God's Sabbath and Ours: The God Who Rests (1 of 3)

Dr. Justo L. González

Baylor University
Waco, Texas
March 6, 2007

God's Sabbath and Ours:
The God Who Rests
(1/3)

The Sabbath has long been a subject of lively and even bitter debate among Christians. For reasons I shall explain in a moment, but as you may already guess, it was not a theme I cherished as I was growing up. And it is a theme that still leads to many controversies. The matters at issue have been many: Should Christians keep the Sabbath? If so, should they keep it on Saturday, or on Sunday? How did the change from one to the other come about? Was it legitimate?

Such matters are not the subject of these lectures. But perhaps it would be helpful, simply to set the matter aside for the time being, to open a parenthesis and summarize what most historians believe on the matter. Very briefly, it would seem that the very earliest Christians, being also Jews, continued keeping the Sabbath as was customary, on the seventh day of the week, but they also began gathering on the first day of the week in order to break bread in celebration of the Lord's resurrection. Thus Acts 20.7 refers to "the first day of the week, when we met to break bread." The first day of the week was called "the Lord's Day" because it was the day of the Lord's resurrection—in a way, every Sunday was a little Easter. As Christianity became less and less Jewish and more and more Gentile, the Sabbath or Saturday continued having special significance and was often called "the day of preparation." On that day, Christians would prepare through fasting and meditation for the Easter celebration of Sunday. If possible, they would also rest—although one must remember that they were living in a society

and mostly belonged to social classes which seldom were allowed such rest. Christians, like most subjects of the Roman Empire, did not—could not—have a day of the week set aside for rest.

Early in the fourth century, Emperor Constantine declared Sunday to be a day of rest. Like many of his policies on religious matters, this was ambiguous. Many in Rome—and Constantine himself—held high regard for the god Sol Invictus—the Victorious Sun. Therefore, in declaring Sun-day a day of rest, he may have been trying to please both the devotees of this god and Christian believers, who worshiped on that day. By then apparently very few Christians kept the Sabbath, which had never been the day assigned for Christian worship but was rather a day to follow the commandment of rest. Now, given the opportunity to rest on that day, Sunday quickly supplanted Saturday as a day of rest, becoming both a day of rest and a day of worship. To this was added the polemic against a Judaism that was also seeking converts, and which was therefore one of Christianity's main competitors. In that polemic, many Christian preachers and teachers declared that keeping the Sabbath on Saturday was "Jewish superstition." In consequence, by the beginning of the Middle Ages there was hardly any recollection among Christians of the time when they both kept the Sabbath on Saturday and gathered to worship on Sunday.

Closing the parenthesis, and leaving the matter aside for discussion later if anyone so desires, it is evident that many of us have heard and experienced attitudes towards the Sabbath that are

not very alluring. Quite apart from the rather legalistic matter of the day of the week on which it is kept, there is another equally legalistic one that we have all encountered: what activities are acceptable on that day, and what activities are not? As a young boy, I was not allowed to go to the movies or to play cards on Sunday. Others of more conservative inclinations within my own church would neither buy nor sell on Sunday. To this day here in the United States, even despite all our insistence on the separation between church and state, we have laws that prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages on Sunday.

Such strictures go far back in my own Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley tells us something of how he applied them:

> It was on a Lord's day, in August, 1757, that, in a small company who were met for prayer and religious conversation, mention was made of the gross and open profanation of that sacred day, by persons buying and selling, keeping open shop, tippling in alehouses, and standing or sitting in the streets, roads, or fields, vending their wares as on common days; especially in Moorfields, which was then full of them every Sunday, from one end to the other. It was considered, what method could be taken to redress these grievances; and it was agreed, that six of them should, in the morning, wait upon Sir John Fielding for instruction. They did so: He approved of the design and directed them how to carry it into execution.
>
> The way being paved by these precautions, it was in the beginning of the year 1758, that, after notices delivered again and again, which were as often set at nought, actual informations were made to the Magistrates against persons profaning the Lord's day. By this means they first cleared the streets and fields of those notorious offenders who, without any regard either to God or the king, were selling their wares from morning to night. They proceeded to a more difficult attempt, the preventing tippling on the Lord's day, spending the time in alehouses, which ought to be spent in the more immediate worship of God. [1]

The story goes on, and at the end Wesley gives us a tally of the results:

For unlawful gaming, and profane swearing	40
For Sabbath-breaking	400
Lewd women, and keepers of ill houses	550
For offering to sale obscene prints	2

Given such a history, and its continuation in much of my tradition, it is not surprising that so many Methodists today believe the Sabbath to be a burdensome set of restrictions, or that so many others would rather not speak of it. And, for similar reasons, such attitudes are also common among Baptists, Presbyterians, and others.

****

Nor is this only a problem for the church of our time. It was already a problem for many in the early church. The debates about the meaning of the Sabbath and how it is to be observed go back to the very beginnings of Christian history. How the issue is posed in the New Testament is well known and need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that much of the polemics of Jesus with the Pharisees and the religious leadership of Israel had to do with how the Sabbath was to be kept. What must be pointed out is that the Sabbath continued being an issue for the early church, in its polemics both against Gentiles and against those Jews who rejected Christianity. In these polemics, Christians took a variety of positions that have continued throughout history.

First, some Christians simply declared that the law regarding the Sabbath has been abolished. This is the position of the unknown author of a treatise known as An Answer to the Jews, often

attributed to Tertullian. After a long argument comparing the law of circumcision with the law regarding the Sabbath, this author concludes:

> It follows, accordingly, that, in so far as the abolition of carnal circumcision and of the old law is demonstrated as having been consummated at its specific times, so also the observance of the Sabbath is demonstrated to have been temporary. . . Whence it is manifest that the force of such precepts was temporary, and respected the necessity of present circumstances; and that it was not with a view to its observance in perpetuity that God formerly gave them such a law.[2]

Then, there were other Christians who believed that the Sabbath should still be kept, but not in exactly the same way in which Jews kept it. Reflecting a time in which most Christians still kept the Sabbath, and then celebrated the Lord's resurrection on the next day, another unknown author—this one expanding on Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians—suggests:

> Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner, and rejoice in days of idleness; for "he that does not work, let him not eat." For say the [holy] oracles, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread." But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body, admiring the workmanship of God, and not by eating things prepared the day before, nor by using lukewarm drinks, and by walking within a prescribed space . . . And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. [3]

The instruction of this text, that Christians should keep the Sabbath meditating on the Law, and then celebrate the feast of the resurrection on the next day, was soon forgotten, even though this seems to have been the practice of most early Christians. By the time of Constantine most people coming into the church were Gentiles and had never kept the Sabbath. Since for Christians the holiest day of the week was the day of the resurrection of the Lord, Sunday,

whatever Sabbath-keeping was left was now conflated with Sunday, which became the Christian version of the Sabbath.

****

But it was not only Christians and Jews who had difficulties with the Sabbath. Pagans seeking to discredit or to undercut Christianity also pointed to it. At some point during the second half of the second century, an otherwise unknown pagan philosopher by the name of Celsus undertook to refute Christian teaching, mostly by way of ridicule. Celsus was a Neoplatonist and was therefore convinced that there is a single source of all that exists. On this point, he had no disagreement with Christianity. His disagreement was rather on the way this single source was to be conceived. For Celsus, the Ineffable One, the source of all being, was unknowable, impassable, and immutable. Out of this Ineffable One, the many—that is, all that exists—emanate, much as a series of circles emanate from a disturbance on the surface of a pond. What he then finds at fault in Christian teaching about God is not the notion that there is only one God, but rather the notion that this God intervenes actively in creation. From his perspective, the Judeo-Christian notion of a God who acts, who speaks, who relates, and who judges is childish and ludicrous.

For these reasons, after commenting on the story of creation, Celsus goes on to say that "After this, indeed, he [God] is weary, like a very bad workman, who stands in need of rest to refresh himself!" He then continues: "It is not in keeping with the fitness of things that the first God should feel fatigue, or work with His hands, or give forth commands."[4]

A few decades later, Christian philosopher Origen, urged by one of his patrons, undertook the task of refuting Celsus' long treatise. (Ironically, it is thanks to this refutation that we have what remains of Celsus' work, for Origen quotes it extensively.) Origen too, like Celsus, is a Platonist philosopher, and therefore in attempting to refute Celsus he agrees with his opponent up to a point, declaring that God's perfection implies impassibility and immutability. He then goes on to explain that to speak of God working and resting is a mere metaphor for the unlearned, since wise Christians know that God neither works nor rests.

The problem is that in this argument—as in the rest of his theology—Origen has conceded too much. Not only does he say that God is incapable of fatigue; he also implies that God is incapable of action.

There is, however, a vast difference between the Immutable One of the philosophers and the active, creating, caring, and judging God of Scripture. Granted, these too are metaphors. But they are not second-rate metaphors for the unlearned—for those who do not know of the immutability and impassibility of God. On the contrary, the metaphor of a loving God is closer to biblical faith than the metaphor of an impassible God; and the metaphor of an acting God is closer to biblical faith than the metaphor of an unmoving God.

It is important to understand this, for ultimately Celsus' real difficulty with Judeo-Christian teaching has less to do with God's rest than with God's activity. Indeed, the immutable, impassable One of Celsus is always at rest, and never at work.

It is not so in Scripture. In Scripture God's rest always appears within the context of God's work. It is so in the Genesis story, where we are told that God's rest comes after six days of creative work. And it is so in the Decalogue, which begins with a statement of God's work: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20.2). Nine of the Ten Commandments are grounded in God's liberating action: "I led you out of the land of Egypt . . . [therefore] you shall have no other gods before me." "I led you out of the land of Egypt"—I am a mighty God, powerful in liberation and powerful in judgment—therefore, "you shall not steal." But this one commandment about the Sabbath is grounded in God's inaction—in God's rest: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it" (Ex 20.8-10). It is within this context of God's actions that the commandment appears to keep the Sabbath. And the basis for the Sabbath is the assertion that the God who worked all the days of creation rested on the seventh.

"God rested," says the Bible. What are we to make of this?

First of all, much to my surprise and against what I have repeatedly thought and said, God's rest on the seventh day implies the ontological autonomy of creation. I have repeatedly said and written that God's act of creation continues to this day, for without God's sustaining power all things would immediately dissolve into nothingness. The first part of that sentence is correct: God's creative action continues to this day. But the second is questionable. Scripture speaks of a God who rests from the work of creation—and the world goes on! This is a God so powerful as to be able to create a world that remains in existence even while God rests!

This is the sharp point of contrast between Celsus' Platonism and Christian doctrine. It is the contrast between creation and emanation. Celsus would agree that all things come from the One; but then he would add that all things are emanations—extensions—of the One, so that ultimately all that exists is the One from whom all things come, of whom all things are part, and to whom all things return. The Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation affirms that, although all things come from the One, they are not part of the One; they are other. They have their own subsistence. God said, "let there be"; and there was; and there is. Now there is not only God, but God and creation. Certainly, creation itself is not eternal, as God is. But medieval theologians correctly affirmed that at least part of it is "sempiternal"—this is to say, that while having a beginning in time it has no ending.

Secondly, and as a consequence of the first point, God's rest is an expression of God's love. God is willing to create another reality—other realities—vis-à-vis Godself. Thanks to creation, other beings exist—beings that are other than God. And God's love is such as to allow these beings to subsist on their own—to subsist even while God rests.

This is one of the reasons why we speak of God as a parent. We commonly think of God's parental love mostly in terms of God's care and providence. To say that God loves us as a parent means that God supports us, provides what we need, and forgives us when we go astray. But parental love goes beyond that. In the best of cases, parental love begins before the moment of conception, when a woman and a man agree to consider begetting a child knowing that this child will be an independent being. The decision to beget may depend on the parents; but once the child is born, and as the child grows, it becomes an independent human being—one who will give the parents both many occasions of delight and many occasions of heartache and disappointment. Likewise, God the eternal Parent did not have to create a world, and did not have to create us. And having decided to create us, God could have made us totally subservient creatures—creatures without the ability to disobey. But God's paternal love goes beyond that. God's love results in a creation with its own existence, and in creatures that are quite capable of disobedience. Not only our existence, but also our freedom—and even our freedom to rebel—are the result of God's love and are manifested in God's rest—in God's willingness to create other beings beyond Godself.

Thirdly, this means that the "otherness" of God goes both ways. As a reaction to liberalism, which tended to speak of God as some sort of superhuman, and to confuse human capabilities with divine power, theologians in the twentieth century took to speaking of God as "the wholly other." This was an important corrective, which must not be forgotten. But God's rest, and the ontological autonomy of creation, mean that we too are "wholly others" vis-à-vis God. The distance between Creator and creator must be stressed, not only to make it clear that God is sovereign, holy, unapproachable except by divine revelation. It must also be stressed to make it clear that in creating us God has decided that there will be other beings besides Godself; that God has given us autonomy; that God gives us space to be ourselves.

Finally, this leads to the fourth point that follows from God's rest: God is not always available to us, at our beck and call. There is much Christian preaching that ignores this. We are told that if we want something, all we have to do is pray, and if we have enough faith God will give it to us. This denies and undercuts the sovereignty of God. God is not like a drink dispensing machine: you put in your coins, and out comes the drink. Such a god is in truth an idol, a god constantly and continually at our disposal, ready to do our bidding.

No. Our God is a god who rests, a god who is not always available. In the Genesis story, God is not right there to tell the man and the woman not to fall to the wiles of the serpent. God plants the garden, creates the human couple, and seems to leave them to their own devices. This means that in a sense God forsakes creation; God leaves creatures to their own devices.

Although often forgotten, this is a fundamental aspect of the faith of Israel. Thus, the Psalmist cries:

> As a deer longs for flowing
> streams, so my soul longs for you,
> O God. My soul thirsts for God, for
> the living God.
> When shall I come and behold the face of
> God? My tears have been my food day and
> night, while people say to me continually,
> "Where is your God?"
> . . .
> I say to God, my rock,
> "Why have you forgotten me?
> Why must I walk mournfully
> because the enemy oppresses
> me?
>
> As with a deadly wound in my body,
> my adversaries taunt me, while they
> say to me continually, "Where is your
> God?"
> (Ps 42.13,9-10)

And in another Psalm:

> My God, my God, why have you forsaken
> me?
> Why are you so far from helping me,
> from the words of my groaning?
> O my God, I cry day by day, but you do not answer;
> and by night, but find no rest. (Ps. 22.1-2)

And in another:

> Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?
> Awake, do not cast us off forever!
> Why do you hide your face?
> Why do you forget our affliction and
> oppression?
> For we sink down to the dust;

our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (Ps. 44.23-26)

Lest we think that such complaints are the result of a lack of faith, it is important to point out that in each of these Psalms there remains an unshakable faith in God's power and God's love. Thus, the Psalmist who thirsts after God, and who feels pressed by those who constantly ask, "Where is your God?" can still say:

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and
why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise
him, my help and my God. (Ps. 42.11)

And the Psalmist who complains that God has forsaken him, that God will not answer his prayers neither by day nor by night, can still declare:

All the ends of the earth shall
remember and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
To him indeed shall all who sleep in the earth bow
down; before him shall bow all who go down to the
dust,
and I shall live for him. (Ps. 22.27-29)

And the one who tries to waken God from slumber does not forget:

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their
days,
in the days of old. (Ps. 44.1)

What we have in all these Psalms—and in many other places in Scripture—is the complaint that God is at rest; that God is not like a Coke machine ready to dispense solace whenever we put our coins in the slot. In all of these laments, the Psalmist wishes that God were always actively manifesting God's power, but ultimately recognizes that God's power is such that it does not have to be proven at every turn. God's power is not manifested only in the act of creation; it is manifested also in the fact that creation still functions when God rests. In short, God's power and love are manifested not only in God's presence, but also in God's apparent absence.

We like to speak of God's constant presence—and even of the fact that this presence is such that we cannot flee from it even if we try. To quote another Psalm,

> Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
> if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
> If I take the wings of the morning
> and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
> even there your hand shall lead me,
> and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps. 139.7-10)

But there is also the other side of the coin. Just as God's power is manifested both in action and in rest, both in creation and in Sabbath, God's love is manifested both in presence and in absence.

****

Lest we think that this experience of the absence of God even in the face of belief is only a matter of ancient Judaism, Christian examples of similar experiences also abound.

One of these is the case of St. Augustine. He had already come to believe all the Christian doctrine his mother and the church had taught him. He had decided that he wished to become a Christian. And yet faith and the sense of the presence of God eluded him to the point that, he says

> ...I flung myself down, how, I know not, under a certain fig-tree, giving free course to my tears, and the streams of mine eyes gushed out, an acceptable sacrifice unto Thee. And, not indeed in these words, yet to this effect, spake I much unto Thee, — "But Thou, O Lord, how long?" "How long, Lord? Wilt Thou be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us former iniquities;" for I felt that I was enthralled by them. I sent up these sorrowful cries, "how long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?[5]

As we know, Augustine's prayer was finally answered that day at the garden in Milan. But for quite some time before that God's response had been silence. It would seem that, like the God of the Psalmist, God was asleep; or that, as in the story of creation, God was taking a Sabbath.

Twelve centuries later, St. Teresa of Avila spoke of her experience of prayer: that it was sometimes like a gardener going to a well for water and finding it dry. All that the gardener can do is come back to the well again and again, until finally there is water. According to St. Teresa's experience, this absence of response was a sign of God's love, testing and strengthening the believer's resolve. God's love is present even in God's apparent absence.

And the experience of John Wesley is well known—how he admired and even envied those who had the assurance of their own salvation and what he called "saving faith." But he himself could not attain such faith nor such assurance, no matter how much or how bitterly he called on God. He believed in God. He was a Christian. He was convinced that God had the power to give him saving faith. And yet, for quite some time God would not respond. In a way, during all that time God was absent; God was at rest.

****

The theme of the absence of God is central to the teachings of Jesus. In some of the parables, it is we who are absent from God. The lost sheep has to be found. The lost coin has to be found. The prodigal has to return.

But in other parables it would seem that the issue is not our absence from God, but rather, God's absence from us. We call these stories "parables of stewardship." And this is an excellent name for them, for stewardship is precisely what a steward practices when the master is away. While the master is there, a steward's role is limited. It is when the master is away that the steward must take responsibility. In one of his best-known parables (Mt 25.14-30), Jesus tells of a man who, "going on a journey," called three of his servants, gave to each a large amount of money (five talents to one, two to another, and one to a third) and "then he went away." In other words, the parable is about how to manage while the Master is not present. Similarly, the parallel parable in Luke—the parable of the ten pounds—begins with the words: "A nobleman went to a distant country..."—in other words, he absented himself. In another parable in the

same twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew where we find the parable of the talents, Jesus speaks of ten bridesmaids going out to seek the bridegroom. But the bridegroom is delayed—in other words, he is not present at the time when they expected him to be.

In Matthew 21 Jesus tells another parable of absence: "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country." Do we see the parallelism between this parable and the story of creation? God made the earth and all that is in it, and planted a garden, and gave it to the human couple to till. And it was all very good. And then God rested!

There are many other parables of absence in the teachings of Jesus. A master returns and discovers how a servant has been keeping his household. A thief comes at night, when people least expect him. . .

We often speak of the presence of God, and rightly so. But this other theme or metaphor of absence is also common in the Bible. Even apart from sin, God gives the human creature space, freedom to exercise its responsibility. In the story in the garden, after creating humankind, and giving it dominion over the rest of creation, God lets them exercise that dominion, even though it also implies the possibility of sin. And this absence, just as much as the divine presence, is a sign of love.

I was saying earlier that God's rest is an expression of God's love as a parent. The point there was that, just as earthly parents deciding to have a child are also deciding to create something beyond themselves, not entirely in their control, so God's decision to create the world and to create us is a decision to create something beyond Godself, and not entirely under God's control—even though we know that ultimately God's purposes shall prevail.

Now the image of parenthood may be taken one step further. Parental love is not manifested only in the act of procreation, and not only in the many actions of feeding, nurturing, and guiding, but also in a parent's acts of absence. Out of love a parent finds it necessary to step back and let a child try its wings, even at the risk of pain and failure. A parent who is always present, guarding a child from every risk and every hurt, is not a very good parent. A child whose parents are always hovering around, guarding the child's every step, will never learn to walk. And a child who is never given the responsibility of making decisions, even at the risk of error, will never grow up. Out of love, a parent must step back. Likewise, God's parental love is manifested, not only in creation and in sustenance, but also in God's apparent absence—in God's letting us run our lives and much of the world by ourselves, even at the risk of ruining both.

Soren Kierkegaard expresses this more fully in his book *Gospel of Sufferings*:

> When a child is allowed to hold on to his mother's dress, can we say then he is walking along with her, just as his mother walks? Nay, we may not say so. First must the child learn to walk alone and on his own, before he can go the way his mother goes, and go as she is going. And when the child is learning to walk

> alone, what must the mother do? She must make herself invisible. That her tenderness towards him is the same and remains unaltered, that indeed it probably grows greater, just at the time when the child is learning to walk alone, we know very well; the child, on the other hand, may not always understand it. But what is meant by the child having to learn to walk alone and to walk on his own is, in a spiritual sense, the task set anyone who is to be somebody's follower—he must learn to walk alone and to walk on his own. Strange, is it not? . . . That heaven's care for us in unchanged, and is indeed, were it possible, still more solicitous in this hour of danger, we know very well, but perhaps we cannot always understand it, when we are learning.[6]

And Julian of Norwich expresses it similarly. She writes:

> The mother may sometimes suffer the child to fall and to be distressed in various ways, for its own benefit. . . . And if we do not feel ourselves eased, let us at once be sure that he is behaving as a wise Mother. For if he sees that it is profitable to us to mourn and to weep, with compassion and pity he suffers us until the right time has come, out of his love. [7]

****

We are learning. We are learning to live as God's children in a world where the hand of our Eternal Parent is not always visible, in a world where God has placed us to be stewards of the absent master, to grow as we could, not where God is always holding our hand and guiding our every step.

But then, the divine absence has an added dimension: sin has come into the picture. This is indeed God's world. But it is God's rebellious world. This world, made by God, is also godless. It is a world of injustice and oppression, of war and prejudice, of hate and falsehood. In this godless world of God, the image that appears so frequently in the parables, of the absence of the master, is both a realistic description of our present situation and a call to responsibility. While the master is away, the steward must run things according to the will of the absent

master. Nor can the steward consult the master at every move, for the steward must learn the master's mind, and this can only be done if the master is not constantly supervising, constantly telling the steward what to do. There are times when we do not hear a clear word from God. It is precisely at those times that it is most important to know the master's mind; and, paradoxically, it may be precisely at those times that we grow closer to God—just as a child grows closer to her mother when she learns to walk on her own, when she has to make decisions on her own, when she has children of her own.

Learning the master's mind: that is a steward's primary task. To this the steward must devote every effort, both when the master is present, and when the master is not. When the master is present and speaks, a good steward heeds the voice of the master and takes note. When the master is absent or silent, a good steward takes the risk of acting on the basis of what is known of the master's mind, knowing full well that it is quite possible that the master will find fault in what the steward did. In such cases it is better to take a risk, as the managers of the five and the two talents did, than to "play it safe," as their counterpart with one talent did. Like a loving parent, this master of ours wishes for us to grow, and every parent knows that there is no growth without risk.

But even so, the sometimes-absent master has given us much whereby to learn the master's mind. In a way, this is the function of Scripture; this is the function of the community of believers; this is the function of conscience. None of these—not even all three together—are a

guarantee of divine approval. The risk is still there. The talents must still be invested in a market that is always uncertain. Faithful Christians do not all agree on every course of action. We each and all must take the risk of acting according to what we believe to be God's will—like a faithful steward who makes a decision hoping that this is what the master would wish him to do.

****

One of the ways in which Christian stewards seek to know the mind of their master is through the study of what God has commanded. One such commandment is: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." This commandment stands at the center of the two tables of the Law—as it were, as a bridge between the two tables. The first table speaks of responsibility towards God: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." The second table speaks of responsibility towards others: "Honor your father and your mother . . . You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet . . .” In between stands the Sabbath commandment. It is a commandment to honor both God and others, and therefore it has to do with both tables of the Law. It honors God by resting as God rested, by serving as a remembrance of God's work of creation. It honors others in that the commandment extends to them: "you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your town." In brief, the commandment calls us to imitate God, and in so doing, both to rest and to allow all of creation to rest. It reminds us that, even at times when God seems to be absent, we are servants and children of the Creator God whose love and justice we are to imitate. And that is

the reason for the rest of the commandments: "Honor your father and your mother . . . You shall not murder."

****

Now a final but all-important note. In his *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther made several astonishing but important declarations, to wit:

> 19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.
> 20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through those things which have actually happened.
> 22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened. [8]

Luther's point is that this strange God of ours, who has revealed Godself in Jesus Christ, is powerful through apparent powerlessness, and that some of God's mightiest acts are performed in apparent defeat.

God's rest, which from our perspective may seem weakness or powerlessness, is all the contrary. I can imagine God, just before that very first Sabbath, looking at the work of creation, stepping back from it, and exclaiming, like an artist having completed a painting, "It is finished." And we all know the story of God incarnate on a Friday afternoon, just before the beginning of the Sabbath, having completed the suffering of the cross and crying "It is finished!" And he descended into the Sabbath rest and into the tomb. And some of those around him mocked his death, and some deplored it, and some simply didn't care. But all would agree that he had lost

the battle, that he had descended to his final rest, that there was no life and no hope left for him. And yet today we know that through that Sabbath rest God was accomplishing God's greatest work since creation; that through that seeming defeat, God was breaking the yoke of oppression that had held us captive for yea so many generations.

Tomorrow we shall take a look at what this means for us, as children of an active and resting God.

Notes

1. Sermon 52, *Society for Reformation of Manners* (Jackson ed., 6:152).
2. *An Answer to the Jews*, 4 (ANF, 4: 155-56).
3. Pseudo-Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* (interpolated text), 9. (ANF I :62-63).
4. Quoted by Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6.61 (ANF, 4:601).
5. *Confessions*, 8.12 (NPNF, 1st series, 1:229)
6. *Gospel of Sufferings* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1955), pp. 15-16.
7. *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 300-1.
8. *Heidelberg Disputation*, 19, 20, and 22 (Luther 's Works [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957], 31:40-41).