Dear friends,

Today, we are continuing our series on the Ten Commandments by looking at the commandment that I think is one of the most difficult to understand: the Third Commandment. Over the last two weeks, we've studied some pretty straightforward "thou shalt nots": you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. But what about the command to "remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy"? It's maybe not immediately clear just by reading this verse what God is commanding us to do and not to do.

Perhaps adding further confusion are the words that follow after this familiar command. When you read the full text of Third Commandment in the Book of Exodus, as we'll do in just a moment, you'll notice that there are several sentences that you probably didn't learn in catechism class. It's a bit easier to memorize just verse eight: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." But how should we understand the other verses that we'll hear today?

Finally, what I think might be the most challenging thing about the Third Commandment is this: Like all of the Ten Commandments, the Third Commandment teaches us God's moral will for all people and for all time. However, this commandment also teaches God's will for a certain people at a particular time. And we need to be careful not to mix those two things.

The will of God expressed in the Third Commandment can be summarized with the same word that has been the theme of our series: Love. And specifically: We are to show our love to God by honoring His gift of rest—for our bodies and for our souls. Our goal this evening [or morning] is to learn three important truths about God's gift of rest.

Let's begin then by hearing the Word of God as it is recorded in Exodus chapter twenty, verses eight to eleven:

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 male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.* ***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.* This is God's Word.

I would imagine that all of us have done work on the seventh day of the week, Saturday. Maybe some of you even worked today [or yesterday]. Does this mean that you are guilty of breaking the Third Commandment? I think you know that the answer is no. But why? Aren't God's words given to Moses here clear? Why isn't it a sin to work on the seventh day of the week?

The answer to that question leads us to the first truth we'll consider today about God's gift of rest. And that's this: All of the Sabbath regulations of the Old Testament, including those found in the Third Commandment, have been fulfilled by Christ. We heard that in our second reading from Colossians, chapter two: "[*D]o 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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*"

Now there are many Christians who misunderstand this. Since the Christian church has traditionally worshipped on Sunday in honor of the day that Jesus was raised from the dead, some have come to believe that Sunday is the new Sabbath. And so some churches insist that weekly worship services must be held on Sunday and that believers must refrain from work on this day. There are also a few denominations, like the Seventh-Day Adventists, who claim that Christians are still bound to worship and rest on Saturday.

Both of these views are mistaken. Scripture is clear: New Testament believers are no longer bound to set aside a specific day for resting from work and for worship. It's not against the Third Commandment to hold a weekly worship service on a Saturday night or a Monday night or a Tuesday afternoon. And it's not against the Third Commandment to pick up a shift on a Sunday or Saturday or do chores or some other work on a particular day of the week. *All* of the ceremonial regulations of the Old Testament, including those surrounding the Sabbath Day, have been fulfilled by Christ.

So, if this true, if the specific commands that we just heard from Exodus no longer apply to New Testament believers, then what's the point of the Third Commandment? I think the first application we immediately jump to is that Christians are to honor the preaching and teaching of God's Word. This, of course, is an important application. It's one that Martin Luther outlines in his Small Catechism, and one that we'll return to later on.

But it's also important to keep in mind that one of the original purposes of the Sabbath Day, which we heard from the Book of Exodus, was to give God's Old Testament people rest—and not just for their souls, but also for their bodies.

What an amazing gift the Sabbath was for the Israelites. Living in an agricultural society with no modern technology involved lots of back-breaking work. And so being given the seventh day of the week to do nothing other than rest and worship was a tremendous blessing. And did you notice that this rest even extended to animals? The oxen, the donkeys, these beasts of burden, needed a break too. And so by setting aside a day of rest, God was telling his chosen people that it's good and pleasing to take a break. In fact, the LORD himself rested on the seventh day of creation. The Third Commandment teaches us that God cares about the whole person—soul and body.

Now, as we already heard, New Testament believers are no longer bound by the Sabbath regulations of the Old Testament. But God still cares about the whole person. And this leads us to a second truth about the Third Commandment. God wants *us* to have rest—not just for our souls, but also for our minds and our bodies.

Maybe it's worth pausing here to dwell on that word, Sabbath. The most basic definition of *Shabbat* or Sabbath is "rest." Of course, "rest" does not quite do this word justice. We're not talking here about taking a little cat nap or a fifteen-minute break at work. Maybe an illustration can help us appreciate the rest we're talking about here. The other day I was helping someone move into their house. It involved hauling boxes and furniture, and reminded me that I'm getting old. And then, when the job was done, we all sat on the porch, relaxing and enjoying some pizza and a beer. Ah, *Shabbat*! It's the refreshment that comes after hard labor. But it's even more than that. It's that relief that comes when you receive a break from the burdens of life's demands. It's that sense of renewal that comes when you step away from the frantic busyness of our day-to-day routine.

God wants you to have that. So why don't we? Maybe it's our workaholic attitude. Now, certainly there are many pressures and responsibilities in our modern lives that we can't ignore. But how often is our addiction to work due to our own exaggerated sense of importance or indispensability? Or maybe our lack of rest stems from our uncomfortableness with slowing down. Of course, the Bible warns against idleness. But just as dangerous is the temptation to feel that we have to be constantly busy—and if we're not, we're somehow being unfaithful. One of the lessons of the Old Testament Sabbath is that God in his wisdom connected physical rest with worship. When we don't find time to refresh our bodies and minds, it's very likely that we aren't going to find time to renew our souls.

So does that mean you need to set aside one day each week to rest? Not necessarily. But it's a good idea to consider. It's somewhat similar to the Old Testament command to tithe. Like all other civil and ceremonial regulations for the Israelites, New Testament Christians are not bound to set aside ten percent of their income as gift to the LORD. But it's still a wise principle to consider. So also is the practice of setting aside a time each week to rest—not just from your job, but also from the hustle and bustle of your daily life.

A time of rest, of course, will look different for different people. For those of us who spend much of our work week staring at a computer, a time of rest might be spent doing physical things—going on a hike, taking bike ride, or even doing "work" like gardening or building something with your hands. For those of us who spend much of our week at a home, rest might mean a time free from chores or cooking meals. I should also mention here that your pastors and other ministers of the Gospel need rest too. That's why congregations encourage called workers to take one day each week away from their official duties.

Of course, setting aside a time for rest should not be an occasion for legalism. That was the mistake the Pharisees made in the Gospel lesson. Our bodies and our minds certainly need rest, but our "time off" should never come at the expense of loving our neighbor. And we also need to keep in mind that any earthly rest we have will always be imperfect.

And that leads us to a final truth about the Third Commandment: God certainly values our physical rest—and we show love to God by giving our bodies and minds a break—but our perfect Sabbath-rest is only found in Christ Jesus. Let me read again from those verses from Colossians: "*[D]o 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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*"

All of the Old Testament ceremonies and regulations, including those surrounding the Sabbath, were signs that foreshadowed the Son of God who would take on human flesh, enter our world, and keep each of those laws perfectly. For all of us who are wearied and burdened by our sins, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection has granted us rest for our souls. And through faith in Christ's saving work, we are promised eternal life, which Scripture depicts as a perfect *Shabbat*, where after a life of hard work and patient endurance, our completely restored selves—soul and body—will forever rest from our labors and enjoy the holy splendor of our Triune God.

And you and I receive a foretaste of that eternal Sabbath-rest every time we encounter God's Word. What a wonderful thing that every week—whether on Saturday or on Sunday or on Monday—we have the opportunity to gather together around the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. But this isn't the only time we get to partake of this heavenly rest. I love how Luther puts it in his explanation to the Third Commandment in his Large Catechism: "*[W]e Christians should make every day a holy day…, that is, occupy ourselves daily with God's Word and carry it in our hearts and on our lips…. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person [and] the day… are sanctified by it.*"

God wants you to have rest. Though we are not bound to the Old Testament regulations surrounding the Sabbath, he wants you to take a break from your labors, your stresses, and your strains. It's God-pleasing to set aside time each week for physical and mental refreshment and renewal. But ultimately, God wants you to partake of the rest found only in Christ. Every time we encounter God's Word, in public worship or in our personal lives, there our perfect *Shabbat* is found: rest for our souls from sin and the promise of an eternal Sabbath-rest in the new heavens and the new earth. Amen.