

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 117-c & 119

Delighting in the Sabbath

Halifax, 12 December 2010

Introduction

Today we continue on in our study of the fourth commandment.

- If you have been here over the last few weeks, you know that the fourth commandment is the one about keeping the Sabbath Day holy.
 - This commandment is given to you in Q. 115 or the Larger Catechism:

Q. 115: Which is the fourth commandment?

- A. The fourth commandment is, remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

We have already learned that God instituted the Sabbath at creation.

- He sanctified this day and blessed it to be a holy festival day.
 - It is as day that is set apart each week from all other days...
 - when our Sovereign Creator God calls us to assemble before His awesome throne that we may rejoice before Him as we consider His marvellous work of creation.
- And we also learned that now that Jesus has come, He has changed the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week.
 - He did this because on the first day of the week,
 - He rose from the dead as the first-fruits of the new creation,
 - as the first-fruits of the kingdom of righteousness and eternal life.
 - When we have trusted in Him, this great work of redemption becomes the focal point of God's work that reveals Him to us even more than the work of creation.
 - We still praise Him as Creator, but now much more as our gracious redeemer.

Both our duty to observe God's Sabbaths as well as the day change is spoken of in Q. 116:

Q. 116: What is required in the fourth commandment?

- A. The fourth commandment requires of all men the sanctifying or keeping holy to God such set times as he has appointed in his Word, expressly one whole day in seven; which was the seventh from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, and the first day of the week ever since, and so to continue to the end of the world; which is the Christian Sabbath, and in the New Testament called the Lord's day.

For the last couple of weeks, we have been looking at how we are to keep the day holy—how it is to be set apart from the other six days of the week.

- In Leviticus 23, we saw that it is to set the day apart as a joyful festival day and as a holy convocation in which we assemble before our heavenly Father in each community.
- This is the subject taken up in Question 117:

Q. 117: How is the Sabbath or the Lord's day to be sanctified?

- A. The Sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.

Last week we concluded with a look at our attitude about keeping the Sabbath, and how a lot of things fall into place when we are eager to meet with the LORD on His day.

- This is very important. It is often spoken about in scripture.
 - There is something very wrong with us if we consider it a burden to set aside our ordinary work and recreations to meet with our gracious redeemer...
 - to come before His throne of grace and pour out our prayers and our praises,
 - to sit at His feet and listen to His word that reveals Him and His will to us,
 - to encourage one another and fellowship together before Him.
- As our attitude about the day is so important that I want to devote our whole lesson to this subject this week.
 - So we will continue to look at Q. 117 and also add Q. 119.

Q.119: What are the sins forbidden in the fourth commandment?

- A. The sins forbidden in the fourth commandment are, all omissions of the duties required, all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them, and being weary of them; all profaning the day by idleness, and doing that which is in itself sinful; and by all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations.

I. I want to begin with three scripture readings that speak of three raunchy attitudes about the Sabbath.

- Then I will give you a parable that illustrates these three raunchy attitudes...
- And then we will examine ourselves as to these three attitudes.

A. The first one is Amos 8:5.

- In Amos 8, the prophet is rebuking the people for their greed that is manifested in oppressing the poor, cheating people, and chaffing at keeping the Sabbath because they would rather be at work.
 - God is very displeased with His people about this and threatens to chasten them if they will not repent.
- Here, I will read Amos 8:4-10.
 - Amos 8:4-10: "Hear this, you who swallow up the needy, And make the poor of the land fail, Saying: "When will the New Moon be past, That we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, That we may trade wheat? Making the ephah small and the shekel large, Falsifying the scales by deceit, That we may buy the poor for silver, And the needy for a pair of sandals—Even sell the bad wheat?" The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: "Surely I will never forget any of their works. Shall the land not tremble for this, And everyone mourn who dwells in it? All of it shall swell like the River, Heave and subside Like the River of Egypt. "And it shall come to pass in that day," says the Lord GOD, "That I will make the sun go down at noon, And I will darken the earth in broad daylight; I will turn your feasts into mourning, And all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist, And baldness on every head; I will make it like mourning for an only *son*, And its end like a bitter day."
- You see here that greed had such a grip on them they couldn't wait for the Sabbath to end so they could get back to their business.
 - Instead of yearning for the Sabbath, they yearned for the Sabbath to over!
 - There are a lot of people like that to day—
 - it seems like a waste to spend a day in worship when they might have used the day to increase their wealth—
 - at least doing improvements around the house.

TRANS> The second scripture reading speaks of a Sabbath problem that is perhaps even more common to us...

B. It is from Isaiah 58:13-14 where the Lord calls the people to stop doing their own thing on the Sabbath day.

- He is explaining to them why it is that He has not been blessing them.
 - And one of the reasons He mentions is that they had this bad attitude about the Sabbath.
 - They felt that they had better things to do on the Sabbath than spend the day with God.
 - The reason, of course, was that their heart was not right with God.
 - He tells them that if they call the Sabbath day a delight, He will richly bless them.

- Listen as I read to you from Isaiah 58:13-14:
 - Isa 58:13-14 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."

C. The third scripture reading is from Matthew 12:1-13.

- Here you have people who are very zealous about keeping the Sabbath—so zealous that they break God’s law to keep it!
 - I’ll explain more about this later, you heard me right...
 - They are so zealous to *keep* the Sabbath that they break God’s law in their effort to avoid breaking Sabbath.
 - The Pharisees were so zealous about keeping the rules that they lost sight of the very LORD who had given them the rules!
- Here, let me read the passage to you.
 - First Jesus talks about doing what we call works of necessity—like building a fire to heat the house or cooking lunch...
 - And secondly He speaks about doing what we call works of mercy—caring for an injured person or pushing someone’s car out that got stuck in the snow.
 - Listen to God’s word:
 - READ> Matthew 12:1-13.

TRANS> So you see that there are three wrong attitudes about the Sabbath that are addressed in these three scriptures...

- We may summarise them like this:
 1. “But I have to work.”
 2. “I’d rather be doing something else”
 3. “You’ll never catch me breaking the Sabbath!”

II. Here is a parable to illustrate all three of these attitudes.

Joe is one of the finest husbands around.

- He and Jane just got married about a year ago.
 - They are both very busy,
 - But Joe is always available for Jane.
 - He consistently gives himself to meet her needs...
 - even at great personal sacrifice.
 - He is loving, kind, gentle, wise, and faithful.

As a good husband, Joe would like to spend more time with Jane.

- But it is difficult to get in more than a half an hour each day because Jane is so busy.
 - He realises that if their relationship is going to grow, they need to spend more time together.
 - He feels like they hardly know each other and he yearns for that to change.
- Joe explains this to Jane and he suggests that they take two vacations:
 - two weeks in December and two weeks in July.
 - He asks Jane to see if she can get the time off.

Now you would think that Jane would be delighted that her husband (as wonderful as he is) wants to spend time with her!

- But not so!
- She complains...
 - “But Joe, Don’t you realise, I don’t get paid vacations!”
 - “Besides, if I take that much time off, I may not get that promotion I have been looking for and then we won’t be able to replace those hideous Arborite counter tops with some decent granite ones.”
 - “How can we afford it?”
- Joe shows her that with his bonus, it will be no problem...
 - He insists... “We really need to do this.”
 - With some reluctance, Jane concedes.

But after a while, Jane begins to rather like the idea of a two-week vacation!

- After all, she **has** been very busy and she **does** need a break.
- She begins to think of all the things she would like to do!
 - She starts making her own plans—
 - a one-week shopping trip with some friends...
 - she can finish that scrapbook project that she started before she got married...
 - and she can redo the wallpaper in the basement.
 - She completely forgets the whole purpose of the vacation...
 - to spend time with Joe!

In the meantime, Joe is planning a trip to Bermuda as a surprise for Jane.

- He has been praying that their relationship will be strengthened by the time apart.
- He has no idea that Jane has been making her own plans—plans that exclude him!
- When the time gets close,

- Jane mentions something about the renovation project she had planned for one of the weeks...
- Joe encourages her not to plan anything—
 - He has made plans for them...
 - He wants to spend the entire two weeks with just the two of them.
- Jane explodes with anger!
 - She calls a friend and starts going on about how unreasonable Joe is...
 - Her friend says, “What has he done now?”
 - “He wants me to spend the whole time just with him! He says he has already made all the arrangements!”
 - “What? That’s ridiculous!”
 - “Who does he think he is, wanting to dominate you like that?”
 - “What about our shopping trip?”
 - “Just tell him you already have plans!”
 - “That’s right, he has to understand that I just cannot be tied down like that!”

Jane proceeds to tell Joe to cancel his plans—that she already has commitments that she can’t break!

- Joe is very disappointed.
- He hardly gets to see Jane at all in December.
- But he does get her to agree to set aside time in July to go to Bermuda.

When July finally comes, Jane begrudgingly goes along...

- She complains to all her friends...
 - “Joe insisted that I spend the whole time with him...”
 - “And I did give him my word...”
 - She keeps saying:
 - “He doesn’t want me to do anything else with anybody else—just with him.”

When they arrive in Bermuda, Joe runs into an old friend that is staying in the hotel with his new wife and arranges to have dinner with them.

- He thinks Jane will especially like his friend’s wife and very anxious to introduce them to each other.
- But Jane is sour the whole evening...
 - She hardly says a word.
- When they return to their room, Joe asks her what is wrong.
 - She replies,

- “Well, I **thought** you didn’t want me to spend time with anyone else but you! I was just trying to do what **you** wanted.”
- With a firm anger, Joe assures her that that is not what he meant...
 - But during the whole trip, Jane is quite cold and unresponsive...
 - She never lets Joe forget that *she* has done her duty!
 - *She* has spent the entire two weeks with him alone.
 - But it was not quite what Joe had in mind.

III. Now what about you? What is your attitude about the Sabbath?

- A. Are you so attached your worldly possessions that you are reluctant to set aside a day each week from your work—be it work around the house or at the office?
- Are you like Jane who did not want to miss work to be with the one who loves her and who wanted to spend time with her?
 - Are you like the Jews that Amos spoke to who said,
 - “When will the Sabbath be past that we may trade wheat?”
1. If that is your attitude, you won’t get much benefit from the Sabbath even if you don’t actually do any work on it.
 - That’s what seems to be the case in Amos 8:5.
 - They were outwardly keeping the Sabbath, but the whole time they were yearning for it to end so they could get back to work.
 - Their hands were not into their work, but their heart and thoughts certainly were.
 - This is so sad!
 2. The Sabbath is God’s gracious gift to us.
 - We are so busy all week—and that is good—He has called to serve Him by serving each other in our respective callings.
 - But He also knows that we need time apart from our work for more focused communion with Him.
 - We are to take time for this each day—
 - He appointed the morning and evening sacrifice at the temple, and the Jews would keep this as time of prayer in their communities.
 - Daniel even kept these times while he was exiled in Babylon and we do well to set aside time each day for private worship in our homes (and by worship, I include reading of the Word as well as prayer).

- But God in His wisdom knows that we need more than that.
 - He has also given us a whole day each week to set aside our daily work.
 - It is His gift to those that He loves.
 - He wants to be with them.
- And as we have seen, He has appointed that we gather together to hear His word.
 - This is not just a ritual!
 - No! His purpose is to make Himself known to us on the Sabbath!
 - In His Word, He tells us of His great love for us.
 - Of the plans He has for us to give us a future and a hope.
 - Of the goals He has for us and for His church.
 - Of His promise to work in us and to bless us.
 - He tells us what great things He has done for us...
 - not only has He made the world, but He has sent Jesus to Redeem us.
 - He shows us His glory, His power, His grace and His wisdom.
 - And He reveals to you His law so that you can learn how to live beautifully for Him in this world and how to do those things that please Him.
 - You are to come into this day with yearning to learn of your gracious God.
 - He made the day to be a blessing for you!
 - Not to shackle you and keep you from your work.
 - You need to come to the day with eager anticipation!
 - Not with an attitude that you can't wait for the day to be over so you can get back to your work!
 - And not only does He call us to receive His word on the Sabbath—to learn of Him,
 - He also calls us to praise Him.
 - What else can you do on the day that He is showing you His glory and His gracious work for you?
 - He is the King of Glory!
 - He is the LORD God who made heaven and earth and all that it is in it.
 - He is the gracious redeemer who sent His Son.

- And it is only fitting that the day should be filled with both public and private praise and thanksgiving!
 - And not only do we praise Him when we learn of Him,
 - but it is also a day to earnestly seek Him!
 - You honour Him when you pray with yearning that He would bless you in all the ways He has promised!
 - And that He would fill your life with the riches of His grace and strengthen you to do His will.
3. How inappropriate it is to come to this high and holy day with a desire to get back to your daily work when He has such excellent things prepared for you on this day!
- What a shame that in our depravity, He has to command us not to work on this day!
 - It exposes our corruption that we ever should have wanted to work on such a day!

TRANS> If you are so attached to increasing your possessions that you can't even set apart one day for communion with God,

- your heart is clearly in the wrong place.
 - When that is your attitude, there is no way your work on the other six days can be for the glory of God.
 - You are not seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness, you are seeking the treasures of this world.
 - Work is not wrong, but it is to be done for the glory of God with thanksgiving.
 - We are not cattle who only seek good pasture.
 - We are made for communion with God.
 - Our sin makes us like cattle, but we are made to know God.
- The very same things we have said about our work may be said about our recreations that have nothing to do with keeping the day holy.

B. Are you so attached your recreations that you are reluctant to set aside a day each week to commune with the LORD?

1. Maybe you are like Jane when she decided that taking time off work was not such a bad idea...
 - but then completely ignored the reason for taking time off work!
 - We had a vote in Nova Scotia not too long ago about whether businesses ought to be closed on Sunday.

- The majority did want them to be closed, but it was not in order that they might commune with God.
 - It was in order that they might have time with their families, time to go to the park, time for leisure activities.
 - People wanted to have a quiet day of rest and relaxation.
 - All good things, but not the purpose of the holy Sabbath!
 - Jane missed Joe's point in having a vacation when she planned a shopping trip with her friends and projects that left no time for Joe.
 - So do you when you make plans on the LORD's day that have nothing to do with worship and feasting before Him.
2. As we saw in Isaiah 58, the people were looking at the Sabbath as a day to do whatever they wanted...their own pleasures...
- Isa 58:13-14: "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
 - Let me stop and explain that phrase—
 - The idea is that the Sabbath is holy ground and you are not to trample upon it with ordinary things that are not holy... so again...
 - "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."
 - There are a lot of people who have tried to change what this passage is clearly teaching because they want to have the Sabbath as a day of recreation.
 - They want it to be a day for sports or for watching movies or for going to the zoo—that kind of thing.
 - But it is difficult to force that out of this passage.
 - They do this by taking the words, "not doing your own ways nor finding your own pleasure nor speaking your own words" to mean that you are not to engage in sinful ways or sinful pleasures or sinful words.
 - Of course you are not to do such things on the Sabbath!
 - But God is speaking here specifically about what ought not to be done on the Sabbath in view of keeping it holy—sanctified from other days.
 - Such things are not to be done on *any* day.
 - He is talking about things that are not to be done in the Sabbath day in order to keep it holy to the LORD.

- Don't come trampling upon His holy day with your own everyday activities...
- The day is to be devoted to communion with God, to feasting before Him, to keeping a holy convocation.
 - I am not here to make rigid rules—
 - for example, it might even be in keeping with the day to watch an inspirational movie that would enhance your communion with God...
 - So its not about saying “no movies period”
 - One person might find that going on a walk was quite in keeping with the goal of the day, and another might find it a distraction.
 - So its not about saying no walks...
 - We are not to judge one another, but we are to honestly check our own attitude and see that what we are doing really is about communion with God—that we are keeping the day holy to Him.
 - We are not to do “our own ways or find our own pleasure or speak our own words” on this day.
 - The alternative is not that the day is to be unpleasant for us—
 - Not at all—
 - The LORD commands us, in fact, to call it a delight!
 - We are to delight in sitting at His feet and learning of Him, in giving Him concentrated attention and devotion on His day.
 - Jane might claim that she would try to think about her husband a lot while she went shopping with her friends,
 - but that was hardly what he had in mind when he asked her to take a vacation with Him.
 - It was not enough that she refrain from doing things that would displease her husband while shopping like running up the credit card or hanging out with her old boyfriend...
 - It was that she would do what He had asked her to do instead of doing her own thing.
 - It was the problem of doing her own thing at the time He had set apart to be with her.
 - There was a problem in her heart that she did not call it a delight to spend the day with her husband.
 - If you know the LORD Jesus and all that He has done for you,
 - How can it not be a delight to spend the day with Him?
 - Who wants to play tennis when the LORD of glory wants to meet with you!

C. But now let's turn to consider the third raunchy attitude about the Sabbath.

- This is the way of those who insist that they will never break the Sabbath!

- 1. This is wrong because there are times when God's law *requires* you to break your Sabbath rest.
 - Turn to Matthew 12 and see what Jesus says about the priests in v. 5...
 - Matthew 12:5: "Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?"

 - The priests were commanded to prepare sacrifices on the Sabbath, and there was a lot of hard work involved in doing so.
 - Jesus does not say that they do not profane or break the Sabbath by doing so. They break their Sabbath-rest because God has commanded them to!
 - He says that they are blameless when they profane the Sabbath in this way.

 - And consider the action of His disciples that Jesus is defending here.
 - They have picked grain and prepared it by rubbing it in their hands—threshing it as it were, because they were hungry.
 - In doing this they broke the Sabbath, but it was something that needed to be done in order for them to be able to eat under the circumstances.
 - And eating is necessary.
 - It would have been altogether different if the disciples had been harvesting their fields on the Sabbath, but they were not.
 - They were just picking and eating as they passed by.
 - They were grabbing breakfast on their way to church!
 - It was necessary for them to do this if they were going to be nourished as they prepared to go into the synagogue.

 - Just as the priests preparing of sacrifices was necessary if God was to be worshipped as He had commanded,
 - so it is necessary that we be sufficiently nourished as we come to worship...
 - And not only that, but as the Sabbath is also a day of feasting, there is a certain amount of food preparation that is necessary.
 - It is good to do as much as we can before the Sabbath, but there is work that breaks our Sabbath rest that must be done if we are going to have a feast.

 - And there are other necessary things like getting to the holy convocation.

- Obviously, travel is necessary.
 - You break your Sabbath rest to do it, but you are blameless in breaking the Sabbath in this way...
 - In fact, you would be guilty of not keeping the Sabbath if you refused to break your rest by going to the place of assembly.
 - But such travel is altogether different than going on a business trip or a vacation on the Sabbath.
 - It may indeed be that you need to travel for your work, but you don't need to travel on the Sabbath in most circumstances.

TRANS> So you see that there are works of necessity that we do that break the Sabbath without breaking God's law.

- There are many others—
 - Perhaps you need to take a nap on the Sabbath!
 - But see that the purpose of the nap is not to escape boredom.
 - See that it is to strengthen you for further communion with God on His day.

2. Jesus shows us that it is also lawful to break the Sabbath to do works of mercy.

- In some ways, works of necessity and works of mercy overlap...
 - Even after explaining about works of necessity in verse 5, Jesus quotes the Old Testament in verse 7 where the LORD says:
 - "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."
 - If someone is hungry, the Lord would prefer that you broke the Sabbath to prepare food for them than that you rigidly keep the Sabbath.
- Jesus makes this point very vivid to His legalistic opponents when He gets to the synagogue.
 - In verse 10, it says:
 - Matthew 12:10: And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" —that they might accuse Him."
 - And Jesus asks them if they think it is wrong to rescue a lamb that is fallen into a pit on the Sabbath.
 - Is it lawful to break the Sabbath for this purpose?
 - They all knew that it was lawful.

- So Jesus says,
 - Matthew 12:12: "Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."
- It is so contrary to our Lord's will and intention for anyone to ignore the need of his neighbour in the name of keeping the Sabbath.
 - This is especially so now!
 - This is the day when we remember how the LORD broke His Sabbath rest to come and redeem us—as an act of mercy.
 - It is only fitting that whenever we see someone in distress on the Lord's Day, we should do what we can to relieve them.
 - To walk by without helping is the sin!
- 3. You see from this that the Sabbath is not about binding us up by a lot of rules so that we can hardly move!
 - That is not it at all!
 - That is a very immature way to keep the Sabbath!
 - There are elevators in the Jewish section of New York City that open on every floor on the Sabbath so that no Jew will have to break the Sabbath by punishing a button which would be lighting a fire!
 - We have "Sabbath mode" on our ovens so that the oven will turn on before the Sabbath and we won't have to "light a fire" by turning the dial!
 - This is absolutely absurd!
 - When God forbade the lighting of a fire in the OT, it was a prohibition against a blacksmith lighting a fire to ply his trade!
 - It was not about building a fire because it had turned cold...
 - Certainly not about pushing buttons on an elevator!
 - It interferes more with communion with God to have the elevator open on every floor than to push the button!
 - This is the kind of problem that Jesus is correcting!
 - The goal is not to make it as inconvenient and difficult as possible for us on the Sabbath.
 - It is not about seeing what extreme lengths we can go to to avoid doing any kind of work.
 - It is not about seeing how much of our comfort we are willing to give up as a sacrifice to obey the rules.
 - It is about setting aside a day for the worship of God!

- To learn of Him, to learn of His will for us, to praise and thank Him, to talk of Him and of all His wonderful works, to feast before Him with joy!
- The Sabbath is not a sacrifice we make, it is a gift we receive...
 - Certainly, there are things we have to give up in order to set apart the whole day for the LORD.
 - But the focus is hardly on what we are giving up!
 - What would you think of a bride whose talk was about all the things she must sacrifice to get married?
 - What would you think of her if she seemed to be more focused on what she was losing than on what she was receiving?
 - There is so much to receive on the Sabbath that we ought to be glad to give up our work and our recreations!
 - It is a day to spend in joyful communion with our gracious Lord!
 - When you look at it like that, it is not so hard to decide what ought and what ought not to be done on the Lord's Day.
 - Oh brothers and sisters, let us get all that we can out of this wonderful day when our Lord wants to meet with us.
 - Don't distract yourself by focussing on rule keeping—
 - But give yourself to communing with God.
 - Let the longings of Psalm 42 be your own longings!
 - Turn to Psalm 42 in your Psalter and present these words to your LORD to express your desire to communion with Him.