

July 16, 2023

Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; Romans 6:1-11

Have you ever worked on a project for a long time, put in a lot of effort, and then once it's completed, you ask yourself, "What am I going to do now?" Or maybe it was a long-awaited vacation or a celebration that you've been looking forward to, and then it's over, and you wonder, "What now?" Or perhaps retiring from a career that you've been in for a long time. You head home that last day, and start retirement the next, and wonder, "What will I do from here on out?" I'm sure there are plenty of other examples you might think of.

St. Paul asks the question at the beginning of our Epistle reading from Romans chapter 6: "What shall we say then?"

He's not talking about the first day of retirement or looking at a completed home renovation, though. He's talking about something much bigger – being set free from sin and death by God. This question of, "What shall we say then?" or "What do we do now" is something that God's people have wondered throughout the ages. How do we live as Christians?

From His grace and mercy, God gives us an answer to that question – the Law! Today's readings all focus on that idea – God giving His Law to His people. There are plenty of misconceptions about this, but when we understand this rightly, we are given great comfort and peace as the Lord guides us.

It might seem surprising that the Law would give us things like comfort and peace. This is because often, we think of the Law as a bad or harsh thing, especially as contrasted to the Gospel.

The Law kills, the Gospel brings to life. The Law condemns, the Gospel saves. Now it is true that the Law does kill and condemn. The Bible says, "the Law brings wrath."

But this isn't because the Law is itself bad or evil or something. Remember, God gave the Law, so it is good. The issue is that the Law shows us God's holiness, purity, and perfection. Those who would dwell with God in heaven forever must therefore share this holiness, purity, and perfection, as sin cannot remain in God's presence. Otherwise, God would cease to be holy.

We are condemned by the Law not because of the Law, but because we are sinners who break the Law in thought, word, and deed. The Law exposes our sin by holding up God's holiness. It is a mirror in which our sins are revealed. We fall short of its standard – the glory of God.

And this is true of all men. Every single human being who has ever lived, aside from Jesus Christ, is a sinner. Thus the Law condemns all men – not because it is bad, but because we are.

This is where the Gospel comes in. God knows our fallen condition. He knows that we are unable to save ourselves, to do any good apart from Him. And so He comes, purely out of His grace and mercy, and dies for us on the cross.

He lives a perfect life, satisfying all the Law's requirements. And He dies a sacrificial death, paying the penalty for our sins. His blood is the price paid to ransom us from the powers of sin and death.

Working through Baptism, He brings us out from this old life into a new one. Our old self is put to death in the font and a new man emerges, joined to Christ and His eternal life. Again, it's nothing we do; it's all what He does for us. That's the Gospel.

That is then the point at which St. Paul asks the question: "What shall we say then?" Having been redeemed by Christ, set free from our captivity to death, what should we do now? This is where the Lord directs us to His Law, not to condemn us again, but to give us direction in this new life.

It's a similar situation to when He first gave the Ten Commandments – our Old Testament reading. The Lord God had saved His people Israel, crushing their captors beneath His might and then washing away Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. The people now stood outside the land of Egypt for the first time in over 400 years. What should they do now?

It's in this context that they are brought to the foot of Mount Sinai and the Lord descends in glory to speak with Moses and give the Law to His people. He didn't give it to them beforehand, and say that if they kept it that then He would deliver them from Egypt. No, He saved them because He had promised to do so, because He had chosen them out of love.

The Lord had promised to lead them to the land He had sworn to their father Abraham, and He was certainly going to do that. But how should they live on the way? How should they reflect the true God to the nations around them?

We Christians are God's chosen people, the new Israel of God. He has saved us purely out of His grace and mercy, and He has promised to lead us to the heavenly home He has promised to our fathers as well. How shall we walk in newness of life, as Paul writes in our Epistle? What shall instruct us along the way? The Law!

As God's people, the Law has several purposes for us. Firstly, it serves to restrain the sinful inclinations that we still possess. It's true that God has redeemed us, made us His own, given us new life in our Baptisms.

But the old sinful flesh still clings to us. We still struggle with temptation and evil desires, and we'll continue to do so until the day we go to be with the Lord. Look at the Old Testament people of Israel. They've been saved by God's mighty power, set free from slavery, and what's one of the first things they do? While Moses is up on the mountain, the people get Aaron to make them an idol – the Golden Calf – and then they proceed to worship it and celebrate in impure, sinful ways.

Or look at the question as Paul asks it in our Epistle: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" The reason he asks this is because it's a very real temptation for us to think that, because our sins are forgiven in Jesus, we can just do whatever we want. We think that, "I'm baptized. Jesus has paid for my sins. So it doesn't matter if I sin because it's forgiven too, right?"

The Christian faith becomes seen as a series of hoops to jump through, and if you've jumped through the right ones, then you can do whatever you please.

Against this, the Law reminds us that sin is still sin, and God still despises sin. If we refuse to follow Him and instead seek our own way, then we will face His judgment. The people of Israel were delivered from Egypt, and God was leading them to the Promised Land, but those who rejected Him and grumbled against Him, or worshiped idols of other nations, or just refused to enter into the land were judged.

The Scriptures specifically warn us against following their example, such as where we are told of the Israelites, "For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did."

The Law warns us against evil, that we might seek to resist temptation, to put our sinful desires to death every day.

Yet the Law isn't given only for us Christians to know what not to do. Another reason it was given was that we might know what is good and right for us to do. As our Epistle says, we are buried with Christ in Baptism that we might walk with Him in newness of life.

God puts His name on us in Baptism, marks us as His own, and sends His Spirit to dwell in our hearts. We then reflect God and His goodness to the world. And the Law, such as the Ten Commandments, shows us how to do this, as it shows us the holiness and goodness of God.

Let's take a few of those Commandments as examples. The First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. In this Commandment, God is simply stating reality: there are no other gods – only Him. Anything else people might look to for their good is false hope, an empty shadow.

As Christians, we keep this Commandment when we don't put our trust in other things or people, but trust in God alone. Because we fear and love the Lord above all things, we don't need to fear the things of this life, be they corrupt governments or economic uncertainty or problems with health and disease or what other people think of us or anything. God gives us great peace when He leads us to believe what He says in this Commandment.

And as we live out this Commandment, others see the peace that we have, the joy that we can have even in the face of worldly problems, and they may then seek this peace, giving us the opportunity to share the Gospel with them.

The Fourth Commandment: Honor your father and your mother. God is our Father, the Lord who has authority over us, who loves us, who provides for us, who teaches us, who disciplines us, who protects us.

He gives us earthly fathers and mothers who then are to do these things in His stead, exercising their authority over their family for these purposes. The Lord also grants authority to others, such as the government He has given to us, to keep peace and order, that the Church may grow in a stable society. These earthly authorities are not perfect, but they are still instituted by God, and so we show them the honor due their station, for by honoring them we honor God.

And God blesses this, attaching a promise to this Commandment: “that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” A society where children honor their parents, where parents strive to reflect the Lord to their children, where the people seek to live in peace under their government, where the rulers hold their station in humility, this is a society where days may be long and peaceful, rather than cut short by conflict or strife. And it’s a society that will be attractive to all people – as peace is a desirable thing – again providing opportunities to witness to Christ.

One more, The Sixth Commandment: You shall not commit adultery. This Commandment concerns love and faithfulness. God is the one who loves perfectly, sacrificially. He is always faithful, even when His people are faithless. All that He does is not for Himself, but for the sake of His bride, the Church, “so that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish,” as we read in Ephesians.

Christians reflect this when they live in relationships that reflect this love. Jesus doesn’t just use the Church to make Himself happy while refusing to commit to her, but rather He died for her, suffering the wrath of hell for her sake. Thus Christians don’t live together or sleep together outside marriage, regardless of their age, because to do so would be to give a witness opposite that of how Christ loves us.

We choose spouses in holiness and honor, seeking things of eternal importance rather than superficial worldly pleasures, that our relationships might show the world the love that Christ has for His Church. We submit to His will, trusting that His will for us is better than whatever ideas we might have. When we sin against God and against our spouses, we ask for forgiveness, and when we are sinned against, we forgive, as Christ forgives us over and over again.

Relationships that are grounded in Christ, centered around His Word, and reflect His love create stable families, and as we said concerning the Fourth Commandment, this gives the Church stability to grow and also provides great opportunities for witness to the world.

With each of the Commandments, God reveals part of His holiness and His divine character. We who are joined to Him by our Baptisms then seek to show forth this splendor to the world by living in accord with these Commandments. We don’t earn our salvation through that; it’s Jesus and only Jesus who saves us. But as He said, He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. He tells us, “whoever does [the Commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

As we reflect on the great gift He has given to us through His precious blood, and as we seek to share that love with the world, the Commandments serve as our guide. Being made the children of the Most High God, led out of slavery to sin and death on our way to the Promised Land of heaven, we ask, “What now?” Our answer begins, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.