



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 2

June 2, 2024

Keeping the Sabbath Holy

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

¹² “ ‘Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but 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 or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ 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.’ ”

You may recall learning the Third Commandment in Confirmation class by memorizing it from the *Small Catechism*, which, depending on when you were confirmed, went something like this: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” or “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” I’d like us to consider this Commandment today under three headings: 1) What is the Sabbath day?; 2) What does it mean to keep it?; and 3) What does it mean to keep it holy?

What is the Sabbath day? The Hebrew word *shabbat* means “rest.” So, the Hebrew *eth yom hashabbat* means “the day of rest.” It was the seventh day of the week. As Exodus 20:11 explains:

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.

In our calendar, we call this day “Saturday,” but in other cultures it’s known by a variant of its original name. In Spanish, for instance, it’s *Sábado*; in Polish it’s *Sobota*; in Russian it’s *Subbota*; and so it is, for many other languages, a close pronunciation of the original Hebrew.

The Sabbath was to be, then, a day of rest, a day in which the hard work of life was to cease, and this was based on God’s established pattern, as Moses explained, that God ceased from His work of creating. It’s interesting to note that God did not cease *all* His work. Immediately after creating, God set about His work of preserving His creation, and soon, after the fall into sin, He would take up His work of redeeming and sanctifying our fallen race.



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In the home there would be a reflection of this. Meals were still prepared, essential care of the children continued, and so on. And in the church, the work of leading God's people in worship was done. It was only heavy work, burdensome work, that was to cease so that God's people could rest. And it wasn't merely for the Children of Israel that this kindness was to be done. Servants, resident foreigners, and even animals were to be given a day of rest as well.

So, what does it mean to keep the Sabbath day? For the Old Testament Jews, it meant to cease their labors so that they and those under their influence might rest. As Moses says, "On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you."

It seems pretty simple, doesn't it. And it was held to be so for many centuries. But, after the time of Ezra the scribe – roughly 400 years before the birth of Christ – various Jewish sects arose and began to proliferate Sabbath rules and regulations. After the destruction of Herod's Temple in 70 AD, these Sabbath laws ballooned into hundreds of forbidden actions. Even in Jesus' time, the Sabbath regulations had become more work than the rest they were intended to impose. Were the Jews who followed these rules really keeping the Sabbath? Jesus made it very clear that they were not and reminded them that the Sabbath was meant to serve man and that man was not meant to serve the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

Paul, too, had to contend with Judaizers, who maintained that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were binding upon all believers. They insisted that Gentile followers of Jesus be circumcised and that they should follow all the purity and dietary laws. Paul had to go to Jerusalem to confront the brothers there concerning this. Even Peter had succumbed to their influence. Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, argued for Christian liberty in the observance of such regulations.

And for us, too, our default setting for all the Commandments is to ask, like those who came to John the Baptist in Luke 3, and like the rich young man in the Synoptic Gospels, "What must I do?" Jesus pointed out to the young man standing before Him that he was asking the wrong question. If we want to save ourselves, God has already given us the plan for that: Keep the Commandments. All of them. Perfectly. The rich young man thought he had done that. But, with incisiveness known only to God, Jesus saw what stood in the way of this man earning salvation for himself: his love for his possessions, his wealth, which had become his god, something he couldn't give up, something more important to him than following Jesus.

What was wrong with the man's question? It sounds very pious, does it not? I mean, he wanted to inherit eternal life. How many in our day never even consider eternal life? So, isn't desiring eternal life a good thing? Yes it is; certainly it is. But the man's question



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was wrong because he thought that he would inherit eternal life by his own actions. “What must I do?” It’s the wrong question, because it lays the responsibility for our salvation on our own shoulders. And we can’t bear that burden. It’s too great for us. We buckle under the weight of it. Nor could we ever stand up to the challenge. We don’t have what it takes. What did Jesus say? “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We can’t do that. No one could ever do that. Except Jesus. And therein lies the trouble with the man’s question. He was looking to himself for something he was incapable of, but the One through whom eternal life comes was standing right there in front of him.

And, so, when it comes to the Third Commandment, our tendency is to ask the wrong kind of questions: How often do I have to come to church? How often do I have to receive the Lord’s Supper? We want to quantify the Commandment down to where we think we can manage it, because we think that fulfilling it is something we can manage, something we either can do or must do to make ourselves – or keep ourselves – right with God.

Of course, we do need to recognize that the Third Commandment is not part of the Ceremonial law, but the Moral law which does not pass away. So, we’re not free simply to disregard the charge that God has given us to observe the Sabbath day and to keep it holy. But what does that mean? How does a believer keep the Sabbath day and keep it holy?

For believers in Christ, the Third Commandment is kept in the Divine Service, through God’s own work of creating, redeeming, and preserving His people through the Means of Grace, the Word and Sacraments, as we attend to the holy activity of hearing, learning, proclaiming, and obeying the Word of God. This is the place where we find our true rest, rest for our souls, rest that says that our working, our striving, our slaving, trying to be acceptable to God, trying to be what He expects us to be – knowing that we can’t – is just so unnecessary. Or fighting Him, rebelling against what He expects of us, running from the light so we can hide in the shadows; it’s just as much work and effort, if not more. Do you think Adam and Eve were comfortable in the bushes, draped in leaves, which they had scrambled to stitch together to cover their nakedness? You can bet their hearts were pounding in their chests. They weren’t resting. And neither are you as you keep playing the God game, thinking that somehow you can balance the scales on your own.

Maybe you don’t come to church much. Maybe you step through that doorway a couple times a year, maybe once a month. Maybe you’re here every week. Who are you trying to please by being here? Forget it. It’s not about that. We don’t come here to please anyone. It’s not our principle goal to serve anyone, not even God. We come here because He invites us to, so that He may serve us and give us rest. Beloved, there is nothing more restful than for your soul to be at peace, to have your sins washed away, and to stand before God clean, not because you’ve cleansed yourself, but because He has washed you in the blood-bought forgiveness of His Son. When you come here in faith, repenting of your sins, trusting in Christ’s work of redemption for you, believing that His



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sacrifice was for you, that His suffering, death, and resurrection has given you forgiveness, life, and salvation, and you leave here washed in the blood of Lamb, cleansed, forgiven, and pure, and you walk out those doors in peace, having found rest for your soul, knowing that you a beloved child of God, *that* is what the Sabbath is all about.

And if you think you need to quantify that, then you really don't get it. You might as well tell a husband to quantify how many times he kisses his wife. Should a husband kiss his wife? Absolutely! But who's going to quantify that and say that, in order to be a good husband, you have to kiss your wife at least once a week? If we have to quantify it that way, it loses its purpose, doesn't it? For kissing your wife ought to be done to express your love, not to fulfill a quota.

What can be said about a husband who doesn't want to kiss his wife? There's something wrong, and that wrong needs to be addressed – for his own joy and matrimonial health. The same should be said about a Christian who doesn't want to go to church, who has no interest in keeping the Sabbath. For, while we don't make a rule as to how many times you have to be in church, we do recognize that, if you don't want to be in God's house, there's something wrong, and that wrong needs to be addressed – for your own joy and spiritual health.

You know, God thought it was a pretty good idea for His people to observe the Sabbath. And just because we don't set minimum requirements, doesn't mean that God isn't interested in whether or not we're treating His Sabbath as holy. He does want us to keep it holy. Why? Because He wants us to receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. It's not about us serving Him; He wants us to come and be served, for He is the great Rest-giver, who effected the greater rest, the spiritual rest, the eternal rest for our souls through His suffering, death, and resurrection. That's what the Sabbath rest is really all about, and it's what keeping the Sabbath holy really means. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen