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Red Roses Without Love

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red roses without love



red roses without love

Is that what Christians who keep "Saturday for Sunday" offer the Lord each week?

By C. MERVYN MAXWELL

On the first Monday when the red roses arrived, quite by surprise, the little lady was thrilled beyond words.

Her husband was a busy executive, away from home most of the time. Beating himself against the clock to keep the growth-curve always climbing, he rarely had a moment for his wife anymore. He never phoned to let her know where he was, and when he wrote, it was usually to get her to do something for him at the office.

But evidently he still cared. He had sent her a dozen red roses; and every woman knows what red roses mean.

But there was no note with the flowers, and there was no other sign of affection during the days that followed. So when another dozen roses arrived the following Monday, she found herself more puzzled than pleased.

When a third dozen came on the third Monday, she confessed she didn't know what to make of it. She phoned the florist to find out what was up, and was informed that her husband had ordered the flowers sent out every Monday without fail, until further notice.

Needless to say, after several months of this, she came to dread Mondays like the plague. To avoid the room where the bouquets were displayed. To hate the fragrance they gave off. To see in a universal symbol of love only an ugly symbol of estrangement.

For even flowers . . . even red roses . . . every Monday . . . *without love* . . . can be murder.

This story has a direct bearing on the question of Sabbath and Sunday observance in the twentieth century.

To the half billion Christians in the world who "keep Sabbath on Sunday," it is an enigma and a riddle that two and one half million of their fellow Christians—Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh Day Baptists, and so on—"keep Sunday on Saturday." Christians keeping the Old Testament Sabbath in the twentieth century? An anachronism!

Most people don't mind too much, of course. A person has a right to his beliefs, they say. Some put it a little stronger and call it foolishness. But when those same out-of-step Christians appear before legislative bodies and city councils to denounce Sunday laws, reciting betimes the Sabbath commandment in defense of the seventh-day Sabbath, insisting that there is no command in all the Bible to honor Sunday, then indeed judgments sharpen. Some Sundaykeepers, especially those who are theologically inclined, denounce keeping Sabbath on Saturday as sheer legalism—not considering, perhaps, what judgment might well be made concerning them, who seek to force cessation of Sunday work by civil law!

Sabbathkeepers themselves say that their observance of the seventh day is an expression of their love for God. "Is it legalism to love God?" they ask. Legalism has been defined as "strictness . . . in conforming to law . . . as a means of justification." In theological circles, legalism is thought of as trying to earn God's favor through outward obedience to God's law, without the inward spirit of gratitude, humility, and love that come from realizing that, apart from the grace of God given through Christ, no man can please God. Legalism is like giving red roses every Monday, without love.

Let us admit it right off: Sabbathkeeping can be legalism.

It is said that a certain shopkeeper, somewhere, sometime, was extremely careful not to lose to the Sabbath a single second of busi-

ness more than was absolutely necessary. He kept his store open until the very instant that the sun went down on Friday night, and he opened it again the very instant it set on Saturday night. In fact, he watched for sunset on Friday night from the top of the flight of stairs outside his store in order to gain every advantage he could from the curvature of the earth, and he checked for the setting of the sun on Saturday night from the bottom of the steps, where it seemed to occur a fraction of a second earlier!

This shopkeeper—if he ever existed, that is—was a legalist. The Sabbath was for him no longed-for period of fellowship with God, no warmly welcomed spiritual experience, but merely an interruption in his private affairs, and nothing more. In other words, the Sabbath for him was "a dozen roses" that he gave to God each week, without love.

In the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Christians living in Galatia is acknowledged to have been written against legalism. In this book Paul makes some very severe remarks about the observance of days. "Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years," he scolds. "I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you

labor in vain" (Galatians 4:10, 11).

It is often assumed that Paul is here denouncing the observance of the seventh day as the Sabbath—but if he is, then he is denouncing all other days and seasons along with it. His remark, as it stands, applies equally to the observance of such "days" and "times" as Sunday, Lent, Easter, and Advent, as it does to the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.

If this verse means that Sabbathkeeping is legalism, it means that Sundaykeeping is also legalism. It opposes the observance of all "days . . . and times."

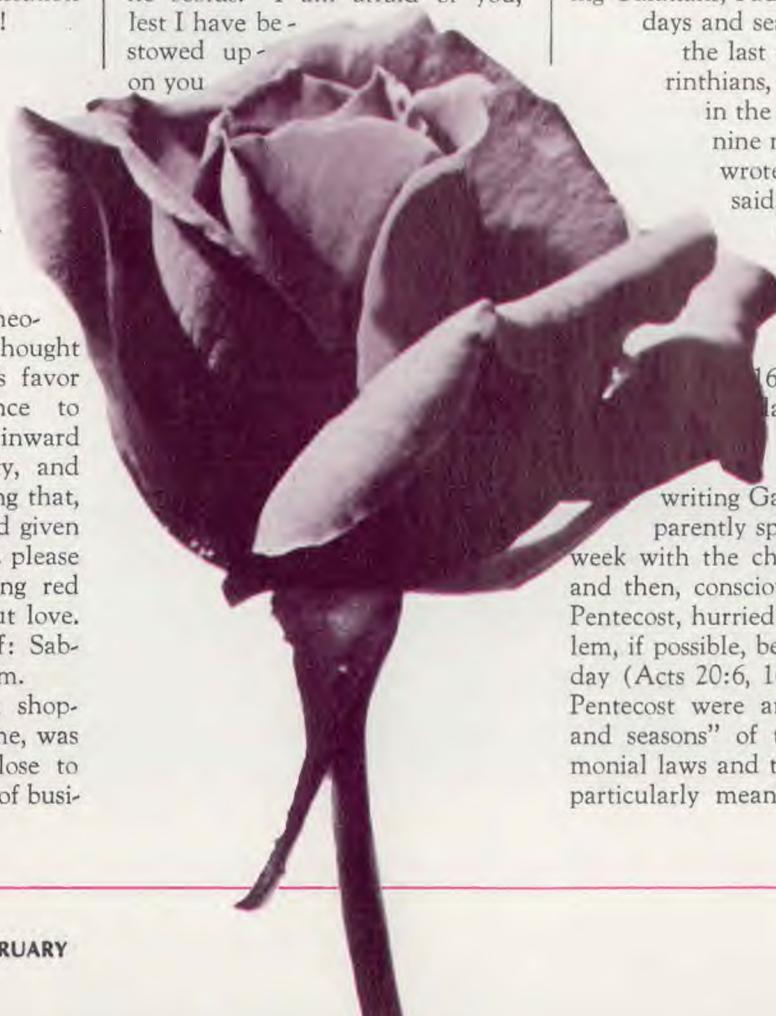
But it is unrealistic to use an author's words without considering their context. Did Paul really mean to condemn all observance of all set times?

Hardly. Or at least, if he did, he condemned himself. For Paul personally observed certain days and times as a part of his own religious practices.

There is a widespread concurrence among many scholars that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians from the city of Corinth, and that he did so around the year A.D. 58. If it is true that he did so, then there is evidence that within months both before and after writing Galatians, Paul freely observed days and seasons himself. In

the last chapter of 1 Corinthians, a letter he wrote in the spring of A.D. 57, nine months before he wrote Galatians, Paul said, I hope to spend next winter with you, but "I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost"

(1 Corinthians 16:8). Then a year later, in the spring of A.D. 58, a few months after writing Galatians, Paul apparently spent the Passover week with the church at Philippi and then, conscious once more of Pentecost, hurried to get to Jerusalem, if possible, before that special day (Acts 20:6, 16). Passover and Pentecost were among the "days and seasons" of the Jewish ceremonial laws and they had become particularly meaningful to Chris-



tians as well because Jesus' death occurred at a Passover and the Holy Spirit fell on a Pentecost. Paul, as a Christian Jew, was not in the least embarrassed to observe these "days" with their new Christian context. Near the end of Paul's life someone remarked that he still kept the Jewish laws; and this is in harmony with his own statement that in order to convert Jews to Christianity he was willing, at least on occasion, to live like a Jew. (1 Corinthians 9:20.)

Evidently, then, when Paul blamed the Galatians for observing "days, and months, and times, and years," he was not condemning the observance of days per se. How could he have done so? Jesus, the Author of the Christian religion, kept the Sabbath day regularly. Luke 4:16 says it was His "custom" to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Then what is Paul attacking in Galatians 4:10? Obviously, the mere observance of days and seasons in a "legalistic" manner, without true godly faith, as if there were some virtue in the observance in and of itself.

If Paul were alive today, would he not condemn mere Christmas-and-Easter Christianity? Or mere go-to-church Sundaykeeping? Or mere punctual but ritualistic Sabbath observance? The J. B. Phillips translation, with its characteristic knack for getting to the heart of a text, has put Galatians 4:10 this way: "Your religion is beginning to be a matter of observing certain days or months or seasons or years."*

The little lady screamed when the red roses came without love. But would she have felt the same way if her husband had presented the flowers to her each week personally, with every evidence of a renewed and heartfelt devotion? Of course not.

God hates mere ceremonious Sabbathkeeping. But does this mean that He is opposed to grateful and affectionate Sabbathkeeping?

One basis for the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is to be found in the Ten Commandments. God said, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days

Sandy and Andy Blount tutor children as part of the San Diego Adventist church's inner-city project. In several cities such youth projects are held on Sabbath afternoons.



shalt thou labour, 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" (Exodus 20:8-10). The Sabbath is enjoined in one of the commandments.

In the New Testament, Jesus, the Son of God, who once said, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30), said to His followers on the way to the cross, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (chap. 14:15). A little later He added, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love. . . . Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (chap. 15:10, 14).

How can Christians turn Him down? They believe that Christ left heaven to be born in a stable—for men. They believe He gave His life on the cross—for men. They believe He was resurrected and ever lives to intercede—for men. Christians who believe all this cannot but love Him. Then if He asks His followers to keep His commandments if they love Him, how can they turn Him down?

I grew up in a large family in a fine old house in the country. There were several little lawns, a

Japanese pond, a fifty-tree orchard, and a number of outbuildings, such as a tool shed, a greenhouse, and a large old garage. Whenever dad went away on a trip he would leave a list of jobs for us to do while he was gone. The list might include such items as "Rake the driveway," or "Clean out the pond," or "Tidy the tool shed."

We enjoyed checking off these lists of jobs. We took a lot of interest in our home place. We'd have the driveway leafless and the tool shed spotless by the time dad got back—and would he be pleased!

But we learned, too, to do just what dad said. If he said to tidy the tool shed, well, it might have been that the garage needed sweeping just as much. But if dad said to tidy the tool shed we tidied the tool shed first. If possible we swept the garage as well, but we did it afterwards.

Mother once said that there were a lot of people in the world who are sweeping the garage when God said to tidy the tool shed. She said that this was one difference between keeping Sunday and observing the Sabbath. It made quite an impression on my mind.

Adventist youth in Takoma Park, Maryland, sing for nursing-home patients as part of their Sabbath activity.



If I had swept the garage and left the tool shed in a mess, just because that's the way things seemed best to me, would that really have been love? Would it not have been, instead, just ornery adolescent disobedience?

While it is true that there can be obedience without love—the theologians call it legalism—is it not also true that there cannot be love without obedience; and, further, that where there is true love, obedience follows willingly? Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments."

But Sabbathkeeping is not just a matter of heartfelt obedience. It is also, and even more so, a matter of fellowship with God. The Bible says that God rested on the Sabbath day. (Genesis 2:1-3.) When

Christians rest on that day, they rest with Him. The Bible says that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. (Exodus 20:10.) When a person makes the seventh day his Sabbath, he is making God's Sabbath his own. The seventh day is the special day which God, for reasons of His own, has marked each week for an unflinching appointment with His people.

If a young sweetheart wrote her fiancé that she was arriving on such and such a flight at such and such a time, would he prove his love to her by getting to the airport a day late?

If, instead, he managed to get there by the very time she specified, would this be "legalism"?

Would it not rather be love to meet her right on time?

Of course it would! And if he really loved her, he would take great pains to be there on time, too. Why? In order to make her happy? Yes. And for another reason too: In order to be with her.

Sabbath observance that is done punctiliously and mechanically is undoubtedly pure legalism. A dozen roses every week, without love.

But Sabbath observance done as an expression of gratitude, . . . in a spirit of genuine affection, . . . for the purpose of fellowship with the Lord . . . ?

Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments."

Is it really legalism to love God?

* From *The New Testament in Modern English*, © J. B. Phillips 1958. Used by permission of The Macmillan Company.