

A Matter of Life or Death

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Introduction

A group of us were talking at a funeral luncheon this week, when one fellow said that he thought snow was a good analogy for people. When regular people get together, they can get along. When he and his wife go to other churches, people love them. It doesn't matter what their denomination is. Then he pointed to me and said, "Then you get guys like this fellow who say, 'If you want to come to my church you gotta believe what I believe.'" I assured him that he was welcome to attend our church, but in order to become a member, he had to accept what we believe. He then went on to say that the Law of God is summed up in these two commands: *Love the Lord your God* and *love your neighbor as yourself*. But we have a gazillion churches all bickering about doctrine, instead of loving each other.

Snow Is Beautiful, but ...

As I drove home through this "lovely" snow, I began to think about our conversation. When I'm driving, this snow doesn't look so lovely. It looks dangerous. It's fine on the trees and fences. But you can't keep it there. It gets on the roads and sidewalks. And there it causes problems. It's slippery and when it piles up, you get stuck. When it melts and refreezes, you get ice, which is even slicker. And if you get snow on top of that, you can't see the ice. Yes, the snow is beautiful. But it's also dangerous and deadly.

Incomplete Thoughts

I also don't think my friend thought through what he had said about the two GREAT COMMANDMENTS (read **Matthew 22:36-40**). When Jesus said that all the **law** and **prophets** depend on these two commandments, he didn't mean they do away with the Law or replace it. All the Law and Prophets work together to show what it **means** to love God and love your neighbor. If we're going to love God and neighbor, we must look to the law and prophets to see how to do it. What does it mean to love God?

Jesus Interprets the Commandments

Jesus doesn't make the 10 COMMANDMENTS any easier. The ***Epitome of the Formula of Concord*** says, *Christ takes the Law into His hands and explains them spiritually*. He does this to help us learn from it correctly. Luther writes in the ***Large Catechism***, concerning the 5TH COMMANDMENT, *Christ Himself ... says that we must not kill, neither with hand, heart, mouth, signs, gestures, help nor counsel*. So, we see that there's more to the law than just the letter. In the ***Small Catechism***, we read what the 5TH COMMANDMENT means: *We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need*. And that's just 1/7 of what it means to love our neighbor.

A New Light

Now that puts a whole new light on our **Old Testament** reading. God's serious about His Law. He tells us today that it's a matter of life or death. If we keep His Law, that means life. If we don't that means death. Now, with Jesus' interpretation, we see that there's so much more to the commandments than the words on the surface. If keeping the 5TH COMMANDMENT meant to just refrain from taking another's life, most of us wouldn't have a problem keeping it. The same is true with the other commandments in the Second Table. But we all have problems with all the commandments when we take them seriously. And good intentions don't cut it. Being 90% successful on a test is good. But not in the Commandments. Anything less than 100% is failing.

It Looks Like Death

Since it's a matter of life or death, it looks like it's death for us. Just saying we love God and others and being "nice" to them doesn't cut it. Keeping the letter of the law doesn't cut it. Being partially successful in keeping the law doesn't cut it. In other words, we just don't cut it. That means death for us.

The Good News

And that's where the church comes in. The church is where we hear about God and His forgiveness. If the church is doing her job, anyway. God knew we would fail at the law. So, He sent His Son to die on the cross of Calvary, taking our place, paying the price of atonement for our sins. He has kept the law for us and died to pay the debt we owed to it. By faith, we receive this forgiveness and life. We believe that He has died for us, rose from the dead and lives for us. The Holy Spirit works this faith in us and keeps working this faith in us to strengthen us throughout this life. He doesn't make us perfect, but He does give us life.

Jesus Keeps the Law for Us

To say that Jesus keeps the law for us, doesn't absolve us from right living. Part of being made alive by the Spirit means that He puts within us a desire to love God. Even though we know we can't keep the law perfectly, now we want to keep it and we strive to live holy lives. But God's grace is there to catch us when we fall.

Means of Grace

Through Word and Sacrament, we receive God's grace of forgiveness and the power to live for Him. When we receive the body and blood of Jesus, we receive forgiveness of sins and our faith is strengthened for the journey. In this matter of life or death, we are given life, even though we deserve death.

*May the peace of God,
Which passes all understanding,
Keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
