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THE SABBATH AND MODERN CIVILIZATION.

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RECENTLY the writer was requested to answer the following question: "Has modern civilization modified the works of necessity and mercy mentioned in the Westminster Standards in connection with the Sabbath?"

It will be seen at once that this is a difficult question, and one about which intelligent and conscientious Christians are not at all agreed. Many seem to think a great modification of such works has been brought about, in the providence of God, by the changed circumstances in which men now find themselves. They plead the necessities of modern civilization: the necessities of commerce, now carried on on so vast a scale, and constantly involving so great interests, and demanding in its exchanges so much promptness and dispatch; the necessities of labor in ministering adequately and seasonably to the numerous and pressing wants of millions of our people crowded together in our great cities; the necessities of the railway, postal and telegraphic service in preserving communication, often admitting no delay, between the different parts of our widely extended country; the necessities of refreshment and recreation, after toil during the week more exacting and exhausting than any to which men were ever before subjected. These alleged necessities seem to have made the impression on them that the Sabbath law of the Scriptures has become unsuitable for this age; that it is impossible to observe it with the strictness there enjoined; that it is unreasonable to suppose we are expected to do it; that the strict observance there required and these necessities, which often can-

not be postponed a single day, cannot be reconciled the one with the other, and that, therefore, either the strict observance of the day, or most important interests of men, must every Sabbath be more or less seriously sacrificed. There can be little doubt that this impression is widely prevalent.

It may be well, then, to begin this discussion by showing that whatever may be true as to works of necessity and mercy, modern civilization has not modified the Sabbath law itself. The laws of God, as well informed Christians*know, are divided into two classes—moral and positive. It is not meant, of course, that they are so designated in the Scriptures. So far as the writer has observed, the word “moral” does not occur in the Scriptures; neither does the word “positive.” But it is meant that the Scriptures contain two kinds of laws, which expositors have generally agreed to designate by these two terms. By moral laws are meant those laws which are grounded in the nature of things: in the nature of God and man, and the relations subsisting between them, and which impose duties, many of which would have been recognized as obligatory any way, even if they had never been formally enjoined. It would have been seen to be man’s duty, for instance, to love God; to reverence and honor him, even if God had never specifically required it. These laws, having their ground thus in the nature of things, are unalterable; as unalterable as the nature of God and man and the relations between them, out of which they spring. What are called positive laws, however, had a very different origin. They had their source, not in the nature of things, but only in considerations of merely temporary expediency. The ceremonial laws of the Mosaic dispensation, for instance, requiring sacrifices, incense, oblations and other rites, were imposed, not because the nature of things made them necessary, but only because they would be temporarily useful for the religious instruction and training of the Israelites in the particular circumstances in which they then were; and hence, when those temporary circumstances passed away those laws passed away with them. Such, then, are these two kinds of laws, as they are found in the Word of God; the one as lasting and as unalterable as the changeless constitution of things which gave them being; the other transient, and passing out of existence with the merely transient exigencies in which they originated.

Now the Sabbath law, as has often been pointed out, belongs partly to one of these classes of laws and partly to the other. In so far as it requires a particular day for rest and worship—the seventh day under the old dispensation, the first under the new—it is positive, for there is nothing in the nature of things making either of these days of the week, rather than any other, absolutely necessary. But in so far as it requires time for rest and worship, and a definite time, it is moral, as may be made evident in this way; men are bound by their natural relations and obligations to God to worship him, not only privately, but socially and publicly. They are bound to assemble themselves together that they may receive the instruction of his Word and honor his name, and that they may give their public, united and concentrated testimony to his truth and claims, and so give in his behalf to the world the most influential testimony in their power. That they may do this, however, a fixed and known time for the purpose is necessary. Otherwise, regular and united assemblies would not, and could not, take place. That the time fixed and made known may be everywhere the same and have an authority that all will recognize as binding; an authority that will fully express man's duty and God's rights in the case, and so do all that can be done, as far as the use of means is concerned, to secure the observance of the day, it is necessary that it be fixed and made known by God himself. The history of the Christian world shows that where the time has been supposed to have been appointed by human authority, civil or ecclesiastical, it has been recognized as obligatory by very few, and that where there has been only such a Sabbath, there has been practically no Sabbath at all. As certain as it is, then, that the nature of things makes rest and worship necessary, so certain it is that if that rest is to be universal and that worship to be everywhere regular, united and public, the time must be appointed and proclaimed by God himself. The Sabbath law, then, both as to the end in view and as to the means by which alone that end can be attained, is moral; and, therefore, cannot be modified by modern civilization; nor by anything else. Can modern civilization modify any other moral law? Can it modify the moral laws against idolatry, or profanity, or theft? Can it modify any other law in the moral code in the slightest degree? Well, for the same reason, it cannot modify this law. It may disregard and violate it, as it is

constantly doing, but it cannot alter it. This law, then, stands in the divine statute book as it has always stood. It requires now the same observance which it required in the beginning. In no respect has its essential strictness been relaxed. Men need its rest now more than ever before, because their energies are more severely taxed, and they need its worship now more than in any previous age, because the absorbing pursuits and enticing pleasures of modern civilization more seriously imperil their spiritual interests. It is absurd, therefore, to suppose that just when the strict requirements of the law are most needed, they have in large measure been revoked. It is in vain to plead changed pursuits, changed circumstances, and a changed civilization in favor of a changed law, when all these changes only make the law unchanged more necessary than ever before to man's highest interests here and hereafter. The Sabbath law itself, then, has not been modified.

But have works of necessity and mercy been modified? Are they now of a different character from those mentioned in the Scriptures? Are they to be considered as determined and regulated by different principles? Is that permitted now that was not permitted then? Does the providence of God, in modern civilization, authorize and necessitate a change of view as to what may and may not be done on his day?

A general answer to these questions seems to be found in what has already been said. The Sabbath law itself has not been modified. But that law, as expounded in the Scriptures, prescribes what may and may not be done on that day. It, in principle, defines works of necessity and mercy. Since, therefore, it has not been changed, of course no essential change has been wrought in them; and no one can claim that there has been, unless he claims that God teaches one thing in his Word and another in his providence.

But a more specific answer to the above questions may be found in what the Scriptures teach about works of necessity and mercy. What is a work of necessity? What does the word "necessity" mean in this connection? There is a fairy tale about a tent, so pliant and compressible that it could be shut up within the narrow compass of a walnut, and yet so elastic that when taken out and stretched, it could cover a king and his whole army. The word "necessity" seems to be regarded, in this connection, as

having a similar capacity for almost indefinite expansion. It is stretched and stretched in almost all directions, until it is made to cover and shelter almost any theory as to the nature of works of necessity and mercy any one chooses to hold. A work of necessity, however, is not just any work that any one may choose so to regard. It is not just any work that any great corporation may find it convenient so to account. It is not just any work that those who love gain or pleasure more than they love God and his worship may prefer so to adjudge. God has not thus left the observance of his day at the mercy of the selfish and perverse judgments of men. That would have been fatal to all the great ends for which the day was intended. It would then have been so completely filled up with works claiming to be works of necessity that all time for rest and worship would have been crowded out. On the contrary, he has given us very clear instruction as to what works may be performed on his day. He has laid down on the subject general principles so plain that no one need ordinarily be in doubt as to their application in specific cases. He tells us, for instance, that the day is intended, in part, for rest, physical rest, mental rest; rest from all kinds of toil; a rest which no competent physiologist or physician will deny is necessary for continued health and strength, and for prolonged efficiency in any of the pursuits of life, and so a rest benevolently prescribed and required in behalf of man's best interests, and, therefore, a rest which it is irrational and suicidal for him to refuse. He tells us also that the day is for worship in all its different exercises private and public. Such, in general terms, are the two great purposes for which the day is designed. Of course, then, he does not allow on the day any works that are inconsistent with these purposes. That would be nugatory and self-defeating. It would be requiring rest and worship on his day, and at the same time allowing what would with absolute certainty prevent them. It would be both doing and undoing the same thing at the same time by the same means. Of course, such preposterous legislation as this would be, cannot be ascribed to God. From this point of view, then, it may be seen that modern civilization cannot so modify works of necessity and mercy as to introduce into the Sabbath anything that is in conflict with the great beneficent ends for which the day was appointed. It cannot so modify them as to convert a day intended for rest into a

day for work; a day intended for worship into a day for pleasure.

This will be still more manifest if the nature of the works that may be done on the Sabbath is considered. When the Saviour was on the earth, he was again and again charged by his enemies with doing, or allowing to be done, on the Sabbath what was inconsistent with its requirements. He availed himself of such opportunities, and sometimes seems to have sought them, to give such instruction in regard to the objects and proper observance of the day as was then, and would ever afterwards be, needed. On one occasion, for instance, his disciples were walking on the Sabbath through a grain field, and being an hungered, they plucked some of the heads, and rubbing the grains out in their hands, ate them. Whereupon the Pharisees charged them with violating the Sabbath law. They said that that law prohibited all work on that day; that it forbade harvesting, but that it was as certainly harvesting in principle to gather a few heads as to gather many. They said also that it forbade threshing; but that was as certainly threshing in principle to rub out a few grains as to thresh out a whole crop. The Saviour, however, defended the disciples. He defended them on the ground that what they had done was a necessary work; necessary to minister to their physical wants; to satisfy their physical hunger. Their case, he said, was like the case of David, who, when fleeing from Saul, having no other means of supply, asked and received the shewbread of the tabernacle, which, in all ordinary cases, it was lawful for only the priests to eat. He thus taught that it is lawful for men to satisfy their physical wants on the Sabbath; to do whatever is necessary, that could not be done before, to make themselves comfortable; and it is evident that such work is in perfect harmony with the objects of the day. Those objects, as has been indicated, are rest and worship; but in order that the body may fully rest, it must be comfortable, and in order that men may give themselves up wholly and heartily to the worship of the day, no disturbing and distracting physical wants must be pleading for satisfaction. Work of this kind, then, that could not be done before, is not only allowed on the Sabbath, but virtually required, that the chief purposes of the day may be more certainly and completely gained.

But, in connection with the incident mentioned above, the

Saviour gave further instruction in regard to work lawful on the Sabbath. The priests, he said, do work on the Sabbath, in connection with the temple services, in preparing and offering sacrifices and in other ways; "and they are blameless," thus teaching that any work necessary to provide for the worship of the day and incidental to its different exercises, that could not be done previously, is not only in harmony with the law, but implicitly enjoined by it, since otherwise the worship could not take place.

Still further instruction as to works lawful on the Sabbath was given in connection with the miracles of healing, which he wrought on that day. His enemies asserted that he thus violated the Sabbath law, but he declared that such work was in accordance with that law; and the reason is plain: such merciful work was not only in harmony with the merciful objects of the day, but, by relieving suffering, fitted the healed the better to enjoy the rest and to engage in the worship the day requires.

It is thus seen what kind of works are lawful on the Sabbath; and it is carefully to be noted that they are all works *in perfect accord with the rest and worship for which the day was ordained*. They are all adapted and designed the better to secure those two great ends.

There is here, then, a test by which the works which modern civilization has introduced into the Sabbath on the plea that they are necessary and merciful may be judged. Amongst these works is the Sunday newspaper, not differing in its contents essentially from the papers published on secular days; containing accounts of the civil, political, financial, military, domestic and foreign events of the day, and especially, in sensational form, accounts of all recent crimes and immoralities. Is this a necessary Sabbath work? Would the Saviour have approved it? Would he have had such literature, to any extent, to substitute, on the Sabbath, the great truths of his Word? Does this work stand the tests he has prescribed? His day, he says, is a day for rest. Is the Sunday newspaper necessary for anybody's rest? Is it necessary for the rest of those who publish it, and of those who in the cities and along the railways spend a large portion of the day in distributing it? Is it necessary for the physical and mental rest of those who read it? The Sabbath is a day for worship. Is this paper necessary to enable those who publish and distribute and

read it to engage successfully in the religious exercises of the day? Does it dissipate worldly thoughts and a worldly spirit, and lift up the soul into communion with God? The Sabbath is a day of mercy. Is this a work of mercy? A work of mercy to whom? Can it be a work of mercy to the thousands who handle the paper on the Sabbath, and to the hundreds of thousands who read it, to put any obstacle or temptation in the way of their enjoyment of the inestimable blessings of rest and worship, which the day is intended to bestow? Is it not evident thus that modern civilization cannot so modify works of necessity and mercy as innocently to intrude the Sunday newspaper into the sanctities of the day? Is it not absurd to say that it is necessary for the rest, or for the worship, or for any of the other merciful purposes of the day?

Another work that modern civilization has thrust into the Sabbath as necessary is the running almost everywhere of railway trains, carrying on freight and passenger traffic just as on the other days of the week. But are these trains necessary for the rest of the day, or for its worship, or for any of its other merciful purposes? Do they tend to secure these ends or to defeat them? It will not do to say that, although not necessary for these purposes, they are necessary for other important purposes, and that this justifies them. That cannot be true unless the Sabbath law has been so far modified by modern civilization that that is now lawful which wholly defeats the original purposes of the law. But the Sabbath law, being moral, is no more capable, as we have seen, of modification than the moral law against profanity or murder. Much that is plausible, and to the worldly man, conclusive, is said in defence of this kind of Sabbath desecration; but it all at last comes simply to this: *this kind of traffic on the Sabbath is more important and necessary for the world than the rest and worship of the day are.* But men delude themselves if they imagine that God agrees to that; and that he will not hold them at last to a dreadful account for sacrificing in this matter their own highest interests, and denying him his clear and just rights.

Other instances of the attempted modification of the Sabbath law might be mentioned, if there were space; but enough, perhaps, has now been said to indicate the principles by which they are to be tested.

A few other considerations, however, may be added in refutation of the notion that modern civilization has modified works of necessity and mercy. In one way or another the Sabbath, in many parts of our country, has been so filled up with works claiming to be necessary to man's welfare and merciful in their purposes and results, that thousands and hundreds of thousands are robbed of the day's rest, and of its religious privileges. Now, there is no doubt that such works have greatly increased in number, and in some respects, changed in character, since the Saviour's day. The enormous increase of population, and the crowded and frequently unfavorable circumstances in which multitudes live, make this inevitable. Still they have not so changed in character and become so great in number as to make that necessary which is now constantly witnessed: multitudes every Sabbath fully engaged in their usual secular pursuits. Many, however, say that this is necessary. Many business men, many Christian men, many corporations and heads of departments in the State and national governments unhesitatingly affirm that it is necessary. Much commerce, they say, must move on the Sabbath as on other days; the mails must be transported and delivered; telegraphic communication between the different parts of the country must be maintained, and factories and shops of certain kinds must be kept in operation. The ever pressing wants of men make it indispensable. It is a mercy to multitudes that it is done. It is in harmony with the beneficent spirit of religion. Under the influence of this view the number of secular pursuits prosecuted on the Sabbath, and the number of persons engaging in them, is constantly increasing; and the public mind and conscience are becoming more and more accustomed to this state of things, and thus the Sabbath, and the great interests dependent on its right observance, are becoming involved in ever increasing peril.

There are several considerations, however, which show this view to be erroneous.

One is, that since all men need the Sabbath—need it so much, indeed, that it is indispensable to their highest temporal and spiritual interests—it can hardly be true that in the cases of so immense numbers it has become a work of necessity and of mercy to deprive them of it. Yet this is practically what is now said. This work on the Sabbath, it is affirmed, is necessary; it is a

merciful ministration to the wants of thousands. But if this be true, then it has become a necessity and a mercy to multitudes of our people to take away from other multitudes what is a necessity and mercy to them. This, however, seems to be a contradiction in terms.

Another consideration which shows this view to be erroneous is that God commands all men to "remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy;" to use it exclusively for the great purposes of rest, worship and mercy. Is it, then, probable that in these modern times, when the Sabbath is more needed than ever before; more needed for rest because the physical strain is greater than ever before, and more needed for worship because the influences unfriendly to man's spiritual interests are more numerous and powerful; is it probable, in such circumstances, that God has brought it about in his providence that hundreds of thousands are being entirely exempted from remembering it and keeping it holy, and are being wholly released from all obligation to take its rest, and to render its worship? If strict obedience to the law was required when it was less needed, can it be that vast numbers are released from all obedience when it is vastly more needed?

Still another consideration against this view is that if all the works now done on the Sabbath are works of necessity and mercy, then, on a vast scale, has modern civilization converted ordinary secular pursuits into works of that nature, and, it would seem, might carry on the conversion to almost any further extent, for no sufficient reason can be given why most of the work now done on the Sabbath is necessary, that would not justify Sabbath labor in almost any other department of human activity. So that we have this remarkable result, that modern civilization has so completely converted almost all the secular pursuits of life, and given them such a character that they are no longer barred out of the Sabbath by the Sabbath law, but may come into the holy day and be prosecuted during its sacred hours in perfect harmony with its original design. In other words, it has abolished the distinction between works that may and may not be done on that day by making almost all works necessary and merciful on that day! But what is this but to say that it has, so far as it has thus gone, blotted the Sabbath itself out of existence.

This introduces the last consideration against this view. It

tends towards the utter destruction of the Sabbath. It takes away the rest of the day, and thus destroys it as far as that is concerned. It takes away all opportunities for the worship of the day, and thus destroys it as far as that is concerned; and by thus completely robbing the day of all the blessings it was intended to bestow, it practically expunges the fourth commandment from the decalogue. Can the works that do that be necessary? Can they be works of mercy to men? Are they worth more to the world than the day they destroy? The simple fact is that these works are plain and inexcusable violations of the law of God, and by so much as that law is immeasurably important, by so much is the guilt great of all who have any part in its infraction.

Neither the Sabbath law, then, nor the works of necessity and mercy prescribed by it, have been essentially modified by modern civilization. That civilization has done a great deal. It has wrought mighty and noble achievements. But there is one thing it cannot do; one thing it cannot even dare to attempt to do without running the imminent risk of its own complete undoing: it cannot in the least modify, much less abolish, one of the most important of all the moral laws God has ever given.

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