**Exodus 20:8-11** July 15, 2018

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** The Fourth Commandment

*Exodus20:8“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 11For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Do You Keep the Sabbath “Holy”?**

They were walking on the shoulders of the road. Wide grassy shoulders without sidewalks, and they were just walking along as the Benzes and BMWs whizzed by. On the richest side of the richest city on the continent they were walking on the side of the road. They weren’t homeless: they were well-dressed and well-kempt. They weren’t health enthusiasts: no running shoes or spandex. They weren’t protesters: no picket signs. Walking. Who were those people? What were they doing? The somewhat unusual clothes and hairstyles of these people clued us in to the fact that they were Jews observing the Sabbath. And though, most likely, they were of sufficient means to drive $50,000 cars, perhaps even having them in their garages, they were walking on their way to the synagogue.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The stricter orthodox Jewish interpretation of the Sabbath commandment runs this way: God commanded that no one light a fire on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:3). To drive a car you have to make a fire. Therefore an observant Jew will not drive a car on the Sabbath. Now we might think that is a bit of a stretch. But whatever else you might say, you must admit that they took the Third Commandment seriously: ***“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping in holy.”*** They took it seriously. In a city of wealthy people, they were willing to look odd on a weekly basis, in order to obey the Biblical Sabbath day command.

**“Holy” Means “Set Apart”**

The very first sentence of our reading says, ***“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”*** The word I want to key in on is the last one, “holy.” “Holy” is such an important *and misunderstood* concept that we should review it. I know that I have done this other times, but I think it is worth reviewing this every year or two.

If I asked you, “What does the word ‘holy’ mean?” You might tell me it means something like “being really good, being perfect.” Which is how we usually use the word, and how the Bible often uses the word. But the word “holy” means a lot more than being good. When you go back to the original language of the Hebrew in the Old Testament, and the Greek in the New Testament, and even in older English, “holy” does not really mean “morally pure.” The word “holy” means “set apart.”

Take this example, when the Lord appeared to Moses, the Lord said to Moses, *“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”* Now how can dirt be morally pure? It can’t. It’s dirt! Then how could God call that ground “holy”? This is the original meaning of the word “holy.” That ground was “set apart” for God. God had determined that at that time, that space of ground was specially set aside to God, and therefore Moses had better act like it!

That is what those 21st century Jews were doing on their way to the synagogue. They had set the Sabbath day aside as holy. It was a special day for which they would change their behavior, they would live differently, to make sure the day was set apart for God.

“Set apart” is at the core of the word “holy” in the Bible.

“Holy” is kind of the opposite of multi-tasking. When you multi-task, nothing is “holy”. You throw it all into the pot and stir it around and treat it like none of it is special. But some things do demand our full attention. That is why texting and driving are illegal. Driving deserves and demands our full attention, if not for your own good, then for the good of the people around you. And there are times, too, that God wants our full attention.

**Why We Must Setting Apart God-Time**

God said, ***“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy… The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord.”*** It is God’s day, set apart for God.

God knows how we are. If we don’t set things apart, we ignore them. We know it. Like that mother in the children’s sermon: she knew that she needed to have a jar and a pre-determined iron-clad rule about the money she put into that jar and then she would be able to use it for that special purpose. If she just kept it in her purse she would keep that money there… until she wanted to spend an extra $5 on someone’s birthday present, or got hungry for chocolate. At some point in life we all realize that we need to do that sort of thing for important things. We know that if we don’t set things aside we fritter them away.

It’s not just money. That even more precious gift, time, if we do not discipline ourselves to set time aside, we waste it. That is why God told the Israelites to keep the Sabbath day holy, to set it apart, for God. It is the only way we humans can ever really give God the attention he deserves.

Yet God’s command to the Israelites creates as many questions as it answers. One of the first questions is: “If God told us to set aside the Sabbath – Saturday – as a special day, then should we not worship on Saturday?” And another question: if God said, ***“On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the [foreigner] within your gates,”*** should we not be prohibited from working on this day? Those are two good questions because those are things we don’t do. And any time that we read a command of God, and then don’t do it, we had better be able to explain why! Why don’t we worship on Saturday, why don’t we stop all work?

The reason is found in God’s own word. The strict observance of the Sabbath was in force from the time of Moses until the time of Jesus. This command served a purpose until the Savior of the Nations came and accomplished his work. We can’t go into a detailed explanation here. But let this one Bible passage from the book of Colossians suffice: *“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival…* ***or a Sabbath day****. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”* Once road construction is complete, the DOT takes down all the construction barrels and signs. Once Jesus appeared on the scene and completed his work, the signs that pointed to him, like the Sabbath day, were packed up and removed from the scene.

Note what I said, “The shadow passed away.” In the Sabbath commandment there is both a shadow and an eternal truth. The eternal truth remains in force. The core truth of this commandment is in that word “holy.” The core truth of this commandment is that God wants us to set aside *time* in our lives to God. He has given us the freedom to choose the time, the place, but set it aside.

That’s what we do here isn’t it? Every Sunday, at this place, at this time, we set aside time for our Lord. And God is pleased when we do that! That is what Mary was doing at Jesus’ feet, listening to our Savior’s words.

**Truly Setting Apart God Time**

But in your hearts, is this time truly holy to the Lord? Of course, there will be exceptions. In emergencies certain rules are laid aside to serve a greater good. Doesn’t the ambulance exceed the speed limit on the way to the hospital? If someone is drowning at the far end of the swimming pool, won’t you run even though the pool rules say you must walk? Some laws have priority over others. If you had a heart attack and are in the hospital, I’m not going to be asking, “Why weren’t you in church yesterday?”

But I am not talking about emergencies. Think about the last time you didn’t get to church. Or if you have set-aside devotion time, think about the last time you didn’t pray or read your devotion. Why not? I’ll bet it wasn’t an emergency. It was almost certainly something like, “Well, that really shoots a hole in my Sunday!” Or better yet, “I was out with my friends and didn’t even think about it!” Can you say “self-incrimination.”

Or maybe “setting aside” time for God is some variation of this: I can worship God while I’m fishing. While that is not untrue, it is also true that worshiping God while fishing, driving or golfing is not time “set aside” to the Lord. It is time doing what I want to do, and kind of squeezing God in around the edges. ***“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy!”***

Here is one more point that must be briefly brought out: In our reading from Hebrews it says, *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.”* (Hebrews 10:24). Setting aside time to God strengthens your fellow Christians.

A certain Christian who didn’t get to church that often, walked into his church one Sunday and was surprised that attendance was down. He said, “Where is everyone?” as if everyone else was the problem! Where had he been the last five weeks?

On the other side, I have people ask me routinely, “Where is so-and-so?” They notice that someone hasn’t been coming to church and they miss them and are concerned about them. And that person has been out pursuing his dreams or she has been feeling sorry for herself. When those Christians ask, I can hear a discouragement in their voices. When you decide to not come to church, the rest of us suffer. You have an obligation to the Christian family!

When people make a choice to not worship, they rarely think about anybody else than themselves – how they feel, whether they are tired or busy or would rather be at the lake. It’s pure selfishness toward God and other people!

Look. I am your pastor. I am not pointing this commandment at any one, any more than I am pointing it at myself. My set aside devotion time this week didn’t do very well a couple days. And that is not good. In fact, in at least a couple instances, I am certain it was sin. I chose something else over God in my set-aside God time. This commandment applies to every person. The all-knowing God who knows whether you have really set aside time to God. We cannot stare into those Ten Commandments with unblinking eyes. For as we look into the Law of God, we realize this truth, *“Through the law we become conscious of sin.”* (Rom. 3:20).

As we realize how low a priority we give to God’s time, how often we don’t give God time because of selfish world-centered reasons, we realize that God’s Ten Commandments make me see my need for Jesus. I needed Jesus to die on a cross for me! And he knew that, and he did! And now, he invites me to stay close to him, to devote time to him, to “keep the Sabbath day holy” so that he can strengthen me in that!

Which is precisely why the early Christians chose Sunday as the Lord’s day. Sunday is the day Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday is the day when the first believers understood that their sins were completely paid for and taken away and live forever. So the Christian Church chose a new holy day, Sunday.

Keeping this commandment really comes down to this question, “Have I set aside some portion of my day, of my week and put the label: GOD’S on it?”

No, you don’t have to walk to church from Rineyville. No, you don’t have to take a full 24-hour day of rest from every stitch of work. But you should be able to humbly say to God, “Heavenly Father, because of your great mercy to me, I set aside this time, these times to you. May I use them to worship you, to thank you, to be strengthened by you. Amen.”

*A revised sermon from 2015.*

1. As we observed in the Gallo Manor area of Sandton, RSA back around 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)