

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In the midst of the Ten Commandments, God said, *“I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments”* (Ex. 20:5-6, NIV).

Luther calls that “The Close of the Commandments” in the Small Catechism, but God speaks it right after giving the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods.” He goes on to explain: “God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.”

Yes, there is demand in the First Commandment ... “You shall ...”, “We should ....” Yes, there are threats in the Close of the Commandments ... “God threatens to punish ....” But for Luther, beyond the demands and threats, there is the call to faith, to believe, to trust: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” “Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him.” This is His eternal covenant, *“the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations”* (Ps. 105:8).

God told Adam, *“in the day that you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die.”* God was faithful to His word when Adam ate, for Adam died, and so have all who have followed Adam, being born in his likeness, after his image (Gen. 5:3). But it’s not what God wanted; this work of condemnation and death is called God’s alien work. Remember, *“the LORD [our] God, ... is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2:13). He does not desire to condemn; He does not desire our death — *“I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD”* (Eze. 18:32).

He wants us to live: *“turn, and live,”* He says (Eze. 18:32); *“Return to the LORD your God”* (Joel 2:13). These are calls to repentance and faith. He desires to save. *“God our Savior ... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim. 2:4). Grace and mercy, forgiveness and life, these are God’s proper work.

Surely, His desire to save is clear from the moments following Adam’s sin. *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”* (Gen. 3:15). And surely, God kept this word of promise, too, as He sent His own Son down from heaven, to be born of woman, to do battle with the ancient serpent in the wilderness, to be bruised in His heel by the cross, but crushing the head of the serpent by it, and defeating sin and death.

As Jesus Himself proclaims to us in the Gospel: He was not sent *“into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* It was not God’s alien work that Jesus came to do, but His proper work. He came not that we might perish, but that we might have eternal life.

Of course, it would cost Him dearly. He would have to offer His own life up unto death, an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. He would have to do it by being lifted up on a pole, like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Back then, the people looked on the bronze serpent, and were saved from the fiery serpents that were biting and killing them. They looked on it and lived. For us now, we look to God’s Son Jesus, similarly lifted up ... lifted up on a cross, to save us and give us eternal life.

But not everyone is saved; some indeed are condemned. Our Gospel stops one verse too soon. Jesus goes on to tell us who are and who are not condemned. And it has nothing to do with for whom Jesus came or for whom Jesus died, for we know that *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,”* Jesus Christ; and we know that *“Jesus Christ the righteous ... is the [atoning sacrifice] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:1-2). The atonement is not limited as our Reformed brethren claim. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God sacrificed bearing the sins of the world (John 1:29).

“How then is a particular person saved?” *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”* (Matt. 19:26). *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”* (Eph. 2:8). Salvation is a gift that comes from God, received by faith. Not only did God give His only Son, but God gives us His grace, and through this grace the Holy Spirit, that we might be given faith and be saved. Thus, Jesus goes on to say in our Gospel: *“Whoever believes in him [in God’s Son] is not condemned.”* Condemnation, on the other hand, is a result of the rejection of God’s grace, a rejection of the Gospel, a rejection of the Holy Spirit: *“whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God”* (John 3:18).

Not that we know God’s ultimate verdict for anyone now. Who knows who will repent and turn back in faith to the Lord? Who knows who will endure in the faith unto the end? That’s why God’s alien work of the law continues to be preached, that His Gospel might be given a hearing. God puts us to death by the law that He might bring us to life by His Gospel; He wounds us that He might heal us (Deut. 32:39); He makes us guilty that He might declare us righteous by faith; He brings us down to hell that He might raise us up to heaven.

This happens by the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins preached, but not only in one way. As Luther wrote: “God is superabundantly generous in His grace” (SA,

III, IV). It also comes by the waters of Holy Baptism about which Jesus instructs Nicodemus and us today. By these waters God drowns and kills, as St. Paul writes, but He also raises up to newness of life. *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Rom. 6:3-5).

Yes, we who were born dead in our trespasses and sins are given new life by this sacrament; we are given birth into the kingdom of God by God Himself — begotten from above by these Spirit-filled waters. Young and old alike can take comfort in this application of God’s grace, for neither young nor old have anything to boast about except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Neither the young child like Josiah who dies before he is able to speak nor the old man like James who dies having had his brilliant mind stripped from him and unable any longer to speak ... neither has any reason to boast except in Jesus Christ the crucified, in the grace they were afforded, in faith they were given in Jesus Christ.

Begotten of the Spirit in Holy Baptism and having passed through death, they now have life. The promise is fulfilled for them: *“as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Thanks be to God for giving us His Son our Savior. Thanks be to God for giving us His Spirit, that through Him we might have the same faith to look to God’s Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and hold onto the same promise of eternal life unto the end and be saved.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.