

When God gave the Law at Mount Sinai, he spoke to the people of Israel saying, **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 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. 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”** (Ex 20:8–11).

It is God who makes time holy. “Holy” simply means “set apart.” When we speak of “holy” things, we mean things that are set apart for God, they are not given for any other use. This is a holy place. This space is set apart for the service of God. God blessed the seventh day, made it holy, claimed it for Himself, the day belongs to Him. It was the day after the six days of creation. On the seventh day God ceased to make new kinds of creatures and He showed His satisfaction in all that He had made. That is what it means when we read in Genesis that **“God rested”** (Gen 2:3). For ancient Israel, the seventh day recalled God’s work of creation. Despite all human work and ingenuity, craftiness and creativity, things that have become exponentially evident in the millennia since the Exodus from Egypt, the Sabbath regularly reminded God’s people that all things that are, are only because of God’s creation.

The Sabbath was also given for the purpose of physical rest and refreshment for people and animals alike. “Sabbath” means “rest.” Here we see the gracious and kindness of our heavenly Father’s care in granting physical rest. All the other ways we measure time are evident from creation itself: the day - governed by light and dark, sunup and sundown, the course of the month as the moon waxes and wanes, and the year of the sun’s rotation. God gave the heavenly lights to govern the days, months, seasons, and years (Gen 1:14). But there is no basis in nature for the idea of a seven-day week, the idea that just as there are set times for labor, there is a set time for rest. God gives it, reveals it in His Word. This prevents the abuse of endless work. Remember that Israel had just been set free from slavery. It also prevented rampant laziness.

The Sabbath was also the time when God’s people gathered in holy convocation, a gathering that belonged to God, a gathering for the purpose of hearing God’s Word and receiving the rest which is given there, the rest of the forgiveness of sins and a good conscience that is given by God’s promise of the Savior from sin and death. This is why we hear so often of Jesus preaching on the Sabbath. Luke tells us, **“as was [Jesus’] custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read”** (Lk 4:16). But one of the earliest and most frequent occasions of our Lord’s confrontation with the Pharisees is what Jesus does on the Sabbath. The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, was given as a day of rest for the people of Israel. It was a gift. By the time of our Lord’s incarnation, it had become more about the work of not doing any work, than about resting in the Word of God.

So when Jesus and the disciples pick grain and eat it on the Sabbath because they are hungry, they are accused of breaking the Sabbath. But that is nothing compared to when the Pharisees get angry that Jesus dares to heal on the Sabbath, to tell a paralytic to rise, pick up his mat, and go home. So also in today’s Gospel, as He dines in the home of a ruler of the Pharisees on the Sabbath, we read that **“they were watching Him carefully”** (Lk 14:1). They are lying in wait, ready to pounce. We see this all over today, as people wait for a word that is misspoken, that could easily be twisted to mean something absolutely unintended by the speaker, and it is precisely the worst construction that is placed on it.

But Jesus is watching too. He knows the thoughts of their hearts, that on the day they are to fix God’s Word in their minds, they are bent on catching Him. So He asks them a question. He cuts to the chase of what the Sabbath is for. He asks **“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?”** Is it permissible to do good, to have mercy? The answer which they are unable, unwilling to give, even though it is obvious, is “Yes.” It is lawful to have mercy. It is lawful to do what is manifestly good, what God commands us to do, and what He Himself has come to do. So Jesus heals the man with dropsy who is before him and sends him on his way. Again, He asks the Pharisees who among them **“having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out”** (Lk 14:5). And they are again unable to state the obvious: those in need are to be helped. The Sabbath is no excuse to be pitiless.

Here you see your redemption. The Word which Israel of old had gathered to hear preached to them on the Sabbath the Word which proclaimed and promised the coming redemption, the Word which spoke of the Seed of the Woman, the

prophet like Moses, the King from David's own house, God-With-Us. Instead of demanding to be served by His lowly creation, God came in humility, to serve, to give His life as a ransom for many, put Himself in the lowest, darkest, most damning place. And having satisfied all that the Law demanded, making perfect atonement for your sins, He was laid to rest in the tomb. God, once again, rested on the seventh day. His work of the new creation was complete, nothing more needed to be done, it was finished. Jesus is our rest. He speaks a word to those, to you, who are **"weary and heavy laden,"** and gives rest to your soul. He is the one who has had mercy on you, and come to your aid, giving rest to those who are restless until they come to Him.

This is the Christian Sabbath. It's not a day, it's a person. St. Paul writes to the Colossians, **"let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ"** (Col 2:16 – 17). The rest of the Sabbath, the joy of the old festivities of Israel, the solemn bestowal of forgiveness that was given on the Day of Atonement, it is all given fully and clearly in Christ Jesus. He is our rest, not just one day of the week, but every day. This is the inner Sabbath, the rest of faith in Christ, which the Christian receives through His speaking in His Word at all times when that Word is read and meditated upon.

Because Jesus is our rest, we also gather to be with Him where He gives that rest to the Church. The ancient Sabbath was a day of gathering. The Holy Spirit gathers His holy Christian Church. Since the days of the apostles, the Church has gathered around her risen Lord on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, on which He rose to deliver His rest to His Church. The writer to the Hebrews says, **"let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some,"** (Heb 10:24–25). You see how already then, there were those who thought that Christ's redemption meant they were free not to gather with the Body of Christ, that they could live as Christians in isolation from one another, that the gathering of the Church is not essential to Her existence.

The command of the Third Commandment that still remains is not about a particular day, but hear and learn God's Word. Faith is the ear that hears the Word of God and believes it. It longs to be filled with those rest-giving words; it drives you to where that Word is heard. And it so happens, faith doesn't just do that for you, but for all other Christians. So here we are! With believing hearts that tell sleepy eyes that there are things far more needed than the rest of the body. With believing hearts that tell hands itching for the golf club or baseball bat that there are far more precious gifts given here to be grasped. With believing hearts that tell weary ears that would rather hear something else, that here is the sweet, gentle Word that gives balm to the soul.

What gets in the way of this hearing and receiving, the works and pleasures that would hinder your hearing and learning the Word of God, are to be avoided. Do not let anything in your life outweigh the hearing and learning of God's Word, whether it's on Sunday morning, or your daily devotions. This is not because God despises leisure, wants you to be sleep deprived, or hates your hobbies. He gives these things as good gifts. But above all He wants to give you what you need most. To give you what grants rest. To give you what preserves you in faith. To strengthen you on your pilgrimage to the eternal Sabbath, the heavenly rest that will never end, where you **"shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike [you], nor any scorching heat"** (Rev 7:16). The weary labors of work, the toil and tribulations of your soul, the battle against your lazy, unbelieving sinful nature, will be past. You will have rest.