

A Holy Day

<i>Text</i>	Jeremiah 17:19-27
<i>Readings</i>	Exodus 20; Matthew 12:1-14
<i>Theme</i>	An exhortation to keep the Sabbath day holy reinforced by a blessing and a curse.
<i>Purpose</i>	To explain the New Testament use of the Lord's Day against the Old Testament background of this passage.

The last thirty years have seen great changes in the way New Zealanders use the Sunday. Prior to the mid 1980s most shops in NZ were closed. There were no ads on TV on the Sunday. The hotels were closed on this day. In Christchurch in the 1970s there was only one emergency pharmacy open in the centre of town and one petrol station, which is where all the taxis filled up.

Back then not everyone attended church – New Zealand has always has a relatively low percentage of people attending church services – but people took the Sunday as a day of rest. It was a family day. People slept in, rested, did some gardening, enjoyed the outdoors, or went to the beach or into the bush.

The situation has changed a great deal since then. For many people Sunday is business as usual. Many of the smaller businesses are closed but most of the larger retail outlets are open – Mitre 10, the Warehouse, Repco, and all of the big garden centres. The movie theatres and video outlets are all open. So too are the restaurants and bars and all the shopping malls. So many people have a Sunday outing to the malls that they have become known as the cathedrals of the postmodern era. That is where people go to worship the gods of consumerism and materialism.

New Zealanders have largely thrown off their Christian heritage and tradition and any belief in the Bible as God's word.

We now live in a secular society where there is little regard for the Lord's Day or a Sabbath rest. Keeping the Sunday as a Holy Day is a foreign concept.

1. Sadly, that was also true for the people of **Judah** at certain times in her history.

That was certainly the situation in the days of Jeremiah. The people carried on with their business as usual. Sunday trading was commonplace. On the Sabbath local farmers and traders carried their loads through the gates of Jerusalem just like any other day. People worked in their homes and on their farms just as they did the other six days of the week.

In view of this widespread neglect of the Sabbath the Lord told Jeremiah to go and stand at "the gate of the people" and proclaim the word of the Lord. We are not sure exactly what gate of the city this was, but it was probably one of the main thoroughfares in and out of the city. After that he had to go and

proclaim the same message at the other gates. The Lord wanted all the people to hear this message – the “kings of Judah and all the people of Judah and everyone living in Jerusalem” (verse 20).

The message from the Lord was solemn and urgent. “This is what the Lord says; Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day” (verse 21). The Hebrew reads; “Watch yourselves”. This was a serious command and it was strongly expressed.

Jeremiah reminded the people of the command God had given to their forefathers. We read that command in Exodus 20:8 – “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...”

The word holy means “set apart”. The seventh day was to be distinct from all the other days of the week. It was to be separate. The people of Israel were to treat this day as one set apart from the other six.

On this day they were to rest. The word “Sabbath” means rest. They had to work the other six days but then they had to cease work on the seventh day. That was based on the pattern of God’s creation where he worked six days in creating the world and then rested on the seventh.

God gave this command for our benefit. He is our Creator. He made us and he knew that we would need one day of rest. He knew we need one day in seven for physical and spiritual refreshment. We need a day aside from our normal labours so we can stop and think and reflect and worship the God who made us.

God knew that we would be more productive in the other six days if we took one day off in every seven and he knew that it would be vital for our spiritual well-being.

This cycle of one day in seven is built into the pattern of creation. We need a day to refresh ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Without this we will run down in all of those areas.

In our present day and age we have probably less hours of work per week than people have had in ages past. Yet never before have people been so stressed and anxious and in need of so many pills and sedatives and anti-depressants. There are many reasons for this but one of them is that the fourth commandment is so widely disregarded today.

Today we need to listen to God’s command and obey it; and so did the people of Judah.

But they “did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and did not listen or respond to discipline” (verse 23).

This was an important command in the law.

Their disobedience to this command was evidence of their disregard of God and of the rest of his law.

Disobedience to the fourth command was very public and visible. It was obvious to everyone what they were doing. Their carrying of loads in and out of Jerusalem on the Sabbath was shameless defiance of the Lord.

2. The Lord tried to direct them in obedience with a **promise of blessing and warning of cursing**.

When the Lord had made his covenant with the people of Israel he had promised blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. If they followed his law all would go well in the nation. If they did not then they would be judged. Here he reinforced those blessings and curses and made them more specific. These focused on three areas: the kingship, the city of Jerusalem and the temple.

The promise of the kingship is in verse 25: If the people were careful to obey the Lord “then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this city with their officials. They and their officials will come riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by the men of Judah and those living in Jerusalem.”

This promise went back to that made to David in 2 Samuel 7 and was repeated in Psalm 132: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

The Lord repeated that promise through Jeremiah in a picture of pomp and ceremony.

But the people did not obey God’s commands and in 587 BC, Zedekiah, the king of Judah, was captured, blinded and then taken away into exile. The kingship was suspended for the 70 years of exile; but not completely cut off.

After the exile the Lord re-established the kings of Judah and they reigned in Jerusalem once again.

God kept that line of Judah going because eventually Jesus was going to be born as the Son of David in the line of Judah. The kingdom of Judah was a type, a picture, of a better and greater kingdom that was coming – the kingdom of Christ. Later Jeremiah promised that the Lord would “raise up to David a righteous Branch, a king who will rule wisely and do what is just and right in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5). The promises of God were fulfilled in Christ, the Messiah, the King of Kings. Today we, as the people of the Lord, live in his kingdom and under his rule.

The second promise and warning concerned the **city of Jerusalem**.

Verse 25: “and this city will be inhabited forever.” God made this promise because Jerusalem was the city of David. It was the capital city of the Kingdom of Israel; it was the place of the temple; it was the city of God’s name.

If the people of Judah had repented and turned to God in obedience he would have allowed them to continue in this city.

But they refused to repent and obey and so God invoked the curse of the covenant which is recorded in verse 27.

There the Lord warned that if they did not obey him regarding the Sabbath he would “kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that would consume her fortresses.”

That too was fulfilled when God destroyed the city using the Babylonian army. Then the people were either killed or carried into exile.

500 years later, in 70 AD, the city was destroyed once again after the people of Israel refused to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. That time God sent the Roman armies who devastated Jerusalem in one of the most terrible events in history.

Today the city of Jerusalem is inhabited once more but it does not have any current biblical significance. Jesus told the woman by the well in Samaria that a time was coming when people would not worship God on Mount Gerizim nor in Jerusalem. Worship would not be tied to one particular place. Rather God’s people would worship him in Spirit and in truth wherever they gathered, as we are doing today. (John 4:21). So the place of worship changed with the coming of Christ.

So too did the **temple and its offerings**.

In verse 26 God pictured the blessing that would come to Judah in terms of the OT covenant with its system of sacrifices and offerings.

Just as we appreciate it when there is a full church so too the people of Judah were glad when many people came to Jerusalem for the feasts and festivals. God promised that if they obeyed his law regarding the Sabbath then they would be blessed with people coming from the towns of Judah and the villages around Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin to the North, and from the foothills to the west, and from the desert region to the south. They would come to the temple bringing all types of sacrifice and offerings to present to the Lord. It was a picture of joyful and glad worship of the Lord.

The people of Judah, however, did not honour the Lord but rejected his commands. As a result the temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system was stopped for 70 years until the temple could be rebuilt after the exile.

Then, 500 years later, the temple was destroyed once again and has never been rebuilt.

But that doesn’t matter because we don’t need a temple today because it has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He was the one who was “greater than the temple” (Matthew 12:6). “Destroy this temple,” he said, “and I will rebuild it in three days.” He was referring to his body in his death and resurrection. The entire sacrificial system has been fulfilled in Jesus and we don’t need any of those Old Testament regulations or ceremonies any longer.

3. All this brings us to consider the application of all this to us living in this **New Testament age**? What does the Lord want us to do with the fourth commandment?

We need to recognise that **much has changed** from the Old Testament to the New.

We have already described some of those changes.

The kingship, and the sacrifices, and the temple have all been fulfilled in Jesus.

The city of Jerusalem is no longer significant for God's people as a place of worship because we can come together in corporate worship as his people in any place.

We also note that in the NT the day has changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week. Jesus is "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). Jesus rose on this first day of the week and the NT describes this as the Lord's day. Since then the church of Jesus Christ has begun each week with the celebration and remembrance of the Risen Lord! We start each week in the light of his resurrection victory. We gather for worship at the beginning and end of each Lord's Day to praise him.

There are also many differences between Old Testament Israel and our situation in New Zealand. Israel was a theocracy where God was the King and they lived under his law.

But New Zealand, as we have noted, is a secular society where God and his laws are ignored. Christians are a minority, as they were in the first century in the Roman Empire.

Many of the Christians in that early church situation were slaves and they had to work on the Lord's Day for their pagan Roman masters; they had no choice about that. They were like the Jews living as slaves in Egypt who had to work without any day of rest.

We also need to recognise that much has changed from the rural agrarian society of the people of Israel to the urban technological society of the 21st century. Society is much more complex in an urbanised and industrial society.

Many of the essential services need to be maintained, such as water, power, sewage, communications and transport and so people need to be rostered on to maintain these.

Some people need to keep working for works of necessity and mercy, such as doctors and nurses, hospital staff, firemen and policemen.

Farmers need to milk cows and look after their animals.

Then there are also large industrial plants, such as a steel mill and a paper mill, that have to keep going and cannot close down for one day each week.

But having noted all these changes we need to recognise that the principle of the fourth commandment is still part of the **moral law of God**. It is one of the 10 commandments. It is still part of the covenant will of God for us today.

God wants you to rest on one day in seven. This is a pattern for his creation that is based on his work and rest. He wants you to cease from our usual work, whatever that might be – whether that be in your factory, in your office, in your home, from your buying and selling, from your study at school or at university. You are to work six days and rest for one.

To be consistent at this we must, as much as possible, avoid making others work. If you can avoid it don't go buying or purchasing or travelling on this day. We don't want to get caught in a legalistic attitude about this, like the Pharisees, and we don't want to make rules for others about how they use the Sunday, but for ourselves we should seek to apply this as best as we can, as consistently as possible.

Where at all possible this day of rest ought to be the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, so that all God's people in each church can come together to worship him.

This is a day for our spiritual benefit.

This is a day to worship the Lord our God.

It is a day to celebrate the great works of God in Christ.

It is a day to sing God's praise and to hear his word and to thank and praise him.

Most people in NZ today have little regard for this day of rest as the Lord's Day.

For most people this is a day like the other six and they carry on with whatever suits them.

But we in the church are the people of God.

We are a holy people, a people belonging to God.

And this is a holy day, a day set apart, a day of rest and of worship.

Let's use it as God intended it.

Let's be careful to obey the Lord.

Let's honour the Lord Jesus on this the Lord's Day.

Amen.