

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
*The Start of National Lutheran Schools Week*  
Catechetical Instruction on the Third Commandment  
1/27/19c

**Summary:** God gives us the gift of His Word, as well as time and space to hear it. The Third Commandment, regarding the Sabbath Day, aims to bless all people with the rest that comes through the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is the main message heard in God's Word. What place are you giving to God's Word, and how are you hearing it? Today's readings furnish both positive and negative examples of hearing God's Word. We are warned against rejecting Christ's message as the synagogue worshippers in Nazareth did. We are encouraged to imitate the attentive hearing of God's Word which we observed in the Nehemiah reading. Whereas rejection of God's Word leads to rage and murderous fury (Luke 4:28-29), acceptance of His Word leads to joy and spiritual strength (Neh. 8:10). Why? Because God's Word conveys the glad message of release through God's Son, Jesus Christ. All held in bondage by sin and death and Satan (note the mourning/grieving of the people as they heard God's Law read by Ezra) are released by the grace of Jesus Christ, crucified for us and raised. **Beautiful Savior Lutheran School's purpose, like the purpose of every Lutheran school across our country, is to teach the Word of God to our students. Our students are blessed as they gladly hear and learn the Word of God, the Gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. You will be blessed if you "hold preaching and God's Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it".**

I. The greatest gift God gives us is His Word.

This morning's service began, "From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised" (*LSB* p. 260, from Psalm 113, verse 3).

The Lord's name is certainly to be praised because of the undeserved blessings He showers upon us all, on a daily basis. God gives us life, health, and strength of body and mind. The Lord gives us community, companionship, and many joys within our families, schools, and church. God gives us nourishment for our bodies, satisfaction in learning and labor, and leisure time to pursue our interests and to enjoy His creation.

But the greatest of the gifts that God gives us is His Word—along with times and places to hear and learn it.

The Third Commandment is a commandment concerning God's Word. Through the Third Commandment, which we recited a moment ago, our

Creator aims to bless all people with the rest that comes through believing the Gospel of Jesus Christ (which is the main message heard in God's Word, the Bible).

This Sunday morning, as we usher in National Lutheran Schools Week here at Beautiful Savior, we consider the Third Commandment and its meaning and application in our lives:

***What place are you giving to God's Word, and how are you hearing it?***

II. Hearing God's Word: Luke 4's negative example and Nehemiah 8's positive example

Today's Bible readings furnish both negative and positive examples of hearing God's Word.

In the Luke 4 reading, we heard how Jesus attended the weekly Sabbath service at his hometown synagogue. This was in the early days following Jesus' Baptism by John, Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness, and Jesus' initial preaching and ministry in Galilee. Luke relates what happened on that Saturday there in Nazareth. Jesus read a portion of the prophet Isaiah, a key passage of the Old Testament Bible that spoke of the coming Messiah. "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me," and so on. And when Jesus had finished the reading, He proceeded to explain and teach. His opening sentence caused a stir: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

It was as much as to say, "These words were written about Me."

But the hometown crowd couldn't seem to get past the fact that they knew this guy. He had grown up there. He was Joseph's son. So where did He come off speaking all high and mighty? Already Jesus had earned a reputation for spectacular signs. The hometown crowd wanted to see for themselves. Would Jesus show His stuff?

Jesus knew their thoughts. He knew their skeptical minds and their hard hearts—two things that needed to be cleared out of the way if they were to receive their Messiah in humble faith. So Jesus—boldly and very courageously—pressed where it hurt. He named their flaw and their failing. They were judging by appearances. They were falling into the pattern seen many times in Israel’s past: the prophet finds no welcome in his hometown. Never mind if he is speaking the truth, they don’t want to hear.

When Jesus likened this tough Saturday morning synagogue crowd to the rebellious Israelites of Elijah’s day and Elisha’s day, that was too much for them to bear. They cut His sermon short, chased this upstart preacher out of their synagogue, and pushed Him to the edge of a cliff. They would have thrown Him over, too, but miraculously, Jesus walked right through their midst and went His way.

Those Nazareth worshipers exhibited what Dr. Martin Luther in the Small Catechism calls “despising preaching and God’s Word”. It is what God forbids in the Third Commandment.

What is required in the Third Commandment—in order that God’s intended blessing may come to us by faith—is that preaching and God’s Word be regarded as sacred...that we gladly hear it and learn it.

This morning’s Nehemiah reading illustrates this.

Nehemiah and his contemporary Ezra lived more than 400 years before Jesus. They were part of what is known as the post-exilic community of God’s people. 70 long years their forefathers had lived as exiles in Babylon, after God finally had enough of His people’s rebellion and idolatry and allowed the neighboring empires to squash Jerusalem. But now, by God’s mercy and by His miraculous intervention, the descendants had another chance. God had seen to it that the exiled people of Judah and Jerusalem were permitted to return to their home. So they came home—chastened, yet cheered. They rebuilt Yahweh’s

temple. They rebuilt Jerusalem's walls. And they sought God. They heard the Lord's teaching, His Word—and earnestly.

Just how seriously they took God and His Word can be seen in various details from the reading:

When Ezra the priest and scribe opened the Bible, everyone stood up! (v.5)

When Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, all the people answered, “Amen, amen!” They gave their enthusiastic “Yes,” and they lifted up their hands (v.6). Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground (v.7).

As Ezra read, with explanations and interpretations from himself and his associates, the people listened. I mean, they really listened—like long and patiently. I find this detail really remarkable. The people—*standing*, you remember—listened to Ezra read *from morning until midday!* I'm pretty sure if I try that today I'll be preaching to an empty sanctuary long before noon.

But that was the reality for Ezra and the eager and earnest worshipers in Jerusalem.

Besides, they internalized the message, personalized it. They don't seem to have committed that error still common today in which one listens to the preaching of the Law and thinks of all the ways that it applies to *the other guy*, but never admits that it also applies to him, or to her.

In the open square in front of Jerusalem's Water Gate that day, there doesn't seem to have been much of that judgmental spirit. No, there was weeping, and heartfelt mourning. Not “Woe is he!” but “Woe is *me!*”

Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Hold God's Word sacred, and gladly hear it preached, and learn it. Yes, those men and

women from today's Nehemiah reading are an example to us of obedience to this God's Third Commandment.

III. The results of rejection of His Word and of acceptance of the same

But does it really make a difference whether we obey this Commandment or not? Are there actually negative consequences if we despise God's Word? Are there actually benefits if we devoutly hear it?

*Please note the outcome for each set of worshipers—those in Nazareth from Luke 4, and those in Jerusalem from Nehemiah 8.*

When Jesus preached, the people heard, but rejected. They did not accept it. They did not believe it. And what did this response on their part lead to? It led to rage and bitterness and murderous fury. Just look at them. They were a mess...beside themselves—wanted to throw Jesus over a cliff.

Similar emotional responses are not uncommon today when God's Word identifies and rebukes the idolatries of our age: comfort, ease, trust in wealth, and pleasure; autonomy, self-determination, and living life the way I want to. To many, God's fatherly correction which He issues us in His commandments is unwelcome. The words of Christ's faithful preachers are felt today to be an intrusion into the flow of people's pleasant lives.

What a pity. For God has many blessings in store for those who hear His commands, and repent.

This is seen in the Nehemiah reading. When the worship leaders noticed now the people were weeping and mourning over their sins as they heard God's Law, they promptly comforted them. They preached Good News to them. They assured them that God wanted to be merciful to them. They invited them to have joy and receive strength through God's love and forgiveness.

“This day is holy to our Lord,” they said. “Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (v.10).

Interesting thing is, the same strength and joy from God, the same forgiveness, love, mercy, and comfort was contained in the message that the synagogue preacher Jesus brought to His hometown friends on that Sabbath Day—if they had only listened and taken it to heart.

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD”—

—or, as our bulletin cover has it, “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus was more than just the hometown boy. Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, the Anointed One. And He stood before His townsfolk that day with the greatest announcement of good news. For He had been sent upon the most marvelous mission of deliverance, rescue, and release—that is, deliverance for them and for us, rescue for them and for us, release for them and for us. Because all have sinned, and because the wages of sin is death, and because God is loving and compassionate, His Son came for sinners; Jesus came in the flesh to die for us. Not on man’s time and in man’s way, on a Saturday morning at a cliff’s edge, but in God’s time and His way, on a dark Good Friday at a cross. Jesus came to suffer and die so that mankind’s sin problem might be remedied at the core. Yes, here in brief is God’s good news: *All held in bondage by sin and Satan are released by the grace of Jesus Christ, crucified for us and raised up.*

How sad that the Nazareth worshipers excluded themselves from this good news through their unbelief!

You, however, may accept this true revelation from God and receive its happy promise today by faith. You may trust in Jesus and experience the liberty from condemnation that He alone can give. You may rely upon Him as the one who can and does “heal the brokenhearted,” who “set[s] at liberty those who are oppressed” (v.18). You may lend your glad “Amen” to the Gospel words sung by God’s little children this morning: “My God is so great...He sent His Son Jesus for me!”

It is true that none of us has perfectly kept the Third Commandment (or any of the commandments). We would stand guilty before God, all of us. But the good news is that His Son, Jesus Christ, has stood up and has stood in for us! He has fulfilled this and every commandment in our place. He has also paid the price of my sins and yours. Because of Jesus, You and I may depart from God’s house today cheered and relieved, for “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10).

#### IV. Beautiful Savior’s purpose as a Lutheran school

Today we launch a very special week called National Lutheran Schools Week.

Beautiful Savior Lutheran School’s purpose, like the purpose of every Lutheran school across our country, is to teach the Word of God to our students. We know of nothing better to teach them. Our students are blessed as they gladly hear and learn the Word of God, the Gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.

**And you, too, will be blessed if you “hold preaching and God’s Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”**

Amen