

Pastor Jim Cords
He Will Lead, Will We Follow?
March 7, 2021

The holy gospel for this third Sunday in Lent comes to us from the Gospel of John, the second chapter¹:

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple, he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Lord, open our hearts and our lives to Your direction today. But first, penetrate our souls with your love and your grace that our lives might be rooted in your goodness and your mercy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We are on our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross. It is a time during this Lenten season when we seek to draw nearer to God and to seek to have our sins forgiven and our lives directed and strengthened so that we might live well and live in honor and glory to our Lord, Jesus Christ. That is seen in some very strong ways in our text for this day as we look to the Ten Commandments in our first lesson.

I once had someone say to me you cannot break the Ten Commandments. You can only break yourself on them. The idea is that the Commandments of God are unyielding. While we

¹ John 2:13-22

may enter into our own suffering and bring suffering to others by going against these Commandments, in fact, they are fixed and unchanging. We do well to live according to them.

I want us to pay attention to how these words begin. “And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”² These first two verses of Exodus 20 set the stage for everything that's going to follow. It's not simply God the Creator who tells us the rules we are supposed to live by. Rather, it's the God who saves us, the God who rescues us, the God who journeys with us, who gives us a set of understandings that this is how we are to live with God and with one another. So let us be sure to hear these Commandments in that spirit.

Maybe in the spirit that we are given in Psalm 19. Psalm 19 says this. “The law of the Lord is perfect,” And what is its effect? “Reviving the soul,” “making wise the simple,” “rejoicing the heart,” “enlightening the eyes,” and “enduring forever,” “more to be desired are they than gold,” “sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.”³ As we begin to look at these Commandments, let us remember that they are good, that they are a gift, that they are life to the community and to our relationships. They're not just a set of rules that we are told we have to follow. They are a gift from God.

You may remember the phrase, “you can catch more flies with honey than you can vinegar.” I wonder if that was a part of the motivation of Martin Luther when he wrote his Small Catechism. When we talk to parents and when we are learning how we might parent well our children, we learn that sometimes it's just not very effective to say no, no, no. and quite honestly, our little ones and even our older ones sometimes are doing things to which we will say no, no, no. But especially when we're working with our little ones, we are encouraged to redirect their attention to positive behavior. I have to admit there are times when I need *my* actions redirected. As a matter of fact, there have even been times when this instruction about how to work with children has been an instruction given from a parent who knew better to me, so that I would know better how best do to lead and guide and bless my children. I'm grateful for that encouragement, even though I wasn't always very good at it when I was a young parent. My children are fortunate that they had their mother who was much better at it. Now,

² Exodus 20:1-2

³ Psalm 19: 7-10

as I watch my kids teach and lead my grandkids, I see that they are very good at redirecting my grandchildren's attention that they want them to have and actions that they want them to engage in.

Martin Luther was seeking to help parents when he wrote the Small Catechism. Last Sunday at our outdoor worship, we had a baptism. At that baptism, the parents made promises that most of us made when our children were baptized and very likely our parents made when we were baptized. That is, that we would raise them in the faith. We would teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. As they grow in age, we would place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith. Well, Luther wanted to help those parents who made those promises and so he wrote the Small Catechism which does those very things. It teaches the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.

So today as we hear the Ten Commandments read in Exodus 20, I want us to listen to what Luther said. How he shifted to the positive side of those Commandments when he gave his explanation. So let's walk through this and let's pay attention to how Luther hears these Ten Commandments.

The First Commandment, we are to fear and love and trust God above all things. That is, we are to have no other gods and so the explanation for that is that we are to fear, love, and trust God above all things. Think about who God is. What He has done in the creation of the world and what He has done in our own redemption in Christ Jesus. God creates us, loves us, forgives us, reclaims us, redeems us in Christ. So we are grateful and so we love Him and we trust Him and we give Him the reverence that God is due.

This love then, this worship of God, is the basis of all of the Commandments that follow. We hear that in Luther's language because in each one of the explanations of the rest of the Commandments, we hear these words. "We are to so fear and love God that ..." We are motivated to keep the Commandment, to do what the Commandment calls us to do or not do, what it forbids us to do, out of our love and reverence for God.

Listen to this second Commandment's explanation. "We are to so fear and love God that we call on Him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving." Not using God's name in ways that are outside of His character, but using God's name to call on Him to be active in our lives, to lead us

and guide us, to correct us when we need correction, to help us to know which way to turn, and to strengthen our faith that we might trust Him in difficult times. We are to fear and love God so much that we call upon Him when we need Him.

This covenant relationship that we have with God is for every day and is for all of our circumstances. This relationship with God is in the daily realities of our life, that God is with us. We have opportunities moment by moment to let others know that we know that God is with us and that He loves us and that He loves them. So we call upon Him in our time of need. We live in gratitude for God's love and provision. We recognize the abundance of that provision in our lives. When we can trust God in that way, the rest of the Commandments that follow are significantly easier to follow when we live a life in the abundance and provision that is ours in the promise of God.

It includes even in keeping the Sabbath day. The third Commandment's explanation is this. "We are to so fear and love God that we regard His word as holy and gladly hear and learn it." We're so incredibly grateful for who God is and what God does for us and with us that we want to know God better. We want to hear His word. We want it to shape us, so that we can experience the fullness of life that God intends for us. In the Word, we hear God's voice. We hear from Him as we walk with Him. We see God's word at work in our hearts to empower us to trust and obey. We begin then to view the world differently as we pause and acknowledge the presence and goodness of God. We then begin to view the world not for what others do or what is happening in the world, but from the perspective of who God is. Coming from God's love and embrace and having experienced His love, we then see the world differently, through those eyes and it changes how we can respond and how we can hear these Commandments.

The fourth Commandment's explanation is this. "We are to so fear and love God that we respect obey, love, and serve our parents and others in authority." Look, I'm a child of the sixties and seventies. I don't like authority. I'm trying. I'm learning. I'm better than I was, but anytime I see in scripture or in other places, you know, authorities telling me what to do, I want to run the other way. I want to do my own thing, but the reality is the scripture teaches us that God is almighty God, that God is the one and only true Authority. The scripture also teaches us that God puts authority figures in our lives. He's chosen who our parents are. He is involved in putting governors, presidents, and other leaders in place. So we are called to respect them, to

honor the office that they hold. It doesn't mean they're always right and it certainly doesn't mean we're always wrong, but it does mean that we are called to honor and respect them, and to trust that God has them in their position for a reason. Therefore, we will give them honor and respect.

This is the only Commandment, by the way, that tells us that if we do this, our days will be long in the land. There's a blessing attached to this honoring. I think we experience that blessing in our lives. When we honor those in authority, we get along a lot better. When we dishonor them, we make life pretty difficult for ourselves and others, so this is a wise commandment to follow.

Now we move to the fifth commandment. We move into a list of Thou-shalt-not's, but we continue to listen for the insights that Luther shares in the Small Catechism. Luther's explanation of the fifth Commandment, thou shalt not kill, is put this way. "We are to so fear and love God that we help our neighbor in all their physical needs." Not only will we not hurt our neighbor, we will *help* our neighbor. We will find ways to strengthen their physical bodies rather than tear them down. Jesus in the New Testament equated anger and name-calling of our neighbor with killing, so He certainly calls us to this higher standard of looking to the physical well-being of our neighbor, rather than wishing them ill, rather than seeking vengeance. Our true calling as children of God is to assist our neighbor to be as strong as they can be. Although it's a good idea in the process to make sure you don't kill them.

The sixth Commandment is explained this way by Luther. "We are to so fear and love God that in word and conduct, we are pure and honorable, and husband and wife love and respect each other." Thou shalt not commit adultery. I had a conversation with a husband one time. He told me that he was absolutely committed that his wife would not leave him. I thought that was a little backward. I thought, maybe, he should be committed not to leave his wife, but I listened on. He said, "I made a promise when I got married that I would never be divorced." I was actually at his wedding and I don't remember him saying anything about not getting divorced. I don't remember that being in the vows or being in the homily from the pastor. As a matter of fact, I said to him that doesn't quite sound right. If I remember right from your wedding, you made a promise to love, honor, and cherish your wife for as long as you both shall live. How are you doing with that? I asked him. Because it isn't enough in marriage just to hang

in there, even though I can understand that there are times in relationships when it feels like that's all you've got. But that's not our calling in marriage. In marriage, our calling is to honor our spouse, to cherish them, and to find every way we can to bless and encourage them. These days, marriages are really hard, not because of who your spouse is, but just because of the culture in which we live. God created marriage and in marriage, He strengthens the whole of human community. When marriage breaks down, our whole community loses, so let's try to think about ways that we can not only invest in and strengthen our own marriage, by cherishing our spouses, but also ways we can encourage others to remain loyal in their relationships, to live with sexual purity in the covenant of marriage.

Luther's explanation for the seventh Commandment, thou shalt not steal, is this. "We are to so fear and love God that we help our neighbor improve and protect their property and means of making a living." Not only not take what isn't ours, but make sure that others don't either. I was pretty little and my mom had taken me to the corner drugstore. There was a Tootsie Roll there and I wanted one. My mom said no. I took it anyway. Of course, I was an impatient small child. So as I got into the back seat of the car in the parking lot, I had a Tootsie Roll in my mouth. My mom looked up in the mirror and looked at me and said where did you get that? I was caught red-handed. It was probably a really good thing because I learned my lesson on something very small. That stealing was simply not right. I had to go back in and apologize to the store owner. He was very nice and gracious. I was embarrassed. I learned my lesson. But what you see is God doesn't want us to simply not take what isn't ours. He wants us to protect our neighbor. He wants us to preserve a community that has honesty and integrity at the heart of it. He wants us to help our neighbors to be successful in how they are stewards of the gifts that God provides to them. So whether it's a neighborhood watch or some other means of just looking out for our neighbor, making sure that people don't do bad things to their stuff or take it, we're called to love and watch out for one another, as the body of Christ in the world.

That goes on then to the eighth Commandment and the explanation there. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Thou shalt not lie. We are to so fear and love God that we defend our neighbor." Here we go now. "Speak well of them" and get this "and explain their actions in the kindest way." This is tough. We are essentially supporting our neighbor's reputation. Now, I'll

tell you. When I like my neighbor, that's easy. When I don't like my neighbor, that's really hard. It's really much easier to just assume that they intended the worst thing by what they said or what they did. That they did it on purpose, so that they could get back at me, hurt me, whatever, make my life miserable. They turn the radio up at night when they know I'm trying to go to bed just to bother me. Now we are to so love and understand God's love for us and others that we demonstrate that love and grace in our response to them. And so we understand when they had a bad day. And when they take it out on us, we don't take it personally. Maybe even we engage more deeply, listen more carefully, share grace with greater kindness. Jesus encouraged his disciples when they're slapped to turn the other cheek. It's hard, but it does cultivate good community and good relationships when we can constantly be looking for the best in each other, and projecting that, and interpreting what they do in that way.

The ninth and tenth Commandments move to this question of coveting. Thou shalt not covet and Luther puts it this way. "We are to so fear and love God that we help our neighbor to keep what is theirs." We don't cheat them out of it. We don't try to bargain them out of it. We don't try to find laws or rules that allow us to take what's theirs. But let's be honest. What this is really talking about is when we see that others have some beautiful thing or blessing and we want it. We may even start saying to ourselves something as idiotic as "I deserve it more than they do." But it's really all rooted in greed. It's rooted again in a discontentment. Rather than in an understanding that God has blessed them. Should we not rejoice in that? God is blessing us. Should we not rejoice in that? Maybe perhaps, we can cultivate a mutual blessing. The things that I have that are blessing that God has provided with me I can share with you and the things that you have that God has provided to you you can share with me. That's the kind of community that God wants us to live in and create. Again rooted in who God is and what He desires for His people and for the world through His people.

The tenth Commandment then has these words in Luther's explanation. "We are to so fear and love God that we urge our neighbor's wife and workers to remain loyal." To remain loyal. We don't try to get them to come work for us. We don't try to steal someone's spouse. We look for ways to bless and be a blessing. Loyalty is part of that and very often, we need one another to encourage us, so that we work through the challenges we have in life rather than just bail.

Now as I've gone through each of these explanations. I've stayed on the positive side. I haven't actually been reading the full explanation that Luther went to. I have just been reading the positive side, the things that we are called to do, rather than just simply the things that we are called not to do or putting them together.

Luther's Small Catechism ends with a summary. This is what it says. "God promises grace and every blessing to all that keep His Commandments. Therefore we are to love and trust in Him and gladly do whatever he commands." Maybe you've had the experience or maybe you've even been a part of it where you're told to do something like say you're sorry and you failed to do it with gladness. Often, when corrections come into our lives, we failed to respond with gladness, with gratitude. Instead maybe with some resentment or we begrudgingly agree.

But I believe that all of these directions God has given in the Ten Commandments are a gift. They are honey. They are gold because they tell us how we can live together and be together in community, how we can encourage and bless one another. Right now, in these days, I believe we need this more than ever. Again, not simply not doing bad things to each other, but intentionally finding ways that we can do good things for and with each other. Find the encouragement and joy that comes from God's love for us, from our confidence that God will do as God has promised He would do. To live as I encouraged the baptismal parents, to live with their newly baptized child in the knowledge that they are loved by God every day. That's our calling as people of God.

We are to so fear and love God that it shapes who we are, that it shapes what we do, that it directs our relationships, and that it defines our purpose and life. We love because God first loved us.

May you experience the embrace of our loving God who is able by the power at work within you to do abundantly far more than all you might ask or imagine. Lord, give us the will and the courage to live the lives that you have created us for. Amen.