

Sermons on Deuteronomy by John Calvin

On Thursday the 20th of June, 1555

The 34th sermon, which is the fifth on the fifth chapter¹

¹² *Keep the day of rest, to hallow it as the Lord your God has commanded you.*

¹³ *Six days you shall labour, and do all your business.*

¹⁴ *But the seventh day is the rest of the Lord your God, you shall not do any work in it.*

After he had spoken of the pure worship and serving God, by glorifying his name without dishonoring it in oaths or in other ways, he now mentions service to God as it is required in his Law, and of the order which he has set down by which the faithful are to exercise themselves.

For example, the [Sabbath or] day of rest was, first, a figure partly to show that men cannot serve God properly unless they put to death all that is of their own nature and dedicate themselves fully to him so as to be separate from the world. Second, the day of rest was a ceremony to bring the people together so that they could hear the Law, call upon the name of God, and offer sacrifices and do all other things that concern the spiritual government. Thus we see the type of Sabbath day being spoke of – yet it cannot be well understood without setting forth these two parts separately.

Therefore, we have to note that the Sabbath, or day of rest, was a shadow under the Law until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ so as to make men understand that God requires that they should utterly cease from their own works. This is what I meant when I said that we must put to death all that is of our own nature if we are to conform ourselves to our God. This is what Saint Paul declares, and we have many other instances in the NT. But it is sufficient to declare what is apparent, namely in Colossians (2.17) where it is said that we have in Jesus Christ the substance and the principal part of the things that were under the Law. Therefore it was necessary for the fathers of old to be trained in this hope, by the day of rest as well as by other ceremonies.

But now that the thing itself is given to us we must not rest any longer in shadows. Indeed the Law is not abolished (Mt 5.18; Eph 2.15; Col 1.14,17); so we must hold now the substance and truth of it. Even so, the shadow of it is done away by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If someone demands to know how the fathers of old knew that it was a shadow, the answer is that Moses gave them this understanding of it, as is shown sufficiently in Exodus 31.13, 17. For God having given his Law to Moses (recorded in Exodus 20) tells him the purpose of the day, saying that he had ordained the Sabbath to be a warrant for the sanctifying of the people of Israel to himself. He says: “It is a badge of my holiness which I have ordained among you.” When Scripture speaks of our being made holy to God, it means that we are to be separate from all things that are contrary to his service.

But where is such pureness to be found? We are in the world and we know that in the world there is nothing but utter rebellion and sinfulness, as Saint John says in his canonical letter (I Jn 5.13). But men don’t need to go outside themselves to battle God and his righteousness, for all our senses and desires (as Saint Paul says in Romans 8.7) are enemies against God. When men follow their own thoughts, desires, wishes, and lusts, they make open war against God.

We know how it is stated in the sixth chapter of Genesis (v.5) that the imaginations of man’s heart is always evil, and that everything that man devises on his own is utterly perverse and corrupt in God’s sight. So then, we can clearly see that we cannot be sanctified before our God, that is, we cannot serve him without defilement, unless we are separated from the defilement that is contrary to him, and unless the things of our nature are abolished.

¹ This modern English rendering of Calvin’s sermons is based on the translation made by Arthur Golding in 1582. It was translated into modern English by James R. Hughes from the facsimile edition published by The Banner of Truth Trust in 1987. For a modern translation, made directly from the French, see the translation of Benjamin W. Farley published by Baker Book House in 1980.

Now it was necessary that all these things be shown as figures to the ancient fathers because Jesus Christ was not yet fully revealed to them. But in these days we have the full accomplishment and perfection of all things in Jesus Christ. As proof of this, Saint Paul says that the old man is crucified with him (Rom 6.6). When Paul speaks of the old man he means the things that we have received from Adam, all of which must be done away. He is not speaking of the physical body or of the essence of the soul but of the sinfulness in us. The blindness that makes us go astray, and the wicked lusts and passions which are utterly disobedient to God's righteousness, must be beaten down because they have come from Adam.

How is this to be done? Not by our own power or effort but by our Lord Jesus Christ who, by dying for us to wipe away our sins so that they would no longer be charged to our account, has purchased for us this prerogative through the power of the Holy Spirit which enables us to forsake the world and ourselves. By this, our sinful desires shall not master us.

Although we are full of disobedience, yet God's Spirit rules over us to hold down the passions and to keep them in subjection. Therefore it is said that we have risen with him (Christ), as Saint Paul declares in the previously mentioned passage in Colossians. But this was not yet made manifest under the Law. Therefore, it was necessary that the fathers who lived at that time should have some help, such as the sacrifices, to nourish them in the hope of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that they might know that their sins were washed away by the blood of the mediator. Similarly, they had the Sabbath day as a warrant for the grace that was purchased for us in order to put to death our thoughts and passions, so that God might live in us by the power of his Holy Spirit (Gal 2.19,20).

Now we have some understanding of what we have considered briefly: that the Sabbath day was a figure to represent what was fulfilled in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore let us note that the Sabbath applied to the whole service to God to show men that they could not honour him in a pure manner unless they renounced themselves and were separated from the defiling aspects of the world and their own sinful nature. For the same reason the Jews were rebuked by the prophet Ezekiel (20.21, 22; 22.8; 32.38) for not keeping the Sabbath day. They were told (and with good cause) that they had broken the whole law in general because they despised the Sabbath day and had thrust the whole service to God under their feet.

The prophet Isaiah says that if the day of rest is not kept, anything else is of no worth (Is 58.13). Therefore, men must give up their own 'virtues' and be content to leave them, or else it is not the LORD's Sabbath, nor will he approve of what they are doing. In this we see that it is useless just to observe the ceremony. For the Jews kept the ceremony very properly when they assembled on the Sabbath day; and they didn't lift a finger to do housework, yet they fed their own wicked desires. Afterwards they followed their desires and thereby mocked God, abusing his name and defacing and falsifying the entire order that he had ordained. For this reason he rebuked them. The most important thing was for them to see the meaning of the figure, which was to serve God spiritually. It was necessary for the Jews to keep the ceremony as they were commanded. But God kept them from having its pure substance. Instead they had only the shadow until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus we can understand what Saint Paul means (Col 2.20) when he says that we are no longer tied to the old bondage of keeping the Sabbath day. Instead we must give much honour to Jesus Christ and be content with what he has given to us in his own person, since we no longer have the outward things that were under the Law. From this we observe how the ceremony itself applies to us today – it is past. Therefore we must come to the important point of this which is that to serve God properly we must learn to give up our own wills, thoughts, and desires. Why? Because otherwise we will be wise in our own conceits and will imagine that we can serve God with this or that, and thus mar everything. Therefore, we must lay down our own 'wisdom' and hear God speak, without following our own will or fancy.

Thus, the first way to keep the Sabbath as we should is to give up the things that seem good to ourselves. Instead we must rest. How are we to rest? We must stand still so that our minds don't wander to our own inventions. I say, we must continue quietly in obedience to God. When we are tempted by our own lusts, we

must consider that all our lewd and disobedient desires are enemies of God. Therefore, we must rest, considering what God wants, so that he may work in us and guide and govern us by his Holy Spirit.

By this we see that God did not miss anything when he ordained the Sabbath day. And since it has such large a scope, what else do we need to teach us the perfect doctrine of holiness other than what the Holy Spirit has set before us? The purpose is that we should live in holy obedience to God. How are we to do this? By receiving his simple word and by fashioning our lives according to his righteousness. Now since the things of our own nature are contrary to this, we must start by renouncing ourselves. Having done that, we will have what is necessary to serve God. But this is very hard to do. Therefore, when we hear God commanding us to keep the Sabbath day, let us consider well that we cannot do it by playing at it. Instead we must be firm with ourselves. We will profit throughout our lives if we keep the Sabbath well by renouncing whatever is our own and by dedicating ourselves entirely to God.

We ought to be more on fire for keeping spiritually the Sabbath of the LORD since we have been set free from the slavish subjection to the Law and since God has granted to us greater privileges than he did to the fathers of the past. Our privileges are that God is content with our putting to death the old man and being renewed by the power of his Holy Spirit, and that we are no longer bound by the ceremony that had to be observed so carefully under the Law. Since God handles us in such a loving manner, it should cause us even more to consider the principle, so that we can follow it daily. But we must not believe that the ancient fathers had just the ceremony as a spur to give them life. Now that our Lord Jesus Christ has come we have much more than the outward and visible sign. Since all the things which were prefigured in those shadows are accomplished in him, we must not continue craving the things under the Law.

Thus we see how the things that are ordained here concerning the Sabbath day are now fulfilled, at least with respect to the truth of the figure that the fathers had only as a shadow. In fact, what was commanded about the day of rest must also apply to us as well as to them. For we must take God's law as it is and thus have an everlasting rule of righteousness. For it is certain that in the Ten Commandments God intended to give a rule that should endure forever. Therefore, let us not think that the things which Moses says about the Sabbath day are unnecessary for us – not because the figure remains in force, but because we have the truth represented by the figure.

For this reason, the Apostle (in Heb 4.3-10) applies the things that were spoken about the Sabbath to the instruction of the Christians of the new Church. He shows us that we must imitate our God in whom reside happiness and perfection, because the entire sovereign welfare (or highest good) of man consists in being created in the image of God. What is to be done now, since the image is defaced by sin, so that it can be restored again? You know that the way for us to attain to perfection is to model ourselves after our God, yield to his will, and inquire about his works so that we may act like him. Therefore, let us understand that to serve God well we, on the Sabbath Day, are commanded to strive to the uttermost to subdue our own thoughts, and desires so that God may reign in us and rule us by his Holy Spirit.

Therefore it is a vain thing for all hypocrites to ignore this requirement to be holy and to rationalize their actions. For as long as the wicked have covetousness lurking in their hearts and as long as they are full of envy, spite, ambition, cruelty, or craftiness, it is certain that they do nothing other than break the Sabbath. Therefore we must conclude that they throw out service to God just as I showed before from Ezekiel, and as it is said in Jeremiah (Jer 17.24). This is the reason that the ceremony was so carefully prescribed under the Law.

Do we think that God ever took pleasure in man's idleness? Surely not! Rather he punished as severely the person who worked on the Sabbath day as he did the person who had murdered someone. Why? It seems to be a cruel thing that a man should be put to death for chopping a little wood on the Sabbath day (Num 15.32-35), as if he had committed murder. And yet God does condemn to death the one who cut wood on the Sabbath day. Why? Because under this figure is included the whole service to God. The same applies to those in Jeremiah (7.21, 22, 28) who carried loads and drove their carts on the Sabbath day. Why? It seems that God is dealing too much with trivial and childish matters. But he had his eye on what was signified by

the Sabbath day. When that was despised by the Jews, they acted as traitors and showed that they did not take the Law seriously.

Now, to return to our own situation. Since we aren't constrained by the figure and since God has given us greater liberty, which was purchased for us by the death and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us learn to give ourselves wholeheartedly to him. Let us understand that we can work hard on everything else, yet to no purpose if our hearts are not controlled and if we don't renounce all our own thoughts and desires. God must govern us completely and we must sincerely desire nothing other than rest in him. For this reason, God sets forth himself as an example. He thinks it is not enough to command men to rest, but also shows them the way. After he had created the world and everything in it, he rested. He didn't rest because he was weary or because he had a need to rest, but rather, to direct our attention to his works so that we might rest in them and, having considered them, model ourselves after him. Will we keep the spiritual rest?

Since it is said that God rested from his work, so must we rest also. We must cease from doing what seems good to ourselves and whatever our own nature covets. If we are not challenged by this example, we show clearly that we do not seek our own good but instead continue in a cursed and wretched state. For the sovereign welfare of men (as I said before) is to cling to God and to be united with him. Notice that the LORD calls us to himself and tells us that we cannot have true holiness or union with him unless we rest from our own work.

Now, if we are so unruly that we must always keep our arms and legs in action and be continually doing what we think is best, surely this breaks the bond that is between us and God. It separates us and estranges us from him as much as is possible. Doesn't it also appear that we seek to be left as a prey for Satan to be carried away by him since we don't want to be under the protection of God? Yes it does, but what of it? There are very few who consider this.

The world sees only the liberty that men claim for themselves. If someone comes along and tells a man that he must not live according to his own fancy he will respond "Nonsense, I know what is best for myself." But a man could not think of a better way to despise God more openly than by this rebellion. It is the same thing as saying that we will have no one sovereign over us. Men will not acknowledge this. Yet it is the case. For, as I have already said, we cannot serve God unless we begin by abstaining from our own thoughts and desires. Therefore, when men are selfish and trust in their own wisdom, doing what they wish and following their own desires and fancies and not striving to suppress them, or are offended when others try to correct them, it is a sign that they never understood what it means to serve God or what is the most important point of the Law.

Therefore, let us understand that God gives us his example to attract us gently to keep the spiritual Sabbath of rest. He wants us to be unhappy being separated from him, as I said before, and to see the bands that connect us if we do not withdraw ourselves from his religion and truth and if we allow ourselves to be ruled by him.

At this point someone may ask: "Why were the Jews commanded to rest only on the seventh day?" For we are to understand from this that we are not to renounce our own thoughts and desires on only one day of the week but continually all of our lives. To be brief, the rest that God requires of us is everlasting, and not in 'fits and starts'. Why then did he choose one day of the week? To show us that even when we have done all that we can to renounce our wicked lusts, our false pretenses, and whatever else is of our nature, we will never be able to put them aside fully until we have shed this fleshly body.

It is true that the faithful should keep a Sabbath continually all their lives by giving up their own wills and works and by endeavoring to give themselves to God in full humility and submission, so that they may quietly obey him. I mean that we must do this, or else all the service we desire to give to God will be a fiction, and he will ignore it and reject it.

Nevertheless, we cannot be faithful in renouncing our desires without there being something worthy of blame in us. Indeed Saint Paul rejoices that the world was crucified to him (Gal 6.14; 5.17) and he to it.

Yet, in spite of this, he says that his sinful nature continually fights against the spirit so that there is never an agreement between the two. He confesses in Romans (7.15-19) that he felt such strife continually in himself, that he did not do the good as he would have liked; that is to say, he did not perform it with a sincere desire, nor was he fully determined to live according to the will of God. Instead, he found that there was always something hindering him so that it seemed to him that rather than running strongly he went about limping.

Since this is so, let us understand that God's ordaining the seventh day for rest was not without cause. In so doing, he makes it clear that we cannot attain to perfect holiness, which is required of us, in a day, let alone in a month. Why is this? Because, even when we have fought heartily against the desires of our sinful nature and against our wicked thoughts, there will always remain some dregs. These will remain until we have been united with our God and he has taken us up to his heavenly kingdom. Until that time, we will always have some temptations and trouble, and restlessness in ourselves, so that we will know (I refer to those of us who endeavor to serve God) that we are still subject to many temptations and the prods which provoke us to do this or that.

Are not all these things hindrances which hold us back from spiritual rest? If a man rested in God as he should, he would not conceive his own thoughts which would turn him aside from the right way. He would not have any wicked lusts or wishes. All such things would be far from him. Now then, when we conceive numerous evil things, this is when Satan steps in to assault us and to perplex us with restlessness. Once our minds are inclined to do evil there are a number of things in us which tickle us and push us forward. And, although we hate the evil, yet it is by these temptations that we are provoked to carry it out. From this it is clear that it is not an easy matter for us to be weaned from our wicked lusts so that they no longer reign in us. So then, let us press forward, endeavoring to keep God's spiritual Sabbath, for we shall never attain it fully until the end of our lives.

Two things are brought to our consideration. The first is to be displeased with ourselves and to mourn continually. We need to consider that although we may think that we have taken great pains to obey our God, nevertheless we fall far short of keeping the things that are required in the Law. Thus we have cause to humble ourselves. God will always find more than enough to condemn us with respect to our service for him, and also because our spiritual rest is nowhere near what he has commanded. Just as we have a need to humble ourselves and to be sorry, in true repentance, so we ought also to be stirred up and made alive to go forward since we see our own need.

It is true that God has given me grace so that I may desire to serve him, but how do I react? Sadly I am still far off from doing it. Since we see that this is true, what should we do to force ourselves forward? By hating the evil in us, let us also be very sincere to profit from the rest and to go forward in it, daily making an assessment of ourselves. You see then that God has given us an occasion to humble ourselves all of our lives, showing us that we must be sincere in correcting our ways by putting to death the vices of the sinful nature more and more every day. Consider that it is not enough to crucify partly the old man, we must be fully buried with Jesus Christ, as Saint Paul says in Romans (7.4), as I said before. This is the meaning of the seventh day as it is mentioned in the passage.

Now we come to the second consideration, which is, as I have said already, that the Sabbath day was a regulation of order in which the faithful of God exercised their service. It was ordained that men should assemble on that day to hear the doctrine of the Law preached, to commune together with sacrifices, and to call upon the name of God. Considering these points, they belong to us as well as to the people of old. Even though the type has been fulfilled, I refer to the same thing that Saint Paul does in his letter to the Colossians (2.16,17); nevertheless, as concerns the regulation, it continues today and still has application. What is the purpose of this regulation? We are to assemble in the name of God. It is true that this should be done continually, but because of our weaknesses, or rather, because of our laziness, it is necessary that one day be appointed.

If we were as sincere in serving God as we ought to be, only one day in the week would not have been appointed. We ought to meet morning and evening without following the written Law, to be built up more and more by God's word. Truly this exercise is needed by us considering that we are so inclined to do evil

and that anything can move us from the right path. Therefore, it would be for the best if we came together every day in the name of God. But what is the reality? We see that men will scarcely meet together on the Lord's Day, and they must be constrained almost by force. Considering that there is such weakness in us, let us understand that this regulation was not given only for the Jews, that they might have a day in which to come together, but also it is for us. It belongs to us as well as to them.

There is another thing we need to note. We are being very narrow if we have only a rest for our hands and feet and go not further than that. What should we do then? We must apply this rest to a higher purpose. We must refrain from our business which hinders us from meditating on the works of God. We must call upon his name and exercise ourselves in his word. If we spend the Lord's Day in partying, games and sports is this honoring God? No! Is it not mocking him and misusing his name? Yes! When the stores are closed on the Lord's Day and men do not travel about as they do on other days, is this so that we can have more leisure and liberty to attend to the things that God commands? Is it so that we can be taught by his word, meet together for the confession of our faith, call upon his name, and exercise ourselves in the proper use of the sacraments? This is how the Sabbath regulation should serve us.

Now, let us now determine whether or not those who call themselves 'Christians' behave as they ought to. Consider how many think that on the Lord's Day they can freely go about their own business as if there were no other day of the week in which to do these things. Although the bell rings to call them to hear the sermon, yet it seems to them that they have nothing else to do but think about their business and take stock of one thing or another. Others are given over to stuffing themselves with food privately in their homes, because they are afraid to show such contempt in public. To them the Lord's Day is an excuse to avoid the Church of God.

From these things we see what desires we have for Christianity and service to God, since we use the Lord's Day as an excuse for withdrawing further from God instead of as a help to bring us nearer to him. Once we have gone astray it causes us to pull completely away. Is this not a devilish sign of disrespect in man? Sadly, in spite of this, it is a common thing. We wish to God that these things were rare and hard to find. But the world shows how holy things are misused to such an extent that people have no regard for observing the Lord's Day as he has ordained it – a day for withdrawing from all earthly cares and affairs so that we might give ourselves entirely to God.

Furthermore we must understand that the Lord's Day was not appointed only for listening to sermons, but that we should spend the rest of the time praising God. For, although he gives us food every day, we do not keep his gracious gifts in mind and give him the glory. It would indeed be a poor thing if we did not give consideration to the gifts of God on the Lord's Day. And, because we are so occupied with our own affairs on the other days of the week, we are slow to serve God in them in the way he has assigned on the one day. The Lord's Day must, therefore, serve as a tower in which we can go up to view God's works in the distance. It is a time in which there should be nothing to hinder us or keep us occupied, so that we can employ our minds meditating on the benefits and gracious gifts he has given us.

If we can apply this (that is, if we can meditate on the works of God) on the Lord's Day, then we will be able to rest more during the remainder of the week. The keeping of that Day will, as it were, shape and polish us beforehand so that to the extent we have meditated on his works, to that extent we will be influenced to benefit by them and will be led to give God thanks on Monday and every other day of the following week. Now, if the Lord's Day is spent playing games and in other empty pastimes, and in things that are clearly contrary to God, so that men think that the way to keep the Day 'holy' is by offending God in different ways, and if God's holy regulations which he ordained to bring us to himself are broken in this way, then is it any wonder that men act as brute beasts the rest of the week?

What are we to do then? Let us understand that it is not enough for us to hear the sermon preached on the Lord's Day to receive some good instruction and to call upon the name of God. We must also digest the same things, and bend our minds to meditate on the gracious things that God has done for us. By this means we may conform ourselves to the things that will lead us to our God on Monday and during the rest of the

week. So that we will have time to meditate on the things we have learned, let us put out of our minds all the things that hinder us or which drag us away from meditating on the works of God.

Thus we see what is the regulation for keeping this Day. It is not to keep the ceremonies as strictly as under the Jewish legal bondage, for we do not have the figure or shadow any longer. But rather, the Day serves as a means of calling us together so that we may learn, to the extent we are able, to apply ourselves more fully to serving God. We are to dedicate the day entirely to him, so that we may completely withdraw from the world and, as I said before, so that we may have a good start for the remainder of the week.

Also we should consider that it is not enough for us to meditate upon God and his works on the Lord's Day by ourselves. Rather, we must meet together on a specified day to perform the public confession of our faith. In fact, as I said before, this should be done every day, but because of man's spiritual immaturity and laziness it is necessary to have a special day dedicated entirely to this purpose. It is true that we are not limited to the seventh day, nor do we, in fact, keep the same day that was appointed for the Jews, since that was Saturday. But, to show the liberty of Christians, the day was changed because the resurrection of Jesus Christ set us free from the bondage to the Law and canceled the obligation to it. That is why the day was changed. Yet, we must observe the same regulation of having a specified day of the week. Whether it be one day or two is left to the free choice of Christians.

Nevertheless, if people assemble to observe the sacraments, to offer common prayer to God, and to show agreement in the union of faith, it is convenient to have a single specified day for the purpose. It is not enough that each person withdraw into his own home, whether to read the Holy Scriptures or to pray to God. Rather, it is best that we keep the regulation that God has commanded and that we come together in the company of the faithful and there show the agreement which we have with the whole body of the Church.

But what do we find? We find that service to God is treated with disrespect. As I said before, there are a great number who easily find it in themselves to mock God and think that they are exempted from the law that applies to all men. It is true that they come to hear the sermon five or six times per year. What do they do when there? In fact, they mock God and his doctrine. They are pigs which come to defile the temple of God, and they should be in stables. It would be better for them to stay in their stinking hovels. To be blunt, it would be better that these wicked and filthy scoundrels were cut off from the Church of God, rather than coming to mingle with the company of the faithful. And yet, how often do they come? If the bell rings long enough you will look and find them there. So we ought to be more diligent and careful in stirring ourselves to confess our faith so that God may be honoured by common agreement among us.

Beside that, all superstitions must be banished. We see that it is the opinion of the Papacy that God is served by idleness. This is not the way we are to keep the Sabbath Day holy. But, so that it may be applied to a right and lawful purpose, we must consider, as I said before, that the Lord requires that this day be used for nothing else but for hearing his word, for offering common prayer, for confessing our faith, and for the observing of the sacraments. These are the things that they are called to do. Nevertheless, we see that all these things have been corrupted by the Papal system. They have allocated days for honoring their male and female 'saints' and have set up images for them. They have come to the conclusion that they are to worship by idleness.

Since the world is given over to corruption, it is best for us to consider carefully this passage concerning the Sabbath Day as it is given by Moses. Let us consider the purpose of our Lord's command to the people of old: that they should have one day of rest in the week. Since we know that the day has been abolished by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, we should ensure that we apply ourselves to the spiritual rest. That is, we should dedicate ourselves entirely to God, forsaking all our own ideas and desires. But we should retain the outward regulation, as it is useful for putting aside our own affairs and business so that we can apply ourselves entirely to the meditation of God's works, and occupy ourselves in a consideration of the good things that he has done for us. Above all this, let us strive to acknowledge the grace he offers daily in his Gospel so that we may be strengthened in it more and more. When we have used the Lord's Day for

praising and glorifying God's name, and for meditating on his works, let us show all week that we have profited from this.