

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity, September 4, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 285, 196:1, 289, 292:1-4, 288.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 5:1-22, Romans 3:10-31, Matthew 19:16-26.

Sermon Text: John 1:17

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

If you have spent any vacation time outdoors, you have probably seen and recognized some of what God has created. Many people think that enjoying ‘the great outdoors’ brings them closer to God. But that really doesn’t really bring us closer to God. As you heard last week, from God’s works of creation we can see his power and wisdom and realize that everything that exists was not just randomly formed or evolved but that it was created by an omnipotent creator. We can experience his power, whether through thunderstorms or rushing rivers or death.

But we cannot see or understand all that he has done for us. In a sense we can recognize God’s law in what humans call the “laws of nature” but we cannot know that he intended for mankind to live forever. We cannot see all of God’s love for us from what he has created. That must come from another source. That source is what he has told us in words. And his words have been recorded for us in the book we call the Bible. As we examine the Bible, we find that there are two chief teachings or doctrines in God’s infallible, verbally inspired Word. These are Law and Gospel.

Last week you heard about the source of all our teaching and preaching. Today we begin to look at the contents of the Bible, which is and must be the source and foundation of our religion and our entire lives. Today we look at

THE TWO MAIN BIBLE TEACHINGS

- 1. What does God’s Law teach us?**
- 2. What does God’s Gospel teach us?**

We begin by asking ‘what does God teach us by the law?’ By the law God teaches us what he wants us to do and not to do. Paul writes in Romans *“Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’”* Romans 7:7 (NIV)

But the law of God has a deeper, more important purpose for us.

What else does the law teach us? When we examine our lives according to God’s law it also teaches us that we are all sinners who deserve God’s punishment of death and damnation.

So God gave his laws, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which plainly show us – all mankind – that we are all sinners, through and through.

Unfortunately, not everyone sees the Law of God as a means to teach us about sin. There are people who see God’s law as a means to get to heaven, sort of a ladder to climb so we can earn our way into eternal life, as the young man in our Gospel lesson thought.

When God says “thou shalt” – “you shall”, and “thou shalt not” – “you shall not”, he is giving an unconditional command. His commands are not merely “suggestions”, or simply alternate ideas for living, as so many people, including cartoonists, have mocked it, made light of it, and spoken and written of God’s “suggestions”. That is certainly the way many people would like to think of God’s commands.

God is serious and in earnest about his Law. We read in Galatians: ***“All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’”*** Galatians 3:10 (NIV) The Scriptures are filled with that idea: ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Romans 3:22-23 (NIV) ***“No one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”*** Romans 3:20 (NIV) And we have this dreadful pronouncement by God: ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** Romans 6:23 (NIV)

Adam and Eve, the first humans, knew what God wanted. Ever since then, all humans have shown ***“that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”*** Romans 2:15 (NIV) This has been called “natural law”. Everyone also has a conscience, the voice in everyone which bears witness to God’s law. But conscience isn’t always reliable because conscience may be so hardened by sin that it no longer bothers a man when he sins, or it may tell him something is a sin which God doesn’t say is a sin. The Bible tells us ***“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”*** Romans 1:21 (NIV) We also read in Scripture that unbelievers ***“are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.”*** Ephesians 4:18-19 (NIV)

So we can never know from creation or from our conscience what God has done to save us. That is the message of the Gospel; that comes only from the Scriptures, the Word of God. That is something that mankind just cannot learn on his own, regardless of any wisdom or knowledge he acquires. ***“As it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.’”*** 1 Corinthians 2:9 (NIV) We just cannot save ourselves from our sins. That knowledge must come from God’s Gospel. But let’s talk a little more about law, God’s law.

Because sin dulled the law in man’s heart, God gave his law in a second way. He caused it to be written down, and gave it to Moses at Mount Sinai.

“These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.” Deuteronomy 5:22 (NIV)

When we examine the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, we realize that God gave three kinds of law on Mount Sinai.

God gave the civil law to govern the people of Israel as a nation. For example, the civil law established the punishment for crimes such as injury to another person or damage to another person’s property. We might compare this to all the laws which our civil government makes.

Secondly, God also gave his people the ceremonial law. These were the laws that told the people when, where, and how they were to worship God. The laws about priests, the sacrifices, the Sabbath days, the Passover, the tabernacle – all these were ceremonial laws. The ceremonial laws served as pictures or types or symbols that pointed ahead to the promised Savior.

Thirdly, God gave the moral law. God had written the moral law in man’s heart already at creation because it is God’s will for all people of all time. God gave the moral law in the form of the Ten Commandments. In these Ten Commandments God told the people of Israel how his holy will for all people applied in a special way to them as his chosen people.

The basic content of the Ten Commandments is repeated in the New Testament though not always in the same words or in the same order in which he gave it on Mount Sinai.

God’s moral law was given and intended for all mankind. Luther chose the Ten Commandments for his catechism because it is the simplest summary we have in the Bible of God’s moral law. His explanations, the “what does this mean” that we have memorized, explains what the law of God really means for us.

Scripture and our catechisms have presented the idea of “love God and love your neighbor” as the very simplest summary of God’s Law.

As I emphasized earlier, these are commands, not merely suggestions or ideas. God wants us to obey his commandments perfectly, just as Jesus said ***“be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*** Matthew 5:48 (NIV) Perfect obedience is the only way to eternal life.

But it should be clear from a careful study of the commandments that we just can't obey perfectly. We want to remember the purpose of the Law. God really had three purposes, three uses for his law.

What purpose does God's law serve in the outward lives of all people? God's law helps to preserve order in the world by keeping the wicked actions of all people within bounds. To a degree, it prevents coarse outbreaks of sin, and serves as a curb. People are – to some degree – afraid to break laws, including God's laws, because of the danger of punishment. I like to think of how the curb in front of your house keeps muck from flowing over on to your lawn. We might also think of the 4 or 5 foot high concrete curbs along the highways which separate traffic. While it is still possible for vehicles to crash over that high barrier, it helps prevent crashes.

Then we ask what purpose does God's law serve in the hearts of all people? God's law shows all people their sin and their need of a Savior. This is the law as a mirror. For example, the mirror I look into shows me just the way I am, with all my flaws and imperfections.

And thirdly we ask, what purpose does God's law serve for Christians living in a sinful world? For the believer, surrounded by a sinful world, God's law shows Christians the way of life that is pleasing to God. This is the law as a guide, as a straightedge. One child compared this to the lane lines painted on the highway.

Many think of laws as something burdensome, particularly God's laws and commandments, as something they don't want to follow.

But God introduces his commandments with the words ***“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*** Exodus 20:2 (NIV) With these words God reminds us that it our loving maker and Savior who gave us these commandments. He does this to make us willing and glad to obey his commandments.

Now I have to admit that we haven't spoken much of the Gospel in this sermon. But the Gospel is essential, critical for mankind. As we proceed through the catechism in our sermons we shall see that even in the teaching of God's Law we must find Gospel. Because no human can obey God's law perfectly to earn eternal salvation, it was necessary that God send his Son, Jesus Christ, true God and true man, to live a sinless life and to die for sin so that everyone who believes in him will be saved. Jesus obeyed all of God's law perfectly, in our place, for us.

Remember that without the Gospel of Jesus Christ there would be no hope of salvation.

By the Gospel God teaches us the good news that in his love he sent Jesus to take away the sins of all people. And by the Gospel God teaches us that everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life and salvation.

So we must reject the idea that the Bible is simply a book of laws that show us how to earn our way into heaven. The chief purpose of the Bible is to lead all people to know and believe in Jesus as their only hope of salvation.

The Law cannot save us. Jesus Christ saves us because he – and only he – obeyed God's law perfectly. It isn't enough to 'just do the best I can' and hope God will reward me. The reward I deserve is eternal damnation. The reward I receive is eternal life, as a gift, through faith in Jesus Christ.

It is absolutely true, as we just heard, that ***“the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*** Romans 6:23 (KJV)

Next week we will begin looking at God's Ten Commandments. As we begin our catechism instruction classes each fall, this is also the part of Luther's Small Catechism which our young people study and learn.

But although we talked a great deal about God's law today, in preparation for our study of the commandments, remember that it is the Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ which saves us.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” John 3:16-17 (NIV) May we see that love and that Savior in every sermon and be saved eternally! Amen.