

PROTECTING THE GIFTS

Exodus 20:7-11

Third Wednesday in Lent (Series B)

February 28, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon text continues our series through the Ten Commandments. It is Exodus 20, verses 7 through 11. Tonight we consider the Second and Third Commandments. Please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 7, we read in Jesus' name.

⁷ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep 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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We tend to think of the Ten Commandments as being all Law.

I should probably define what that term means. As Lutherans we have this distinction between Law and Gospel. And it's not really just a Lutheran thing. It should be a Christian thing, because the distinction between Law and Gospel is a Bible thing. So other Christians will talk about Law and Gospel too, but as Lutherans we kind of have a reputation for it. We make a big deal of it, and we believe we are right to do so.

We see Law and Gospel as the two main doctrines of Scripture. They are the two primary messages God speaks to us. We define the Law as "the divine Word which tells us what we must do" (H.U. Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*, p. 33). And we define the Gospel as "the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Savior" (*ibid*, 34). The Law includes God's commands as well as the threats of punishment. The Gospel includes the mercy, grace, redemption, peace, and salvation which Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection.

So it's pretty easy to recognize the Ten Commandments as Law. They are, quite plainly, words from God that tell us what we must and must not do. So we naturally think of the Ten Commandments as the clearest summary of the Law. And this is right. But there is also a great deal of Gospel implied in the commandments, because each one of the commandments protects a certain gift from God to us.

So each of the Ten Commandments do two basic things: they prohibit a certain action, and they protect a gift. So remember this: each commandment both prohibits and protects. And Luther's explanations in the Small Catechism usually help us recognize these two things.

So the Ten Commandments are like a fence around the good gifts God has given in order to protect us and these gifts to us. And when we understand this function of the commandments, then we see that they are not some arbitrary rules God made up in order to take all the fun out of life. They are gracious commandments that protect and promote what is good. And this is good.

To demonstrate this, let's consider the Fifth Commandment. It's always kind of easy to use the Fifth Commandment as an example, because it's the most common sense commandment. Pretty much everyone acknowledges the virtue of the Fifth Commandment. It is, "Thou shalt not kill," or, more literally, "You shall not murder." Murder is bad. Pretty much everyone recognizes that.

So let's try a little exercise. This is one of the things I do with the confirmation kids with each commandment, and I'm going to do it with you too. Two questions: First, *What does the Fifth Commandment prohibit?* That's pretty easy. It prohibits murder, or the unauthorized taking of human life. And second, *What gift does the Fifth Commandment protect?* This isn't quite as easy, but I think you'll at least recognize it when you hear it, and I hope you learn how to answer this question for the rest of the commandments. The Fifth Commandment protects God's gift of life. God is the one "who gives life to all things" (1 Tim. 6:13), and the commandment against murder protects this gift. So it's not like God is trying to steal the joy of murder. Instead he is protecting the gift of life, and this is good.

So let's apply this principle of prohibiting and protecting to the earlier commandments. Last week we considered the Introduction and the First Commandment. The First Commandment says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." So what sin does the First Commandment prohibit? It prohibits idolatry—the worship of false gods. And what gift of God does the First Commandment protect? Do you see it? It protects God's gift of himself to us. Remember the Introduction to the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD thy God." The gift is God himself. And I should clarify: it's not God who needs the protecting. It's the giving of himself to us that needs to be protected. The God who created heaven and earth has become our God and has taken us as his own. And so he has become our Savior, Defender, and Provider. So if we go and make something else our god—whether it's a statue of a god, or material possessions, or our own bellies—we put this other false god in the space that only the one true God should occupy, and we usurp the gift of God himself in our lives. And the basic problem with all these false gods is that they are unable to save. So it's not like God is trying to steal the joy of idolatry. Instead he is protecting the gift of salvation, and this is good. So the First Commandment prohibits idolatry and protects God's gift of himself to us. He has become our God, and he wants to keep it that way. So he gave us the First Commandment.

Now let's apply this to the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt not take the Name of the LORD thy God in vain." So what sin does the Second Commandment prohibit? This is pretty easy. It prohibits the vain use of God's Name. And I'll explain in a little bit what that means. But first, let's also identify what the commandment protects. Maybe you've figured it out already. If you haven't, I think you'll recognize it when you hear it, and you'll see a little more clearly how this prohibit and protect thing works. The gift that the Second Commandment protects is the Name of God. God has given his Name to us, and Luther's explanation helps us understand how this is a gift to us. After Luther says what we should not do with God's Name, he goes on to explain

what we should do with it: we should “call upon Him in every time of need and worship Him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.” The gift of God’s Name to us means that we have access to God. He has revealed to us who he is—that’s what it means that he has given his Name to us. He has revealed his identity to us as our Father; our Savior Jesus Christ; and our comforter, counselor, and teacher, the Holy Spirit. So we use his Name to call upon him in prayer. His Name is a gift to us.

So what does it mean to take God’s Name in vain? The common example is when we say, “Oh my God,” without really thinking or when we drop something on our foot, and we use the name of our Savior as an expletive. These are sins that should be avoided. We should also probably avoid the use of “OMG,” “jeeppers creepers,” and “Jiminy Crickets,” because they’re all derivatives of taking the Lord’s Name in vain. And, by the way, just a little tip: if you ever hear the words “Oh my God” or “Jesus Christ” come out of your mouth in vain, just use that as the start of a prayer, and turn your vain use into an honorable use. That will help to break a bad habit and start a good one.

So these vain or meaningless uses of God’s Name are probably what we think of first regarding the Second Commandment. But there is actually a more serious violation which threatens the gift of God’s Name to us. On Sunday I mentioned that theological error is a sin against the Second Commandment, and I promised to explain that this evening. Since then I know you’ve all been in great suspense to hear the explanation, and your suspense is about to end.

When we talk about God’s Name, we’re not just talking about the letters J-E-S-U-S or the Hebrew letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, which spells “Yahweh.” We are talking about the complete revelation of who God is. That’s what we mean by his Name. It’s his identity. And theological error is always some kind of perversion of the truth concerning God. Whenever we say something about God that is not true, we pervert the revelation of God’s Name—that is, his identity—and we break the Second Commandment. To say something—anything—about God that is not true is to use his Name in vain.

For example, if I were to teach that God is a rainbow unicorn who comes to turn the snow into Skittles that would be an obvious theological error. And it wouldn’t be harmless. Hopefully it’s silly enough that no one would actually believe it. But if, by chance, someone did believe that heresy, it would rob them of God’s true identity. So instead of calling upon the true God for the good things he has promised, they would call upon some imaginary unicorn for candy. That would be awful, because it wouldn’t work. That and every other kind of theological error is a sin against the Second Commandment.

So you can see how the Second Commandment applies especially to preachers and teachers. It applies to all of us, but especially to preachers and teachers. And this includes parents, because you are the theological professors in your homes. All who have been given the vocation of making God’s Name known to someone else must be extremely diligent to use God’s Name truthfully and not in vain, because, while this commandment can be violated intentionally, it is more often violated by simple negligence when we speak things about God that are mere opinion instead of what he has revealed in Scripture.

So don’t think that it’s harmless to accidentally say things about God that are not true. It is not harmless, and we are responsible for our negligence. Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of

these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42).

It is imperative to believe and teach rightly about God so that his Name might be known and praised and called upon. His Name is a great gift he has given us so that we might call upon it and be saved. And this is why we’re so obsessed with correct doctrine. I suspect that at times some of you may have gotten annoyed with me over my obsession with doctrine. Perhaps I don’t always have the gentlest spirit with it, but this is the reason we should take our doctrine seriously. Correct doctrine makes known the truth of God, so that we might call upon the true God and be saved. “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ ” (Rom. 10:13). God’s Name is a gift to us which the Second Commandment protects.

Now let’s apply this prohibit and protect thing to the Third Commandment. What does God prohibit when he says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”? Our first guess might be “work.” God commanded the Israelites to do all their work in six days and to rest on the seventh. And doing work is certainly one of the ways we can violate this commandment, but the essence of the commandment is something else. Some work is allowed on the Sabbath. In the gospel lesson, Jesus taught that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:12). There are certain works which are necessary on the Sabbath. It takes work to get out of bed in the morning and leave the house. People have been warning me that it takes even more work when you have kids. It takes work to get you and your family ready and out the door for church on Sunday morning. But if you neglect that work, you profane the Sabbath. And it still takes work to feed your family. But if you neglect that work, you neglect your vocation and break other commandments. It is lawful, even necessary, to do good works on the Sabbath.

So the thing the commandment prohibits is not necessarily work itself. The commandment prohibits forgetting and profaning the Sabbath. And the word “Sabbath” simply means “rest.” If your work causes you to not rest in the good gifts your God gives to you, then it is a violation of the commandment.

And since we just defined the word “Sabbath” as “rest,” perhaps you can guess by now what good gift the Third Commandment protects. It protects God’s gift of rest. And rest is not necessarily the absence of labor. If you just decide to lay in bed all day, it won’t take very long before your stomach disturbs your rest. You can be super lazy and just not get up, but your stomach will not allow you to rest. And if you have kids to feed, their stomachs will not allow you to rest either. Your laziness will not be very restful. But if you get up and fry some bacon and eggs, things will get better. Breakfast might take some work, but then you will get to eat it with your thankful and well-behaved children, or maybe just in your quiet and peaceful dining room, and that will be restful. So rest isn’t necessarily the absence of labor, but the enjoyment of the fruits of labor. And if you have kids, then you can share the fruits of your labor with your children, and they can share in that rest too, even though they didn’t do any of the work.

So rest is always the result of work, but it’s not always the result of the work we do. Sometimes we rest in the fruits of someone else’s labor. And this is the kind of rest the Third Commandment protects. It protects the gift of rest God gives to us as a result of his work. And this goes back to the creation of the world in Genesis one and two. In six days God created all things in heaven and on earth. The last of his material creation was man. On the sixth day he created Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden to rest in the fruits of God’s labor. It was

perfect. Then God rested from all his labor and blessed the seventh day. It was rest for God and for his perfect creation.

And one of the fascinating things about the creation account—you might have heard this before, but we can't really discuss the Sabbath without mentioning it—one of the fascinating things about the creation account is that there was no end to the seventh day, or at least there wasn't supposed to be. At the end of each of the first six days, there's a statement that says something like, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (Gen. 1:5). And this pattern was repeated all six days. But on the seventh day, it wasn't. God just rested, and that was it. The week of creation was complete, it didn't have to start over again. Now, we probably don't take this to mean that the sun didn't go down. It probably did, but when the sun came up again, it wasn't the start of a new week. It was just another Sabbath day where Adam, Eve, God, and all the creation just enjoyed God's work for another day. This state of rest which God had created was supposed to last forever.

But, of course, you know the rest of the story: snake, fruit, eat, die. And God's rest was destroyed. And from that point on, the entire Bible is the story of God restoring this rest. The devil had destroyed it, but God was determined to fix it, and this is really the whole point of Scripture—the story of what God has done to restore his perfect rest.

This is the whole point of Jesus coming down into this chaotic unrest. His death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead gives us rest from the burden of sin. And he has even promised to come again and raise the dead. On that day he will give us rest from death. He will take us into his new creation where we will have perfect and eternal rest in the fruits of his labor.

So the Sabbath command has never been about resting in the fruits of our own labor. It has always been about resting in the fruits of God's labor. So when we take a day to not go to work, we rest in God's promise to give us our daily bread. And we're reminded that even the bread we work for is his gift to us. The physical rest we practice when we take a day to not work is a confession of faith that God will provide for our daily needs. If we blow off the commandment, we lose this rest, and we lose the greater spiritual rest God desires to give us on the Sabbath.

Even more important than the physical rest we receive when we don't go to work is the spiritual rest God gives us through his Word and Sacraments on Sunday morning. It is through his Word and through the gift of Jesus' body and blood that God delivers to us the forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and everlasting salvation. This is the whole point of going to church—to receive spiritual rest for our souls. You spend six days and twenty-some hours out there in the world trying to live according to the Law. You struggle and strive to be faithful all that time in your vocations, and it can be wearisome. And then you get maybe one to three hours a week here, depending on whether or not you come to Sunday school or midweek services. It's not an ideal ratio.

And this is why every Sunday morning service will always proclaim to you the forgiveness of sins. We will also consider how God desires for us to live. But to withhold forgiveness or to replace it with something else that seems more "relevant" would be to steal your Sabbath rest from you. We need this rest for our souls. And this concept of spiritual rest is why Luther was absolutely right to interpret the Third Commandment as being about worship. Christian worship is God serving us his gifts so that we might have rest in Jesus' finished work on the cross.

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And this is the part where I have to tell you that skipping church is a sin. And I know; if you're sick or if the weather is bad, sometimes it's wise to stay home. I'm not talking about that. But when you think the preacher is boring or repetitive—which he is sometimes—when you think you've heard everything he has to say or when you just want to do something else, skipping church is a sin. So when you have to be out of town, find a faithful church to visit. If you need help, ask me. I would be thrilled to help you find a church to visit. But just skipping it altogether is a sin.

The commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." We do this when we "regard [God's Word and the preaching of it] as holy and gladly hear and learn it." To despise or neglect this is a sin against the Third Commandment. God prohibits this despising, because he wants to protect the gift of his rest to us. So please don't think of this as a burdensome commandment. It's not supposed to be, and if I give you that impression, I have failed. This is a joyful and restful commandment. God prohibits neglecting the Sabbath simply because he desires to protect his gift of eternal rest, which we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus Christ has earned this rest for you by doing the dirty and grueling work of suffering and dying on your behalf. Our sins, which are many, are forgiven for his sake. And he has risen from the dead, opening this heavenly rest to us and demonstrating his power to raise us from the dead. So God the Father will welcome you into his eternal rest. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.