

Enter That Rest

In the name of him who gives his people rest, dear friends in Christ: Our Lenten evening devotions this year are on the Ten Commandments. We've been counting them down backwards. Most recently we did the Fourth, which treats our obligation to the human authorities that God has established: parents, government officials, and so forth. With that we finished what's called the Second Table of the Law, which are the seven commands that regulate our dealings with other people. Tonight we turn our attention to the last of the commandments on the First Table of the Law, which are the three that describe our obligations toward the Lord God.

And this, the Third Commandment, stands apart from all the others on both tables. It's the only command that doesn't obligate us to do anything. Quite the contrary, it tells us not to do anything. The main thrust of the command is that we rest. That is, stop working. Take a break. Relax. Set down your burdens, put your feet up, and don't fret: there will be time to do what needs to be done later. Right now, rest. As far as commandments go, that's pretty sweet.

It's worth noting that in the ancient world there were all kinds of other legal codes developed by various cultures. Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Persians, whoever, all of them had laws against killing people and stealing and so on – what we would call basic laws of morality. But only among God's people Israel was there a law that told them to take one day in seven, the Sabbath, and set it aside for a day of recovery and refreshment. Only the Lord God provided his people a regular day of rest.

And oddly enough he gave two different reasons for it. In Exodus, when this law is first given to Moses at Sinai, the Lord explains that his people are to rest on the Sabbath because that's what he did after the six days of creation. The Sabbath was to be a constant reminder that God did all his work to create us and see to it that all our needs were taken care of in six days, and on the seventh he rested. The Sabbath was to be a celebration of God's care for his people – a sign of our trust in him. You don't have to work every day to feed and clothe yourselves. God will take care of you. He's got it covered. So don't worry. Today you rest. Receive and enjoy the work that God has done in creation.

Now, when the Lord restates this command to Moses in Deuteronomy, as we heard in the reading, he gives a different reason for it. This time it's, "Remember you were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." No mention of creation here; this is about salvation. You used to be a slave. You worked hard all the time; never got a day off. And what did all that work get you? Nothing. No matter how hard you worked, you were still a slave. But then the Lord rolled up his sleeve and went to work for you. He saved you by his mighty arm. So now you rest on the Sabbath in celebration of the Lord's work of salvation for you.

That the Lord gives two different reasons for observing the Sabbath is not a contradiction; no, the two go together – they're complimentary. The point is that you rely on God's work both for your bodily needs (creation sorts of things) and for your salvation. So take your rest trusting in him. He'll take care of it all for you. In view of this it's clear that this commandment isn't really a Law in the proper sense. Law's have to do with what we are

required to do. They are about human works. But this is about God's work and trusting in him. That means it's Gospel. It's a gift. And it's to be received as a gift.

This is what most people don't understand. The Pharisees at the time of Christ twisted this commandment into a terrible burden. They came up with hundreds of nitpicky rules for what constitutes work. And if you stepped over any of the lines they made up, say if you lifted something that weighed more than a forkful of food or took more steps than the maximum they allowed you, well, then you were considered to be working and you were in violation of Sabbath. What a terrible sinner you are! They turned the gift of rest that God intended into a long list of things humans had to do (or not to do) to be righteous. In other words, they took Gospel and turned it into Law – which is always our sinful way. We want to be righteous by our works, not by God's work for us. But this sucks the spirit right out of the Sabbath ordinance. The Lord didn't give this command to be a burden. He meant it for his people's good – for their rest and recreation.

And he didn't dictate to them what constitutes rest. People were to refrain from the labor of their regular livelihoods: the jobs they did in order to survive. But God didn't say you couldn't go for a hike and a picnic, or that children couldn't run around and play, or that people couldn't engage in sports or other leisure time activities. The Pharisees would have said no to all such things. And so do the Sabbath legalists of our day. Yes, there are still some around, and they still don't get it. They see the Sabbath command as a way to please God through our dutiful and obedient resting.

We can fall into a similar trap. Many Christians read this commandment as "Thou shalt go to church on Sunday." Now, don't get me wrong because I do want people to come to church on Sunday, but that simply isn't what the commandment says. Besides, Israel's Sabbath was Saturday, not Sunday. And the commandment says rest. It doesn't say go to church. But if it's read that way, it becomes another source of self righteousness. "I went to church today, so I kept the Sabbath command." No, you didn't. You think your act of going to worship makes you obedient in God's sight. And by thinking this way, you've turned what God intends as Gospel into Law. And your self righteous attitude about it makes you even guiltier of sin.

How then should we understand this commandment? First, let's recognize that it doesn't fall into the category of moral law. That is to say it's not a basic question of right and wrong. Murder is wrong because it hurts people. Same with stealing and all the other commands. But no one is harmed if you don't take one day in seven off. Besides, it's completely arbitrary. Why not take one day in eight, or half a day every four? There is no moral dimension to one day in seven. Okay, so follow me now, if it's not moral law, that means it must fall into the category of a *ceremonial* law. These were laws that the Lord gave his people in order to teach lessons. They were pictures and shadows of things to come. Specifically, they were pictures and shadows of Christ. All of the ceremonial laws find their fulfillment in him. The Old Testament sacrifices are a good example. All those lambs and goats that were offered on altars were meant to point to the sacrifice Jesus would ultimately make for sin. Now that he's done that, we don't need the pictures any more. We've got the real thing. So we don't offer sacrifices. Instead, we receive the benefit of the sacrifice Jesus already made.

In the same way that Jesus fulfills the laws pertaining to sacrifices, so he also fulfills the Sabbath. That is to say, he is our rest. When someone comes to faith in Christ, he comes to understand that all his efforts to save himself by trying to obey the God's Law are completely useless. It's a form of slavery from which there is no escape. God demands perfect obedience. You must be 100 percent righteous. But everything you do, even the best effort, is tainted by

sin. So you can work until you drop but you're still no closer to saving yourself than you were before. In fact, if you're trying to do it yourself, you're only digging deeper into the debt of sin.

But Christ is our rest. When we come to faith in him, we understand that he has done it all. He did all the work by living a perfect life for us and then offering himself as the perfect sacrifice when he suffered and died on the cross. There's nothing left to do. And if you think there is, if you think you have to add your efforts to his perfect work, then you are denying what he did and there is no rest for you. This is what the passage from Hebrews is saying. It's talking about the Israelites who refused to enter the Promised Land when the Lord first offered it to them. He told them to go in and take possession, and that he would fight all their battles for them and give them the land. But they didn't believe it. They didn't trust him to deliver. They thought they'd have to fight the enemy on their own and that they weren't strong enough to win. They refused to receive the gift that God was offering them. So the Lord said, fine. You don't trust me? Then there shall be no rest for you. Go back into the desert for 40 years. Wander about there until you're all dead. You shall not enter my rest. I'll give it to your children.

So, in view of this, one way we can violate the spirit of the Sabbath command is to imagine that we need to add our works to Christ's in order to be saved. If we don't find perfect rest in Christ, there is no other rest for us. It will only be endless effort to please God through our own works, which as we've already seen is futile slavery that ends in death. We don't want to go there.

But there is another way we can violate the spirit of this command. This is what Luther so deftly identifies in his explanation to this commandment. "We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and the Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." Notice that he doesn't say anything about a particular day of the week. And that's right. In the New Testament era, we have no Sabbath Day. We have Jesus who is our Sabbath rest all of the time. We find our rest only in him and his accomplished work. The dangers we face are the sins of apathy, indifference, and neglect with respect to this great rest that God gives us in Christ. It happens when we start thinking, "Oh, yeah, Jesus. Right. He died for me. Great. Now I'm forgiven. But hey, I've been there and done that. I don't need it anymore." It happens when we downplay our need for the peace, rest, and forgiveness God gives us in Christ and start asking, "How much of this Gospel do I actually need? What's the bare minimum? How little doctrine and Christian understanding can I get away with and still be saved?" It happens when we treat God's saving Word and Sacraments like the people in the Parable of the Wedding Feast. The king sends out invitations for a lavish banquet to celebrate his son's marriage; but no one can be bothered to come. They've all got better things to do.

Such behaviors betray an attitude of contempt toward Christ and the gift of rest he gives. It's as if the sweet, saving Gospel were some foul tasting medicine to be despised and spit out. The very process by which God delivers Christ and his salvation are viewed as a painful burden to be borne instead of the joyous event that it is. It's amazing. If we had any inkling about how sick with sin we actually are, if we had any idea of the dangers that surround us – how vulnerable we are to the temptations of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh, then on a typical Sunday morning out in front of the church it would be like a suburban Wal-Mart on the day after Thanksgiving. Mobs of eager people would be camped out overnight to be first in line when the doors of the church were unlocked. And if you think I'm exaggerating, then you really don't get it. That's the way it would be if we actually understood the threats we face and how precious are the gifts God gives us here.

But we don't. Not even me. I say the words. On some level I know they're true. But due to the sin nature in me, I can't bring myself to actually think and feel that way. None of us does. And for this we need to repent.

And take full advantage of what Christ offers us here this evening in the gift of his body and blood by which we receive again his forgiveness, life, and salvation. The table will soon be prepared. The gift of rest in Christ will be given. Let us strive to enter that rest, now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!