

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

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

Hymns: 294, 287:1-2, 295, 297, 353:7.

Lessons: Daniel 3:1-30, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, Matthew 4:1-11.

Sermon Text: Exodus 20, 1-6.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

A story has been told about a young preacher who was invited to preach to death row prisoners. He preached a powerful sermon about God's Law, making sin and eternal damnation for lawbreakers very clear. But he made no mention of the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of all mankind, and that faith in Jesus as Savior is the only way to be saved eternally. Afterwards, the warden asked him about the fact that his sermon contained no Gospel. His reply was "Oh, I'll preach Gospel next week." The warden asked "what about the man in cell number 2? He is scheduled to be executed on Wednesday." That little story tells the importance of proclaiming both Law and Gospel every chance we get. Law and Gospel must be found in every sermon.

The preacher and later also seminary teacher who was instrumental in the founding of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod delivered a series of lectures in 1884 gathered into a book titled "The Proper Distinction Between Law And Gospel", an essential study for every true preacher of the Gospel. In the 25 theses or statements drawn from Scripture upon which Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther lectured, he emphasized that "rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular." (Thesis 3) He states in Thesis 5 that "the first manner of confounding Law and Gospel is the one most easily recognized – and the grossest." It is representing Christ as a new Moses, or Lawgiver, and changing the Gospel into a doctrine of good works. Walther also stated that "the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel." (Thesis 6) Walther goes on and elaborates in about 400 pages the importance of proclaiming both Law and Gospel, which belong in every sermon.

In the next ten sermons, you may hear more about Law than Gospel, because we are following the Small Catechism in our sermon series and Luther presents the Ten Commandments in the first part of the catechism, so that we may rightly know our sins and willingly confess them. But you will – you must – surely also find Gospel in these sermons, or the preacher isn't doing what God has called him to do – to preach the whole counsel of God.

So today we look at

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

- 1. We must fear – that is, respect, honor, and give all glory to – the true God.**
- 2. We must love the true God above all things.**
- 3. We must trust in the true God above all things.**
- 4. Because we are unable to do all these things, we must look to Jesus Christ for salvation.**

When my children were young, we were walking through the neighborhood and one of the children commented upon seeing some lawn statues: "look at the idols".

This may be the first thing we think about when we think of the first commandment and idolatry, the most significant sin against God. A statue on the lawn isn't necessarily an idol, but it can become an idol. But there is more to breaking this first commandment than bowing down and worshipping a statue.

Let's start today by asking 'Who is the true God?' The true God is the one who has revealed himself in the Bible, his written Word, as "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" The Holy Ghost is also called "the Holy Spirit." In the creed which we confessed earlier in our service we confessed our faith in that true God, and spoke of the work of each of the three persons of the true God.

In explaining this commandment, Luther used three special words. We must "fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

1.

What does it mean to "fear" God? When we first think of the English word "fear" we think of being afraid of, as men should fear God's anger and punishment against sin.

But in Luther's explanation of the first commandment, it does not mean this. God does not want us to be afraid of him. He loves mankind, and wants us to think of him as "Our Father, who art in heaven."

The word translated from Luther's German here as "fear" means to place God's word and command above the word and command of anyone else. It is holy awe and respect, which leads to obedience.

Children look up to their parents and think highly of them; but it is God whom we should fear "above all things" because he is the almighty God. No one is greater and holier than he is.

We fear God above all things when with our whole heart we respect him as the highest Being, honor him with our lives and avoid what displeases him.

We are to revere him, respect him, honor him, stand in awe of him and give all glory to him as our God. We are place his word and command above every other word and command.

2.

Luther also uses the word "love". When do we love God above all things? When we regard him as our dearest treasure and wholeheartedly devote our life to his service. When we cling to Him as our God with our whole heart.

To love means to have a longing for someone, a desire to be with him. Children love their parents and they want to be with them and have them care for them. To love God means to desire him, to want to be with him.

Because "***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***" John 3:16 (NIV) and is daily blessing us in our lives, we should love him "above all things", more than any thing or any person on earth. "***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.***" Matthew 22:37 (NIV) Such love will prompt us, will motivate us, to serve him gladly in our lives by doing those things that please him.

3.

Especially with the first commandment, we learn that we must trust in God above all things. This means to put our whole confidence in him, take him at his word, and rely upon him for every help and blessing. It means to commit our lives to his keeping and rely upon him for help in every need.

To trust is the very opposite of to doubt. It means not merely to believe what God says, and that he is able and willing to do what he promised, but to depend upon him, feeling sure that he will help us in every need. This is the way that children trust in their parents. It means not only that in our hearts we firmly believe that everything he tells us in the Bible is true, and that all his promises are dependable but that in all our troubles we confidently look to him for help, feeling sure that he will not fail us.

"Above all things" – more than we trust in man, or trust in our own wisdom, or trust in riches, for God is able to do far more than we ask or think. Earthly things and humans often fail us, but God says "***Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.***" Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)

Such trust and faith in God will drive worry and fear out of our hearts and make us feel safe, secure, and happy as we seek to keep the commandments of our God. "***Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.***" Psalm 37:5 (KJV)

Strictly speaking there are no “other gods” beside the Triune God but there are many things which men regard and worship as gods.

In this commandment God forbids us to have anything or anyone as our god instead of him or beside him. The glory to be worshiped as God he demands exclusively for himself and will not share it with another. Therefore not only idol worshipers but also atheists, who refuse him this honor, sin against this commandment.

When do men have other gods? There are many ways.

- When they regard and worship any creature as God. This may be nature as a whole, an individual creature, an image, or anything.
- When they openly or secretly worship or believe in a god who is not the triune God. This can be an imaginary being, such as a stone, gold, silver, or wooden statue. This can be anything that men call a god, such as the Muslim Allah, the Great Spirit of Native Americans, the god of modern Jews, who do not recognize Jesus Christ as God. This can be the “god” of the Unitarians, of Christian Scientists, of the Mormons, or of the lodges. All these profess faith in one god, who is supposed to be a spiritual essence, but is not the Triune God of the Bible.
- When they fear, love, or trust in any person or thing as they should fear, love, and trust in God alone. We can think of worshipping possessions, nature, and even the human body.

All of this idolatry can be open, so that others see it, but it can also be secret idolatry. We are also forbidden to secretly fear, love, or trust in any person or thing as we should fear, love, and trust in God alone.

God requires that we have only him as our God. This means that from the Bible we learn to know him as the true God; that we own and acknowledge him as our God; that we worship him as our only god. Such worship must not be mere lip service but one in spirit and in truth, from the heart, with all our heart!

When we worship the true God, we fear, love, and trust in him above all things.

We must not forget God says “thou shalt not”. “You shall not.” But he also says “thou shalt”, “you shall”. The positive side of this and all other commandments should also receive special emphasis. It is important that we learn what to avoid, and we must also learn what we are to do. We are to observe all that God has commanded. The law is not only a mirror to show us our sins, but also a guide in our sanctification of our lives as Christians, as children of God.

4.

So we must realize, from the law as a mirror, that we have broken this commandment and deserve eternal damnation. So what hope is there? Who alone fulfilled this and all commandments in perfect obedience? In our stead? In our place? Our Savior Jesus Christ alone fulfilled this and all commandments in perfect obedience. Jesus kept this commandment for us. ***“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”*** Romans 5:19 (NIV)

This is the blessed message of the Gospel. The Gospel saves us from our sins against this commandment and all commandments.

What blessings are ours through Christ’s perfect obedience? Most importantly, we are justified in the sight of God. That means that God declares us “not guilty” of all our sins. When we realize and believe that, we learn to follow our Savior. The Christian joyfully confesses ***“I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.”*** Psalm 119:32 (NIV)

May the blessings of Christ’s obedience lead us to strive mightily to obey this commandment, knowing how much God loves us. Amen.