

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

The Third Commandment. “You are to hallow the day of rest.”

Our word “holy day” or “holiday” is derived from the Hebrew word “Sabbath,” which properly means “to rest,” that is, “to cease from work.” Our common German expression for “stopping work” literally means “taking a holiday.” In the Old Testament, God set apart the seventh day, appointed it for rest, and commanded it to be kept holy above all other days. As far as outwardly observing this commandment is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews [or better “the Israelites”] alone. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest on Saturday, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor. Later, however, the Jews interpreted this commandment too narrowly and grossly misused it. They even slandered Christ and would not permit him to do the very same things they themselves did on that day, as we read in the Gospel [Matthew 12:1-13; Mark 2:23-28; 3:2-4; Luke 6:1-10; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:9-18; 7:22-23; 9:14-16]—as if the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment could be fulfilled by refraining from work of any kind. This was not its intention, but rather, as we shall hear, it meant that we

should sanctify the holy day or day of rest.

Therefore, according to the bare meaning of the words, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ [See Colossians 2:16–17].

But to give a Christian interpretation to the people of what God requires of us in this commandment, please note that we do not observe holy days for the sake of intelligent and well-informed Christians, for they have no need of them. We observe them, first, because our bodies need them. Nature teaches that people who have gone about their work all week long should also retire for a day to rest and be refreshed. Second and more important, we observe them so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God’s Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.

But this, I say, is not restricted for us, as it was among the Jews, to a

particular time such as Saturday or Sunday, for in itself no one day is better than another. Actually, worship ought to take place daily. However, because this is more than most people can do, at least one day a week ought to be set apart for worship. Because Sunday has been appointed for this purpose from ancient times, it should not be changed, so that things may be done in an orderly fashion and no one create disorder by unnecessary innovation [such as holding sporting events on Sunday mornings].

This, then, is the simple meaning of this commandment: Because we observe holidays anyhow, we should use them to learn God's Word. The real business of this day should be preaching for the benefit of young people and everyone else. Physical rest should not be forced on people.

Accordingly, when you are asked what it means to "hallow the day of rest," answer: "Hallowing the day of rest means to keep it holy." And what is meant by "keeping it holy"? Nothing else than devoting it to holy words, holy works, and holy living. The day itself does not need to be made holy, for it was created holy. But God wants it to be holy for you. So it becomes holy or unholy on your account, depending on whether you spend it doing something holy or something

unholy. How does such "making holy" take place? Not when we sit in our easy chair and refrain from hard work, or get ourselves ready to go to a dance [neither of which Luther was against,] but it happens when we make use of God's Word and exercise ourselves in it.

Truly, we Christians ought to make every day such a holy day and devote ourselves only to holy things, that is, to occupy ourselves daily with God's Word and carry it in our hearts and on our lips. However, because we do not all have the time and leisure, we set aside several hours a week for the young people, or at least a day for the whole community, when we can concentrate only on these matters and deal especially with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and thus regulate our entire life and being in accordance with God's Word. Whenever this is the practice, a holy day is truly kept. When it is not the practice, it ought not be called a Christian holy day. For non-Christians can spend a day in rest and idleness too.

But God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. By it all of God's people have themselves been made holy. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day,

and the work is hallowed (made holy), not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints (holy people). Accordingly, I constantly repeat that all our life and work be based on God's Word if they are to be God-pleasing or holy. Where that happens the commandment is obeyed and is fulfilled. Conversely, any conduct or work apart from God's Word is unholy in the sight of God, no matter how splendid and brilliant it may appear to be.

Note, then, that the power and force of this commandment consists not in the physical resting but in the hallowing, so that this day that we spend resting spiritually in God's house may have its special holy function. This takes place through God's Word. Places [churches], times [Sunday mornings], persons [pastors], and the entire outward order of worship [our liturgies] have therefore been instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.

Because so much depends on God's Word that no holy day is sanctified without it, realize that God wants this commandment to be kept eagerly, and he will punish all who despise his Word and refuse to hear and learn it, especially at the times appointed for worship. Therefore this commandment is violated not only by

those who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day, like those who in their greed or frivolity neglect the hearing of God's Word or lie around in taverns dead drunk like swine. It is also violated by that other crowd who listen to God's Word as they would to any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear the sermon and leave again with as little knowledge at the end of the year as they had at the beginning. It used to be thought among us that Sunday had been properly observed if one went to Holy Communion or came to church just long enough to listen to the Gospel Lesson being read; however, no one among us at that time asked probing questions about God's Word, and no one took the time to teach it either. Now that we have God's Word, we still fail to eliminate this abuse among us, for we permit ourselves to be preached to and admonished, but we listen to sermons without serious concern about changing our attitudes and behaviors to please God.

Remember, then, to be concerned not only about hearing the Word, but also about learning it and retaining it. Do not think that it is up to your discretion or that it is an unimportant matter. It is the commandment of God, who will require of you an accounting of how

you have heard, learned, and honored his Word in your attitudes and actions.

In the same way those with conceited spirits should also be punished who, after they have heard a sermon or two, become sick and tired of church and feel that they know it all and need no more instructors. This is the sin of laziness or weariness—a malignant, pernicious plague with which the devil deceives many hearts [especially those who were recently confirmed] so that he may take us by surprise and steal the Word of God away again.

Let me tell you this. Even though you know the Word of God perfectly and have already mastered everything, you are still daily in the territory of the devil, and he does not rest day or night in seeking to take you unawares and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these commandments.

Therefore keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder God's Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs from us without first producing fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and

devotion, and it constantly creates clean hearts and minds in us. For God's Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living [see Hebrews 4:12]. Even if no other benefit or need drove us to the Word of God, yet everyone should be motivated by the realization that through the Word the devil is cast out and put to flight, this commandment is fulfilled, and God is more pleased than by any hypocrisy, no matter how brilliant.

[Adapted from Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, © 2000 Fortress Press: Minneapolis, pp. 396-400.]

We have heard God's Law explained well by Luther. Now hear God's gospel spoken by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 11. <sup>28</sup>*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest [I will give you Sabbath].* <sup>29</sup>*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... and you will find rest for your souls.* <sup>30</sup>*For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* Our yoke is sin. What a heavy burden to carry! Jesus' yoke is forgiveness, and that's a burden light enough for us to carry. It's much easier to love the Lord and keep his commandments when you know that he loves you and forgives you for Jesus' sake.