

Third of the Ten Commandments

A few weeks ago we began our sermon-study of the Ten Commandments, beginning with the background to Moses and the giving of the Commandments, then the First Commandment and, last Sunday, the Second. Today we speak about the Third Commandment; I am following the order given by the Church Father, St. Augustine of Hippo:

"Observe the Sabbath day and 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; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 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."

Saturday is still the Sabbath day, and for this reason many monasteries and cathedrals have Divine Liturgy on that day. But the early Christians began to honor the first day of the week, Sunday, in a special way because it was the day of the Lord's Resurrection, and so they transferred the obligations of the Saturday Sabbath to Sunday, the Day of the Lord.

Before discussing this Commandment in some detail I must tell you that at this point we encounter a small but interesting textual difficulty.

You may remember that I said last week that there are two places where the Commandments are listed in the Old Testament—the Book of Exodus and the Book of Deuteronomy. This arrangement and order is slightly different. Very few people realize this today. The passage in Exodus 20 actually contains 14 or 15 commands, even though the Bible itself speaks of only Ten Commandments. So the way in which this is parsed, the way in which the various imperative commands are listed or combined, is different from translation to translation, from Church to Church. In the texts that have come down to us through the centuries, there are variations in the following manuscripts: the Jewish or Hebrew Talmud, the



Entrance of the
Theotokos to the Temple

Anglican or King James translation, some of the Reformed Protestant works, the Lutheran, and the Catholic/Orthodox Christian translations.

You might be interested to know that the Talmud; which is the Jewish commentary on the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) dates to at least the Third Century A.D. And in this version verses 1 and 2 of Exodus 20 are considered the First Commandment, and then verses 3-6 are combined as the Second Commandment. The oldest surviving text of this, however, is from Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, in the first century. They ended the first commandment after verse 3 and grouped verses 4-6. As I said, I'm following the numbering given by St. Augustine; this is because I feel it more readily lends itself to explication and sermon-making.

Before going into the commandment about keeping the Sabbath, I want to point out that there is really one verse in Scripture that we need to *always* keep in mind as the foundation of all the other Commandments. This is from the Gospel of St. Matthew (5:17-18), where the Lord says: "*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till Heaven and Earth Pass, one jot or one tittle shall in No Wise Pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled.*"

What is a "tittle"? In Hebrew it is a very small distinguishing mark, such as a diacritical sign or a dot. This is something small and seemingly insignificant; except it *isn't* insignificant. In other words, the Commandment to fully submit to the Sabbath rules has not been abolished but, for Christians, it has been transferred to Sunday and, believe it or not, is still in full force!

Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh-day Baptists, the United Church of God, and some other churches disagree. They claim that meeting for worship on Sunday originated in paganism, because worship of the sun god took place on Sunday. So these groups insist on keeping Saturday as the Sabbath, believing that none of the Ten Commandments can ever be abolished or changed in any slightest way, in spite of the Lord's instruction that He has given *all* power in heaven and on earth to His Church. These are folk, of course, who do not believe in the authority of Christ's Church.

The dictionary tells us that a commandment is a *command*, an order, an edict, a decree. In other words, it is to be obeyed without hesitation, and this is true for this commandment as well, even though its full observance was switched to Sunday. The Talmud, which, as I said, is the Jewish commentary on the Torah, actually contains hundreds more commandments—more than 600, as a matter of fact. Jewish belief holds that the observance of all these commandments is for Jews only, while the Ten Commandments were binding on all human beings. In the era of the [Sanhedrin](#)—the Lord’s own time--transgressing any one of seven of the Ten Commandments carried the [death penalty](#), the exceptions being honoring your father and mother, saying God's name in vain, and coveting. This should be a rather serious consideration for us today, in our very lax and casual time.

So how are we Orthodox Christians expected to “keep holy the Lord’s Day”? First, we must deal with the very real fact that in our times many people *must* work on Sunday; they have no choice if they are to support themselves and their families. (When I was a kid no stores were open on Sunday, only gas stations, restaurants and movie theatres. But, in the service of increasing materialism and greed, this has all gone by the wayside in the last 40 years as we have steadily moved away from Christianity as a barometer of how to live). I note that in England, Christmas Eve day is only a half day, because it is expected that everyone will go home to their families. So even stores, pubs, gas stations, and restaurants (except in hotels) are closed, and public transportation ceases to function at noon on that day. Nothing resumes until the 26th. So those who wish to go to church but have no transportation of their own, sign up for car pools at their church.

But having to work on Sunday does not excuse us from observing the day in every other way possible. For example, not shopping or doing any but the most necessary business on that day, unless there is an emergency. Keeping the whole day—even while at work—in a specially somber and prayerful way, frequently lifting up one’s mind and heart to God (which we should be doing every day, anyhow). Orthodox Christians can read the *Typica** as well as the appointed Epistle and Gospel for the day, even if they have to work all day! There are all kinds of ways in which to hallow a working Sunday, truly setting it apart from other days of the week.

When I was a boy I remember my grandparents' generation: among those who were religiously observant, even if they didn't necessarily always go to church, there was no work done on Sunday—no yard or housework or anything else; it was truly a day of *rest*. Usually Sunday meals were cooked the day before and on Sunday only the dishes were washed after meals. Reading the Bible at some point was a given, and not until Sunday evening was the radio or TV turned on. This kind of respect for the Commandment was deeply imbedded in our culture in those days. Now, alas, all completely gone as our society and culture descends even more deeply into secularism.

For those Orthodox who can do so, however, attendance at Divine Liturgy on Sunday is a necessary given, for by doing so we are honoring the day in its most important and special way, putting God first in our lives, especially when we can receive Holy Communion in a worthy manner. It will perhaps come as a surprise to many that it is a serious sin, to be confessed, to miss Liturgy on a Sunday without a good reason—such as illness, work, or weather. In the time of the Church Councils, anyone who missed Liturgy without sufficient reason for three Sundays in a row was considered self-excommunicated. We have come a long way since then, and it has been a path *upwards*, but *down*.

You see, followers of Christ understand that we must give or dedicate a certain portion or tithe of ourselves and our time to God. We tend to think of tithing as meaning giving ten percent of our income to God, and indeed this meaning is found in Scripture. We forget that we are also to tithe our time, and our talent, as well as our treasure. Tithing among the Jews had already existed for long centuries before the God gave the Ten Commandments.

How do we give of our *talent*? Well, each of us has talents. Not all are the same. Some may be successfully businessmen and women who can make important contributions to the material welfare and growth of the parish. Some may have a special gift to work with children and youth; others are superb at cooking and baking or outreach to the needy in the parish and beyond—but all have something, no matter how small, they can give to God through the parish.

How do we give of our *time*? Part of this is obviously in volunteer work at the parish or other church venues. But part of it also concerns time spent at church services and time in prayer

and spiritual reading at home. Here's something to think about: if we are to tithe our time on a *daily* basis, then ten percent of a twenty-four hour day is 2 and a quarter hours. Surprising as this may seem in our very busy, secular and materialistic world, this is the amount of time we should give to God every day—and not just on Sundays. We should spend at least 2 hours a day in prayer, scripture study, and spiritual reading. As I tell my spiritual children, put a sign on the TV that says, "No prayer? No TV." And this applies to cruising and browsing on the internet, too. This will seem difficult, even impossible, to beginners. But if we start with just half an hour a day and gradually add on to this, we can certainly do it. We'll find, as we go along that there are many useless "time-wasters" in the day that we can easily eliminate to make room for a deeper prayer life. In addition, the benefits we will receive are absolutely *immeasurable*. Those who have never done this are in for a wonderful surprise!

God has given Himself to us, *completely* and without reservation, body, soul and divinity, through the sacraments and especially the Eucharist. Can we not at least give back to Him ten percent of all that we are? This is all He asks. *And it begins with keeping the Lord's Day holy* and then slowly extending this activity to all the days and nights of our lives.

As we read in the Book of Proverbs (3:1-2), **"My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee."**

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.