

REST

Exodus 20:8-11

Fifth Wednesday in Lent

March 30, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson comes from Exodus, chapter 20, verses 8 through 11. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 8, we read in Jesus' name.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives rest to weary souls.

That's what the Third Commandment is about. It's about Jesus giving rest to weary souls.

And this is why Martin Luther was right to explain the Third Commandment as being about the Word of God. He says, “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise His Word and the preaching of the same, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.”

There was a point for me, while learning the commandments, that I looked at the Third Commandment, as it is recorded in Scripture, and I compared it to Luther's explanation, and they didn't seem to fit. When I read the commandment in either Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5, along with the rationale that the LORD gives, the emphasis that came across was “Do not work.” But Luther emphasizes the Word of God. These seemed like two different things to me. They are not two different things, and eventually this came into focus for me. It helped to read Luther's Large Catechism. And for me, at least, it really helped to understand the Old Testament background for the commandment. That's when I realized that Luther's explanation is not just a Christianization of an Old Testament regulation. Really, the commandment has always been about weary souls receiving rest through the Word of God.

The first aspect to understand is simply the meaning of the word “Sabbath,” or, as it's pronounced in Hebrew “Shabbat.” Just move the “h” from the last sound to the first sound, and it turns into the Hebrew pronunciation. “Shabbat” literally means “rest.” So to fully translate the commandment into English would be, “Remember the day of rest, to keep it holy.” That's what we're dealing with tonight.

With each of the commandments so far, we've talked about how there is a negative side and a positive side. The negative side says what we should not do. The positive side says what we should do. And the positive side also includes the gifts God is protecting with the commandments. All of the commandments are given to us for our good. Even the negative sides

REST (Exodus 20:8-11)

of the commandments have a positive purpose, because they protect the good gifts on the positive side.

So what is the negative side? What does God prohibit when he says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”? Our first guess might be “work.” And that’s sort of correct. God commanded the Israelites to do all their work in six days and to rest on the seventh. So doing work is one of the ways we can violate this commandment, but the essence of the commandment is much deeper.

Some work is allowed on the Sabbath. In the gospel lesson, Jesus taught that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:12). Then, as a demonstration of this, he healed a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees considered healing to be work. And they were so enraged by this that they conspired how to destroy Jesus. It’s incredibly ironic, because Jesus’ work of healing the man brought rest to him.

The basic problem with Judaism, and I don’t mean true Judaism, because true Judaism is Christianity, but the Pharisaic kind of Judaism ... The basic problem with Pharisaic Judaism is that they saw the Law as a test. They saw the commandments as opportunities to build credibility with God. That’s how the Pharisees thought of the Law. Each commandment was like a question on a test. And if you got enough of them right, then you would pass the test and receive the reward. So they saw the commandments as gifts in the sense that they were opportunities to please God. It’s kind of like if someone finally gets hired for their dream job, but it’s a really challenging job. They thank their new boss for the opportunity to prove themselves. So the Pharisees would thank God that he had told them how they could please him. But that’s not how it is. The commandments are not a test. And God does not judge you based on your score. You do not receive a reward for keeping the commandments. It’s the other way around. The commandments protect the good gifts God has already given.

And there are certain works which are necessary on the Sabbath. You have to get out of bed in the morning. That takes work. And you have to get yourself ready for church and out the door. That takes work. It takes even more work when you have kids. As a pastor, I’m usually exempt from that responsibility. My wife has to do it. But four times a year I have vacation Sundays. And on those vacation days I am reminded that the only thing more difficult than being a pastor on Sunday mornings is being a parent on Sunday mornings. It’s a lot of work. And it’s hard to get a couple kids through a church service. Assuming that the sermon and a few other things are prepared ahead of time, it’s a lot easier to be up here for an hour than out there. My point is that there’s really no way to avoid work. Everything takes work. Life takes work. And if you neglect that work, you actually profane the Sabbath. It is lawful, even necessary, to do good works on the Sabbath.

So the thing the commandment prohibits is not necessarily work. Some work is necessary. The big thing the commandment prohibits forgetting or profaning the Sabbath. If your work causes you to not rest in the good gifts your God gives to you, then it is a violation of the commandment. That’s the negative side of the commandment.

Now for the positive side. The Third Commandment is one of just a few commandments that is already stated in a positive form. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” That’s already in the positive form. It tells us what we should do. We should remember the day of rest, and we should keep it holy.

The word “holy” simply means “set apart.” So we keep it distinct from other days. There’s something different about the Sabbath day. It is set apart by God for the purpose of rest.

REST (Exodus 20:8-11)

That's the gift protected by the commandment. It protects God's gift of rest. And rest is not necessarily the absence of labor. Work is not the opposite of rest. If you decide to just lay in bed all day, it won't take very long before your stomach disturbs your rest. You can be super lazy and just not get up, but your stomach will not allow you to rest. It's far more restful to get up, take a shower, and eat breakfast, even though that requires some effort.

The best rest always follows work. One of the most restful things I ever did was build a fence and a deck in our backyard. And I don't mean that the process was restful. It was hard, especially digging the holes for the fence posts. The whole process took a lot of work and a lot of time. But in the end I had a restful environment. That rest took a lot of work.

Rest is always the result of work. But it's not always the result of the work we do. Sometimes we rest in the fruits of someone else's labor. The rest of my family gets to rest in our backyard too. And tonight we all received rest because of the work Micah and the youth group did. And when you go to a restaurant you rest in the labor of the staff there. That's why it's called a "restaurant." So rest is not just the absence of work. Rest is when you cease working, and you rest in the fruits of someone's work. It could be your own work, or it could be someone else's.

And this is the kind of rest the Third Commandment protects. It protects the rest God gives to us as a result of his work. This relates both to the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2 and to the Exodus from Egypt.

This is one of the interesting things about the Third Commandment. Between Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the two passages where the Ten Commandments are given, the passages are almost identical, but there's a big difference regarding the Third Commandment. In Exodus, the reason for the Sabbath is creation, but in Deuteronomy, the reason is that God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. This is not a contradiction, but both teach the same thing. They teach that we rest in the work God did for us. And both of these reasons ultimately look forward to Jesus and the eternal rest we have in him.

First, let's look at the creation. In six days God created all things in heaven and on earth. The last of his material creation was man. On the sixth day he created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden to rest in the fruits of his labor. It was perfect. Then God rested from all his labor and blessed the seventh day. It was rest for God and for his perfect creation.

And one of the fascinating things about the creation account is that there was no end to the seventh day, or at least there wasn't supposed to be. At the end of each of the first six days, there's a statement that says something like, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (Gen. 1:5). And this pattern was repeated all six days. But on the seventh day, it wasn't. God just rested, and that was it. The week of creation was complete, it didn't have to start over again. Now, this probably doesn't mean that the sun didn't go down. It probably did, but when the sun came up again, it wasn't the start of a new week. It was just another Sabbath day where Adam, Eve, God, and all the creation enjoyed God's work for another day. This state of rest that God had created was supposed to last forever. Every day a Sabbath.

One of the things we see here is that work is not the opposite of rest. Rest and work are both good. They are not opposites. The opposite of rest is chaos, and chaos is bad. In the beginning, before God created the everything, "The earth was formless and void" (Gen. 1:2). Another way of translating that is "chaotic and empty." The six days of creation brought substance and structure in the place of chaos. On the seventh day, that substance and structure is called "rest." So work is not the opposite of rest. The opposite of rest is chaos, and work is the path from chaos to rest. That's what God in the creation. His work transformed chaos into rest.

REST (Exodus 20:8-11)

But we know the next chapter of the story: Snake. Fruit. Eat. Die. And God's rest was destroyed. And from that point on, the entire Bible is the story of God restoring this rest. The devil had destroyed it, but God was determined to fix it, and this is really the whole point of Scripture. It is the story of what God has done to restore his perfect rest.

So, according to Exodus, remembering the Sabbath means remembering that God worked for six days to create a place of perpetual rest. It's not just that God is an example for us, like *God did this, therefore you have to do this*. That's not what it means to remember the Sabbath. "Remember the Sabbath" means, "Remember the rest." Remember God's design for the world. Perpetual rest is God's will for his creation. And God has not given up on his intention. Since the fall into sin, God has been working to bring us back into that rest. That's what we see in Genesis.

Now let's look at the Exodus. In Deuteronomy, the people of Israel were right at the end of their pilgrimage in the wilderness. After forty years, they were about to enter into the Promised Land. And it wasn't going to be Moses leading them into the Promised Land, but his assistant Joshua. And here God gives a different reason for the Sabbath command. Instead of recalling creation, he recalls the Exodus. He says, "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:15).

God commanded them to remember what he had done for them. And this is part of the reason why we understand the Sabbath command to be about the Word of God. How did the Israelites remember that God had brought them out of Egypt? For generation after generation, they remembered it by going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and hearing the Word of God. So Christians are not doing anything new by making the Sabbath day about the Word of God. We don't just take a day off of work to do whatever we want. That's not the rest God desires to give. He desires to give us rest through his Word.

And for the Israelites, the story of the Exodus reminded them that the land they lived in was a gift from God. So they could rest from their labors, and God would still feed them. But that rest was not permanent. It was still only one day a week. It was not the perpetual rest God intended from the creation of the world. Israel's rest in the Promised Land was a foreshadowing of a greater rest to come. We read about this in Hebrews: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on" (Heb. 4:8). When the Israelites remembered the Exodus, and even when we remember the Exodus, it's a reminder that God has not given up on the rest he created in Eden. He is still bringing us there. And he brings us there through Jesus Christ.

This is the whole point of Jesus coming down into this chaotic unrest. His death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead gives us rest from the burden of sin. And he has even promised to come again and raise the dead. On that day he will give us rest from death. He will take us into his new creation where we will have perfect and eternal rest in the fruits of his labor.

So the Sabbath command has never been about resting in the fruits of our own labor. It has always been about resting in the fruits of God's labor. So when we take a day to not go to work, we rest in God's promise to give us our daily bread. And we're reminded that even the bread we work for is his gift to us. The physical rest we practice when we take a day to not work is a confession of faith that God will provide for our daily needs. If we blow off the commandment, we lose this rest, and we lose the greater spiritual rest God desires to give us on the Sabbath.

REST (Exodus 20:8-11)

Even more important than the physical rest we receive when we don't go to work is the spiritual rest God gives us through his Word and Sacraments on Sunday morning. It is through his Word and through the gift of Jesus' body and blood that God delivers to us the forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and everlasting salvation. This is the whole point of going to church—to receive spiritual rest for our souls. You spend six days and twenty-some hours out there in the world trying to live according to the Law. You struggle and strive to be faithful all that time in your vocations, and it can be wearisome. And then you get maybe one to three hours a week here, depending on whether or not you come to Sunday school or midweek services. It's not an ideal ratio.

So the main point of worship is to proclaim to you the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is rest from the burden of sin. We need this rest for our souls. And this concept of spiritual rest is why Luther was absolutely right to interpret the Third Commandment as being about worship. Christian worship is God serving us his gifts so that we will have rest in Jesus' finished work on the cross.

So this should not be a burdensome commandment. This is a joyful and restful commandment. God commands us to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy, because he desires to protect his gift of eternal rest, which we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus Christ has earned this rest for you by doing the dirty and grueling work of suffering and dying on your behalf. Your sins, which are many, are forgiven for his sake. And he has risen from the dead, opening this heavenly rest to you and demonstrating his power to raise you from the dead. So God the Father will welcome you into his eternal rest. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.