the law of the Sabbath day? I'm afraid that a great many people who talk of keeping the Sabbath day are breaking it. God meant business about this Sabbath day. Before we conclude this study we shall see the reason God protected the day as He did. We will see that it was symbolic of something tremendous that He has done for you and me. He did not want it violated in any fashion whatsoever. Neither can those who talk of keeping the Sabbath violate what it symbolizes, as we shall see.

Sabbath Day Restrictions

Let us notice some of the things that they could not do on the Sabbath day, which the Scripture enjoins. For example:

Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day. (Exodus 35:3)

The Jews were forbidden to kindle a fire. Now if you were one who kept the Sabbath but you drove your car down to your church on that day, the minute you inserted the key in the ignition and started the motor of your car, you kindled a fire in every one of the cylinders, although you did not see it. In doing this you broke the Sabbath. I called the attention of a friend to this, since he believes he ought to keep the Sabbath. But I notice that he continues to start his car every Saturday, and I see no indication that he is going to start walking.

And that's not all of it. I turn again to Exodus and read God's provision for the Sabbath rest during the time He provided manna for His people in the wilderness. Notice this language:

And he said unto them, This is that which the LORD hath said, Tomorrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake that [manna] which ye will bake today, and boil that ye will boil; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning. And they laid it up [the leftover manna] till the morning, as Moses bade; and it did not become odious neither was there any worm in it. And Moses said, Eat that today; for today is a sabbath unto the LORD: today ye shall not find it in the field. (Exodus 16:23-25)

No cooking was permitted on the Sabbath day at all. And it would not be permissible to go to a restaurant where someone else had done the cooking, either.

Exodus 16:29 ties into the above verses:

See, the LORD hath given you the sabbath; therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days.

Abide every man in his place, let no man go out on the seventh day.

The expression “a Sabbath day’s journey,” which is about 750 yards, comes from this verse of Scripture. Therefore the Jews could go no farther than 750 yards on the Sabbath.

When Antiochus Epiphanes made his attack upon the nation Israel, he was able to overcome some of the Maccabees, and the reason was that he attacked on the Sabbath day. He knew the Jews would not strike back because they would not even engage in defensive warfare on the Sabbath.

When you turn to the Mishnah (or text) that was combined with the commentary in the Talmud (containing the civil and canonical laws of the nation Israel), you will find that they had reduced the Sabbath day observance of Israel to minutiae, the most trifling regulations. They had 39 ways of breaching the Sabbath, and they divided each one of those 39 ways into another 39 ways, and 39 multiplied by 39 equals 1521 ways in which one could break the Sabbath in Old Testament times! Let me give you some examples: If you tied a knot you broke the Sabbath. A scribe could not carry a pen, because that would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath. A person was not even permitted to kill a flea – it was rather amusing to me that a man could not kill a flea even though it was biting him! In other words, the flea had a free day on the Sabbath. A person could not wear a coat or garment over his other clothing. The thought was that the individual might become too warm, take off his coat and put it over his arm, and that would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath. A woman was not permitted to look in a mirror on the Sabbath day for she might see a gray hair and want to pull it out, and that would be reaping on the Sabbath. Oh, my friend, they had reduced it to where it had become all but ridiculous. Beloved, would you want to revert to the Sabbath?

But we find that God made it very clear to the people of Israel that they were to observe the Sabbath. He said in Leviticus 19:30:

Ye shall keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.

The Sabbath day was bound together with the ceremonial worship of this nation – the two never could be divorced. God said that they must keep holy His Sabbath and His sanctuary.

It is little wonder that Simon Peter stood up in the first Council of Jerusalem and said to those gathered there:

Now, therefore, why put God to the test, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples [Gentiles], which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? (Acts 15:10)

He meant that they, the Jewish people, had not been able to keep all these regulations, so why burden the converted Gentiles with them?

A New Day

When we pass from the Old Testament and come into the New Testament, nothing short of a revolution has taken place as far as the Sabbath day is concerned. Every commandment is repeated in the Epistles for the Christians as items for our conduct, with one exception – the Sabbath day is not given to Christians. Nowhere is it given to the church. In fact, just the contrary is true, for the church is warned *against* keeping the Sabbath day, as we shall see. Our Lord precipitated the wrath of the religious rulers at this very point, and it is here that they broke with Him on the Sabbath question. He claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath, and He justified His claim by raising up the man at the Pool of Bethesda.

My friend, there is one thing that you need to turn over in your mind: Jesus was dead on the Sabbath day! Regardless of what day

you think He was crucified (whether it be Wednesday, Thursday or Friday), one thing is obvious, and upon this all agree – He was dead on the Sabbath day. It was on the first day of the week that He came forth from the dead. And when we turn to the resurrection account in the Gospel of Matthew (which was written primarily to Israel), it opens with a remarkable statement:

In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week.... (Matthew 28:1)

What beautiful language. “At the end of the sabbath” – not just the end of a day, but the end of keeping the Sabbath day – “it began to dawn toward the first day of the week.” That is tremendous!

Pentecost – The Church Was Born

Then we turn to the Book of Acts, and there we read that the church was born – and not on a Sabbath day, but on the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week. Notice Acts 2:1:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come....

What does the Bible mean by “fully come”? Does it mean when the sun had come up or that it was twelve noon or that it was late in the afternoon? No, it does not mean any of that at all. Let me use a parenthesis to make it clear: “When the day of Pentecost [and all of which it spoke] was come....” That which Pentecost had symbolized in the Old Testament is now come. It was the first day of the week, the only first day of the week Israel ever observed – for they observed seven Sabbath days after Passover, and then the day following the seventh Sabbath was Pentecost:

On that day the Holy Spirit came!

On that day the church was born!

Proof that the Church Met on the First Day

It would be exceedingly strange if the church did not make some recognition of the first day of the week. Actually you'll find that the church never met on any day other than the first day of the week. As we turn to Acts 20:7 we find that Paul was preaching in Troas:

And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the next day, and continued his speech until midnight.

That was a long sermon! But will you note that the writer does not insert anywhere such a statement as this: "Now I want to give you a little word of explanation, for it was unusual for the church to meet on the first day of the week." He does not say that for the simple reason that *it was the regular time for the church to meet*. It can be proven that they never did meet on any other day. (There was a group called Ebionites that met on the Sabbath day, but they were called heretics by the early church.)

Paul said to the Corinthians when he wrote to them:

Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him....

(1 Corinthians 16:2)

Friends, why should he designate that day? Plainly, that is the day upon which the church came together.

The church is a new creation of God. It does not belong to the old creation; it is a new work:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship [His "poiema," His poem, His new creation], created in Christ

Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

And the Christian is a new creation, by the way:

Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Paul writes to the Galatians in the sixth chapter, verse 15:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature [creation].

John, when on the Isle of Patmos, wrote: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10). I am aware that a great many commentators hold the position that this has reference to this day of grace in which we live. I will accept that, but I will not rule out the other – it also carries the meaning of the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week.

In the opening of this message I made mention of the fact that the Sabbath day has never been changed to Sunday, the first day of the week. A false propaganda has been circulated to the effect that the Roman Catholic Church changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. That needs to be refuted. The church never did observe the Sabbath day, so how could it be changed? The church observed Sunday, or the Lord’s Day, from the beginning. We have this record not only in Acts, but the body of church history also bears testimony to that fact. For example, during the first century we find a lovely thing to corroborate this, a quotation from one of the church fathers, Ignatius (born in A.D. 69), who was also a disciple of the apostle John:

No longer observing Sabbaths, but fashioning their lives after the Lord’s Day, on which our life also rose through Him.

Also Athanasius (born around A.D. 296), a great man of the faith, left us this statement:

We keep no Sabbaths: we keep the Lord's Day as a memorial of the beginning of the new creation.

The Epistle of Barnabas, which was never recognized or accepted in the canon of Scripture, though no one has ever questioned the accuracy of its historical statements, contains the following:

I shall make a beginning of the eighth day [that is, Sunday], that is the beginning of another universe. Wherefore we keep also the eighth day [Sunday] for gladness, on which also Jesus rose from the dead.

The early church always met on the first day of the week to honor a resurrected Christ and to recognize the fact that they were a new creation. They did not belong to the old creation where the Sabbath day is at the end of the week, but to a new day, the first day of the week.

It may surprise you to learn that the Seventh Day Baptists started the observance of the seventh day, or the Sabbath. So you Baptists are going to have to take the blame here. (The Presbyterians and the Methodists have already got enough to answer for, and I think that you Baptists ought to shoulder this one!) The Ebionites rose in the early church. They were called heretics then, and by the sixth and seventh centuries they had called themselves Sabbatarians. It was not until the seventeenth century when Puritan theology became so dominant and legalistic that the Ebionites began to call themselves the Seventh Day Baptists. And all of the legalists today get the seventh day from them.

The Firm Position of the Lord's Day

Sunday – oh, how important this is to see – does not take the

place of Saturday. The Lord's Day is not a substitute for the Old Testament Sabbath day. In fact, all is contrast. C. H. Mackintosh put it this way:

1. The Sabbath was the *seventh* day; the Lord's Day is the *first*.
2. The Sabbath was a *test* of Israel's condition; the Lord's Day is the *proof* of the church's acceptance on wholly unconditional grounds.
3. The Sabbath belonged to the old creation; the Lord's Day belongs to the new.
4. The Sabbath was a day of *bodily* rest for the Jew; the Lord's Day is a day of *spiritual* rest for the Christian.
5. If the Jew worked on the Sabbath, he was to be put to death. If the Christian does not work on the Lord's Day, he gives little proof of life. That is, if he does not get involved on the Lord's Day in some type of spiritual ministry, he gives little evidence that he has spiritual life. It is a day when you, as a Christian, demonstrate that you belong to Christ. It is not a day when you are to do nothing.

I disagree with those who hold that the Lord's Day is the Sabbath. It is not a Sabbath; it is something new. Today, by meeting on the Lord's Day, we testify that Jesus came back from the dead. For the early church, every Lord's Day was an Easter! Oh, if we could make every Sunday an Easter – come in our new garments and fill our churches and talk about the resurrected Christ – that would be wonderful! Sunday, or the Lord's Day, does not take the place of Saturday, which is still the Sabbath.

Now I have a suggestion to make. It would be ideal if we would acknowledge each day as it was intended to be in its own origin – Saturday, a day of rest, and the Lord's Day, a day of worship. I believe that the Bible would sanction that, for it says,

One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. (Romans 14:5)

We observe the first day of the week because our Lord came back from the dead on that day. We do not observe it as a substitute for the Sabbath day or any other day.

It is vital that we understand that the Sabbath day, which was part of the ceremonial law, has already been fulfilled in Christ. And now the injunction given to Christians is clear in Colossians 2:16, 17:

Let no man, therefore, judge you in food, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day, or of the new moon, or of a sabbath day, which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

My friend, rituals in the Old Testament were shadows of things to come – and shadows are photographs. When a photographer takes our picture, a shadow is registered on a very sensitive negative. That shadow is developed and becomes our picture. The Bible says that as we look back to the Old Testament we find that even the Sabbath day was a shadow of something.

In the Epistle to the Galatians we find a tremendously important point:

But now, after ye have known God, or rather are known by God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, unto which ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. (Galatians 4:9, 10)

Beloved, Judaism has passed away, and it says here in Galatians that today it is the same as any other pagan religion. Therefore, to observe the Sabbath in our day is to return to paganism. Such a legal system is one and the same in God's sight!

In coming to the final word in this study, I turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Let us, therefore, fear lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them; but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. (Hebrews 4:1, 2)

My friend, I keep the Sabbath day – I keep it in accordance with the preceding passage of Scripture.

Now let me give you a personal illustration: When I came to Pasadena to live in 1940, my neighbor – a very fine man, but a member of a legalistic system that keeps the seventh day – nailed me first off. I had not been in southern California twenty-four hours when he buttonholed me and asked, “Do you keep the Sabbath day?” I looked him right straight in the eye and said, “I sure do.” He countered with a gleam in his eye and asked, “What day do you keep?” I looked at him with a gleam in my eye and said to him, “Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.” And then I started all over again on the next week. He broke in on my recital and blurted out, “What in the world do you mean?” I told him something like this: I simply mean that when the Lord Jesus came to this world about two thousand years ago, He said, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work” (John 5:17).

I tried to make it clear to him that when God created everything, including man, man sinned and ran into the ditch. And from that day on, God did not rest because He wanted to redeem the poor, lost sinner and bring him into a place of rest. On the cross Christ died, but before He died He said to the Father, “It is finished” (John 19:30). But when He said it, it was only one word – *Tetelestai!*

Finished.

What was finished? The work of redemption was finished so that now you and I can enter into rest. And, my friend, we don't dare try to add any of our good works to His work of redemption! Look again at Ephesians 2:8 and 9:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast.

Redemption is a completed package, and He presents it to you wrapped up with everything in it. He doesn't want you to bring your do-it-yourself kit along. He does not need that. When He died on the cross, He provided a righteousness that would satisfy a holy God. All He asks of you is to receive this package, this gift of God, which is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

He says, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest [I'll rest you]" (Matthew 11:28). In other words, "I'll give you a Sabbath in which you can rest in Me, your Savior." He makes every day a Sabbath in which you can rest in Him.