

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 2
June 2, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Get some rest!

—Colossians 2:13-17

“Six days you are to labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath rest to the LORD your God.” If there is any doubt that God gave us the Ten Commandments for our good, here we have an example right in front of us. God doesn’t want you to work all the time. He wants you to get some rest. Get some down time. Put your feet up. Take it easy. Working 24/7 nonstop is not healthy, and it’s not fun. God himself rested from his labor of creation. In six days God called into existence the heavens and the earth and everything that is in them, but on the seventh day he rested and reveled in his creation. God wants you to take time off. Get some rest!

But you know very well that just because you’re not working doesn’t mean you’re really resting. You could be lounging on a beach somewhere surrounded by the most beautiful scenery in the world, but if you’re still consumed by stress and your mind is racing and your stomach is churning because of all things that are weighing you down, that’s not restful. You could be catching some leisure time, but if you’re upset with your spouse or angry at your boss or bitter at your neighbor, that’s not restful. If your conscience is bothering you because of some sin you’ve committed, if you’re afraid because the doctor has given you a terminal diagnosis, and you know you’re going to die soon, if you’re going through life with fear or guilt or uncertainty about where you’re going to spend eternity, that’s not restful. So obviously, there’s more to “sabbath rest” than just kicking back and doing nothing.

The Hebrew word for rest is “*shabbat*,” from which we get the word “sabbath.” In Hebrew, *shabbat* means more than just taking a break from work. When God commanded, “Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy,” he wanted his people to enjoy a complete rest of body and soul, mind and spirit. In the Old Testament the sabbath day wasn’t just a day when you didn’t do your shopping, cooking and cleaning. It was a day to pause and reflect on the things of God. It was a day for worship, a day to be fed with the God’s Word. It was a day to celebrate the peace of God’s mercy and forgiveness. It was a day for fathers to lead their families into the Scriptures, a day to give thanks for the mighty deliverance that God’s people had received from God. So from the time the sun went down on Friday until the time it set again on Saturday evening, God’s people practiced *shabbat*. They rested. They worshiped. Every sabbath day Jesus was in the synagogue hearing God’s Word, meditating on God’s Word, teaching God’s Word.

Unfortunately, when the deeper meaning of real rest gets lost, the sabbath day becomes just a grown-up “time-out.” You know what I mean: When a child is naughty you as the parent say, “You’re getting a time-out, and you can’t go on playing until you’ve finished your time-out.” That’s how some people viewed the Old Testament sabbath. They chafed and fumed because they couldn’t do business on the sabbath, and they couldn’t wait to get back to making money on the first day of the week. They went through the motions, but they completely missed the meaning. And by the time Jesus walked the earth, obedience to the Old Testament Sabbath law had reached the point of absurdity. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day had specified the maximum number of steps that a person could take on the sabbath before they had gone too far and were violating the commandment to rest. The Pharisees became angry with Jesus because the Lord had the gall to heal people on the Sabbath. They said Jesus wasn’t keeping the commandment because he showed mercy and kindness when he was supposed to be resting. The nit-pickiness and the legalism reached the point of being ridiculous and comical, and it continues in some circles to this day. Today in Israel many buildings have “sabbath elevators.” If your room is on the tenth floor of the hotel in Tel Aviv, and it happens to be a Saturday, you probably don’t want to get onto the Sabbath elevator. The sabbath elevator is a special elevator that is programmed to stop at every floor, so that orthodox, observant Jews don’t have to go through the “work” of pushing a button. It sounds funny to us, but it’s true.

When God commands you and me, “Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy,” and he tells us to get some rest, he’s not talking about refraining from pushing buttons. He wants his people to experience the complete rest that flows from perfect communion with him. It’s a perfect rest that’s only found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. After all, it was Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you *sabbath*” (Matthew 11). The rest that we have in Jesus is the complete calm and peace that flows from the certainty that our sins are forgiven, and we are in a right relationship with God. St. Paul tells us where this rest comes from in his letter to the Colossians: “Even when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ by forgiving us all our trespasses. God erased the record of our debt brought against us by his legal demands. This record stood against us, but he took it away by nailing it to the cross. After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ.”

Think of the ledger of charges that would stand against us. Think of just our sins against the Third Commandment to remember the sabbath day. We love our pillow more than we love God’s Word, so we break the commandment by

neglecting worship. Or we sit in church and go through the motions. But sitting here all antsy and anxious because you've got things you'd rather be doing, and you don't want to be in God's house is still sinning against the commandment. Being in church while our mind wanders elsewhere is sinning against the commandment. In the same way, neglecting God's Word and worship, despising God's Word, refusing to hear God's Word, and using the day for everything but God's Word—be it work or fun or sporting activities or anything that keeps us out of God's house and away from God's Word—is sinning against the commandment. And God is serious about this commandment, just as he's serious about his commandments regarding murder and adultery and stealing, and God will punish the evildoer. This is one of those areas that can sneak up on us, where we need to especially search our hearts and repent of our misplaced priorities and our despising of God's Word and return to God with a broken heart for forgiveness.

When God says, "Get some rest," he's calling us to return to him and find rest in the comfort of trusting that God has done everything to save us. Imagine if the ledger of charges against us were allowed to stand! There's nothing we ourselves could do to blot out the accusations. With every sin we committed, the charges piled up against us. Every commandment of God that we failed to keep pointed the finger at each one of us and proclaimed, "Guilty! Guilty!" Every commandment. Every sin. The ledger of our behavior was black with our wicked behavior. But God took matters into his own hands to pay our debt for us and to remove our guilt. Our sins were nailed to the cross with Jesus. Yes, even our sins against the sabbath—nailed to the cross! The ledger that stood against us was blotted out by the innocent blood of Christ our Savior. This is why our sermon series is called "A Top-down Faith," because all the completed work has been done by God from above. We contributed nothing to removing our guilt; we only compounded it. But God's mercy in Christ is greater than all our wickedness, and God forgave all our trespasses for Jesus' sake.

Then there's that little phrase, "After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ." That's referring to Jesus' descent into hell. We confess in the creeds that Jesus "descended into hell," and we might be tempted to think that refers to Jesus' suffering, but it doesn't. It refers to Jesus' victorious march through hell to show the forces of darkness that he is victorious. Satan and all his minions have nothing that they can hold against us. The devil can no longer accuse us of sin; he has been disarmed, and we are no longer in his power. He cannot accuse us of sin; his charges cannot stick. Everything that stood against us has been nailed to the cross with Jesus, and we stand forgiven in Christ our Conqueror.

So how does God give us this rest? He gives it to us through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. God tells us how much he loves us in Christ, the price he paid to make us his children in Christ, and when we hear the good news of forgiveness our troubled hearts find rest. This is why for us the sabbath day is especially Sunday, when we worship God and are served by God with the good news of forgiveness, but it's also every day, as we celebrate the forgiveness we have in Christ.

So the Apostle instructs us, "Therefore, do not let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in regard to a festival or a New Moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were coming, but the body belongs to Christ." Don't worry about the day. Don't let anyone judge you about the sabbath. It's not about whether the day of rest is Saturday or Sunday or Wednesday or any day in between. Paul says, "These things are a shadow of things to come. The reality, however, is found in Christ." If you're walking up to the corner of a building, and you can see the shadow of someone coming from around the corner, you know there's someone approaching the corner from the other side, but you can't tell who it is. When you turn the corner and see the person face-to-face, then you no longer focus on the shadow but on the person. All of the Old Testament ceremonial law—all the sacrifices, the festivals, the worship rules—pointed to the fact that Christ was coming; the law was a shadow of the one to come. But now Jesus has come. The eternal Son of God took on real human flesh and blood. The real Christ was nailed with real piercing nails to a real cross. Rest for our souls is not found in yoga meditation or some empty New Age spirituality but in a real crucified body nailed to a tree and in a crucified man who was really dead and was raised to life again.

There's one more aspect of this rest we have in Christ that we want to touch on today. It's been said, "Work hard in this life, give it your all. You can rest when you die." For you and me that's literally true. Revelation says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from this time forward. Yes, says the Spirit, for they will rest from their labors" (Revelation 14:13). The Old Testament sabbath is also a shadow of the heaven that is to come for all who trust in Jesus. The book of Hebrews says, "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). There's another beautiful picture of the rest that Jesus has gained for us. In heaven there is no more stress, no more worry, no more anxiety, no more 100+ days in the desert wilderness, no more toiling by the sweat of our brow. Just rest. Perfect tranquility. Pure, perfect, blissful rest forever.

So get some rest! Rest in the Word of God. Bask in Jesus' forgiveness. And the peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.