July 21, Pentecost 6: 3rd commandment

*8Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.****9****Six days you shall labour, 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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.****11****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*. (Exodus 20:8-11)

**What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.**

Today we will continue the series on Luther’s Small Catechism with the 3rd commandment. The 10 commandments are often divided into the so-called “2 tables of the law”. The 1st table (or the first 3 commandments) are about how we relate to God and the 2nd table (the rest of the 7 commandments) are about how we relate to our neighbors. These 2 “tables” are then summarized in the 2 great commandments of love: love the lord your God with your entire being, and love your neighbors as yourself. But how is “resting” or taking a day off an act of love for God? Luther’s explanation may baffle some people because he seems to make some kind of theological jump from something about the Sabbath day to something about the word of God. What was Luther thinking? Let us then look at this commandment more closely. Verse 8 is the actual command, which has 2 parts: 1) remember the Sabbath day, and 2) keep it holy.

The Sabbath day simply means the day of rest in Hebrew (and it is Saturday). And here we must be clear that this is like any other “holy” days commanded in the Old Testament, such as the Passover, the Day of Atonement, Pentecost, and other major feast days, which are only for the Old Testament people. It means that we are not obligated to observe or keep these holy days, including the Sabbath day, because otherwise, if we are to keep the Sabbath day as if we are still in the Old Testament, then we will also need to keep all other holy days in the Old Testament, which obviously we do not. If anything, the Passover and the Day of Atonement have a greater significance than the Sabbath and yet no churches today will teach that we have to keep them.

So then why do we still teach this particular command about the Sabbath? Is it still important or even relevant? It is because God wants us to rest, which is for our own good. This command is given so that we would learn God’s heart, which is always to love and give us what is good. The command was not given to “test” our loyalty or faith, as though it is given for God. As Jesus himself says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mk2:27)”. It was given for us that we might find rest. And this is the key to understanding the heart of this commandment. It is finding rest and not so much about the particular “day” or time or occasion. If this is the case, then this is actually the basis of all other “holy days”. That is to say, to fully understand the Passover, the Day of Atonement, and all the other special days, one needs to understand this first “holy” day that was set apart in the beginning.

But what are we resting from? Certainly the first thing that comes to mind is the physical rest. We all need to rest each day. Because work has become a curse for Adam and all his children. Before the fall, man worked but without sin and death. Adam worked and it was not difficult and onerous because there were no thorns and thistles and God provided for them. But now work has become burdensome because our lives depend on our hands. We need to exert ourselves and we need to worry about tomorrow and the day after.

Yet there is another kind of rest that we often neglect, which is the spiritual kind of rest from the spiritual kind of work. This is a difficult concept to grasp even though we and the whole world engage in this all the time, but we do not think of it enough and so we seldom realize that we are doing it and may be spiritually exhausted. The spiritual work that drains us is anything that we do WITHOUT faith and God. Spiritual work is not some abstract thing that we do apart or outside of our daily life, as some people may think. Man is created as both physical and spiritual being so that whatever he does, he does both as one. We don’t “feel” the spiritual aspect because it is already part of the physical aspect of our lives. When I eat or sleep or work or go to church or pray, it is both physical and spiritual, it is one and the same. To look for “spiritual” things outside of what we already have and doing is seeking something that does not actually exist.

So how do we get “spiritually” tired? It is when you rely only on yourself for everything, or in other words, to live apart from faith and God. This applies to all aspects of our lives, whether we eat or sleep or work or pray. When you do all these things without faith, it is a “self-work”. For most of us who are believers, this is not an obvious issue because we often waver between the 2: sometimes we do things in faith, sometimes we don’t (this does NOT mean that sometimes we lose our salvation). For the Christian, we do get spiritual rests, that’s why we don’t really feel that spiritual exhaustion. But for those who do not have God and faith, and sadly there are some Christians who are like that, they are exhausted without knowing why. That’s why people can do a lot of “spiritual” or pious works and still get tired, both physically and spiritually. Luther was a prime example of this, especially when he was a monk. He worked very hard but it was without God, and that became a great burden on his conscience. We call this guilt and despair, and together with the body, it is called death, which unfortunately can be conveniently ignored. And we fall into this too, probably not like Luther's extreme condition, where it was so great that he could not ignore it. Ours is so subtle that it could potentially be more dangerous. This is how the devil attacks us, making us think we are okay, that being a Christian without faith from time to time is okay, that we only need God when we “feel” it, that we can ignore the guilty conscience by doing something other than repentance. We, like the world, engage in this “self-work” because the self must do all kinds of work to alleviate or to ignore that guilt and despair.

I was having jetlag when I came back and the way to deal with it is to try to stay awake until night time. But the problem is when you pass a certain hour at night, you don’t feel the fatigue anymore, so it’s hard to sleep at night. But eventually that sleep deprivation will catch up, though this only lasts a few days. What about our spirit and soul and conscience? It can built up longer, but think of the consequences of that! We need proper rest regularly. So then it is God’s will and command, for our good, that we find rest for our entire being of body and soul one day a week.

How does this fit with the second portion in this commandment, namely, to keep this day holy? How then do we rest AND keep this holy at the same time? It seems contradictory, that we need to do something and yet we are to not do anything. Or is “not doing anything” (resting) the way we keep this day holy? To keep something holy simply means to set apart something for God. This is the primary meaning and usage in the bible. It may also have the moral connotation but that is secondary. So for example, this building is “holy”, not because it is morally good or bad, but it has been set apart for God. Likewise, these vessels are “holy” because they have been set apart for special use for God.

The sabbath day is holy not because “Saturday” is more special or holy compared to the other days of the week, but that this day it has been set apart for the people to find rest. And it’s not like the people of the Old Testament just lay in their homes all Saturday and did nothing. They went to the temple to worship God, to hear God’s word, to sacrifice, to pray, praise, and give thanks to God. That is the spiritual rest because in all these things that happen at the temple, the operative thing that gives rest is the word of God. It is the word of God that brings peace and consolation to the troubled heart and guilty conscience.

And that word has come to us in the flesh, that rest has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He IS the word. He IS the lord of the sabbath. Why is he called the “lord of the sabbath”? because he is good at sleeping? He did sleep in a boat in the middle of a storm, but he is the lord of the sabbath because he is the ultimate rest when he laid lifeless in a tomb on that Saturday. We usually focus on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but that Holy Saturday is just as important because that is our rest. Yes, he is a dead body in a tomb but in his death he gives us rest from the curse of Adam and all his children, that though we must by our sweat we shall eat bread, we are not alone by ourselves, left to our devices. In his death he gives us rest from the labors of sin which produces death, that though we sin daily and must face death, the guilt and condemnation is no longer upon our shoulders to bear. And in his death, he gives us rest from the slavery of the devil, that though he attacks and tempts and mocks and continually harass us, we have nothing to fear because Jesus is the lord of the sabbath. He is our rest. And all these are offered here in the service because this good news of Jesus is preached through the word and administered through the bread and wine. Here, God comes to give us rest. He comes and says to us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Mt11:28)”

This is why God has this command. It might sound absurd that we need a command to rest, since it should be a natural thing. But I remember when I was a teenager my father would tell me to go to sleep almost every night, because I would stay up late playing video games or something. He had to tell me to go to sleep, though of course I seldom listened. How much more when the spiritual side of things cannot be felt. That’s why God has this word for us that we should know to stop and find our true rest in him, in his death and resurrection.

And this is why Luther connects this command to the word of God. So he writes in the Large Catechism: “Therefore not only those sin against this commandment who grossly misuse and desecrate the holy day, as those who on account of their greed or frivolity neglect to hear God's Word or lie in taverns and are dead drunk like swine; but also that other crowd, who listen to God's Word as to any other trifle, and only from custom come to preaching, and go away again, and at the end of the year know as little of it as at the beginning. 97] For hitherto the opinion prevailed that you had properly hallowed Sunday when you had heard a mass or the Gospel read; but no one cared for God's Word, as also no one taught it. Now, while we have God's Word, we nevertheless do not correct the abuse; we suffer ourselves to be preached to and admonished, but we listen without seriousness and care.

Perhaps another way of thinking about this is to use the word “refresh” because “resting” seems like nothing is happening. It limits our thoughts to the process, but God is not merely concerned about the process of resting but the result of it as well, which is refreshed and renewed spirit. We sleep not for the sake of sleeping but to be refreshed for a new day of work and service and joy in the Lord. So this command teaches us also to desire God’s word, to cherish it, to learn it, and to retain it, so that in Christ, we may find joy in repentance and faith in our daily living. So what does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.