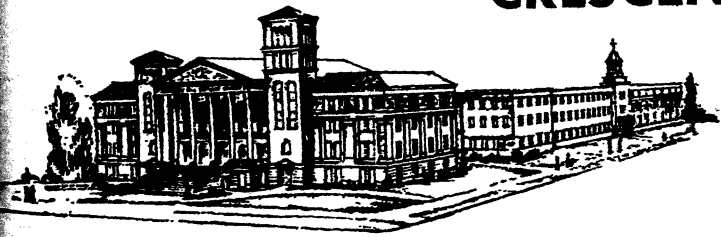


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE CHURCH AND SUNDAY CLOSINGS"



Sunday Morning, January 28, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Mark 2:23-28

Early one morning, about ten days ago, I was called out of my study to answer the telephone. It was a newspaper reporter asking me what I thought about the matter of Sunday closings. The next few moments were a startling revelation to me. I had given the issue a good bit of thought and felt fairly certain about it. But suddenly, as I was confronted by the demand to make a precise statement, I realized how hazy I really was. The more I talked the more confused I became, and I returned to the study quite dissatisfied with myself. Here was an issue of pertinent concern to the community, and I had not thought it through as I should. I resolved then and there to come to grips with the problem, and out of this has come the sermon for this morning. Actually, we are all under the same necessity. If they are asking me, they will be asking you. In the days ahead we shall face this problem in many different forms; thus, it behooves the church to give it her best attention. It would be far easier this morning to talk about some abstract subject that would inspire but not involve us; however, if we are to mean anything in this world to this day, we must face the problems of "things-as-they-are." What about the church and this matter of Sunday closings?

The answer of our American heritage is simple and clear-cut. It advocates an absolutely different pattern for life on Sunday. All businesses are to close, and those twenty-four hours are to be devoted to rest and worship. Now I was reared in a family that took this approach quite seriously. We were never allowed to play games or to study or to do any of the ordinary routines of the week. Sunday was different in every aspect, all the way from the clothes we wore to what we had for dinner. This practice went back many generations in my family. My maternal grandmother would not even cook on Sunday, and would stop whatever she was doing promptly at midnight on Saturday. One time she was making one of my uncles a coat, and twelve o'clock caught her before she got the buttons on. The next day he had to wear it to church unfinished, for the "Sabbath rule" of not working was absolute. This is the American tradition in its purest form, and its answer to our problem would be obvious: "All forms of work should cease on the Lord's Day."

But can the matter really be settled that easily? In my own mind it cannot, for several considerations rise up and demand a hearing.

One of them is the matter of consistency. For all our absolute appeals, do we really mean that all labor should cease? I reflect back on a typical Sunday in my childhood, and recall the following practices: we got up and read a paper that had been delivered on Sunday; we drove to church and quite often had to stop and buy gas; frequently we went out to Sunday dinner at a restaurant; we usually listened to the radio in the afternoon; if sickness arose, we did not hesitate to go to the

drugstore for medicine; quite often we picked up the telephone and got the operator to connect us with someone else; after church on Sunday night we would sometimes get an ice cream cone. Here, amid the strictest of intentions, are at least seven ways in which we involved ourselves with the labor of others on Sunday. And I would ask you to examine your present routine on the Lord's Day. Do you really adhere to an absolute principle, or are you not, like most of us, highly selective and arbitrary? We fight the opening of a department store, but stop at the bakery every Sunday on the way home from church to get something for dinner. We protest loudly about Sunday movies and sporting events, yet go home and watch the very same things on television. In terms of strict logic, our very church practice admits exceptions. We hire a janitor on this day, and here I am, your minister, in the midst of my heaviest work load of the week. I was reminded of this one of the few times I ever spoke to anyone about working on Sunday. He answered: "Don't you work, preacher? Why is it right for you and wrong for everybody else?" The point I am making is that consistency here is hard to achieve. The absolute answer sounds wonderful, but who among us really fulfills it in practice?

A second problem is the confusion about the Biblical teaching. Now I was well into my teens before I realized there was a difference between "the Sabbath" and Sunday. The two terms were always used interchangeably, and I assumed that what applied to one applied to the other. Now I am not sure where the blame should be fixed; maybe I simply did not listen carefully enough. But the fact is that these are two distinct entities. They are different days of the week - the Sabbath is the seventh and Sunday is the first. They commemorate different events - the Sabbath points to God's rest after creation while Sunday points to the resurrection of Christ. And this is significant - the Bible never identified the two. The practice of calling Sunday "the Sabbath" and applying all of the Old Testament strictures to it is a human action and not one that is rooted in the New Testament. If you observe the practice of our Lord, it is obvious that He did not accept the idea of total inactivity. He worshiped in the synagogue, to be sure, but He also carried on His ministry in a fashion similar to other days. Eight times in the Gospels Jesus clashed with the Jews over Sabbath observance, and His refusal to accept their restrictions was one of the factors that led to His crucifixion. This open break with the seventh day and the silence of the new Testament can hardly justify the practice of laying down rules for one day that were originally given for another. If you want to be Biblical, then keep a clear distinction between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday.

A third problem is one of true religious liberty. In this country we believe that everyone should be free to practice his religion according to the dictates of his own conscience. In our multi-religious society, this raises real questions. For the Muslim, Friday is the holy day; for the Jew and Seventh-Day Adventists and Seventh-Day Baptists, Saturday is the special day; for most Protestants and Catholics, Sunday is sacred. Is it honestly fair for one religious opinion to superimpose itself on those who believe differently? Perhaps the issue will be a little clearer if we turned it around and asked how we Christians would feel if "the seventh-day believers" got an ordinance passed in their favor. If everything was closed on Saturday and open on Sunday, would not we cry out in protest that our freedom was being violated? In a country such as ours, the question of religious justice is certainly involved in the issue of Sunday closings.

When you consider, then, the matter of our practices and the Biblical teachings and religious liberty, the simple answer - let all business cease - is by no means so simple. And that is one of the main points I want to make in this sermon. This

is not a clear-cut, black-and-white, open-and-shut case. There are ambiguities and problems on every side, and anyone who is prone to give absolute answers on the spur of the moment simply has not faced all of the facts. There is no easy and obvious solution. Any approach we take will leave much to be desired, and will force us to humbly admit: "we know in part and we prophecy in part" (I Corinthians 13:9). This is as perplexing a dilemma as one can face.

But does this difficulty mean there is nothing we can do? Are we to stand paralyzed before marching materialism and surrender up every evidence of the sacred? The prospect of a community where every day is just the same and the struggle for the dollar knows no relief is certainly foreboding. I do not want to live in such state, much less try to raise my children in it. The thought of losing what Sunday has always meant is as frightening as the issues are confusing. I am torn between the two; what can we do?

I believe there is a Christian strategy for this problem. Let us begin with the familiar statement of Jesus: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). He is saying here that man needs a different day. Putting aside the question of which day, the point is that human nature requires a certain rhythm or variety. Each day we intersperse work and eating and relaxation and sleep. And the pattern of the week should also reflect such variety. This is true in every aspect of life, physical, emotional, spiritual. Human existence cannot possibly come to full realization if the same pace is never broken. If you never ate or never slept or never worked, the whole pattern would collapse. Therefore, life being what it is, we need one day that is different. On the first sabbath, God supposedly rested and contemplated what He had done, and this sets the general pattern for the different day. Man is to stop what he usually does, and in rest reflect on what God has done. For the Christian, the climax of all God's action, both creative and redemptive, comes in the triumph of Christ over death. Therefore, our "different day" is the first one of the week, correctly known, not as "the Sabbath," but as Sunday, "the Lord's Day." It is to our eternal best interest that we spend it in such a way that our bodies and our spirits are re-created. This does not mean that our religion is "a one-day affair." This routine is organically related to the whole week. Stopping at a gas station is different from driving on the highway, but the two are not unrelated. So the strength and power that is gained on "the different day" is the dynamic for all other days. Therefore, as fundamental as our need for food and sleep is our need for this day.

How can we achieve this? Two ways: by making the day different in our own actions and by trying to convince others of its desirability. Now I admit from the start there will be many exceptions and countless individual difficulties. But speaking in the main, if the majority of Christian people would turn to other concerns on Sunday and lead others in this pattern, it could reverse the present direction of events. Here are these businesses, required by law to give their employees a certain amount of time off. If people chose not to buy on Sunday, then closing on that day will certainly follow. A decisive weapon here can be the unspent dollar, and this is where we can exert our influence. It may sound trite or like an oversimplification, but consistency on our part and an authentic evangelism of others are our main hopes.

Such voluntary persuasion is much more in keeping with the nature of the church than the traditional "blue laws." I realize these restrictions have played an important role in our national heritage, but I am suspicious of the whole approach. Truth

is the church's ultimate reality and personal persuasion is her "modus operandum." Whenever she calls in legal power to enforce her concepts, then her very character changes. Such means destroy the ends she is trying to achieve. It is one thing to convince a person of the truth of a position; it is something quite different to coerce him. Yet this is what the church has done in advocating "blue laws." Some argue that these laws are not religious but simply moral or in the interest of public welfare. But on these grounds, why do we demand Sunday? Saturday or Friday would be just as "moral" or restful. No, there is a definite religious overtone, and to force it by law is to exert a pressure that is alien to true religion. Benjamin Franklin once said: "When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and when it cannot support itself, and God does not care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one." Our approach must be evangelism and not legislation. If we could only see it, we are actually hurting the cause of Christ rather than extending it when we act by law. A Jewish merchant was very quick to react to a Christian witness in these words: "I want no part of you Christians who force your habits on everybody. I am closed by conviction on Saturday, and you force me to close on Sunday. I am repelled by such spiritual tyranny." This is the common reaction of a non-Christian; we push him even farther from the kingdom by coercing him to do that of which we cannot convince him. Did not Jesus specifically reject this temptation? Satan tried in three ways to get Jesus to adopt the wrong means: one was the bribery of bread; another was spectacular feats; the third was governmental coercion (Matthew 4:1-11). Each time Jesus refused, resting all His hopes in voluntary persuasion. He would win men the right way, or he really could not win them at all.

And this is precisely how I conceive the church's strategy in the area of Sunday closings. It is not an easy or obvious situation. But the only real hope is for us to be something and to be zealous in calling others to it. If we want to preserve Sunday as a different day, then let us quit buying and lead others to do the same. Instead of whimpering down to the courthouse, let us be "the leaven in society" as the church was meant to be. In my opinion, our strength must not be in law, but in our own conviction.

Sunday can be saved, but only if we, of our voluntary choice, are willing to be something and call others to it.