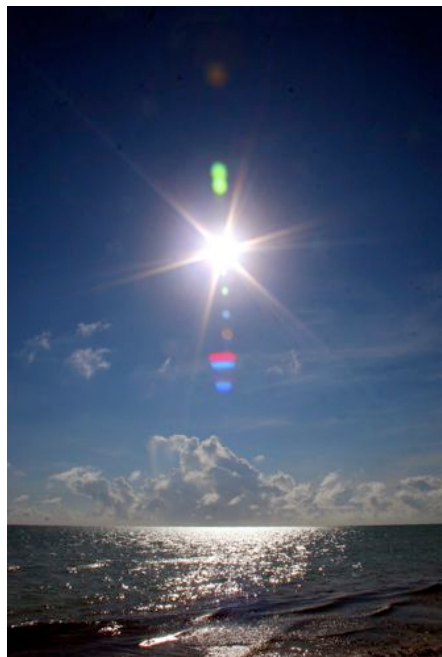


CHRISTMAS, AS ADVERTISED

Recovering the purpose and power of this holy season.



PART 1: 'TIS THE SEASON!

T. M. MOORE

The Fellowship of Ailbe

'Tis the Season!

Christmas, As Advertised, Part 1

'Tis the Season!

A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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'Tis the Season!

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‘Tis the Season!

Welcome to *‘Tis the Season!*

Welcome to *‘Tis the Season*, part 1 of a 3-part series on *Christmas, As Advertised*. In this first series we will consider the role of holy days in Christian life and begin thinking about ways we can help to recover the transcendent meaning and experience, especially of Christmas.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others. Please visit our website, www.ailbe.org.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 From Holy Days to Holidays

“These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times.” Leviticus 23.4

A blur of holidays

“It’s the holiday season!” as the late Andy Williams sings jubilantly every year about this time around our house. It’s a family tradition that, day after Thanksgiving – no sooner, mind you – we break out the Christmas records. Yes, records – Susie and I have had most of these vinyl disks for all 45 years of our marriage, and we play them day-in and day-out throughout the month of December. The holiday season wouldn’t be the same without them. We’ve added some Christmas CDs to the daily offering, but the vinyl discs remain the staple of our holiday celebration.

We’ve tried listening to local radio stations which boast 24-hour “holiday music.” However, that has been a disappointment, but not because they haven’t delivered on what they promise. They are indeed playing “holiday” music all day long – music that celebrates the fun and nostalgia associated with Thanksgiving and Christmas, but without any of those pesky “religious” messages that tend to make people (and advertisers) upset. If a Christmas carol ever appears on the log of one of these stations, it is almost invariably played for melodic and sentimental value, not the message – instrumental versions only. That way you tug at the heart strings of nostalgia without offending any sensitive secular ears.

Wouldn’t want to do that during the “holidays”, you know.

No, the holy days of Thanksgiving and Christmas, like the megalopolis the runs from D. C. to Boston, have become one continuous blur of holiday fun, a national celebration of bingeing and splurging, with as little emphasis as possible on any transcendent realities.

Diversions, distractions, self-indulgence

Holidays in America have come to be regarded as entitlements. They’re all about us, seasons of diversion, distraction, self-indulgence, and time off work. Even the great religious celebrations of the national calendar – Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter – are regarded by most Americans as opportunities to get some good bargains and enjoy a little time for relaxation, not for spiritual reflection and renewal, but just for doing whatever we want.

Sort of like the way most Christians observe the Lord’s Day.

So successful, in fact, has been the transformation of America’s “holy days” into mere “holidays” that we have multiplied them to the point of absurdity. Every month features one holiday or another, days set aside to “honor” one group or event or ideal or another, but all engaged primarily for the opportunity to get some time off work for a little R & R.

Americans love their holidays because they love themselves, and holidays provide some of the best opportunities for escaping our normal routine and rut for a little well-deserved, as we see it, rest and recuperation.

There are so many holidays on the national calendar that we can’t keep track of them all. And the ones we know best are in the process of losing their original meaning and significance. Watching The Weather Channel not long ago, I had to shake my head as the meteorologist paused to “honor”, on Veterans’ Day, all those who had given their lives for our country, since that, he opined, is what Veterans’ Day is all about. Well, no – that would be Memorial Day. If educated TV personalities don’t know the difference between these holidays, what hope can we have that “Secretaries’ Day” or “Administrative Assistants’ Day” will be properly

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observed? And how do we properly observe such “holidays” anyway, except to grab a day off work for a day at the mall, or whatever?

The value of holy days

The “holy days” of the calendar have lost whatever transcendent value they may originally have had. Now they’re just all about us, and the more of them we can conjure and observe, the better.

But let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater. We need holidays – holy days, actually – and God has shown us how to make the most of them. My purpose in this series is to take a closer look at God’s idea concerning how holy days can help to make us, well, holy.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you agree that holidays in America have begun to lose some of their true meaning and significance? Why or why not?
2. What value do you find in holidays, especially those holidays that have a spiritual basis?
3. Do you think the holiday season offers opportunities for focusing on spiritual matters? How might you do that?
4. How can Christians keep from being overwhelmed by the secular and materialistic focus of our traditional holy days?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: Talk with some friends about the difference between “holy days” and “holidays.” Ask a few Christians and a few non-Christians to offer their opinions. Share your own thoughts about this question, and follow the conversations wherever they might lead.

Prayer:

2 The Time of Our Lives

“Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year.” Exodus 23.14

Holidays and time

Holidays are necessarily about time – how we understand it and what use we make of it. For most Americans, holidays signal a change in the way we use our time. Instead of dragging ourselves into work for another day of more of the same, we sleep in, get a leisurely start to the day, and then spend the rest of it relaxing, shopping, recreating, or maybe puttering around in the yard. It’s time for us, after all, and we need to make the most of it.

Time that normally would be invested in making a living is instead given over to whatever we might choose to do. Holidays thus represent a laying hold of time for something other than its normal purposes, and the effect of this is to remind us that, at the end of the day, life, and all the time of our lives, is all about us.

In one sense, this reflects the Biblical idea behind holy days, although it’s nearly 180 degrees off the mark. In ancient Israel God called His people to interrupt their ordinary use of time and devote a portion of the time of their lives to honoring three holy seasons: Passover and Unleavened Bread, in the spring; Harvest, or the Feast of Weeks, in the early summer; and Ingathering, or the Feast of Tabernacles, in the fall. For each of these feasts the people were to journey to Jerusalem, where they would observe various religious activities over a period of several days. Normal routines and responsibilities were set aside so that the people of Israel could participate in these divinely-appointed holy days.

Israel’s holy days

Each of the holy seasons of ancient Israel was designed to remind the people of their special status as *God’s* people. Passover and Unleavened Bread recalled their deliverance from Egypt. During the Feast of Weeks the people acknowledged the first blessings of their harvest, reminding them that God was sovereign in providing for their needs. During the Feast of Tabernacles, when the harvest was plentiful, the people lived in make-shift booths, reminding them of how God sustained them during their journey through the wilderness toward the land of promise.

These holy days were seasons of remembering, reflecting, and re-orienting the people’s use of their “ordinary” time. Each of these seasons was filled with activities designed to engage the people in refocusing on the Lord, recounting His blessings, and rededicating themselves to His covenant and its requirements of love for God and neighbor.

The people of Israel, in other words, were expected to manage their time in such a way as to reinforce their relationship with God and renew their distinction as His chosen, redeemed, and blessed people. Of course, faithful parents taught these lessons to their children throughout the year, and priests and Levites were equally diligent in reminding the people, at weekly Sabbaths, of their special privileges and duties as the people of God.

But the holy days offered a unique combination of community, drama, teaching, worship, and participation which it was important for the people to make the time for each year. Because in so doing they acknowledged their dependence on God and replayed the many facets of His character and covenant.

The holy days of Israel were above all else designed to bring the reality of the unseen realm into the daily experience of human life with special intensity.

Holiday opportunities

Our own holidays are rich in opportunities for making the most of the time of our lives in ways that can

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renew our commitment to the Lord and our involvement in the divine economy.

The word “holy” means to be “set apart” – set apart from normal, everyday use for the special purpose of honoring God and being renewed in Him. Unless our holy days are thus consecrated, planned, and pursued, we will be in danger of employing them mainly in one form or another of mere self-indulgence.

The time of our lives belongs to God. He gives us time as a gift, and He knows best how we should use our time in order to realize our reason for being. Holy days can play an important role in helping us to use the time of our lives as God intends, but we will need to redeem our holy days and recover their true meaning and use if this is to be the case.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are some ways that religious holidays can help to immerse you more deeply in your faith (you might want to re-read the section under the heading, *Israel’s holy days*)?
2. Do you think holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas have potential to affect even non-believers with spiritual truths? Why or why not?
3. How do religious holidays help us in remembering the nature of time and how we are supposed to be using it?
4. Meditate on Psalm 90.12 and Ephesians 5.15-17. Talk about some ways to apply these texts to “making the most” of your holiday time:
5. What are some ways Christians might work together to help one another in making better use of holiday time?

Next steps: What are your plans for making the most of the time of our holy days this season? Ask the Lord to give you wisdom in how to make the best use of this time for His purposes (Ps. 90.12; Eph. 5.15-17). Then talk with family or friends about your thoughts for capturing all the time of this holy season for the holy purposes of God.

Prayer:

3 The Witness of Our Holy Days

“Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.” Acts 21.23, 24

An excellent opportunity then...

It was important to Paul that he should be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks – for Pentecost. He was a Jew, after all, and there was nothing inconsistent with his Christian faith in his participating in this national holy day. Besides, the holy days of Israel had become even more fraught with transcendent meaning and significance since Paul had come to know Christ as the focal point of each one.

Moreover, with so many people from all over Israel gathering in Jerusalem, Pentecost would have provided an excellent opportunity for bearing witness to the “first fruit” of the Holy Spirit, Who is given to all who believe in Jesus. This is precisely what had happened at the first Christian Pentecost, so many years before.

Upon arriving, Paul learned from James that certain of the brethren had taken a vow of some sort and were thus participating with others in one particular aspect of the Pentecost celebration. The apostles in Jerusalem knew that Paul’s credentials were being challenged by those who insisted he was setting aside the Law of God, which, of course, he was not. So they urged him to join in this participation, in order to bear witness to everyone in Jerusalem that the charges against him were not valid. Paul agreed to this, even though doing so ended up with his becoming a prisoner for the sake of the Gospel.

...and now?

The holy day of Pentecost afforded an opportunity to enter in a special way into the saving work of the Lord, and to bear witness to others of that work; and Paul was willing to do whatever was necessary in order to make the most of that opportunity.

His example is instructive for us. In our day people are making it clear that they’re not all that interested in whatever our holy days might be able to teach them about the greatness and grace of God. They mainly just want some time off work to do something for themselves. They will abide whatever religious or spiritual messages come with the deal, as long as they’re not too intrusive and don’t make people feel bad about using the holidays for their own purposes.

But the holy days of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter provide Christians with excellent opportunities, both for deepening and renewing their own faith, and for reminding themselves and others that God is and that He is the Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Heb. 11.6). Like Paul, we need to discover ways of making the most of these holy seasons by encouraging others to consider their real meaning and purpose.

Those outside the Church, who have no faith in Christ, want the privileges and perks of the holy days without the spiritual purpose. They don’t want Christian symbols on their public property. Store owners insist their employees use only “Happy Holidays” and not “Merry Christmas” in greeting customers. Special sales, special sporting events, and all kinds of special holiday travel packages invite us to find in the holidays reasons and means to indulge ourselves, but they have nothing to do with honoring God, as each of the three major holy seasons was originally intended.

This is decidedly *not* what “Christmas” advertises, and it falls to those who know the meaning of this season to set the record straight.

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Taking holidays captive

‘Tis the season, friends, to set aside time for holiness, and to use that time as much as we can for renewing our faith and bearing witness concerning the Lord.

No, the world won’t exactly welcome our ratcheted-up efforts at celebrating the Lord and calling others to count their blessings, consider Jesus, and cling to His cross for the forgiveness of sins. But that’s not the point. Unless we intend completely to forfeit our holy seasons, and to allow them to be taken captive for the purposes of crass commercialism and narrow-minded narcissism, we need to make the best use of these times as God intends, and as the name of the season suggests. Thus it might be that, not only will we find a deeper and more sanctifying experience of the things we believe, we might also bear powerful, credible witness to the One Who has led us to observe these holy days in the first place.

For reflection or discussion

1. Make a list of topics related to Thanksgiving that you might use in a conversation with a friend to bear witness to the real meaning of this holiday:
2. Now do the same for Christmas:
3. Below, write out some “conversation starters” – brief phrases, observations, or questions you might use to initiate a witnessing situation using the holidays as your springboard.
4. What are some things that could keep you from using the holidays as an excellent opportunity for bearing witness to the Lord?
5. What are some things you can do to help make sure you make the most of the witnessing opportunities the holidays will provide?

Next steps: Make a list of everything about the holiday season that holds the potential for bearing witness to the Lord. Share that list with some Christian friends. Pray for one another that you will make the most of your witness-bearing opportunities during this holiday season.

Prayer:

4 Holy Days and History

“So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance.” Exodus 12.14

Grounded in history

The holy days of ancient Israel were grounded in historical events. Certain things happened in Israel’s history, arranged by the mighty hand of God, which were definitive for them as a people and decisive in the subsequent unfolding of their history. The holy or feast days of Israel intended to commemorate and, in a certain sense, relive those important events, thus renewing the people in their true identity and purpose.

Holy days remind us that our religion is rooted in historical realities. It is not simply a psychological construct or an outdated cultural institution. The Christian religion is grounded in historical events, and our holy days remind us of this.

For many people today history as such is mostly irrelevant. The only history that matters for many people is whatever they happen to be doing at any particular moment in time. Such a view of history plays well into the hands of those who delight to revise history, or even to ignore it, according to the demands of their preferred agendas. For most folks the only history that matters is now, today, and what they can get out of it. This translates readily into how they approach the holidays. Thanksgiving has historical significance for them because they get two days off work, a day to binge and watch sports, and to grab some great bargains on Black Friday or Cyber Monday or “Gift Tuesday.”

Christmas has historical significance because, in addition to time off work, we get cool gifts and enjoy fun parties.

Easter has less historical significance for most Americans because it always falls on Sunday, a day they long ago appropriated for their own purposes anyway (and most Christians as well, truth be told). But usually there are some great Easter sales of spring clothing, automobiles, or yard equipment, and so they still look forward to Easter rolling around each year.

History or “my-story”?

The historical significance of our great Christian holy days has, for many people, been reduced to whatever they can experience in a moment in time in order to take their minds off the daily grind. “History” is really only “my-story”, writ larger in my present experience, and holidays exist to allow me to liven up “my-story” in whatever ways I choose.

But Christians must not allow the historical significance of our holy days to go by the board. Thanksgiving is rooted in a national response to events of tremendous moment for the shaping of our national identity and character. It is a day set aside by presidential decree to acknowledge the gracious hand of God in the formation and deliverance of this nation through its darkest times and at all times. Real historical people – Washington and Lincoln – saw the hand of God at work in the formation and reformation of this nation, and their contemporaries agreed with the importance of observing a national day for acknowledging God’s hand in our history.

Real history

Christmas and Easter are grounded in even more important historical events, although it sometimes seems as though not even all Christians believe the birth and crucifixion of Jesus to be historical in the same sense as the days we live in now.

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But the birth of Jesus occurred in real history, as did every day of His earthly sojourn and all the days of His suffering and death. His resurrection also occurred in real history, and so did the pouring out of His Spirit. The history of the Christian movement is real history, and the historical record is clear concerning the many and varied ways in which Christianity has contributed to the historical development and enrichment of the human race.

Holidays are about history, and if we fail to remember that history or to remind our contemporaries of it, then we will only be confirming their narrow and narcissistic view of “history” as “my-story” and my supposed right to make of my life whatever I will.

If we allow our holidays, especially our Christian holy days, to encourage such fallacious thinking, then we will be more contributors to The Lie of unbelief than celebrants of the glory and grace of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why is it important that we understand our holidays to be grounded in real history? What difference does that make?
2. See what you can discover about the history of Thanksgiving (Google it online, and you’ll find plenty of articles). What has changed from the early days of Thanksgiving until today with respect to how people view their lives in history?
3. Now do the same for Christmas.
4. How can understanding the historical basis for Thanksgiving and Christmas help you in using these holidays as a witness for the Lord?
5. Below, write out a couple of conversation starters that use the historical basis of these holidays:

Next steps: Make a list of the historical events associated with Thanksgiving and Christmas. Share that list with some friends. Ask them if they believe these events happened in the same “history” in which we presently live. Follow the conversation wherever it goes from there, making a point to emphasize the historical grounding of each of these holy days.

Prayer:

5 Days for Disciple-making

“When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which the LORD our God has commanded you?’” Deuteronomy 6.20

Disciple-makers all

Holidays provide excellent opportunities for disciple-making, especially – but not only – with children.

During holidays we lay hold of the time of our lives and set it apart from its ordinary uses for special and wonderful activities. We sing special songs, eat wonderful foods (and copious amounts of them), decorate in special ways, attend special celebrations, and tell old, old stories of faith and family. We do this to remember and delight in God’s goodness, rejoice in His steadfast love and faithfulness, and encourage one another in our common hope. The events these holidays commemorate really happened, we insist, and we have come to participate in them, so that our own histories have become absorbed in the history of what God is doing to redeem the world.

Typically, churches work hard to make the most of the disciple-making opportunities afforded by Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, and this is as it should be. Special programs, courses of instruction, worship services, and other activities allow us to redeem holy days so as to renew our focus on and commitment to the Lord.

Since holy days present such excellent disciple-making opportunities, each of us needs to consider how to make this a focus of our own holiday celebrations. After all, each of us has been commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples during the normal course of our everyday lives (Matt. 28.18-20). Since it pleases God and our society to observe these three holy days in particular, and since they are therefore part of the normal course of our everyday lives, they afford us excellent disciple-making opportunities, and we should make the best use of this time for precisely that purpose (Eph. 5.15-17).

Two suggestions

So how can we do that? What are some things we might undertake during holy days in order to capitalize on the disciple-making potential of the season? Allow me to make a couple of very practical suggestions.

First, with respect to your friends, colleagues, and neighbors who do not know the Lord: Encourage them to consider the *transcendence* these holy seasons are meant to recall and invoke. Give them a gift of music to remind them of the historical basis and spiritual significance of the season, and encourage them to open it right away and begin listening. Many people have already forgotten the words to Christmas carols, although they might still be able to hum the tunes. Take the time to explain your favorite hymns and why they’re so important to you. Follow-up later on and ask whether they’ve had a chance to listen to the album yet. Stay after them until they do, and then make that a focus of conversation.

Your unbelieving friends will hear at least – and probably at *most* – the music, but not the lyrics, to Christmas carols over and over again during this season. Your gift of music could do more to help bring the disciple-making message of Christmas back into the foreground of their minds than anything else they might do during this time of the year.

Now, for your believing friends: Do the same thing. And go beyond merely giving the gift of holy day music; get together to sing the great songs of these glorious seasons.

Look, when God had a message for Moses to give to the people of Israel, his final, most important words to be remembered, He had Moses deliver that message in the form of a song (Deut. 31.19; Deut. 32). Singing is so agreeable to the Holy Spirit that He makes it one of the marks of His filling, to lead His people in singing

(Eph. 5.18-21).

Music can be a powerful aid to disciple-making. Let the glorious and beautiful words of our most cherished Christmas music become the focus of conversations on living for Christ our King. What does it mean for our personal lives, for example, that Jesus “rules the world with truth and grace” and that He came to overturn the effects of sin “far as the curse is found”?

The holy days that are upon us afford many similar opportunities for making disciples, for reaching out to lost friends and neighbors and for encouraging those who already know the Lord. We can make these days holy by making it our business to rehearse and emphasize the disciple-making truths that are before us with such focus and intensity during the holiday season.

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Matthew 28.18-20. What is involved in “making disciples”?
 2. What does it mean for us to make disciples “as you are going”?
 3. Do you agree that holidays provide excellent opportunities for carrying out our calling to make disciples? Why or why not?
 4. Below, jot down some thoughts, deriving from the lyrics of Christmas carols, that you might use in a disciple-making context, whether with an unbeliever or a fellow Christian:
-
5. Do you agree that Christmas carols can be an excellent disciple-making tool? Why or why not?

Next steps: Choose a favorite Christmas carol. Study the words carefully. Then make a short list of how these words lead you in thinking about your own discipleship. Share your thoughts with some Christian friends, and encourage them to do likewise.

Prayer:

6 One Day at a Time

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.’
Exodus 31.12, 13

“Above all...”

It would be, I suspect, an unfruitful exercise to try to discover precisely how the holy days of our national calendar came to be mere holidays, how they changed from being days of religious celebration and reflection to seasons of shopping and self-indulgence. Many factors have affected this situation, and no shortcuts will be found to turn back the clock. We cannot make other people see the holidays as we do, although we can do much to recover the inherent meaning and purpose of those days, simply by participating in them as though they were still *holy days* unto the Lord.

There’s plenty of blame to go around for the secularization of our holy days. And the “road to recovery” of a better use of them is certainly long and, at this point, unclear. Perhaps the best strategy Christians could follow, who long to see more reverence and spiritual vitality returned to our holy days, is to attack the problem one day at a time.

Beginning, I suggest, with the Lord’s Day.

It seems rather hypocritical for Christians to complain about the secularization of Thanksgiving and Christmas when, as a community, we have done very little to preserve the sanctity of the Lord’s Day. Among all the commandments and statutes of God’s Law – all the precepts, testimonials, and rules accompanying and clarifying all the Ten Commandments – only one of these is prefaced by the emphatic particle, “*Ach*” which means, variously, “surely, only, certainly,” or, as the English Standard Version has it, “above all.”

It is the fourth commandment, the commandment to remember and observe the Lord’s Sabbath.

The Lord’s Day today

“Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths,” (ESV) the Lord instructed Moses to command the people of Israel. Christians today generally put no stock in that emphatic statement, since they generally attach little significance to the Law of God itself, and they have come to believe that Sunday is a kind of holiday with church thrown in at the beginning. The Lord’s Day, such as it is, ends around noon for most believers. The rest of Sunday is ours for football, work, or whatever we want to do in the name of personal recreation or renewal.

Can you see how this “personalizing” of the Lord’s Day might have led to the rampant personalizing of all our holy days?

How can we expect to recover entire *seasons* of the year for God’s purposes when we aren’t willing to take seriously His instructions concerning our weekly holy *day*? I’m well aware of the arguments contending that the Lord’s Day is no longer an essential part of the Ten Commandments, or that any “day of rest” will do, as long as it’s one in seven.

And I know that every believer who thinks about the Lord’s Day in even the most remotely holy terms feels free to interpret how he may use that day, based on his own preferences and needs.

But all such fumbling and fidgeting with the Lord’s Day does not address the issue of God’s intention in giving us one day in seven to rest from our labors and personal recreations in order to focus more specifically

on Him and His work.

The Lord’s Day – the New Testament Sabbath – is a sign between the Lord and His people for all generations – that, presumably, would include our own. It recalls God’s grace and power in creation and redemption, symbolizes His finished work, and offers us a weekly arena within which to renew covenant with our Savior and King.

How we remember and observe the Lord’s Day will in many ways tell the tale concerning how we follow Him in all the rest of our lives.

Begin here

If we want to see Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter recover more of their true purpose, character, and design, we’ll have to start smaller – one day at a time, beginning with the Lord’s Day. Glories and wonders of *rest* await us on this day, and if we can discover the true blessings of keeping *this* holy day as God intends, we might just be able to affect the way we and others approach all the holy days of the year.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you think that “above all” Christians should observe the Lord’s Day? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree that the Lord’s Day has become as secularized and compromised as Thanksgiving and Christmas? Do you think Christians have any responsibility in this? Explain.
3. Do you think we can recover the real meaning and significance of our religious holidays without recovering the Lord’s purposes for His day? Why or why not?
4. The primary purpose of the Lord’s Day is to rest from our normal occupations and recreations. What do you suppose God thought this was important?
5. In what ways is the Lord’s Day a kind of microcosm of such religious holidays as Thanksgiving and Christmas?

Next steps: What general guidelines govern your use of the Lord’s Day? What is the basis for those guidelines? How do you know they are in line with God’s purposes? Share your answers to these questions with a Christian friend, and pray together for a better understanding of how you should approach this and all the holy days of the Lord.

Prayer:

7 Two Steps Forward

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.’
Exodus 31.12, 13

Recovering the Lord’s Day

Like you, I’d like to see our nation’s holy days recover a healthy measure of their proper purpose and focus. Christians will have to lead the way in this, but we won’t make much progress in re-sanctifying these holy seasons until we begin to recover a proper use of the Lord’s Day as the one holy day in seven God says we should “above all” strive to remember and observe.

In the two givings of the fourth commandment – Exodus 20.8-11 and Deuteronomy 5.12-15 – we find incentives and instructions sufficient to guide us in beginning to recover some of the real purpose and proper use of the Lord’s Day, and, by extension, some of the purpose of our other holy days as well. Two motivations and two instructions are provided, and these can be useful in helping us to make better use of our holy time in observing the Lord’s Day and in bringing holiness back to our holy seasons as well.

Two incentives

Two motivations: Why should we keep the Lord’s Day?

First, as a day to focus on the Lord’s work of creation and providence (Ex. 20.11). The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it (Ps. 24.1). He upholds and sustains the world by His powerful Word (Heb. 1.3). The steadfast love and glory of God are manifest throughout the creation, so that everywhere we look – if we will look carefully and with patience – we may hope to discover some deeper knowledge of God to enrich and sanctify our lives (Ps. 19.1-4; Prov. 25.2). The Lord commands us to remember His Sabbath because it recalls His rest from the work of creation. We rest to enter into His rest in Jesus, there to enjoy the full meaning, significance, and blessing of *all* of creation, rightly understood and used.

The Lord’s Day invites us to meditate on the abundant goodness and provision of the Lord, just as Thanksgiving does and as Christmas and Easter do, by reminding us that God’s blessings include the blessing of creation, and His redemption and renewing grace are for the entire creation.

Second, we should keep the Lord’s Day and all holy days because they remind us of God’s redeeming grace (Deut. 5.15). We rest in the freedom and forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ and give thanks and sing praises to Him throughout the day because of His redeeming and renewing grace. If we work at this every Sunday of the year, when special seasons of thanksgiving and praise roll around, we shall be better equipped to make the best use of these holy days for exalting our Savior and King. Our weekly training in devoting ourselves to praise and thanksgiving will make those annual feasts even more enjoyable and significant.

Two guidelines

Then, two instructions guide us in honoring the Lord’s Day and all holy days. First, “remember” the Lord’s Day (Ex. 20.8). “Remember” means something like “pay attention to,” “make preparation for,” “be thorough and complete” in using the Lord’s holy days as He intends. When we’re trying to “remember” something we focus all our attention on it, shutting everything else out to engage all the resources of our brain in what we’re trying to recall.

Remembering the Lord’s Day should be something like that.

At the same time, we must “guard” the holy days of the Lord (Deut. 5.12) against whatever might seek to

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corrupt, subvert, or hijack them for anything other than the glory of God. We must not let our time or attention during holy days be given over to purposes other than those for which these days are intended. Leave the TV off, at least until the evening. Let your family time be focused around activities designed to recall and reinforce the saving grace of the Lord. Don't give up *any* of this holy time for mere self-indulgence, or you'll be no different from any of your unsaved neighbors.

We forfeit the gold of God's holy days when we mix it with the fool's gold of our materialistic and hedonistic age. *Remember* the Lord's Day each week, and *guard* it from being compromised or set aside. This is what God commands for this one holy day, which is the basis and building-block for *all* holy days.

Learning to use the Lord's Day as God intends can go a long way toward helping us make better use of the holy days of our national calendar. And if we make better use of these holy days, it's quite possible our neighbors will notice, and may be led to wonder about what they're missing in failing to attend to the *message* and not just the *messiness* of Christmas and all our holy seasons.

For reflection or discussion

1. In your own words, explain the two incentives God provided for observing the Sabbath (Lord's Day):
2. Now do the same for the two guidelines He provided:
3. Now, using a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the best rating you could give, evaluate your own use of the Lord's Day according to those incentives and guidelines:

Why did you choose that number?

4. Even if recovering proper use of the Lord's Day doesn't help us in restoring a right understanding of our religious holidays, should we work to restore the Lord's Day? Why or why not?
5. What's the primary lesson you've learned from this series? How do you plan to put that lesson into practice in your life?

Next steps: What do you think? Is there a connection between the Lord's Day and how we use it and the holy seasons of the national calendar? Do you agree that Christians should begin trying to recover the real significance and use of both? Why or why not? Share your thoughts with a Christian friend.

Prayer:

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.