

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Law of God is strict, and it is demanding. Who can keep it? You? If you think you can, I invite you to read again Luther's explanations to the Ten Commandments. There Luther explains what these laws demand ... what you must not do and what you must do. Do you do all this without fail? That is the standard: a righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). "*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48). Do you still think, "I got this"? Then I invite you to do what Jesus said to the rich young man: "*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*" (Matt. 19:21). Would you not do exactly what that young man did? Go away sorrowful? You know you would.

The Law of God is demanding, but even more so were the rules and regulations that the Pharisees added to it. They sought to erect a fence around the law to keep a potential transgressor far from the boundary — that he might not transgress it. And that can make some sense. Museums place valuable artifacts in cases; they rope off areas where people may not go; they cover priceless paintings with glass ... all to keep malefactors from harming them. And we know, in these gray and latter days, that these things work. Modern activists that try to despoil works of art in museums to make a political statement are foiled; activists that do the same with public monuments succeed and even destroy them.

Thus, the Pharisees erected a fence around the Third Commandment, which you know, which you have memorized: "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." Moses reminds us in our Old Testament reading that the Sabbath Day was the seventh day of the week, and it had to do with rest. That's what Sabbath means. "*Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.*" In the model of the God of creation Himself, the seventh day was set apart as a day of rest ... for you, for your family, your servants, your animals, even a sojourner — a traveler who is visiting.

But what does this mean? ... to rest from all your work? The Pharisees were happy to step in and give regulations that explicate the law. One of the things they had determined was that "gleaning" on the Sabbath was against the law. Gleaning, you probably know, generally means gathering leftover grain after the crop has been harvested, but the Old Testament also permitted a different kind of gleaning: "*go[ing] into your neighbor's standing grain*" and "*pluck[ing] the ears with your hand.*" You just were not permitted to harvest the crop as your own by "*put[ting] a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain*" (Deut. 23:25). And this latter gleaning is exactly what the disciples were accused of doing. Gleaning was not illegal according to the Law, but the Pharisees' regulations made it illegal to do on the Sabbath. In fact, they identified 39 different types of "work" that were forbidden

on the Sabbath, things like “reaping, baking, separating two threads, writing two letters, lighting a fire, extinguishing a fire,” and more (see footnote 15 in James W. Voelz, *Concordia Commentary: Mark 1:1–8:26*, p. 217).

But Jesus teaches us today that He “*is lord ... of the Sabbath,*” and things changed as He came along. The commandment, as a day of rest, is really not in effect for us Christians. Remember what St. Paul said in Colossians that Christ has done for us. He “*cancel[ed] the record of debt that stood against us **with its legal demands.** This he set aside, nailing it to the cross*” (Col. 2:14). This is what Jesus came to do: to fulfill the law on our behalf (Matt. 5:17). And He did it! St. Paul said in Romans, “*Christ is **the end of the law for righteousness** to everyone who believes,*” not a “*righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them,*” but a “*righteousness based on faith*” (Rom. 10:4-5). Therefore, Paul says in 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 “*substance belongs to Christ*”! He is not only “*lord ... of the Sabbath,*” but in Him we find the very rest we need, for “*we who have believed [in Him] enter that rest*” (Heb. 4:3). He Himself promised it, and He gives it. “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,*” Jesus says. “*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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*” (Matt. 11:28-30).

In fact, Jesus teaches, the commandment to “*observe the Sabbath*” was not meant to be a burden on man, not for King David of old or his men, not for Jesus’ disciples, and not for us. As Jesus said, “*The Sabbath was made for man,*” for the benefit of man, “*not man for the Sabbath,*” for God needs nothing from us. God is not interested in our “*sacrifice[s]*” that we think might fulfill the law and make us look righteous before others (Matt. 9:13). No. Jesus came as our atoning sacrifice, once for all (Heb. 7:27), and Jesus “*came not to call the righteous, but sinners*” (Matt. 9:13).

That’s why we come to His house, because we’re sinners, because sinners need to be turned away from their own selfish wants and desires and be turned to Christ. We come because we need the assurance of forgiveness in Christ the crucified. We come because we need the strength offered by God’s word and sacrament to live in righteousness and purity. We come because we need instruction from God’s word in this righteous living. We come to be encouraged in this righteousness. We come because it’s for our good.

And, yes, we come offering up the sacrifice of praise to God here, “*the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*” (Heb. 13:15), but we go forth from here seeking to do what God desires. And what He desires from us is mercy. That’s a different kind of sacrifice. It’s not an atoning sacrifice, but it’s still a sacrifice ... of doing good and sharing what we have (Heb. 13:16). It’s offering up our “*bodies as ... living sacrifice[s]*” to God, hating evil, but holding onto what is good, loving others, showing honor, not being slothful but fervent in spirit, rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation, being constant in prayer, showing hospitality, and so forth (Rom. 13:1, 9ff). This is what Christ shows us; this is the path He lights for us, of sacrificial service.

Therefore, God grant that we might continue to “remember the Sabbath,” not as a matter of obligation to stop all labor, but as a matter of opportunity to be with Jesus, to receive our rest from Him, to be built up as followers of Jesus, and to go forth from here unburdened, free to love and serve others even as we have been served. That’s the correct ordering: receive and then respond. As Jesus said, “*Freely you have received, freely give*” (Matt. 10:8 NKJV). God grant this to us ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.