

Exodus 31:13 “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.’”

This was the Lord’s solemn command to His newly redeemed people. He had given them many other commands, but to this one He added special emphasis: “**Above all.**”

Above all, the Lord wanted His people to rest from all their work, just as the Lord Himself had rested from all His works of creation. By observing this command, the people would know that it is the Lord who sanctifies them.

In the Old Testament God also warned the people what would happen to them if they did not keep the Sabbath. **Exodus 31:15** “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.”

God’s command was not to be disobeyed. Why was it so important? Why was God so insistent that His people set aside a holy day of rest?

Besides the obvious purpose of providing physical rest and refreshment, this holy day was established so that God might bring spiritual refreshment to the souls of His people. The Sabbath was a time for the children of Israel to receive instruction in God’s Word.

Luther’s hymn on the Ten Commandments (581) captures the spirit of this command, stanza 4: “‘You shall observe the worship day That peace may fill your home, and pray, And put aside the work you do, So that God may work in you.’ Have mercy, Lord!”

But the Sabbath Day served another greater purpose. Like all the laws given by God through Moses. **Galatians 3:24** “The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.”

It was to teach His people about the One who is Himself the “lord of the Sabbath” as we read in Matthew 11 and 12 tonight. With the coming of Christ in the flesh, the true Sabbath rest had come.

Christ shows us that He has fulfilled the Sabbath when He says, **Matthew 11:28** “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

By urging those who are weary and heavy laden by sin—to find rest in Him, He is telling us that in Him all our labor ceases, and we find true “rest for our souls.”

He rested on the Sabbath Day from all His works of redemption. He said on Good Friday, “It is finished,” after suffering for our sins on the cross. And then He was laid in the tomb, where He rested until the third day.

During His earthly ministry, many who heard Jesus’ invitation, came to Christ in faith, and found rest for their souls.

They cast off their burdens, their guilty consciences, their sorrow over sin, death, and the devil, and they took refuge in the mercy and righteousness of Jesus Christ. They put aside their works so that God might work in them through His Son.

Of course, there were many who rejected this invitation too. Many Jews did not want to lay aside their works, because they wanted their works to count for something.

They had forgotten the true purpose of the Sabbath—to point to Christ. They insisted on carrying their own burdens, spurning the Lord’s gracious invitation to cast all their cares and anxieties on Him and find rest for their souls.

Nothing saddens the Lord more than having His invitation for spiritual rest and refreshment despised and spurned. This is why He weeps over Jerusalem, for He knows what their rejection will cost them.

This is why He so urgently commanded the children of Israel to observe the Sabbath, even adding punitive measures. And this is why He urgently invites those who are troubled by their sins to believe in Him.

Jesus wants you to find rest for your soul, not in the passing pleasures of this world, not in your own works and righteousness, but in Him, in His atoning death, in His rest in the tomb, and in His resurrection on the third day.

He wants you to lay aside all of your sins, just as He wanted His people of old to rest from all their works. And to this end, He has instituted for you and for all of His weary sojourners the salutary gift of the Lord’s Supper.

When you come to the Lord’s Table, weak and weary and burdened by sin, in need of spiritual rest and refreshment. You have multiple transgressions against God. Your thoughts and desires have been soiled with sin.

We must confess our sins before God. Luther says that confession makes us beggars before God, he goes on the say that bringing sin out into the open deprives sin of its power. **Ephesians 5:11** “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”

The weight on your shoulders is too heavy for you to bear. And so, the Lord says to you, “Come to Me. Eat and drink My body and My blood. And you will find rest and refreshment for your soul.”

The Communion hymn by Friedrich Christian Heyder, **I Come, O Savior, to thy Table (618)**, confesses this comforting truth in stanza 4:

“Weary am I and heavy laden; With sin my soul is sore oppressed;
Receive me graciously and gladden My heart, for I am now Thy guest.
Lord, may Thy body and Thy blood Be for my soul the highest good!”

This hymn teaches us that entering into Jesus’ presence is not just something that happens in our thoughts or feelings. Rather, it is a concrete reality in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is present in His body and blood under the bread and the wine.

He is not far away. He is not in some place to which the Christian must go in his or her imagination. The same Lord whose words and deeds were recorded for us in the Gospels comes to us in the Divine Service and invites us to come to Him and find rest.

The children of Israel were not to wander forever in the wilderness. They were pressing toward a goal. The Lord was leading them to the land flowing with milk and honey, the Promised Land.

Each Sabbath was a “rest stop” along the way toward that final rest they would have once they reached the land of Canaan.

The Church is also pressing toward a goal. We, too, look with longing eyes to the eternal rest Christ has promised to give us.

It is comforting to know that each time we gather to rest our weary souls at the Lord’s Table, we are reminded of the future and final rest we will have when Christ comes again in glory.

It is truly a foretaste, not only of the feast, but of the rest to come. Amen.