

Today we are looking at the Third Commandment, which, of course, in Exodus chapter 20 is: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." What do we mean by the sabbath day? What does it mean to remember it? And how do we keep it holy? In other words, what is it exactly that God wants us to do in this commandment? To answer that question, let us look at what the Bible has to say.

So first of all, what does the word "sabbath" mean? The word "sabbath" literally means "rest." It is the resting day. You "sabbath" on the sabbath. And on that day, God's people would rest, especially from their worldly labor, especially from their daily work. And the reason for that is rooted in God's work. It is rooted in the creation itself. Because Exodus 20 goes on to say: "For 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." So resting on that day means resting like God rested. It means keeping a sabbath to the Lord.

I think that's also worth keeping in mind in our day, because we live in a time where we like to be busy. We're always doing something. We're always running somewhere. It's important to remember that we too need to rest. We need to rest from our work, to rest from our busyness, so that we don't let the world and all of its demands rule over our lives. After all, God himself rested on the seventh day of creation. Why would we not want to rest from our work as well?

But what does it mean to rest on the sabbath? Does it mean to just do nothing? To sit at home, to do nothing, to twiddle our thumbs, to stare at the wall, is that what resting on the sabbath means? Or does it mean something else? The Pharisees in our Gospel reading for today thought that the sabbath meant doing nothing, nothing at all. In fact, they had a whole bunch of rules that they had come up with to make sure that they would do nothing. What you could do, what you couldn't do on the sabbath. And you had to keep those rules in order to keep the Third Commandment, at least in their minds. So, for example, you could only walk a certain number of steps. If you go too far, well, then you've broken the commandment. Or you weren't supposed to cook anything, and if you did, there was only some things that you could cook and other things that you couldn't. Otherwise, you broke the commandment. And they were so serious about all of these rules, because they thought that breaking these rules meant you broke the sabbath. In other words, they were convinced if you broke these rules, you had sinned. And that's why they were so angry with Jesus in our reading. They were watching Jesus's disciples pluck heads of grain and eat them. And they said: "You can't do that! That's working. That's work on the sabbath. That is a sin." And that's why they try to get Jesus to stop his disciples from doing it.

But the problem is that the Pharisees had completely misunderstood the purpose of the sabbath. For that matter, they completely misunderstood the purpose of the Law. But the reason why this happened is because they had turned the sabbath into a kind of checklist. And as long as you were keeping the list, then you were keeping the commandment. So they would ask themselves: "Did I keep my steps under the limited number? Yes? Check! I've kept the Third Commandment. Did I not cook anything today? Yes? Check! I've done what God wanted me to do. Have I not done any kind of work in any way at all today? Check! I'm good to go." But when you turn it into a checklist, Christians, you've really missed the point of the Commandment. You've really misunderstood why God gave this in the first place.

And to show this, Jesus uses the example of David. Because David had been running away from Saul, and now he was very hungry when he came to the tabernacle. And he asked the priests who were there for some bread. But the priests didn't have any ordinary bread to give him. All they had was the holy bread which was presented to God. And David ate that bread when the priests gave it to him. Now, according to the Law of God, that should never have happened. That bread was only meant for the priests. Leviticus 24 says very clearly that that bread "shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due." But Jesus points out that David did not sin when he ate that bread, and the Pharisees knew it too. Because the purpose of that commandment regarding the bread was not meant to lead to evil. Because if the priests had kept the bread away from David when he was so hungry and in need, that would've been a very evil thing to do. They would have been denying a starving man the food that he needed to live. The purpose of the commandment was not to prevent this sort of thing from happening. The purpose of the commandment was to meet the needs of the people. And if the needs of the people meant that it had to be let go for the time being, then that was what needed to be done. The Law was meant for the good of Israel and not for evil. And Jesus says the sabbath is no different. He says in verse 27: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." The sabbath was meant for the benefit of man. It was meant for our good.

So we need to ask, then: why does it benefit us? Because it is a day which has been given to the Lord, the day on which we rest from our normal labor, the day on which we rest so that we can hear God's Word and so that we can focus on the things of eternity. It is a day on which we gather together as the Church before the Lord. And we have a great example of this in Jesus Christ himself, because listen to what he did in Mark chapter 1. It says: "They went into Capernaum, and immediately on the sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching." So on the sabbath day, then, our Lord himself gathered together with the people in order to hear the Word and to preach to them and to teach them the way of God. And we likewise, following the example of our Lord, gather together in order to worship God.

Now, yes, it's true. We can do some of these things on our own. We can read the Bible on our own, we can pray on our own, and so forth. It doesn't seem like we need to gather together to do some of these things. And Jesus himself did things on his own all the time. How often do we hear of him in the Gospels going out into the wilderness all alone in order to pray? But Jesus didn't go out alone in exclusion to gathering together. This isn't an either/or kind of a thing, either doing things by yourself or gathering together. Rather, it's a both/and. Jesus did all of these things, praying alone and gathering together on the sabbath. And following the example of our Lord, we can do the same.

But then, of course, we need to ask: which day? When is the sabbath day? The Old Testament sabbath day was always on a particular day, always on the seventh day of the week. But that Old Testament sabbath has come to an end. As Colossians 2 says: "Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." So in other words, the Old Testament sabbath day, always on the seventh day of the week, has come to an end. It was a shadow which disappeared with the coming of Christ. But even though the form is gone, even though the old regulations are all gone, the commandment still remains. We still need to gather together in order to worship the Lord.

And in the New Testament, this day became Sunday, the first day of the week. Because listen to what the New Testament has to say about Sunday. In Acts chapter 20, for example, we hear: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight." So Paul is preaching a very long sermon, one that went until midnight, but they also gathered together to break bread, which is another way of saying to receive communion. But the important thing to note here is that they gathered together as the Church on the first day of the week, on Sunday, in order to hear preaching, to hear the Word, and to take communion, just like we do today. 1 Corinthians 16 says: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come." In other words, the congregation was taking an offering, gathering all this money together to give to Paul so that he could then take it to take care of the poor in Jerusalem. But again, this happened on Sunday, on the first day of the week, just like we do. And then one more thing we hear about in the New Testament comes from Revelation chapter 1. John says: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." And that Lord's Day is another way of referring to the first day of the week, in other words, referring to Sunday. And John being in the Spirit on the Lord's Day meant that he was hearing the Word, that he was praying, and so forth, even while he was exiled on the island of Patmos. So in the New Testament, then, Sunday has been set apart to God, and we gather together on Sunday in order to worship the Lord. Now, of course, that doesn't mean that we can't gather at other times. After all, that's why we're here tonight. We can set apart time in the middle of the week and also give that time to God. But since the time of the New Testament, Sunday has been the Lord's Day, the common day on which the church gathers to worship her Lord.

So why should we keep it holy? How do we keep it holy? What we must not do, Christians, is to imitate the Pharisees and to turn Sunday into a kind of checklist. So that as long as I'm keeping the list, as long as I have it checked off, I can think that I have the Third Commandment. So we might say, for example: "Have I done nothing today? Check! I must be doing what God wants me to do. Did I go to church this morning? Check! I can now go and do whatever I want to do for the rest of the day. Did I take communion today? Check! I'm good to go." But the problem with approaching the Lord's Day in this way is that we misunderstand why we gather in the first place. We're not gathering together here to just talk about God for an hour and then go on with the rest of our lives. We're not gathering here because we have nothing else to do. We gather here because we are gathering to hear his Word. Because this Word, Christians, is life! This is life and truth. There is nothing else in the world that even compares with the Word of God. And we also gather together so that God would build us up together as one body in Jesus Christ, to make us more and more like himself. And we also gather together to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth, gathering as the Church in order to give praises and prayers and thanksgiving to the Lord who has given us all things. In other words, we gather together before the Lord because we are Christians and this is who God has made us to be.

But we also gather here, Christians, for another reason, and that is because we are looking forward to the great sabbath rest which is to come. Hebrews chapter 4 says very clearly: "So, then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God." This rest is still remaining, because it's not yet here. It's still to come. It is pointing forward to the rest which will come in eternity. Because when we gather together to worship the Lord, Christians, we are looking forward towards heaven. Because when that great sabbath rest comes, there's not going to be any more

work. There won't be any more labor, any more busyness, any more running around. We will find an eternal rest in the Lord. So what we do on Sunday together then especially, or on any other day like today, is a small foretaste of what is to come when we are all gathered around the throne of God, shouting our loud hosannas and singing praises to him. Because when eternity comes, Christians, we will be with the Lord, and our rest in him will never come to an end.

Therefore, let us rest as God rested. Let us gather together as the Church before the Lord. Let us not be caught up with the busyness and the cares and the concerns of this life, because all of those things are going to come to an end anyway. But rather let us rest so that we can keep our eyes fixed on eternity, so that we can keep our eyes fixed on God. Because we are looking forward to the great sabbath rest, which is to come, a sabbath rest which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, as we gather together tonight, keep our eyes always fixed on you, because you are the one thing needful. Stamp eternity onto our eyes, O Lord, so that we do not lose our way. Bless this time which we spent together so that we may glorify you in all that we say and do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.