

Sermon — 07/17/22

Text — Luke 18:13b

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to raise his eyes toward heaven, but was beating his chest, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

Theme — “Who Am I?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As some of you may know, I was a philosophy major in college. I can still remember my dad (ever the practical one) asking me, when I told him of my decision: “And what are you gonna do with THAT?” Well, one of the biggest questions that philosophy has tried to answer down through the ages is just what is man? Or, put more personally, “Who am I?” So, it should come as no surprise to learn that this same question pops up in the Bible. The problem is, the answer it gives is NOT one that we really like to hear (although we NEED to hear it).

Man was created by God for a purpose. And it is a seeking after that purpose which causes us to ask the question of “*Who am I?*” Well, God answers that question — that is, He tells us our intended purpose — in His Law. In the beginning, before sin entered into the world, that Law consisted of caring for God’s earthly creation and not eating of just one tree in the Garden. Humans were made to be God’s children. To rule and have dominion as His agents. To receive and share His love. By not eating of that one tree, by their reflecting their Father’s sacrificial love toward creation (and each other), they were the people God made them to be. But, as we all know, Adam and Eve proved unable to follow that Law. They ate of the forbidden fruit and they threw all of creation into ruin and decay and death.

After that sin, God came to them with the promise of forgiveness in the coming Savior. He reassured Adam and Eve of His continued love. And He gave them and their descendants the Law

written on the heart. That is, conscience and an inborn basic understanding of right and wrong. Hundreds — even thousands — of years later, God codified that Law in the Ten Commandments and the laws given to Israel. Hundreds — even thousands — of years after that, Jesus summarized the Law in just two parts: love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself.

In that natural Law written upon the heart, in the Ten Commandments, in Christ's summary we see who we are to be. We see God's purpose for us. God's expectations and requirements. Do THIS, the Law says. Do this and you will live. Do this and God will be happy with you. Do this and you will be what God made you to be. And so, today, we continue our look at the catechism by seeing what the Law says to us. And how we measure up. (pause)

The first use/function/purpose of the Law is to restrain evil. It is given so that Satan may not run amok amongst us: killing, raping, stealing, destroying everything in sight. Imagine what life would be like if we did not have God's Law. It is the basis for ALL human laws (even though sometimes that is hard to see). So, the Fifth Commandment tells us not to kill; in the same way, so does human law. The Sixth Commandment forbids adultery, to safeguard marriage and family; thus, governments throughout history have striven to do the same (though our own culture seems to be throwing it away). The Seventh Commandment protects against theft and fraud and deceitful business practices. And so on. The bottom line is that God's Law makes life possible. Without it, evil would rule. **Satan** would rule. But the Law restrains and chains and hinders him somewhat. What a blessing and gift the Law is! If for this reason only we had the Law, we still ought to thank and praise God. (pause)

The Second Use of the Law is certainly the most important, for it has **eternal** consequences: the Law shows us our sin. Now, nobody really likes to hear it but we need to listen to the Law tell us that. In the Law God says: "Do this" and "Don't do that". He tells us we MUST be perfect, in our **every** thought/word/deed. All the time. But we are not. The Law screams to us that we are sinners. It pokes

its finger in our chest and says: **you** deserve hell. It totally destroys our illusions of goodness and merit. It makes us see the truth; it rubs our faces in our sin; it condemns us as Satan's own. And it does not lie. Like the tax collector of our text, the Law forces us to see ourselves as — not just “a” sinner — but “THE sinner”. The worst sinner. The one who, above all others, deserves condemnation.

But all that is necessary, to prepare the way for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Until we see just how wicked we are, we do not – and cannot – see our need for a Savior. Until we recognize that we have NO hope on our own, we will not cling to Christ as our only Way to heaven. But once the Law HAS done its job in this Second Use — that is, when it has forced us to see our sin and its consequences — then we need to hear the Gospel. And **only** the Gospel. Only what Jesus has done for us. Only how He has kept those commandments for us; only how He has died our death and suffered our hell on the cross, paying OUR debt for us.

And so, St. John writes:

My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. But if anyone **does** sin, we have an Advocate with the Father: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And **He** is the propitiation for our sins...

John's point here is this: the Law and Commandments forbid us from sin. They try to restrain us from sinning (for apart from Christ, we too are controlled by the devil). But still we sin. That the Law cannot stop, even though it tries. But when we sin, we **still** have hope because Jesus is our Advocate; that is, He is the One who stands up for us, who argues for us, who intercedes for us with the Father. Showing Him His hands and feet, the spear wounds in His side, the marks of the scourging on His back, Christ takes our part, saying: “I have suffered all for their sin. I have obeyed everything for them. Father, forgive them.” And He does. (pause)

Now, we come to the third use of the Law: that of a “guide” or “rule”. Thus far we have seen that God has protected you in this fallen world by the Law. Even more, He has driven you to the Gospel

(and your Savior, Jesus Christ) as the Law forced you to see, and confess, your sin. You have been forgiven all, simply by faith in Jesus' life/death/resurrection. You have been washed clean of all your guilt. You have been restored to your rightful place as God's child. You have the promise of heaven and eternal life with your Father. So, how do you show your gratitude for those eternal, incredible, undeserved gifts of His love? How do you live as God's heir? How do you live in the way that God intends you to live? Well, the Law – the Commandments – show you the way.

St. John writes:

By this we know that we know Him: if we keep His commandments. He that says "I know Him" but does NOT keep His commandments is a liar, and the Truth is not in him.

What John is getting at here is that, as Christians, we now WANT to follow the commandments. We know that God has given them to us for our good. We see them as a **blessing** and not as an obstacle, not a burden, not God trying to take our "fun" away. No, they keep order in this world – and so, by following them, we make life better for our neighbor. How much better would life be if everyone obeyed the commandments? Crime would be gone. Trust and honor restored. Care and compassion shown. So, as Christians, we see the commandments as a mark of God's love for us and others.

Now, obviously, even as Christians we fail to perfectly follow the commandments' guidance. We still have sinful thoughts. We still hurt others by our words. We still show a lack of love by our actions. But the bottom line is that we WANT to keep the commandments. That is, a Christian does not ever desire to sin, does not intend to sin, does not plan to sin. So, when John says that if a person claims to be a Christian but then willfully/intentionally/proudly sins there is a disconnect.

St. John says that if such happens that person does not really know God, for he has rejected God's Law. John says that person is a "liar" – bringing to mind Jesus' words that Satan is a liar from the beginning and the father of all lies. And when St. John says that person does not have the Truth in him,

remember that it is in John's Gospel where Jesus tells us that He is the Truth – and so St. John is really saying that person does not have Jesus. In short, we are being told that to intentionally and willfully reject God's Law is to reject the Gospel too. Now, that's a pretty sobering warning! But as Christians we truly delight in the Law -- just as we delight in the Gospel -- for both come from God and are given for our good. (pause)

Ultimately, for us in the Church, everything needs to be tied back to Jesus. And that includes the Law. So, how *does* the Law – how do these three uses/functions/purposes – bring us back to Jesus? Well, think about this: the first use, we said, was to restrain evil. And isn't that precisely why Jesus came? To restrain evil. To plunder Satan (to use Jesus' own words). To conquer sin and death and hell. To give peace. To enable life, eternal life.

Adam and Eve sinned; the world around us sins; WE sin. Satan has stolen away God's good creation and, in the process, has unleashed evil everywhere. But Jesus has come to be our Savior – He who gave the Law AND He who keeps it for us – and in so doing, He has chained Satan again.

So, when the Law confronts us daily with our failures and sins – its second function – we know the answer to its accusations and condemnations: Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus. Yes, I am a great and terrible sinner. But Jesus is an even greater Savior. All sin has been forgiven by His sacrifice of the cross. His obedience and righteousness are credited to us, by faith. All has been done for me – and you – by our Lord Jesus. No more does the Law have the last word; the Gospel does — Christ does.

And that third function of the Law – that of a rule or guide – is fulfilled as Christ lives in, and through, us. As believers, we are joined and connected to Him. He is the Head, we His members. As He leads, so we follow. We rejoice to be His hands, His feet, His mouth – to speak and do for Him. By living as Christians, we show forth Christ to the world. We are the people God made us to be, His

children and image in this world. So, it really IS all about Jesus. Even the Law and commandments.

Thanks be to God! (pause)

So, the Law does indeed answer the question of “*Who am I?*” In the light of the Law, we say: I am a sinner. Indeed, I am THE sinner (to echo the tax collector) or “the chief of sinners” (to quote St. Paul). But more than that, under the Gospel’s grace we now say: I am a FORGIVEN sinner. Forgiven everything in the blood of Christ Jesus, shed for me. And now, as that forgiven sinner, I am one who strives to be the person God intends me to be. Showing forth His love to those around me, by my words and deeds. Not that I am perfect in such — for, to my great shame and sorrow, I still sin daily and much. But as God’s forgiven child, I will do all I can — by the Spirit’s guidance and power — to be the person God wants. And, thanks be to God, He has given us the Law which shows us the way to do just that. In our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Wed — Nicene Creed

OS — Nicene Creed

FE — Offertory/Prayers