

2

LEARN TO WORSHIP

Isaiah 58:13–14

“Place of Worship”

The start gun cracked, and in a flurry of churning water, they were off. Peter’s boat rocketed into the lead like a torpedo launched out of an attack submarine. I inwardly hoped that this kid wouldn’t beat my son too badly.

It was the 500-meter final on the Cedar River, the last race of day one in a Saturday/Sunday regatta. There were two boats to watch: Peter’s and my eldest son Rhodri’s. To be honest, I was not hopeful for my son. Peter had been paddling fully two years longer and was in the division above Rhodri. What’s more, he was at least a year and a half older, with bulging gymnast muscles to prove it. I began planning how I might help Rhodri learn character from losing this race.

Then, within meters of the finish, a strange thing occurred. Rhodri seemed to tap in to another source of power. I couldn’t believe what

YOUNG MEN: SERVANTS AND LEADERS

I was seeing. My wife screamed and dug her fingernails into my arm. Within three or four strokes of the finish, Rhodri's boat had overtaken Peter's by inches. When the froth settled, my son had widened the gap to a definitive victory.

Peter was not accustomed to losing. In his division, he would go on to be the fastest paddler in the USA. Nor was Peter's coach very happy. As the young men paddled up to the float, I overheard an interchange between Peter and his coach.

"So what happened?" the coach demanded.

Peter shrugged and said nothing.

"You'd better change things around tomorrow," the coach said.

Peter seemed to brighten. "I will," he said with confidence.

"Why so sure?"

Peter tossed a look at Rhodri, and said, "Place of worship."

Word travels fast. Peter wasn't worried about losing to Rhodri on Sunday because he knew that Rhodri wouldn't be paddling on Sunday. It seemed curious the way the young man said it: "Place of worship." As if to say, Rhodri won't be racing because the place of worship was higher on his priorities than paddling.

Sabbath Paddling

Sprint canoe and kayak racing in the United States is a fairly unknown sport. Though it's wildly popular in other parts of the world, especially Eastern Europe, and is the fourth largest Olympic sport, mention two-time Olympic gold-medalist sprint kayak racer Greg Barton to your average American sports fan and all you'll get is, "Huh?"

One thing is clear. Sports has become so important in our society that virtually no one thinks twice about major sporting events happening on Sunday.

Before my sons became serious about kayak racing, I knew I needed to have a heart-to-heart with the coach. I explained to him that we are Christians who take the Lord's Day seriously, that what we do on his day is a measure of what is most important in all of life. I then

went on to explain that kayak racing, fun as it is, would never rank as high or higher than the worship of God on the Lord's Day. In short, we were not going to participate in regattas on Sundays.

He was okay with that, because U.S. nationals did not typically include Sunday racing, and there were only a handful of regional races that were both Saturday and Sunday. So we jumped into the sport with vigor and enthusiasm. My sons had grown up sailing and rowing boats and with good water savvy, so they rapidly developed their skills. Since that Saturday race on the Cedar River, my two eldest sons have managed to work their way to the top tier of national competition.

Never Heard of That

Then came an opportunity of a lifetime. Both Rhodri and his younger brother Cedric had won slots to compete in the West Coast team trials at the Olympic Training Center in San Diego. They were thrilled. So was I. Until I asked their coach what the schedule was.

"Heats on Friday, semifinals on Saturday, and finals on . . ."—he paused—". . . on Sunday."

He knew what I would say.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

The next day he was on the phone with the U.S. Olympic coach, who would be at the trials minutely studying each paddler. Our coach was convinced that a great deal depended on the outcome of these trials. They talked for two and a half hours. The boys' coach reported to me that when he tried to explain to the Olympic coach that my boys wouldn't paddle on Sunday, he replied, "Never heard of that."

A couple of weeks passed, in which my sons and I prayed about all this and committed our way to the Lord. But we agreed. They wouldn't be paddling on Sunday. However well they placed in heats and semifinals, the finals were scheduled for Sunday; if the boys didn't race on Sunday, they would gain no points for the entire trials. Humanly speaking, for kayak racing, they were forfeiting the chance of a lifetime.

YOUNG MEN: SERVANTS AND LEADERS

Then the phone rang. “I just got a call from the Olympic paddling coach.” The boys’ coach was breathless. “He’s switched everything around. They’re doing heats, semis, and finals on Friday and Saturday. No Sunday racing agenda. He did it just so the Bond boys could race.”

O me of little faith. I couldn’t believe it. Both of my sons managed to qualify in these trials, and one of them went on to represent the U.S. national team in the Czech Republic at Junior Worlds, an essential step before making the U.S. Olympic team. We’ll have to see what’s next.

My boys and I gave thanks to God. We discussed how God didn’t always choose to work things out like this, but come what may, obeying the Lord and keeping his day holy was always right, whatever temporal opportunities must be forfeited. “He who honors me, him will I honor.”

Not for Us

When it comes to the Sabbath, most Americans would agree with the U.S. Olympic paddling coach: “Never heard of that before.” To a non-Christian, the idea of setting one day in seven apart for worship, fellowship, family time, and feasting makes no sense. Give up overtime pay at work? Miss the big game on TV? Deprive yourself of a trip to the beach on a warm summer day? Miss the big sale at the mall? All for some archaic notion of keeping the Sabbath? No thanks.

But it’s not just non-Christians who think this way. Most post-conservative evangelicals think pretty much like the world about what pleases God on Sunday. Many will even argue that keeping the Sabbath is pharisaic legalism. All that passed away with the Old Testament. We’re not under Jewish law but under grace, they’ll insist, as they lace up their cleats and load the kids into the SUV and head off to the soccer field—on Sunday. Or off to the dog show, or beach, or mall—or boat race. “Sabbath-keeping is not for us,” most Christians say, then in the same breath, “Hey, check out the sale price on these Adidas!”

Christians who care to be biblical have sometimes concluded that they don't have to keep the Sabbath based on a misinterpretation of Colossians 2:16: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." Though the text nowhere says that Christians do not need to keep the Sabbath, some have concluded that this text clears away Sabbath-keeping, relegating it to an Old Testament, outmoded, Jewish practice.

But this is a huge interpretive error. Let me illustrate why. Paul is almost quoting from Isaiah 1:13, where the Lord is rebuking his children for heartless Sabbath assembling. "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies."

Conclude that Paul is abolishing Sabbath-keeping in his epistle to the Colossians, and you must also conclude that the Lord himself is abolishing the Sabbath in Isaiah 1:13. Turn over a few pages in Isaiah, however, and it's abundantly clear that God is doing no such thing:

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the LORD,
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. (Isa. 58:13–14)

Just as the prophet Isaiah was doing, Paul is reminding first-century Christians that their worship of God must come from the heart; they must mean all that they say and do in the worship of God. Paul is specifically addressing the problem of converts who claimed to hope in Christ but whose real hope was in the extrabiblical Jewish laws about how one observed the Sabbath. Paul is exposing the fraud of all the touch-not, taste-not, handle-not, man-made regulations practiced in first-century Judaism.

YOUNG MEN: SERVANTS AND LEADERS

When others stand as judges over your Sabbath-keeping, they do their best to make sure that you miss all the delight. Man-made laws become drudgery and are always more about what you cannot do than what you get to do. Thus, Paul tells these Christians not to let anyone judge them by man-made Sabbath regulations. But it makes a mangle of the Bible's teaching on the Lord's Day to spin Paul into letting us off to do as we please on the Sabbath.

Unlike human regulators of the Sabbath, God ordained one day in seven not to make life miserable for his children. He designed it for our benefit and delight. And it's more delightful to obey and keep his day holy than to shop or go boating or do anything else that rivals worship and fellowship with God and his saints. What we miss when we scorn the Sabbath is the joy of the Lord, riding on the heights of the land, and the delicious feasting on the inheritance of our father Jacob. What could be more delightful!

Which Sabbath?

French philosopher and hater of organized religion Voltaire understood the centrality of the Christian Sabbath. "If you wish to destroy the Christian religion," he said, "you must first destroy the Christian Sunday."

So not only did French Revolutionaries tear down all Christian symbols from churches and cemeteries, and not only did they dub Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris "The Temple of Reason," in their Herculean efforts to expunge every vestige of Christianity from France, they abolished the seven-day week by establishing a calendar with a ten-day week. This was in direct defiance of the God of creation and his Word in Genesis 2:3: "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."

But there are those who smugly point out that the Christian Sabbath is not the seventh day. The Sabbath Isaiah was writing about, they quibble, fell on our Saturday, so you're not actually keeping the Sab-

bath by observing it on Sunday. I can't recollect any of the folks with whom I've had this discussion keeping either day holy, so I'm not so sure they had any practical interest in the outcome of the discussion.

Nevertheless, it's clear in Exodus 20:8–10 that God commands us to “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor 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 best answer to this argument comes, again, from the Bible itself. Trace back through the centuries to when the Saturday-to-Sunday shift happened, and you land directly on a number of pages of God's Word. All the gospel writers begin the historical account of the resurrection of our Lord with the phrase “on the first day of the week” (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Collaborate “on the first day of the week,” describing when the church gathered in Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:20 and 16:2, and Revelation 1:10, with the universal practice of the early church down to the present, and you are on safe biblical ground to celebrate the Christian Sabbath on Sunday, the Lord's Day.

Moreover, I'm convinced that the Christian who chooses otherwise has more explaining to do than the one who keeps the Lord's Day holy to the Lord on Sunday. Applying Pascal's Wager to biblical interpretation, I believe that I would have more to answer for if I failed to follow the Christian Sabbath than if I kept the Jewish seventh-day Sabbath. The shift places Christ's resurrection as the central event in the history of redemption, and thus by keeping the Sunday Sabbath we honor Christ our Redeemer in his victory over sin and death.

I suspect that Voltaire intuitively understood this and knew that undermining Sunday Sabbath-keeping was the sure way to destroy true Christianity. About this he was absolutely correct. Unfortunately, most Christians pooh-pooh such a notion, and so unwittingly aid Christian-haters like Voltaire in their scheme to destroy true Christianity.

How Much Will It Cost?

We Americans think in knee-jerk economic terms about most things. “How much will it cost?” we ask about keeping the Sabbath holy unto our Lord. How much did obedience cost our Lord? Especially in our post-Christian world, obedience in Sabbath-keeping will cost you. The young man who takes God’s Word seriously about the Sabbath will appear odd and out of step, and it will cost him. But then, all this is true of being a Christian.

Given postconservative evangelicalism’s indifference about the Sabbath, it was a wonder that the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* received such critical acclaim and sweeping popularity. The film pitted two worldviews against each other: Harold Abrahams, a secular Jew who ran to prove something about his own worth to the world, to feel his own pleasure; and Eric Liddell, the Scots Presbyterian missionary’s son, the Flying Scotsman. When Liddell ran he felt the Lord’s pleasure, and no inducement could dispose him to evoke the Lord’s *displeasure*—not even if it cost him a gold medal at the 1924 Olympics.

Which it nearly did. Liddell was favored to win the 100-meter sprint, and all Scotland held its breath to see him bring home the first Olympic gold Scotland had ever won. In the movie, as Liddell boarded the steamship for France and the Paris Games, he learned at the last minute that heats for the 100-meter race were scheduled for a Sunday. In fact, the “real” Liddell had known about the Sunday heats for some weeks and had deliberately withdrawn from the event rather than displease God by breaking the Sabbath.

Make no mistake. Liddell was no self-righteous legalist who imagined that he could earn points with God by not running on the Sabbath. People don’t admire legalists. He was an earnest young man who believed and did what pleased God—and all the world was watching.

Unyielding in his determination to keep the Christian Sabbath holy, as the Olympics neared, no argument could persuade Liddell to race on the Lord’s Day. “I, for one, intend to keep it holy,” he said with

conviction. So with precious little time, he began training for the 400 meters, a grueling event that he was not favored to win.

But he did. While critics and supporters looked on, Liddell defied the odds and—arms flaying and face lifted heavenward—he won the gold in the 400 meters.

The Lord's Day—A Win-Win

Inexplicably, the world looks on with admiration at Eric Liddell's heroic stand. Why the fascination with Liddell's convictions when so few Christians share them? Perhaps it is that sense that there is something profoundly more important than the world's glitter. Deep down we know that "all that glitters is not gold."

For Christian men, Liddell's stand ought to help us reevaluate our priorities. Is worldly gain more important than obeying Christ, than honoring his name on his day, than finding our delight in worship, prayer, the study of his Word, and the joyful fellowship of the saints around the table of the Lord?

God ordained one day in seven not to make his children miserable. He designed it for our benefit and delight. Liddell concluded that it was more delightful to obey and keep God's day holy than to win an Olympic gold medal.

Every wise young man should scorn anything that rivals worship and fellowship with God and his saints on the Sabbath. Meanwhile, fools will continue to scorn the Sabbath and forfeit the joy of the Lord, riding on the heights of the land, and the delicious feasting on the inheritance of our father Jacob.

Real men who practice the joy of Sabbath-keeping know that obeying God, regardless of the glitter they choose to forgo, is always a win-win situation. Sure, you can become pharisaic about keeping the Sabbath and in so doing fail to love your neighbor as yourself. And when that rare case arises when keeping the Lord's Day holy and loving one's neighbor conflict, God will give light to the young man who truly desires to honor the Lord.

YOUNG MEN: SERVANTS AND LEADERS

The Christian Sabbath falls on the same day that our Lord triumphantly burst forth from the tomb, and it is the first day that his Father began creating the world with the brilliant declaration: “Let there be light!” Walk in that light every Sabbath of your life, and so honor Christ. “He who honors me, him will I honor.”

Prayer Resolves

- To find my delight in the Lord always, and especially on his holy day
- To plan ahead what I will do, what I will read, where I will go, what I will fill my mind and conversation with on the Lord’s Day

Scripture Memory

“If you honor [the Sabbath] by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the LORD,
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”

Isaiah 58:13–14

For Discussion

1. Read Westminster Shorter Catechism questions 59 through 62.
2. Discuss these alongside the biblical texts for further study below.

“This Day at Thy Creating Word”

O day of light and life and grace,
From earthly toil sweet resting place,
Thy hallowed hours, blest gift of love,
Give we again to God above.

William Walsham How, 1871

For Further Study

Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20; 16:2; Revelation 1:10