

Our Gospel lesson today recounts one of the many times the Pharisees go after Jesus, trying to trap Him with bad arguments and self-centered attitudes toward God's Word. In this particular account, the issue at hand is actually one with which we as Lutherans are quite familiar: the proper distinction of Law and Gospel. This is the teaching that the Scriptures' message has two key parts: the Law, which tells us what God requires of us, and the Gospel, which tells us what God has done for us in Christ.

Now, this isn't some Lutheran invention, but a teaching that the Christian Church has recognized throughout its existence. Luther just happened to be one of those men whom God used to bring this truth back to light after it had been obscured by many years of false teaching. Luther and others brought this teaching back to light, not through their own thoughts and opinions, but by pointing back to the font of truth: God's Word.

As the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to grow our understanding of Law and Gospel, our faith is strengthened, our confidence in Christ grown, and our ability to live a Christian life increased.

The question that the Pharisees put to Jesus deals with a right understanding of the Law: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Now, the Pharisees aren't actually seeking a right understanding. We're told that this particular question was asked specifically to put Jesus to the test.

The Pharisees are probably hoping for something like getting Jesus to pick one of the Ten Commandments and then ask Him who He thinks He is to put that Commandment above one of the other nine.

Yet Jesus is the God who gave the Law and the Commandments in the first place, and no dishonest questioning will be able to trap Him. Rather than picking one of the Ten, Jesus goes to Deuteronomy 6 and recites for these Pharisees the words given through Moses: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." As Jesus points out, "this is the great and first commandment."

Why is it the great commandment? Because it deals with God, the greatest being in existence. Why is it the first commandment, the one before all others? Because it deals with the God who is first, who is before all things.

God is the creator of everything and everyone who exists. It is God's will that upholds the universe. Every good thing, especially including love, is a gift from His hand. Apart from God, there is nothing. And so to God belong our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our love.

This truth has a second, logical result, which Jesus points out: "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If you love God, then you will also love those things which He loves.

We see this even in our human relationships. If say, you're in love with a particular woman, and it just so happens that she and her family love sauerkraut, then you'll try eating it too, because you

love her. And the more you're with her, and the more you eat sauerkraut with her, you may very well start to love sauerkraut too!

Whatever example you may think of, the fact is that your love for another will change you; it will bring you to be more like the person you love. This is true especially with the divine love given to you by God. When you love God, you'll love the things – and the people – that He loves.

And who does God love? He loves you... and He loves your neighbor. God loves all people perfectly, none more or less, showing no partiality. So to love God must necessarily include loving one's neighbor.

Love God. Love neighbor. There are two keys of the Law. And if it stopped there, then maybe we and the Pharisees would be okay. But there's a third key of the Law in the Scripture passage Jesus quotes. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

All. Not "most of." Not "usually." Not "a majority of." All your heart, soul, and mind; everything you are.

The Law cannot be fulfilled by just jumping through hoops or checking off boxes. Outward obedience doesn't cut it. Following the Law must come from a complete desire of the heart, soul, and mind.

There isn't part of your life that's for "God stuff" and then the rest is for your own desires. Even your love for important things like your family, your friends, your own well-being must flow from your love for God. If it doesn't, then those things, those people, are idols.

Now perhaps this all seems like an unreasonable demand, a standard that is too high. If so, remember that God gives the Law to show His righteousness, His holiness, and so the standard is the standard He is held to, so to speak. God loves perfectly, and so in the Law God requires that you love perfectly, too. For God to require anything less would be God hiding His holiness, obscuring His justice.

And so the Law: love God, love your neighbor, love perfectly. Love as God loves. Sound hard? For sinners like you and me, it's impossible.

Confronted with such Law, the perfection of God Himself, you can do two things. You can take the path of the Pharisees and try to justify yourself by arguing over which commandment is greatest and throwing in a bunch of man-made additions to the Law and trying to prove you're more righteous than the guy next to you. But all that will fail, miserably.

Take it from the words of St. Paul, who prior to His conversion was the Pharisee of Pharisees, the Law-expert of Law-experts, the commandment-keeper par excellence. He describes his efforts to fulfill the Law as rubbish, filth, garbage. Through Paul's writings, the Holy Spirit declares, "for by works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight."

The Law condemns us, because it points out that on our own, we cannot be righteous, that we cannot love as God loves.

But God doesn't leave us in this condemnation. He loves us too much for that. And so in addition to the Law, He also gives us the Gospel.

He even extends this to those Pharisees who are trying to ensnare and destroy Him. They are busy squabbling over which commandment is the greatest, and He asks them, "What do you think about the Christ?" He directs their attention away from the Law's demands and toward the promises of God in the Scriptures.

The idea of "Christ" isn't a new thing, a concept Jesus invented in His earthly ministry. No, this promised Savior, or "anointed one" – "Messiah" in Hebrew, "Christ" in Greek – goes clear back, even to the first chapters of Genesis.

On the day of the fall into sin, when Adam and Eve chose to listen to Satan and bring death into the world, God promised that He would send the seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head and restore humanity.

God promised Abraham that, through his seed, his descendant, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

God promised through the prophet Isaiah that His Servant would come and pay the penalty for mankind's sin.

God's people had the Law to tell them how they were to live and reflect God's love to the nations, but even in the Old Testament their hope was never to be in the Law. The hope was always to be in the promise of God to come as the Messiah, the Christ, and deliver them.

Their hope, and our hope, is in this promise: the Gospel. Salvation comes through that promised Christ, Jesus. He is David's son, descended from the king just as promised through the prophets.

He has our flesh, our blood. He endured our temptations, felt our sorrows, suffered our pain. As a man, He was under the Law's demands and obligations. And as a man, He fulfilled these demands, perfectly. He was completely without sin, the only righteous person to ever live.

Yet He wasn't just a man, just an example for us to follow, just a teacher of good moral truths. As Jesus Himself pointed out, He wasn't just David's son. No, He is also David's Lord, the One who was before David, the One who knit David together in his mother's womb. The Christ, Jesus, is both man and God.

The Pharisees obviously don't realize it, but the man whom they are trying to ensnare is the Lord of all, the Almighty God who spoke through the prophets and first gave the Law. The One who hung on the cross is the King of the Jews and also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Because God died on the cross for you, you are able to be given His life. No man can make atonement for another man's life. His life is one worth one life, even if it's perfect. But the life of Jesus, the life of God, given up on the cross, is of infinite worth. His blood, the blood of God, washes away all your transgressions of the Law.

Because Jesus loved His Father with all His heart, soul, and mind, and because He loved you as Himself, even loving you to the point of death, you are not condemned by the Law. In Jesus, you receive that perfect, eternal life and love of God.

Because you have been joined to Jesus in your Baptism and His Spirit dwells in your heart, you are free to delight in that Law of God. You don't have to worry about earning salvation through the Law, as Jesus has already earned it for you. That's the Gospel message. God loves you and has made you His people through faith, and now through His Law guides you in this life.

Note that Jesus doesn't throw out the Law or say that, because of the Christ, the Law doesn't matter. No, He tells us that we are made God's people through faith in Him, and as God's people we can seek to live out the Law without fear. You can see the Commandments as ways in which God both shows you His holiness, and then through you shows His holiness to the world.

And you can face that world in the confidence and comfort of the Gospel. You have been redeemed by the Christ, David's son and David's Lord. Jesus Christ is ruling and reigning over all things, guiding the world of the sake of His Church. His enemies, even death itself, lie beneath His feet. You have His promises, in His Word, that He will sustain you to the end, guiltless in His great and glorious day.

In the name of Jesus, amen.