

Third Commandment – Exodus 20:8

How does the LCMS understand Exodus 20:8 today?

The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod generally understands Exodus 20:8 (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”) through the lens of the New Testament and the teaching of Martin Luther in the Small Catechism. The LCMS does not teach that Christians are bound to keep the Old Testament Saturday Sabbath as a ceremonial law. Instead, it teaches that the commandment’s enduring moral meaning is that God’s people should gladly hear and learn His Word.

The Small Catechism explains the Third Commandment this way: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” // That summary strongly shapes LCMS teaching today.

Here is the basic LCMS understanding:

1. The Old Testament Sabbath regulations were fulfilled in Christ: The LCMS teaches that the specific requirement to rest on the seventh day (Saturday) belonged to Israel under the Old Covenant. Christians are not commanded to observe Saturday as Israel did.

Key passages commonly cited include:

- **Colossians 2:16–17** “Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.”
- **Romans 14:5** “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.”
- **Mark 2:27–28** “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

The LCMS therefore rejects the idea that Christians sin merely by working on Saturday or Sunday.

2. The commandment still has an enduring meaning:

Although the ceremonial Sabbath laws are fulfilled, the LCMS teaches that the commandment still reveals God’s will that His people:

- gather around His Word,
- worship Him,
- receive the Sacraments,
- rest from endless worldly labor,
- and make time for spiritual life.

So, the emphasis shifts from:

- “Keep Saturday exactly as Israel did” to:
- “Do not despise God’s Word and worship.”

3. Why Christians worship on Sunday: The LCMS teaches that the early church gathered on Sunday because Christ rose from the dead on “the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1; John 20:1). Sunday worship became the church’s regular custom, not because Sunday replaced Saturday as a new legal Sabbath, but because it celebrated Christ’s resurrection. Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 are often cited as evidence of early Sunday gatherings.

4. The LCMS rejects both legalism and neglect: The LCMS would usually warn against two opposite errors: **Legalism:** Teaching that Christians must obey Old Testament Sabbath restrictions to be saved or faithful Christians.

Neglect: Treating worship, preaching, and God’s Word as unimportant or optional.

The commandment still calls Christians to repent if they despise worship, neglect hearing God’s Word, or place worldly concerns above the means of grace.

5. Rest in Christ is also part of the fulfillment: The LCMS often connects the Sabbath to the deeper spiritual rest believers have in Christ:

- forgiveness,
- peace with God,
- salvation by grace,
- and ultimately eternal rest.

Hebrews 4 is important here. The idea is that the Old Testament Sabbath pointed forward to the greater rest Christ gives.

In summary: The LCMS understanding of Exodus 20:8 today is roughly:

- Christians are not required to keep the Old Testament Saturday Sabbath laws.
- The heart of the commandment is to honor God’s Word and worship.
- Christians should gladly gather for preaching and the Sacraments.
- Sunday worship is a church custom rooted in Christ’s resurrection, not a new ceremonial law.
- The Sabbath ultimately points to the rest believers have in Christ.