

The Great Sabbath Paradox

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Exodus 20: 8-10

The Sabbath is a great paradox that is rarely talked about or understood. How could we have missed the Great Sabbath Paradox? What is it? Simply put, the great Sabbath paradox, simply stated is this: Even though Seventh-day Adventists extol the entire world to “Keep the Sabbath Holy”, no Seventh-day Adventist has ever kept even one Sabbath holy themselves. As I’m writing these words, I can hear the minds whirring, and saying, “What are you talking about”? Aren’t paradoxes grand? What does the word of God teach concerning all our best efforts at righteousness apart from Christ? “All our righteousness’s are as filthy rags”ⁱ. Now notice the plural of righteousness. That means not just one particular attempt at accomplishing Justification, but all of them. Every attempt is doomed to failure because “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified”ⁱⁱ. So our Sabbath keeping, even our most earnest and sincere attempts at Sabbath worship, falls far short of Jesus perfect, flawless Sabbath Worship. Our Prophet puts it this way, “...passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God. They ascend not in spotless purity, and unless the Intercessor, who is at God’s right hand, presents and purifies all by His righteousness, it is not acceptable to God...Oh, that all may see that everything in obedience, in penitence, in praise...must be placed upon the glowing fire of the righteousness of Christ”ⁱⁱⁱ.

So this passage makes it clear that all our worship, and even our prayers has to be placed upon the “glowing fire” or it is unacceptable to God. So isn’t it paradoxical that Seventh-day Adventist’s are extolling the entire world to keep the Sabbath holy, when they have never kept even a single Sabbath holy themselves? Now the same can be said for every one of the Ten Commandments, but the irony is especially observable when it comes to the Sabbath commandment. Nothing demonstrates how we have somehow managed to miss the main point concerning the law as it applies in the First Angels Message of gospel, sanctuary and worship. Let’s explore these themes in the light of our special message to the world concerning the Sabbath.

One cannot present the true gospel if one has a flawed view of the law of God. God’s law is a reflection of his character, and the underlying principles that the Ten Commandments reflect also reveal the dilemma God faced when Adam and Eve disobeyed that law in the Garden of Eden. It is precisely because God could not abandon his law, alter it or ignore it that man was driven from the garden. The law is “Holy, just and good”^{iv}. So the problem was not the law, the problem was man’s breaking of the law. “The wages of sin is death”^v. So Adam and Eve had to die. Satan sat back and thought, “I’ve got God now, and He can’t save His precious human’s without saving me. I broke the law, and now so did they”. The only thing is he miscalculated in his plan. Satan never expected God to take man’s punishment upon himself! Being such a selfish and self-centered being, Satan was incapable of comprehending the height and depth of God’s love for fallen man, and even himself. God did everything he could to save Lucifer to no avail, and now he would do everything he could to save the human race, including paying their penalty with the life of his only begotten Son”. So because mankind sinned, and their fallen nature was corrupted, they were incapable of keeping God’s law. The challenge to Adam was for him to “maintain” righteousness, not to “attain” righteousness. That was also the challenge for the Second Adam Jesus. Could he succeed where Adam failed and “maintain” the righteousness he was born with? Remember Gabriel described Jesus as “that HOLY THING”^{vi}. Jesus was born holy and had to remain that way. He didn’t have to “achieve” holiness. God made him holy, and Jesus said “The Father that dwelleth in me HE DOETH THE WORKS”^{vii}. So all righteousness comes from God. Remember the plan of salvation in the Old Testament? The Sanctuary system was an object lesson to teach the Israelites all about God’s plan of salvation. Remember the Lamb that represented Jesus the Messiah had to be “without spot”^{viii}. Only a perfect lamb without blemish or spot could be used because only perfect holiness is acceptable to God.

Now let's apply all this to the Sabbath keeping and teaching of Seventh-day Adventists. The First Angels Message announces that we are going to worship our creator who made all things. The Sabbath message is an important part of the First Angels proclamation. But how has the church typically presented it? I'd suggest to you that we have presented it no differently than the Jewish rabbis have taught it. The Sabbath is a symbol of Creation, God has commanded that we keep it, the only true day from the Torah is the Seventh-day so we need to be obedient and not work on that day. How has the Adventist message been significantly different than the Jewish teachers on the subject? The law is an important part of the gospel, sanctuary and worship because it is the foundation of God's government and no lawbreaker can truly worship God. But there are many religions that teach the importance of the moral law. What are we missing in our Sabbath message that God is trying to get across to us? We are not emphasizing the most important part of the message! It's not about OUR Sabbath keeping, it's about JESUS Sabbath keeping! We do not receive credit for even one Sabbath when it comes to keeping the law. ALL our righteousness's are filthy and unacceptable to God unless placed upon the glowing fire of Christ's righteousness. We are saved by HIS 33 years of perfect Sabbath keeping! Only his Sabbath keeping counts toward our salvation. We've never kept even one Sabbath perfectly. When Jesus went to synagogue he was focused on God alone. He read the Torah with absolute purity and devotion. He sang the songs with passion and enthusiasm. His mind never wondered or drifted away from his worship of his Creator. When Jesus left the service, and went out into the world, he spent his Sabbath's serving the communities he went to. He never spent a single Sabbath overeating and sleeping away the day. His Sabbath days were totally dedicated to helping lighten the load of humanity. When you compare his perfect Sabbath keeping with our feeble attempts at following his example, even the best, most dedicated Seventh-day Adventist would have to admit that they fall far short of the ideal Sabbath observance that Jesus accomplished. Fortunately for all of us, by faith we can claim his righteousness, and his Sabbath keeping becomes ours! It's credited to our account, and God looks at us as he does his son, and he is pleased with our perfect observance of his holy day!

So once we realize the ungodliness of our Sabbath keeping and appropriate the perfection of Jesus' Sabbath observance, how should we proclaim the Sabbath to others? For purposes of this chapter we will assume you've already settled the question of the law's immutability, and agree that God's law should be honored by our best efforts to imitate Christ's character by the willing obedience of faith. What does God say the Sabbath is? He declares the Sabbath is "I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them"^{ix}. So to God the Father, the Sabbath is a sign or symbol of Righteousness by Faith! He is the God who MAKES US HOLY. He sanctifies us. To sanctify means to make holy, to set us apart as righteous. So the Sabbath is a sign or symbol that we don't make ourselves holy, it's a sign or symbol that God makes us holy through his son Jesus Christ! The Sabbath tells us to rest from our own works, and to trust in the works of Jesus Christ. When Seventh-day Adventist's begin to preach the Sabbath with true humility, instead of acting as if we are the only ones "keeping the right day", and start admitting that we too are Sabbath breakers, and that it's only through the righteousness of Christ that we can keep it, telling them that the Sabbath is a symbol of righteousness by faith, THEN we will get the world's attention on this important subject! The Bible clearly teaches that one of the most important things we receive when we come to Jesus is rest from our sins through Christ's merits. Jesus states, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls"^x. The word for rest used in this verse literally means SABBATH! Jesus is saying, when you come to me, and learn of me, and receive me, you will find Sabbath for your soul, peace and rest in me! The writer of Hebrews expressed similar thoughts when he wrote, "a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it...For we which have believed do enter into rest,... God did rest the seventh day from all his works... There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God... For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his... Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief"^{xi}. So clearly in Hebrews 4 the writer is using the Sabbath as a symbol of the person of faith, as opposed to the person of unbelief, ceasing from his own works and trusting in the works of God for salvation! The Sabbath is used here, just as it is in Matthew of being a symbol of the way we enter into a saving relationship

with Jesus by entering his rest by claiming his good works as our own! The Sabbath should be preached as a wonderful symbol of grace! We should be proclaiming that we are all Sabbath breakers, but when we accept Jesus, we become Sabbath keepers because the Sabbath symbolizes Righteousness by faith, renouncing our own works, trusting only in the works of Jesus Christ in our behalf, and the grace of God who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves! Like Paul we choose to “be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith”^{xii}.

So the Sabbath is a great paradoxical symbol of Righteousness by faith! It’s a sign that we cannot, by our own works, make ourselves holy. It’s a symbol that we are set apart by God, and sanctified only by grace and not by our own Sabbath keeping. It’s a symbol that we have renounced our own Sabbath keeping and like Paul want to be found only in the righteousness of God which is by faith. The great paradox is that those who claim to be the ultimate proclaimers of the Sabbath, need to repent themselves of their self-righteousness in proclaiming a self-centered message, and instead begin to proclaim the Sabbath as the symbol of God’s grace in doing through his Son what we ourselves could never accomplish. The Sabbath is the great leveler at the foot of the cross, pointing out how an unholy person could never keep even a single Sabbath. In Exodus 20: 8 we are told to “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” In Rev. 15: 4 we’re told “for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee”. Not only are we to keep the Sabbath for a day, but for a lifetime, from the moment of our birth, every minute of every Sabbath we must maintain its absolute holiness! We must present to God only perfect, flawless Sabbath worship, every minute of every Sabbath for only such worship is acceptable to him! No wonder the Lamb is proclaimed “Thou only art holy”! Only Jesus Christ is holy! That’s what the bible teaches. Christ’s perfect Lamb of God Sabbath keeping is our ONLY TRUE Sabbath keeping! He alone is holy! Is it a great paradox? Yes! Is it absolutely true that no human being since the fall has ever kept even a single Sabbath holy apart from Christ? Yes! Is it true that every Sabbath Christ kept is absolutely holy? Yes! Does God command us to keep his Sabbath day holy? Yes! Is it paradoxical? Yes! Can we be as holy as Jesus? Can we keep the Sabbath? Can we obey his commandments? Can our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Can we be greater than John the Baptist? Can we keep his commandments if we love him? The answer to all these questions is YES! But how? There is only one way; through the righteousness of Christ by faith! He alone is holy, and when you receive him as your Savior, he stands in your place and God looks at you as if you have never sinned! Hallelujah! The very Sabbath itself is a symbol of the rest we find by faith in the righteousness of Christ! When we begin to proclaim it as a symbol of grace, and meet our fellow Christians in humility at the foot of the cross, the Sabbath will be welcomed in a way that we have yet to experience. Let us make Christ and his righteousness the very center of our Sabbath message from henceforth!

Prayer

Our Father God, the Lord Our Righteousness! Forgive us for arrogantly assuming that our feeble attempts at worship were acceptable in your sight. Forgive us for giving the impression to our children, families and the communities, that we were “keeping your Sabbath holy” when in fact, we were just as guilty as they were of failing to grasp the true meaning of the Sabbath. Forgive us for our pride and presumption, as we argued rather than proclaimed, as we declared them lawbreakers, when we ourselves were doing the same thing. Teach us to worship you only by placing our own sinful offerings on the glowing coals of the fire of Christ’s righteousness that our worship might be acceptable in your sight dear Lord. May Christ’s perfect Sabbath keeping stand in place of ours! May his perfect law keeping stand in place of ours! And because of his good works alone, may you look at us as if we have never sinned is our prayer in Jesus name, Amen

ⁱ Isaiah 64:6

ⁱⁱ Gal 2: 16

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Selected Messages, Ellen G. White, pp. 344, 345

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- iv Rom. 7:12
 - v Rom 6:23
 - vi Luke 1:35
 - vii John 14:10
 - viii Num. 28:3, 9, 11
 - ix Ezek. 20:12
 - x Matt 11:28, 29
 - xi Heb. 4:1-11
 - xii Phil. 3:9