

“God’s Gift of a Day of Rest”

Don’t you love weekends? Work a full week at your job, perhaps while juggling other family responsibilities, and you might appreciate a weekend. No job, sleep in a bit, relax and escape. Our young people understand this, too. You go to school for a full week, do your homework, participate in some sports or other activities, and eventually, it tires you out. You’re ready for a weekend, or maybe even a summer vacation. It’s nice to get a rest.

Time to rest and relax is a gift from God. Already at the time of creation God set a pattern for people. For six days he was active by the almighty power of his word to create the heavens and the earth, the sea and all the creatures that fill them. And then, on the seventh day God rested. Hopefully it is obvious to you that God wasn’t worn out from his work, but he made a point that his work of creation was complete and he made the seventh day of the week special. He set a pattern of work and rest.

Many generations later, God established for himself a nation of people that he called his very own. He gave them laws and regulations. They would serve him by following these laws, and he would bless them. Primary among these laws were God’s Ten Commandments. You may have noticed a depiction of the Ten Commandments on the front cover of your bulletin this morning. At the bottom of the left tablet of stone on this picture you find the command to remember the Sabbath. That word, Sabbath, means “rest.” In giving this commandment God was reinforcing for his people the need to set aside a day for rest. In fact, he mandated for his people that they were to observe Saturday, the seventh day of the week, as a day of rest. He even established as death the punishment for disobeying his Sabbath law.

Forty years after God gave this law, his people were on the verge of entering into the Promised Land. They stood before Moses, who had led them to that point, but would no longer be their leader. And Moses repeated for the people and reminded them of the laws that God had given. His mention of the Sabbath Law, which many of us know as the third commandment, serves as the text for our sermon this morning. **“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”**

The Lord had certainly given his people a gift in the form of physical rest on the Sabbath Day, but the regulations he put in place for the Sabbath Day make it clear that this law concerned more than just physical rest and relaxation. This commandment had another purpose, a spiritual purpose.

The Sabbath Day was a special opportunity for the people of God to consider the wonderful works of the Lord. As they rested from their work, they would no doubt recall how God had rested from his work of creating the world. According to our text, they would also be reminded of how he had led them out of Egypt. In Egypt, these people had become slaves and were oppressed, but God rescued them from their enemies, and he made them his very own blessed people.

And as they remembered this great deliverance, the people would also consider a greater deliverance. God had consistently throughout history promised to send the people a Savior from their sin. As the Old Testament Israelites offered up sacrifices, they learned that God took away sin by the shedding of the blood of an innocent victim. In their rituals of purification they learned that God had to wash away sin before he would allow sinners to approach him. By all the laws that set them apart from the people around them, God was reminding his people that he had a special purpose for them: to be the ancestors of the Savior of the world. And through the Sabbath Day rest, God was picturing the rest that their Savior would give to their souls.

You know the feeling of a soul without rest, don't you? Something's not right. I need to do more, I need to be more. Whether it's how I stand before God or how I appear to the people around me, I can never be satisfied by my own efforts. I am always busy, I am always working, and yet I can never make any progress. My friends and my family members know how cruel and unkind I can sometimes be, and my God knows better than I do that I have failed him miserably. He has every right to watch me squirm as I try to figure out how to please him. He has every right to say, "That's enough!" and to send me away from him forever.

But instead he gives me rest. He sent his own dearly beloved Son into my world. He had Jesus live under the same expectations that God has for me. He let Jesus experience the same temptations I do. And when Jesus had perfectly navigated that minefield of temptation, he sacrificed himself for me. He took my sins, and he died for them on the cross. His body lay in the grave for a Sabbath day before he brought it back to life to assure me that his righteousness is mine. There is nothing I can do. There is no work to be done. I am at rest.

So now I say with the Psalmist "**My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him**" (Psalm 62:1). I hear the voice of Jesus saying, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls**" (Matthew 11:28-29). Through faith in Jesus as my Savior, I have rest, rest for my soul.

All along, God was pointing his people to that rest. The Apostle Paul in our second lesson this morning explained how the Sabbath Day, like so many Old Testament observances, was a "**shadow of things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ**" (Colossians 2:17). That means that as New Testament believers, God no longer requires that we observe a particular day as a day of rest. It means that Saturdays can be used for fixing up the house or whatever else we have in mind, and it means that working some on Sunday isn't necessarily a sin. The reality for us is that Old Testament signs have been fulfilled in Jesus and we have the real thing!

And that means we will want to find time to rest in God's Word. We will want to set aside portions of our busy schedules to remember what God has done for us and to consider the wonderful things he has promised to us. The Pharisees in today's Gospel misunderstood the Sabbath Day. They didn't realize that God was concerned chiefly with people's hearts and not with the minute details of overdone rules. Having a bite to eat when hungry wasn't a sin for the disciples. The Lord of the Sabbath was able to explain that. The Sabbath was a gift that God had given to his people.

It's important for us also to be careful not to turn God's gifts into something they are not. Let's not let a happy occasion like a weekly gathering with believers around God's Word turn into a chore that we do every Sunday. Let's not think of our church attendance as a sacrifice that we make in order to please God. Let's see this as an opportunity to be renewed and to find rest in God's Word. Let's cherish the rest for our souls that we find here every week.

And finally, let us see this rest as a glimpse of the future rest that awaits us, the rest from all our labors in the perfect joy of heaven.

As you've heard, it was Vacation Bible School week this past week. And there were a lot of people who put a lot of time and a lot of effort into the week's activities. Physically, they probably needed a weekend. Spiritually, however, they were in the perfect place to find rest, because everything was based on God's Word and sharing his message of salvation. I pray that you would find such rest today, throughout your week, and throughout your life, in the Word of God.