

Sermon for September 24, 2017 – The Third Commandment

Exodus 20:8–11 (NIV84)

Theme: God’s Sabbath Command

- 1) It’s not just about attending worship.
- 2) It’s about being in the Word.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

What do you think: Is everyone missing from church this morning breaking the 3rd Commandment? Is everyone attending worship keeping the 3rd Commandment?

The reason I ask these questions is because we so often associate church attendance with God’s command to keep the Sabbath day holy that we think that by the mere act of coming to Church we are keeping this commandment. This, however, is far from the truth.

“Well,” someone might ask, “if the third commandment isn’t about Church attendance, what’s it all about?” Let us let God’s word answer this question for us, under the theme: **God’s Sabbath Command:** 1) It’s not just about attending worship. 2) It’s about being in the Word.

Part One: It’s not just about attending worship.

Now, in order to appreciate how this commandment applies to us, we first have to understand what the words mean and how they originally applied to Israel after the LORD appeared to them at Mount Sinai.

The LORD said: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” The word translated as “remember” has a deeper meaning than to merely call something to mind. To the Jew, remembering means to sharply focus your attention on someone or something. In other words, God is saying, “Give the Sabbath day the greatest attention – setting it apart from all other days of the week.”

Well, that leads to the question: “What is the Sabbath day?” The word “sabbath” means rest and refers to the seventh day of the week (the day we call “Saturday”), which the LORD wanted the Jews to keep as a day of rest – as our text indicates: ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

Do you know what's fascinating about this portion of God's command? Even though many ancient Mideastern cultures and religions had a seven-day week like the Israelites, not a single one of them had anything like the Sabbath command, in which all classes of people – from the highest King down to the lowest slave and even animals – were commanded to take a weekly rest from their labors. The Sabbath command was very unique - meant to separate the Israelites and their God from every other nation that surrounded them.

And why, exactly, did the LORD command this weekly holiday? Was it merely because he knew that everyone needs a break to remain on top of their game? No, he gave it for a much more noble purpose, which he expressed by saying: ⁱ *For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

Did you ever stop to think why the LORD rested on the seventh day after creation? Was it because he was exhausted from all his work? No, being God, the LORD doesn't get tired! Well, then, why did God rest? Truth be told, the Bible doesn't tell us. However, based on the LORD's declaration on the sixth day that everything was very good (i.e., perfect), I like to think that the LORD's "resting" involved him basking in the glory of his work. Why do I think that? Because it was for this exact purpose that he commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath: that they might have a day, free from work, in which they could bask in the glory of God's workⁱ of both creating them and saving them.ⁱⁱ

Yes, the Sabbath is more than just about "attending" worship. When God originally gave this command to the Israelites, his intent was that they use their day of rest to reflect upon the LORD – who he is and all the good things he has done for them. The keeping of this command would distinguish both them and their God from the rest of the nations around them. In keeping this command, their faith would grow as they "remembered" – that is, sharply focused their attention on everything the LORD has done and promised – especially regarding the coming Messiah who would offer the once for all sacrifice for the forgiveness of all sin.

You see, the Sabbath is also important because it was a foreshadow (that is to say, a living picture) of the eternal rest Christ would win for us through his cross. This is why, thousands of years after the LORD first gave this command, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their failure to understand the true purpose of this command. It was not a means to earn God's favor through an outward keeping of the law, rather it was given to direct our attention to the eternal rest the Christ would win, as Jesus once said: *"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."*²⁸ *So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, God gave the Sabbath as a living picture of the eternal rest Jesus would win for fallen mankind – a rest into which we enter through repentance and faith in Him. And this rest is not something far off in the future. It is a peace that we enjoy now through faith in Christ, as Jesus once said: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*^{iv}

The eternal rest Jesus won for us on the cross is the fulfillment of God's Old Testament Sabbath command, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Colossians: ¹⁶ *Therefore do not let anyone judge you*

by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.^v

Now someone might ask: “If the Sabbath command was a living picture of the rest Jesus would win for us, does this commandment still apply to us today – and if so, how?” First let me tell you how it doesn’t apply. Since Jesus is the fulfillment of this law, all outward keeping of the Sabbath day (i.e. making sure we don’t work on Saturday) does not apply to us Christians. Neither is it proper to call “Sunday” the new Sabbath, nor the act of “coming to church” the way we keep this commandment. Christ and Christ alone is the fulfillment of the Sabbath. Since this is the case, to keep the Sabbath means to find our rest in Christ. And where do we find Christ? Only in His Word.

Part Two: It’s about being in His Word.

Luther properly explained the meaning and application of the 3rd commandment to Christians by writing: “We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy, and gladly hear and learn it.”

In our 2nd reading from the book of Hebrews, we read that, ever since Christ came, God set apart a new day in which his people are to find their Sabbath rest. That day is called “today”; or to say it another way: it is every day. God wants us to find our rest in Christ every day as we meditate on his Gospel promises – applying them to our lives.

This leads to the question: where do we hear and receive God’s Gospel promises? One place is in church – as believers gather together to hear and study God’s Word and partake of His sacraments. Christians do these things to bask in the glory of the LORD’s work – contemplating all that he reveals to us about himself and what he has done to save us.

“Wait a second, pastor: I thought you said the Sabbath command isn’t about attending worship.” I stand by that statement. Just as flying isn’t about going to an airport, so keeping the Sabbath day isn’t about attending worship. But, just as you generally need to go to an airport in order to board a plane so you can fly, so also, in order to meet Christ, you generally need to join with fellow Christians who are meditating on his Word.

You see, that is the whole point of worship: to take a break from our various vocations in order to find rest in the glory of God’s work. Yes, this is something we can do every day as we prayerfully read or recall God’s Word on our own, but weekly worship is meant to be a special time of refreshment, where we encourage one another as we sing and pray together^{vi}, as well as listen to the servant the LORD called to teach us His Word.^{vii}

Jesus once said: *where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*^{viii} Yes, Jesus is especially present, every time we gather for worship. He is here to give us rest through

the Gospel: offering us the very forgiveness he won for us through His cross. Now think about it: if worship is all about fellowshiping with Christ - basking in his glorious works and receiving eternal rest through the forgiveness of sins he offers us through the Gospel - how can we not come to worship? What could be more important?

And yet, here is the sad truth: we don't always want to take the time to study the Bible, come to worship or pray. Why not? Because we think worship is boring, the Bible too hard to understand and there are so many other things we think we need to be doing. But did you ever stop to think why we consider worship boring? True, maybe your pastor isn't the most gifted sermonizer, nor our Lutheran hymns anywhere near Billboard's "Top 40" list. But, if you really love someone, aren't you willing to put up with things other people find boring or difficult to learn about them?

Could it possibly be that we don't enjoy worship because we don't love God as we ought? "No," we think, "that can't be it!" Oh, but it is! How often don't we just go through the motions of worship – coming to Church because it's the thing to do. How often don't we look at the clock and think: "Come on, there's something I want to do later on today?" Is this kind of worship really finding rest in Christ: basking in his work for us? How often don't we make all sorts of excuses not to come to Bible class – thinking things like: "I come to worship and pray, that should be enough." Is such thinking showing genuine love for God?

Take some time to evaluate your excuses why you don't make an effort to attend Bible class, have daily devotions in God's word, and pray regularly. Are they truly valid reasons, or are they merely excuses the devil, the world and your sinful nature have convinced you of in order to separate you from communing with Christ through His word?

Understand that the devil will do all he can to try to separate you from God. He will try to convince you that you are a strong Christian who knows a lot. "You don't need to be in God's Word 24/7," he says, "It's not like you're a pastor." But do you notice what he doesn't tell you: that he is trying to murder your soul – and that the only defense against him is being in the Word – meditating on God's promises 24/7 and applying them to your life?

You see, God's Sabbath command is not meant to be a burden. It is meant to free and protect us from the devil by connecting us to Christ through His Word. Nothing frustrates Satan more than when we gladly hear and learn God's Word – basking in the love God demonstrated for us in Christ. Through Jesus' perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection, he has forgiven our lovelessness toward God. And the more we bask in this forgiving love, the more we grow in our own appreciation of and love towards God. We are given the rest, renewal and strength we need to face all the evils and troubles of this earth, knowing that our loving LORD is with us to work in all things for our eternal good.^{ix}

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy – this command means more than just attending worship. It means living in God's Word every moment of our lives – taking every opportunity

we can to meditate on and rejoice in all of God's wonderful works for us, centered in Christ. Through such meditation we receive true rest. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Psalm 92

ⁱⁱ Cf. Deuteronomy 5:13-15

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 2:27-28 NIV84

^{iv} Matthew 11:28 NIV84

^v Colossians 2:16-17 NIV84

^{vi} Cf. Colossians 3:16

^{vii} Cf. Ephesians 4:11-13

^{viii} Matthew 18:20 NIV84

^{ix} Cf. Romans 8:28