

“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God 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, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

My wife and I both wear smart watches. When I think about a wrist watch, my reason for wearing a watch is that I want to be able to tell time. But my watch does so much more. It can tell me my pulse rate, although I sometimes wonder how accurate it is. It counts the steps I walk during the day; it lets me know how many stairs I have climbed. It can give an estimate of the calories I have burned. Newer watches can function as a GPS, and my watch does have a GPS that will allow me to track the route of a hike. Some can display videos of workout routines. You can put songs into their memory and play them during your workout. Some people use their watch to make credit card payments, simply swiping them by the machines. I don't do most of those things, but I do count my steps and my activity minutes day by day. I find it helpful to have a goal and a way of measuring whether or not I am reaching that goal. It reminds me to be active, especially if I have been sitting for too long. If I meet my goal today, it will set a new goal for my steps tomorrow, helping me to do the best I can for my health.

My watch can be helpful in encouraging me toward a healthy lifestyle. But that benefit can be lost if I become obsessed with the need to meet that goal, no matter how unrealistic that might be. What was meant for my good could become a burden, even though that burden may have a good purpose.

Today God says to us: *“Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.”* God gives us something that is beneficial and helpful to us. It reminds us of what is necessary—some time for rest, but it is designed to point us to the grace of God at work for us. It is unfortunate that so many people, including many Christians, have forgotten that command, and the blessings that God wants to give us by the time we spend with Him. We have lost what it means to keep the Sabbath day holy. There are misguided views of the Sabbath, like the Pharisees who became obsessed with their rules and regulations regarding the observance of the Sabbath. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus confronts the Pharisees over the proper observance of the Sabbath, and teaches us one of the most important lessons about the Sabbath day: *“And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’”* (Mark 2:27, ESV) The Sabbath day is not kept holy by a set of rules that keep us from doing anything that may be construed as work. The Sabbath day is kept holy by being God's day, the day in which He wants us to enjoy both physical and spiritual rest. Sunday was once recognized as the Lord's Day, both legally and in the practices of people. But when we hear people talk about Sunday today, there is very little of God in their conversation. In fact, most people see Sunday in a far too self-centred way. We see this in the reasons people so often give for not going to church: Sunday is my only day to sleep in. Sunday is my only day to watch sports, or to be part of a team. Sunday is our family day. But when we talk about my day, or even our day, are we not forgetting that the Sabbath is first and foremost the Lord's day? This day is the day that is to mark us as being different from the world around us. It is the day to be kept holy or sanctified. That word 'sanctify' means to set it apart as holy, to dedicate it or consecrate it to a higher purpose. If we are to sanctify the day, we need to make our observance of Sunday first and foremost the Lord's Day, the day we set apart for Him. Then we begin to keep that day holy.

Whenever a pastor preaches on the third commandment, it always seems that he is talking to the wrong people, because the ones who really need to hear the sermon are the people who aren't in church. It almost seems silly to remind those who are regular and faithful in their attendance of this commandment. But no matter how regular and faithful our church attendance, it is important that we learn this commandment, too, especially when we remember all that lies behind this commandment.

There is a reason why God wants this day set apart for Him. He does not do it for His sake, out of a sense of personal vanity: “if people set this day aside, they will have time to give me the proper worship I deserve”. No, He commands us to observe the Sabbath day, because it is for our own good. Remember when mom would tell you to eat your vegetables, because they were good for you? We might really prefer the sweet desserts or treats like chocolate, but they don't have the nutrition we need like

vegetables do. God makes it very clear that one of the great blessings of the Sabbath day as a holy day is that it becomes a time of rest. We are not machines. We were not meant to be on the go seven days a week. We need time to rest, to relax, to get away from the daily grind. How sad it is that our world has lost sight of this, and that we so easily get caught up in being busy for endless days at a time. Sunday has become just another work day to many. Oh, that we would see, as a society, the need for this day of rest, this day sanctified to the Lord.

There is another, even greater benefit for those who observe the Sabbath day. A wealthy entrepreneur went on a hunting safari in Africa. He hired a seasoned guide and local natives to carry his gear. He was a driven man and wanted to go much faster than his guide right from the start. Every day he pushed and drove his safari team from morning until night, until they could barely stand. Finally, the burden bearers could go no further. They collapsed into a shaded area and would not move. The wealthy tycoon, used to instant obedience from those who worked for him, was furious. "Get up, you lazy bums!", he yelled. "Push on!" They all just sat there, not even meeting his eyes. The impatient man stormed at the guide, "What's happening here? Why won't they go on". The guide replied, "They must stay here all day. They won't move, no matter how much you shout and bully them. We have been going too hard and too fast and we must let our souls catch up with our bodies."

We need this day to let our souls catch up to our bodies. After we struggle and strive all week in this hectic, sinful world, we need to come to the Son, and let Him fill us with the rays of new life and hope. Jesus said: ***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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."*** (Matthew 11:28-29, ESV) That is the real rest that this day brings: the rest we need for our souls. We need time to get away from the world, but that doesn't simply mean curling up in a corner, or lying in bed. More than anything else we need the comfort, strength and support the Word of God brings. And so we set apart the day for the Word of God, which doesn't mean just sitting in a pew, but hearing the word and putting it into practice. Luther wrote in the Large Catechism: *But God's Word is the treasure that sanctifies everything. By the Word, even all the saints themselves were sanctified. Whenever God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or meditated upon, then the person, day, and work are sanctified. This is not because of the outward work but because of the Word, which makes saints of us all. Therefore, I constantly say that all our life and work must be guided by God's Word, if it is to be God-pleasing or holy. Where this is done, this commandment is in force and being fulfilled.* (LC, 91-92 - CPH 2022)

As we gather around the Word of God, that Word says some very important things to us. Through the Word, we are confronted again and again with our sinfulness. That isn't a pleasant thing, and it can make us very uncomfortable and unsettled. But the blessings of the Sabbath that are for our good come as that word reveals the greatest news of all. It tells us about the Lord of the Sabbath, the God who has brought life and salvation to us as He delivers us from sin, death and the devil. It shows us that Saviour who came and took upon Himself our sinfulness and who paid the price for our sin through His death on the cross. Best of all, it tells us of the sure and certain life we have because that same Saviour rose again from the dead. Isn't it interesting that God commands His people to observe the Sabbath day because of His deliverance of His people? ***"You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."*** The Sabbath was a way in which God's people remembered the Lord who delivered them. It helped them to focus on that new life and the freedom that they now had by His grace. In the same way, our Sabbath, our observance and keeping of this holy day, help us to remember that we are the people of God, people set free from sin and death through Jesus Christ. As we celebrate the day, we are given the help, the strength and the guidance that leads us on in that new life we have, the life that is the best life of all, for it is the life under grace, and not under the condemnation of sin and death.

That's why this day is so good for us. The devil drives us to be more, to do more, to enjoy more. But he also tries to use our work, our play and anything else that he can to keep us from God and His Word. That is why Luther also says in the Large Catechism: *[The devil] ceases neither day nor night to sneak up on you and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these three commandments and all the commandments. Therefore, you must always have God's Word in your heart, upon your lips, and in your ears. But where the heart is idle and the Word does not make a sound, the devil breaks in and has done the damage before we are aware. On the other hand, the Word is so effective that whenever it is seriously contemplated, heard, and used, it is bound never to be without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devoutness and produces a pure heart and pure thoughts. For these words are not lazy or dead, but are creative, living words. And even though no other interest or necessity moves us, this truth ought to urge everyone to the Word, because thereby the devil is put to flight and driven away. Besides, this commandment is fulfilled and this exercise in the Word is more pleasing to God than any work of hypocrisy, however brilliant.* (LC, 100-102 - CPH 2022)

God loves us so much that, like a loving parent who makes us eat our broccoli, He sometimes commands the things we need

the most. *‘Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy*, He says to us. He does this because it is for our own good that we have the rest, both physically and spiritually that this day brings. Yes, God wants us to keep this day holy, by setting it aside for Him. But then, He takes this day and uses it to bless us with the assurance of life and salvation in Christ. Keep the day holy by using it as God expects. And as you do, you will see His blessings abound as He works through this day to bring real and lasting rest to your life; rest that is greater than all the toil and strain the world dumps upon us. Amen.