

The Fourth Commandment October 12, 2014

Good morning, Brothers and Sisters in Christ. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Today we will take a look at the Fourth Commandment. The text reads like this, "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work: neither you, nor your son, your daughter your male servant, your female servant, your cattle nor your stranger who sojourns with you. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath Day and hallowed it".

There is no time, and I think, no need for us to go through all of the historical information about how the Hebrews practiced this Commandment or how the New Israel morphed the Hebrew Saturday into the Christian Sunday. Rather I would like to consider the relevance of this Commandment for our own time and perhaps discuss how we might more effectively gain the positive fruits of obedience to God's Good Plan in our own lives.

In the simplest terms this Commandment makes imperative, (that is , unconditionally necessary), the setting aside of serious time for the nurture and development of our communion with God and the religious life that supports that communion.

One often hears these days that a person can be "spiritual" without being religious. The implication is that religion may even be an impediment to spirituality. This of course is ridiculous and also a rather juvenile, although dangerous, distortion of reality. It is precisely good religion, in our case, Orthodox Christianity, that sustains, promotes and protects good spirituality – which is communion with God. Spirituality with no religion usually devolves into self-worship of the so-called "god within" whereas spirituality with bad religion tends toward worship of demons like in Hinduism and Paganism.

God has the best wisdom about humanity, (after all, He made us), and teaches through the Commandments, basic truths about how we must shape our ideas, feelings and behavior if we wish to commune with Him as He really is and also if we wish to realize our own highest human potential. This wisdom forms the framework of good religion – God knows very well how our consciousness works, how we tick. He knows how easy it is for us to lose sight of important things and become distracted by the various things that happen to us and around us, both the pleasant and the painful.

We have all experienced this in one way or another. For example: along comes an absolutely splendid fall day, perfect and beautiful. Yet often we are so busy with our work or the various cares and dramas of our lives that we barely notice that beauty and do not find a way to stop and take it in, nourishing ourselves with the glory of it all. The same holds true with family and friends. Many people have impoverished themselves emotionally by not making time for their most important personal relationships. The simple truth is , that if we do not work to organize our lives in such a way that the really important things have a place and time to develop in us, then less important or less desirable things will dominate our attention.

That is what Good Religion does for us. It gives us a way to order our time, our energies and our attention in such a way that the most valuable dimensions of our lives are not overshadowed. Overshadowed is a really descriptive term here. To be overshadowed is to be deprived of light. In the world of plants for example, that means being deprived of sunlight, the very source of the energies that the plant needs to grow properly. Plants that are overshadowed do not grow to their full potential and in some cases even die. So it is also with people, Jesus used the same metaphor in His parable of the sower when talks about the “seed” that is the word of God trying to grow in the soil of the heart, but being “choked” by the vigorously growing cares of this world.

As a Pastor I often hear people complain about having difficulty in really experiencing God’s presence and blessing in their lives, and also about their spiritual weakness when it comes to following God’s Commandments. I

remember expressing something similar myself many years ago to my spiritual father. His answer was typical of his wisdom, "How," he asked me, "do you ever expect to have any spiritual strength without feeding and exercising your soul? As usual," he said, "you have it all backwards, you feed and pamper your body but make your soul fast."

Now this is a pretty good description of the human condition generally. I think we can then see how all of God's Commandments are a much needed corrective to our natural inclinations. Natural that is in terms of what Christians refer to as man's fallen nature.

So then, maybe we should think about how we might take this Fourth Commandment a bit more seriously. This Commandment sets aside an entire day, every week, for "rest". This rest is not meant to be a time of entertainment and amusements, a time for kicking back and watching football on television all day. According to the Scriptures this weekly day of rest is "hallowed" by God. To be hallowed means to be set aside for holy, that is sacred or religious, use.

Coming to Church on Sunday is a good start on this. Congratulations! You're here this morning. But does a couple of hours, (including travel time), on Sunday morning really fulfill this Commandment? Have a few hours become the new 'day' for us? I don't think so. Please understand, I am not preaching a return to some puritanical form of Sabbath keeping. I'm not above watching a football game myself, especially when the 49ers are playing. But two or even three games? From a Christian standpoint that is way over the line. Rather, what I would like to suggest is that we seek active ways to enlarge our keeping of the day as sacred. For example: one of the easiest ways to increase our obedience to God's Word is to attend morning prayers, Matins before the Liturgy. Or, if you are not a "morning person", attend Vespers of Saturday evening which liturgically begins the Sabbath Day.

Sunday is also an excellent time for private study of the Scriptures or for spiritual reading. Turn off the TV, if the weather permits, taking a quiet, prayerful walk in the country, even going fishing if undertaken in the right spirit, can be spiritually beneficial. No, this doesn't mean you can go fishing instead of coming

to Church. Also, let us not forget visiting the sick or the homebound or charitable works of all kinds. The key, I think, is to try and remember that it's the day of the Lord, all day.

To that end I would like to begin a regular catechism class after our fellowship on Sunday mornings. This would encompass an ongoing study of our religion, the Scriptures and the spiritual counsels of the Holy Fathers. However, I would need to hear from you about that, whether that is something that anyone would find helpful enough to attend regularly. But, regardless of that or any other particular activity, let us try and keep in mind the main message of the Fourth Commandment; that it is imperative if we wish to have a real relationship with God, that we set aside not just a few hours of so called "quality time" but an entire day of quantity time for the development and nurture of that relationship.

The Fourth Commandment is also the last of the Commandments that deal directly with our relationship with God; that we have no other gods before Him, that to this end we do not bow down and worship any created thing, including our opinions, instead of the Creator, that we honor Him, His name, by striving to live honorably ourselves and lastly that we set aside serious time for developing our relationships with Him through worship, study and charitable works.

The next Six Commandments have to do with how we are to honor God by our treatment of other human beings. The Fifth Commandment begins this group of Commandments most fittingly by directing our attention to our relationship with parents, with Father and with Mother. We will look into that next week, God willing.

May the blessing of St. John of San Francisco, whose miracle working uncorrupt relics were revealed on this day in 1993, be with us all and help us to acquire a greater desire to be obedient to Christ and to follow Him in both word and deed.

Amen

