

One of the greatest truths Luther recovered in his work in the Reformation was the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. That is, in the Scriptures, we hear two chief teachings: the Law, which tells us what God requires of us, and the Gospel, which tells us what God has done for us in Christ to save us. That's the message of the Christian faith at its most simple.

Yet distinguishing between the two isn't always simple. In our reading this morning from Luke's Gospel, we hear Jesus giving a lot of commands. Be merciful. Judge not. Condemn not. Forgive. Give. Now wouldn't things like these commands be Law, telling us what God requires of us? But didn't Jesus come to save us from the Law's accusations? Why is Jesus giving more rules here?

This section of Scripture, and others like it, are often misunderstood. If taken wrongly, people can stray from the truth and comfort of the Christian faith and crash into the ditch on either side, so to speak. We need to understand what Christ says here clearly, that we might not crash but rather be kept on the true path and given comfort by our Lord's words.

So I spoke of two ditches, two ways of misunderstanding this text. The first ditch that people often crash into can be called antinomianism. It's a big word which means thinking you can do whatever you want.

This error comes from focusing on two little words in this reading and ignoring just about everything else. "Judge not." Of all the passages of Scripture that get pulled out of context and twisted, this one might take the cake.

It's often the response to someone being confronted with his sin, pulled out as a seemingly bulletproof justification. "Judge not!" "Who are you to judge?" "Only God can judge me!" Plenty of variations exist, but all with the same meaning: "I'm going to do whatever I want, live however I want, believe whatever I want, and you can't say anything against it!"

As much as our sinful flesh might want this to be true, the problem with this antinomianism and its refusal to accept judgment is that it would require throwing out the rest of the Bible. As just a few examples:

Proverbs tells us, "Open you mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

God charges Christians, especially pastors, with His words spoken through the prophet Ezekiel: "If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand."

Isaiah denounces the "judge-not" approach to sin, saying, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness."

We see judgment in the Epistles, where Paul and Peter and John denounce those who openly sin against God and His word.

Christ Himself says in John 7, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

Consider even this morning's text itself. Jesus doesn't tell us to leave specks in our brother's eye, because who are we to judge what belongs in an eye socket. No, we are to help our brother, and do so in humility, not hypocrisy.

So this twisting of Jesus' words, hearing "Judge not" and plugging one's ears to everything else in God's word, is a false teaching that pulls people off the path of salvation. If we are never to speak against sin, then there's no explanation for why anyone would need forgiveness, and if there's no need for forgiveness, then Christ's death was pointless.

The second ditch comes from a different, yet equally flawed approach to the text. We could call this ditch legalism, making Christianity all about perfectly keeping rules and not so much about faith in Jesus.

Here, people read those commands of Jesus and try to be faithful to the words and do exactly as they are told. They strive to not judge, not condemn, forgive, and give. The problem arises, not with this seeking to keep Jesus' words, but the heart, the intentions behind the actions.

These commands become a checklist to mark off, a series of hoops to jump through, in order to earn God's love and favor.

If this is how Jesus' words are to be taken, then He goes from being a loving God to an angry, oppressive one. This list becomes an impossible task set before us.

No one but Christ Himself has made it through life without judging someone hypocritically or condemning another. Every person at one point or another has failed to forgive his repentant brother or not given to his sister who was in need.

And Jesus doesn't say "Try not to judge," or "Give more often than not." No, His words here, like the Ten Commandments, are absolutes. Judge not, period. Give, period.

Confronted with absolutes, a person who tries to keep them by his own efforts will fall into one of two errors. Either he'll become a hypocrite, figuring that as long as he's condemning less and giving more than the next guy he's okay, or he'll fall into despair and think that God must hate him for giving him such an impossible task.

This can be made even worse if he's looking for an overflowing measure of earthly blessing with never comes, leading him to think that God doesn't want to bless him. Through hypocrisy and despair, legalism pulls people off the path of salvation and into the ditches of unbelief, like the antinomianism before.

So, if we can't keep these commands perfectly, and we can't just ignore them, what are we supposed to do? What's the key to understanding these commands of Jesus? It's actually one which Jesus gives to us at the beginning of our text: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

This is a command, but more than that, it's a guide, telling us to look at all these words of Jesus through the lens of divine mercy. Jesus tells His disciples to do what He says in light of the ways in which their Father in heaven has been merciful. This mercy of God shown to us and given to us as His children keeps us out of both ditches when it comes to hearing His commands.

So, how has our Father been merciful? First, He has had compassion on us in our sinful, fallen state. He knows better than we do ourselves just how incapable we are of keeping His Commandments. He understands our weakness. And He also understands the suffering which our sins have brought upon us. He sees our tears, feels our pain.

He doesn't remain aloof in heaven, scowling at us unworthy creatures and demanding that we just try harder. No, He loves us and forgives us. He sent His only Son to rescue us from our lost condition.

No matter how many times we fall into sin, He is willing to forgive us. This great, unending compassion acts as a fence to keep us out of the ditch of legalism, and the hypocrisy and despair which follow.

Our Lord knows that we will sin against Him, and He continues to forgive us, to give us grace and mercy. For the sake of Jesus, He does not judge and condemn us eternally, but instead clothes us with His Son's righteousness.

The Lord's mercy also acts as a fence to keep us out of the ditch of antinomianism. Mercy doesn't mean that the Lord lets us do whatever we want. It would not be merciful to watch blind people wandering toward a pit and think, "Well, I better not judge their path." Warning them and even pulling them away from the pit would be the merciful thing to do.

In mercy, God acts to save. The Father's mercy sent His Son to the cross, and in mercy Christ hung there, suffering wrath in our place.

In mercy, the Holy Spirit comes and makes us children of God. In mercy, He makes our hearts and minds to seek after His will. In mercy, He speaks His word to us, teaching us how we are to live as His children, both for our blessing and our brothers'.

It is a merciful thing when our Lord does not leave us in our simple ways but instead works through His Word and Sacrament to train us to be like our teacher, the Lord Jesus.

This mercy is a part of God's very being. And as those who have been begotten of Him by water and the Spirit, this mercy is given to us as His children.

We are not merciful through our own efforts to be like our Father. Rather, we are merciful because our God – the Merciful One – has begotten us as His children and given us His mercy. Being merciful is then nothing other than living out who we are in Christ, being who His word says that we are.

We do not judge from our own hearts and minds, but instead we speak what our Lord has spoken to us in His word. To Him is given judgment, and so we tell the world how He has judged sin and how He seeks to share His mercy with all people.

We do not condemn, thinking that we have the power to send people to hell of our own will. Instead, we speak the truth that those who reject the mercy of Christ will face His righteous condemnation at the Last Day.

We forgive, not grudgingly but freely, remembering how much our Lord has forgiven us.

We give, not out of a desire to get something in return, but because our Lord has poured out His heavenly riches upon us, giving us our daily bread and so much more.

We seek to remove the specks from our brothers' eyes, not to show how great we are, but rather to share the gift of true sight given to us in mercy by the Light of the World Himself. We are always mindful of our own sin, constantly approaching our Lord in confession that He might remove the logs from our own eyes.

Walking this middle path, avoiding the temptations to ignore God's word on the one hand and thinking we can earn God's favor by our own efforts on the other hand, is often a difficult task. Yet we do not walk on this path alone. Our Lord goes with us and before us, mercifully granting us His word and Spirit to guide us throughout our lives. We live as Christians, showing forth to the world the great mercy which our Father has shown and given to us.

In the name of Jesus, amen.