



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.3 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Third Commandment

The Third Commandment means something different for us from what it meant for the Israelites. In its literal sense the Third Commandment does not apply to us New Testament Christians.

But let us first look at the exact wording by which God spoke the Third Commandment from Mt. Sinai: **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it”** (Exodus 20:8-11).

When Moses repeated this Third Commandment as the Israelites were about to cross over the Jordan River into Canaan, he did not reiterate the basis for the seventh day of rest in God’s original six-day creation and seventh day rest. But this is what he said: **“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day”** (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

God gave other rules for keeping the Sabbath through Moses to the people, and the penalty for disobedience was harsh. **“Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death”** (Exodus 31:15). This commandment required God’s Old Testament people to rest and refrain from working on Saturday (that is, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). Obedience to this commandment was strictly enforced by demanding the death penalty for those who transgressed.

In the period between the last Old Testament prophet Malachi and the coming of Jesus, the Jewish teachers added their interpretations and definitions of work to God’s original commandment. As our Redeemer, who was **“born under the law”** (Galatians 4:4), Jesus obeyed God’s Third Commandment. But His enemies accused Him breaking the Sabbath because He refused to follow the traditional interpretations that the Jewish leaders had added to God’s law. When the Pharisees accused Jesus’ disciples of working on the Sabbath because they were plucking the heads of grain as they were walking through grainfields, Jesus explained: **“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath”** (Mark 2:27)

On another occasion His enemies were present for a synagogue service when a man with a withered hand was also there. Jesus asked this man to step forward and then He asked those who were attending the service: **“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”** (Mark 3:4). When they refused to answer His question, Jesus was grieved and angry because of their hardness of heart. Jesus then healed the man, even though it was the Sabbath day, and He repeated that action many times during His ministry.

The purpose of the Sabbath law was to give God's people rest from their physical labor, so that they could praise their God by hearing His Word, by praying to Him, and by meditating on the great things He had done for them. The bodies of men and animals need rest. But above all believers in God's promises need an opportunity to hear the Word of God and to thank Him for His blessings. Their Sabbath was to be **"holy to the LORD"** (Exodus 31:15).

The word "sabbath" means "rest". God rested on the seventh day of the world. That is, He rested from the work of creation. He has never rested from His work of preservation, for Jesus said to the Jews who accused Him of working on the Sabbath: **"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working"** (John 5:17). The Saturday rest pointed backwards to God's rest on the seventh day, but it also pointed ahead to a perfect spiritual rest in the future.

Israelites experienced one such rest when they enjoyed rest in the promised land of Canaan after their many years of wandering in the wilderness. But there were some who did not enjoy that rest because of their unbelief. So it is written in Psalm 95: **"Today, if you will hear His voice: Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion. ... For forty years I was grieved with that generation. ... so I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest'"** (Psalm 95:7-11).

The letter to the Hebrews refers to Psalm 95 and then says: **"Since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it"** (Hebrews 4:1-2). Notice that this rest comes about through hearing the Word of God and believing it. Some of the Israelites did not attain the rest of the promised land of Canaan because they did not believe God would or could give this land to them.

We also have a promised land, the land of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal rest in heaven. How do we attain that rest? By hearing the Word of the Gospel and believing it. **"There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. ... Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience"** (Hebrews 4:9-11). God gives us spiritual rest through the Gospel of Jesus, for in the Gospel the Holy Spirit tells us of God's love for us in Christ, what Christ accomplished for us by His life, death, and resurrection, and what He now offers us: forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in Christ. We enjoy spiritual rest by faith in the Gospel, and we look forward to total and perfect enjoyment of that rest in the world to come. Jesus says to us: **"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"** (Matthew 11:28-29).

The Third Commandment in its original wording does not apply to us today. The apostle Paul wrote: **"Let no one judge you in food or drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ"** (Colossians 2:16-17).

For this reason, Luther's *Small Catechism* explanation of the Third Commandment does not refer to the Sabbath day at all but to the spiritual rest of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that God gives to us through His Word. We could reword the Third Commandment in this way for us New Testament Christians: "Remember the spiritual rest that God gives you through His Word."

The *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352) gives us this English translation of the Third Commandment and Luther's explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

The Third Commandment

You are to hallow the day of rest.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching or God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Luther's *Large Catechism* adds:

"According to its outward meaning, 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" (p. 397).

"God's Word is the treasure that makes everything holy. ... At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed" (p. 399).

In spite of God's clear word in Colossians 2:16-17 and in other passages, there are still some persons today who tell us that we must keep Saturday holy and do no work on Saturday. There are others who tell us that we must keep Sunday holy and do no work on Sunday. But no one should make strict Sabbath observance a matter of conscience for us Christians today. Nevertheless, this is what the Seventh Day Adventists teach: "The seventh day of the week is ... the Lord's Day. ... It should be observed from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday." The *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646, which is followed by some Presbyterians and Reformed churches today, declares that Sunday is the New Testament Sabbath: "God has particularly appointed one day in seven for a sabbath ..., the first day of the week. ... This Sabbath is kept holy ... when men ... do not only observe a holy rest all the day ... but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy" (§21 ¶7 and ¶8).

But there is no command from God that Saturday or Sunday or any other day must be observed as a holy day of rest without work or recreation. Most Christians hold worship services on Sunday as a matter of tradition and convenience, not because of a divine command. Every Sunday is an anniversary of Jesus' resurrection and the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The true Sabbath rest of the New Testament is the spiritual rest provided by Jesus through His Gospel Word of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. This is the sabbath or rest that we should remember at all times. When Martha's sister Mary was sitting down at Jesus' feet and listening to His teaching, Jesus said: **"One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her"** (Luke 10:42). On another occasion He said: **"Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"** (Luke 11:28).

Since God has given us His Word, both law and Gospel, for our good, it is certainly sinful for us to despise His Word or make light of it. God surely wants us to read, think about, and study His Word. The long psalm (Psalm 119) asks and encourages us over and over again to use God's Word. Many other Bible passages do as well. Listen to these words from the letter to the Hebrews: **"We must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him?"** (Hebrews 2:1-3). God's law was given through angels, and disobedience to that law was punished. But now God has given us the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What an insult it is to God when we pay no attention to this Gospel! God Himself sent His Son to proclaim this Gospel, and His apostles risked their lives to proclaim it in the world. It is this Gospel Word that saves us. We cannot escape if we despise this Word, for only he who believes this Gospel will be saved.

God's Word is despised when people listen to God's Word in a careless spirit, as though they came only to be entertained. We should listen to God's Word seriously and strive to retain it in our minds and hearts, and we should think about what we have heard and put it into practice. The Lord God told His prophet Ezekiel: **"They come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them"** (Ezekiel 33:31-32).

James, the brother of our Lord, said to his listeners: **“Lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”** (James 1:21-22). The apostle Peter gave similar instruction: **“Laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby”** (1 Peter 2:1-2).

Since we believe the Bible is God’s Word, God can talk to us not only in church services when we have God’s Word spoken to us, but also when we read the Bible regularly. Many church bodies today no longer believe the Bible to be God’s true Word. If they read the Bible, they accept only those parts that agree with their thinking. But we cannot retain the true Gospel of Christ Jesus very long if we no longer regard the Bible that contains this Gospel as God’s Word, as absolutely trustworthy and inerrant in everything it declares to us, even its history, its miracles, and its geography.

We should not despise or neglect God’s Word but regard it as God’s true Word and gladly hear it and learn it. This is what God tells us to do with His Word. **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”** (Colossians 3:16).

Since there are so many false teachers in the world, as well as false-teaching church bodies, it is important that we attend the worship services of true-teaching or orthodox church bodies, those that are faithful to the teaching of the Bible in every way. The Lutheran confessions agree with the Word of God, and therefore it is good that we seek out confessional Lutheran churches and listen to God’s Word as it is taught by them. When we find such a church and such worship, we should join in with them and listen carefully to the preaching and teaching that comes from that church. The letter to the Hebrews tells us: **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching”** (Hebrews 10:23-25).

When we find faithful preachers and teachers of God’s Word, it is important not only that we listen to them and learn from them but that we support them by our prayers and gifts and honor them for the work of God that they do. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“We urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake”** (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“God is not the author of confusion but of peace. ... Let all things be done decently and in order”** (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). Since our Lord wants peace, not confusion, when Christians gather together for worship, it is generally a good thing to set up a definite time for congregational worship and follow some kind of regular order of service.

It is customary for Christians to follow a certain pattern of worship during the year, so that we remember and celebrate all the great acts of God. For example, we remember the coming of Christ to His people during the month of December, the birth of Christ on December 25, the suffering and death of Christ and His resurrection in the spring of the year, usually in April, and a few weeks later we commemorate the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. God has not commanded us to observe these festivals, but they serve to help Christians remember in a certain order the wonderful things our God has done for us.

Respect for the Word of God leads us also to share that Word with those who do not yet know it and to strengthen those who have heard it so that they grow in their understanding and commitment. Jesus has given all of us Christians our marching orders: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). The apostle Peter is addressing all Christians when he says: **“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”** (1 Peter 2:9).

This Third Commandment as it applies to use today condemns and curses us all. For we have not always had the right attitude towards the Word of God and Christian worship. Have we not neglected the reading of God's Word at times? Even if we have regularly attended Christian church services, have we always paid close attention to what was being said? Have we been doers of the Word and not hearers only?

Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, whose attitude towards the Word of God was always perfect. He taught God's Word faithfully during His ministry. When He was twelve years old, He was found in the temple at Jerusalem actively learning God's Word. He remained faithful to the very end, quoting Scripture from memory when He was hanging on the cross and bringing the comfort of God's Word to the repentant thief hanging next to Him. There was no sin in Him, and it was His holy suffering in our place and His precious blood as the Son of God that has atoned for all of our sins regarding how we have used or misused God's Word. We are saved only by trusting in our faithful Savior.

Questions

1. What makes the Third Commandment somewhat different from the others?
2. What did the Third Commandment require of the Israelites?
3. What was the punishment for failing to hallow the Sabbath?
4. How do we know that the Third Commandment means something different for us? Prove your answer correct from the Scriptures.
5. What does the word "sabbath" mean?
6. What kind of rest does our Lord want to give to us today?
7. How does He give us this rest?
8. What wrong teaching about the Sabbath do the Seventh Day Adventists and the Westminster Confession promote?
9. Why did Luther not mention rest from work in his explanation?
10. Why did Jesus commend Mary for what she was doing?
11. What are some of the ways we can honor the Word of God in our day?
12. What are some of the ways we can despise the Word of God?
13. Why is it important to have decency and order in our worship?
14. Why can we not be saved by observing the Third Commandment?
15. What is the only way of salvation? Why is this so?