

The Ten Commandments and the Christian

When Jesus warns us in the Gospel for today not to be covetous, He reminds us about God's commandments. One of our problems is that the commandments sound bookish or pedantic to us. As remember that we are forgiven sinners, they really should not sound pedantic to us, but they do. We treat them as though they are childish, because we have not taken a serious look at them since confirmation class. Like Pharisees and Pietists and Pentecostals we feel as if we have graduated from them and moved on to bigger and better things.

The Ten Commandments are good. They are right, and are the best things we can do. They are important, and they matter. They can bring those who heed them blessings in this life, prosperity and long life. They offer these blessings to the redeemed people of God, including you and me.

Periodically people in the church try to get rid of the third use of the Law for the sanctified life, as though the Ten Commandments should be shunned and avoided, and some try to dispense with the subject of sanctification altogether. However, if you took out the sections from Paul's epistles that talk about sanctification, they would be only half as thick.

We usually lump all the commandments into the one word "Law", and then we say, "I don't like Law. I want only the Gospel." The result is that we never get around to looking at what the Ten Commandments actually say. In doing so we show that we are - confused about both Law and Gospel.

God gave the Ten Commandments in the context of grace. God had already chosen Israel as His special possession. When He spoke them, He reminded the Israelites that He had brought them out of Egypt. He had already given them the land of Canaan. Immediately afterwards, He gave them instructions about building an altar to maintain their fellowship with Himself through forgiveness, and peace offerings were intended to keep them enjoying that fellowship. When God forgave the people for making the golden calf, He showed Himself to Moses as "the Lord merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

This is the God who, with all the forcefulness that the people could endure, spoke the Ten Commandments in fire, smoke, and earthquake. This is what He wants. What goes on in the life of His redeemed people before they get to heaven does matter to Him. It is important enough for Him to name specifics, ten specifics, and important enough for Him to roar them. They were important enough be accompanied with many more specifics, even though it was assumed that the Promised Land already belonged to them.

It is the holiness, beauty, and importance of the Ten Commandments that make our sins against them so grievous. The more we see that the commandments are holy, good, just, and right, the more we see how horribly we have failed in them. When we confess our sins, we are not saying that we have a problem with what God wants in His commandments. We are saying that the problem is entirely with what God wants in His commandments. The Small Catechism says, "We can examine our everyday life according to the Ten Commandments." There is no question about who is right and who is wrong when we compare ourselves with them. Each believer should examine himself, not according to some general idea of "Law", but according to each specific one of the Ten Commandments.

Violations of the Ten Commandments are a terrible thing. It was a problem so acute that God assembled all the forces of heaven and earth to cure the problem. It took the Son of God Himself to live the holy, beautiful, righteous life that we could not live, as He did the will of His Father. It took the Son of God Himself to pour out His life's blood on the cross, a terrible price for a beautiful righteousness.

Living in the forgiveness that He has won on the cross, what, then, shall we do? We see the answer in what happened after God gave the commandments. The same question was asked when, much to Moses' surprise, God forgave the people for making the golden calf: What was God's response? "Cut two tablets just like the first ones!" If the commandments were good and right when they were first given, they were good and right for the people again.

As God first gave the commandments at Sinai to the redeemed people of God, He gives them, minus the parts meant for Israel only, to the redeemed people today. They still count in the everyday life of God's people today. Remember how Luther wrote a "Table of Duties", which applies God's commandments to people in their various walks of life. Love is rejoicing in what is right, and love is fulfilling the Ten Commandments.

Of course, living under the grace of God as we do, we know that keeping the commandments does not count for our salvation. It never did. As Israel had the Promised Land marked down for them long before God gave them the commandments, we have been elected to eternal life long before we even had a chance to keep or break the commandments. By the grace of God, the safety of our own necks is never in question. That means that, in thanksgiving to God, we can pay all our attention to *Him*. We pay attention to Him by paying attention to

what He wants. And what He wants is the Ten Commandments. In short, it is precisely because the commandments do *not* count for our salvation that they *do* count in our hearts, as God's redeemed.

People who think they can advance to better Christian living by leaving the Commandments far behind them have a way of violating the very fundamentals of the commandments. For example, a stewardship program may wind up lacking any of the common decency that the commandments require. Or, as much as we love our liturgy, we have to beware of rigidly insisting on bowing and kneeling in the proper way and at the proper time, and all the while not giving two hoots about what the redeemed do with their bodies from Monday through to Saturday. We have to avoid creating for people so many things to attend in the church that are not commanded by God that we drag them away from caring for their families, something that God *has* plainly commanded.

In the confession of sins and the reception of forgiveness, we realise that the Ten Commandments are bookish or pedantic only for those who are immature, like children. Instead, we continue to pray and sing, as the redeemed children of God:

Make me to walk in Thy commands
'Tis a delightful road
Nor let my head, or heart, or hands,
offend against my God.

[Adapted from "A Chapel Sermon on Exodus 20: 1-17" by Or James Bollhagen, Associate Professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* Vol161, no. 3, July 1997, 197-200.]