

Sermon 7-21-19
Pastor Ray Lorthioir
Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Martin Luther's Small Catechism Sermon #4. The 2nd and 3rd Commandments

Eternally Valuable

When asked, "which is the greatest commandment," Jesus replied with Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." To this he added and "with your mind." Then Jesus added a portion of Leviticus 19:18, "... love your neighbor as yourself." Finally, Jesus concluded in Matthew 22:40, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." This means that the Ten Commandments can be summarized with one word – Love.

As we saw several weeks ago, hate is not the true opposite of love. Indifference is the true opposite. In reality, the commandments to love God and love neighbor are commandments against indifference. And when we saw how Yahweh says He is a jealous God – jealous for the faithful, righteous affection of the people He created – we determined that indifference toward God is the same as hating Him.

We also determined that love takes time, energy and above all, commitment. Commitment is love. And love is commitment. Is Yahweh committed to us? Existence and survival would be impossible if He were not.

But are we committed to Him? The answer is no. We're all born with a life-threatening handicap in that department. It's called original sin. It's in the DNA we inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve. Deceived by Satan, they made the choice that resulted in them having to both define and choose good and evil for themselves. Their choice was evil in itself. For, in reality, anything contrary to the will of our Creator is evil. And He had commanded them not to make that choice.

Therefore, as definers of good and evil for ourselves, we cannot please our Father in heaven. And our commitment wanders all over the place both to God and our neighbors. This is why Jesus came. The gospel message is that a mortal human being perfectly expressed commitment to Yahweh, loving Him even unto death on a cross.

As it's written in Philippians 2:8-11, "8... he [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the sign that in His obedience unto death He completely overcame the original sin we inherit from Adam and Eve as well as all our personal sins. Christ is risen! He has atoned for all our false definitions of good and evil as well as the choices we have made based on them. Therefore, all who repent of their lust to define good and evil for themselves and put their faith in Jesus will be accounted as righteous as Jesus on the Day of Judgment.

So, what are Yahweh's definitions of good and evil? We find them in the commandments. We also find them in Jesus' discussions of God's commandments. All of God's commandments are commandments either to love Him or to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Lutherans teach that God's commandments do three things. First, they establish norms for civil law. This is why murder is against American law. Therefore, the commandments are a curb on human behavior.

Second, the commandments put our rebellion right before our eyes. They are a mirror that reflects our true rebellious self. Thus, they show us that we have fallen short of the glory of God and we need the justification of our lives that Jesus provides.

Third, the commandments define good and evil for those who have received Jesus Christ and have repented of defining good and evil for themselves. Even though we can't perfectly obey the commandments, they are a guide for walking through life in the righteousness of Christ.

The first three commandments are our guide for loving the Lord our God. Of course, there are many more such commandments. We refer to these as the ceremonial law. They involve circumcision, festivals, refraining from certain types of foods, sacrifices, ordinances for the Temple and the priesthood, and more.

However, in Jesus all these commandments are fulfilled and set aside. There is no more perfect way to love Yahweh than to love Jesus, the Son of God. Loving Jesus is the fulfillment of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. As it is written in 1 John 4:10, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Looking back at the first two commandments, Martin Luther marvelously summed up for us what the first commandment is all about. Anything we fear, love or trust more than God, has become an idol for us. For instance fear about health can make health into an idol for us. Those who are addicted to something love whatever that is more than God. Those who obsess over money have made money into an idol by trusting in it more than God. Let us repent and be healed of these idols.

The second commandment, not to use God's name in vain is more elusive. We tend to think of it as a command not to curse – that is show disgust – using God's Name or title. But it's more than that.

Luther didn't mention this in his explanation of the commandment, but blasphemy is also using God's Name in a sinful way. Again, what is blasphemy? It's speaking evil of God in any way. Therefore, those who say, "I can't believe in a God who allows evil in the world," are blaspheming God. God allows evil in the world because of our rebellion. It's not his job to stop wars and atomic bombs. It's not His job to stop the political and social catastrophes of our times caused by Hitler's brand of Socialism or Marx's brand. It's not His job to stop warlords, gangs and terrorism. No. It's our job to call good what Yahweh calls good, and call evil what Yahweh calls evil, and not perversely confuse the two.

Now, natural disasters certainly overtake the populations of the earth. However, much is caused by where we choose to live – like over active fault zones or near volcanoes. But the rest of it comes from the effect of that initial choice that Adam made. Few realize just how powerful and significant a person Adam was. He was the

gatekeeper of this universe. It was His job to maintain righteousness before Yahweh and keep sin out of the universe. But when Adam chose to know good and evil for himself, he opened the gates of this universe to sin and all its consequences. Those consequences will be with us until the Messiah returns at the end of the age.

Therefore, those who speak evil of Yahweh on account of the evil in this world are themselves evil. They refuse to know the real cause of evil. They impenitently refuse to see the evil in themselves. They refuse Yahweh's great Messiah, Jesus – the one who has put sin, rebellion and evil on notice that their reign on this earth is coming to a close and will end on the great Day of the Lord. Instead, they blaspheme the Name of God.

Now, this morning, we move on to the third commandment. It's actually three commandments in one. Exodus 20:8-11, "8 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.'"

The term Sabbath in Hebrew literally means to stop work. Sabbath is what happens at 5pm. Therefore, a Sabbath Day is a day when we're not obligated to work for a living. Incredibly, it was our Creator's idea that we should get at least one day off from work every seven days. No labor union was involved!

Once upon a time this value was so strong in western culture that civil laws forbade businesses from being open on Sunday. No store could be open on Sunday except a drug store or a bakery. Sunday, the Lord's Day, was a day for church, family and community. All that changed in New York State about 1965 when the so-called blue laws were repealed.

However, it has not changed in the local Orthodox Jewish community here. You won't find an Orthodox Jew at work on Saturday. And if their business is open, it's manned by gentiles. Sabbath is a day for synagogue, family and community.

Nevertheless, observance of the modern Orthodox Jewish Sabbath is bound by many rules and regulations regarding work, just like in the time of Jesus. In fact, electricity, the automobile and modern conveniences have made observance more complicated because each of them does work.

Now, concerning the entire Law, Moses said to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:25, "And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness." So, here the question arises, "is the keeping of the Sabbath Day a righteousness that we present before Yahweh for our salvation?" If so, then how do we make sure we do nothing unrighteous in the keeping of it? For millennia Jewish religious lawyers have puzzled over this last question. The result is rule upon rule.

However, for Christians, the Ten Commandments are not our righteousness before God. Jesus alone is our righteousness. He is our righteousness because He perfectly kept all the commandments. And Jesus had a few things to say about the Sabbath. For, a significant complaint against Jesus by the Pharisees was that He was a Sabbath breaker. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. On one Sabbath, Jesus and His

disciples were walking through a grain field. They plucked some heads off the grain and ate the kernels. The Pharisees called it all work forbidden on the Sabbath.

In response Jesus said in Mark 2:27, "... 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'" In other words, the Sabbath is not about presenting a righteousness of our own before the Lord through the keeping of elaborate regulations. Rather the Sabbath is a gift from God, to be gratefully received so that we may enjoy God's good.

Now, since the Sabbath is a gift from Yahweh to humanity, in reality it belongs to us. Therefore, Jesus could go on to say in Mark 2:28, "'So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'" If Jesus is the Messiah, then, He has authority over the Sabbath as Messiah. And if Jesus has authority over the Sabbath, He is our righteousness before Yahweh concerning the Sabbath.

Back in April, an Orthodox man complained to my wife about the motion detector spotlight we have on the front of the house. Apparently this man's rabbi has ruled that if he turns on a light by passing a motion detector, he's un-righteously causing work to be done on the Sabbath.

Now, I'm the rabbi on this property. Therefore, in accord with what Jesus said, here's how I rule concerning this matter. Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is our righteousness before the Lord. Therefore, turning on a light makes no difference when you have Jesus. For, like the Sabbath Day itself, Jesus is a gift to us from the Lord.

This morning we consider the way Martin Luther taught this commandment in his Small Catechism.

The Third Commandment: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

What does this mean? 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.

There are several immediately noticeable things about this explanation. First, work is not mentioned at all. This is understandable because Jesus has fulfilled this commandment for us. Second is Luther's emphasis on preaching and the Word. Third is his emphasis on the sacred.

What is the sacred? That which is eternally valuable. The Word of God is most eternally valuable. Without it, you wouldn't know what is truly good and evil through God's commandments. Without the Word, you wouldn't know Jesus. Without it you would be sentenced to hell, the place where it's impossible to choose God's good, because God's good doesn't exist there. The Word is sacred.

Luther makes it clear that God's Word also involves love. For, it consumes our time, energy and commitment. But the Word is first God's love toward us, especially when we consider Jesus. Love for us consumed Jesus' time, energy, suffering and commitment on the cross – making it possible for us sinners to be declared righteous before God. Thus, the Word is God's sacred space for us.

In a like fashion, the sacraments are eternally valuable. In Holy Communion we hear the words, "given and shed for you for the remission of sins." Again, this is Jesus' eternally valuable love on the cross, poured out for us in His body and blood.

Therefore, setting aside time, energy and commitment toward the Lord on the Lord's Day brings the eternal benefit of receiving His time, energy and commitment toward us.

Here's a trivia question appropriate for this day after the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing. Do you know the first food and drink that was consumed on the moon? It was Holy Communion, brought by one of the astronauts. Look it up. The astronauts celebrated the sacred on the moon, and indeed what a place for it.

One last thing – humans have known for centuries that the worship of any god has a powerful effect. It unifies a human community. Therefore, how much greater unity should be effected by the worship of the one true Creator God? The Orthodox Jewish community knows this. But the unity of the gentile community has fallen apart as we have substituted pagan values for the worship of the true Creator God. We dishonor our Creator and no longer set aside the Lord's Day, Sunday, for His Word and the worship of His holy Name.

Therefore, as we rebuild here, the third commandment needs to be one of our important guides. Operating in what is eternally valuable is most important. But the sacred is only a derivative of Yahweh's primary desire for us. He desires that we repent of our consuming desire to define good and evil for ourselves and receive instead the righteousness of Jesus Christ. For, only then will we know the value of the Word and the value of the eternally sacred. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.