

Last week I talked about the relationship of the commandments – the law – to the gospel. We often think of the Old Testament as law and New Testament as gospel.

But the Old Testament starts with gospel, or good news. It all starts with God's creation of a good world. God brings order and beauty out of chaos.

Last week's reading based the commandments – the law – solidly in the gospel...the gospel of freedom. The law flows out of God's first word – I am the Lord your God who led you out of slavery. That's the gospel – the good news...freedom

From there, God says, you start learning to live in that freedom. And here's how.

This first table of the commandments deals with our relationship with God. The remaining commandments address our relationship with others.

Depending on how you number the commandments, this is either the first three or the first four.

Some denominations separate the commandment to have no other gods from the commandment to not make idols, or images. Lutherans typically don't. I don't know that it matters much how you number them, but I generally consider those two together.

The commandments all reenforce each other. So, when we worship only God, we will use God's name for prayer and praise and not for purposes that oppose God. We will want to honor God on our Sabbath.

And then it goes the other way – honoring God on the Sabbath and using God's name for prayer and praise help us stay centered in the one true God.

Before we look at how this works, let's deal with this one sort of troubling verse: you shall not bow down to other gods for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

We believe grace and mercy are God's heart...God is love. But this doesn't sound super loving. Until we remember that God does indeed love...and that love includes people we don't love and people we may harm with our actions.

God is merciful and faithful...but God does deal with evil.

There are errors at both ends of this. Some see only a punishing God. They live in fear that they are somehow displeasing God. They make judgements about who God punishes.

That god tends to create a pretty exclusionary, self-righteous, judgmental faith...the kind of faith that actually hurts people.

And the harm that sort of faith has done to certain groups does carry on from generation to generation...and it hurts both victim and the offender.

At the other end are those who see only a God whose forgiveness means our behavior doesn't matter...a God who demands nothing of us.

They are unable to acknowledge that their behavior has consequences not just for themselves but for their neighbors as well, even for generations to come. That is cheap grace. I think Kevin talked about that last week.

God has given the law to bring back the loving, cooperative, and harmonious world of the beginning. When we live by that law we pass that original blessing on from generation to generation.

When we live opposed to it, we pass the consequences on to future generations – until God finally works in history to break the chain.

So, let's look closer at these first commandments. You shall have no other gods.

Israel has just been freed from Egypt. The Egyptian Pharaohs were considered gods in that culture.

That was a god who enslaved them...a god who reduced their worth to what they could produce.

They lived every moment of every day by how many bricks they could add to whatever Pharaoh had them build.

Now, standing in Sinai, their God has just freed them. Trusting and following the commandments of their God will help them continue to live in freedom.

Trusting a false god will just put them right back into slavery.

We can pretty easily see that with the false gods in our own culture. Honestly, we could probably lay claim to a similar god as Pharaoh – a god that reduces our worth to what we can produce.

Let's call that god success. Our culture generally measures success by our monetary worth, or productivity or achievements. Perhaps money is the visible image of that god.

Now, money and success are not in and of themselves bad. That's the thing about false gods – they can actually be good things.

Success and achievement can indeed make life good for you and for people around you. And money is something we all depend on in our economic system.

But when that becomes our primary focus, it becomes our god. And we become slaves to that god.

But faithfulness to the one true God isn't just for God's sake. What happens to the rest of the commandments when money and success are our gods?

We might pray to the one true God with our lips, but what we really are depending on...what we really trust is money. We chase after achievement and success and neglect actual faithfulness.

Instead of using God's name for prayer and thanksgiving, we use God's name to justify whatever practice we think will make us successful and rich. Instead of using God's name to bless those around us, we use God's name to hurt people.

That god...like all false gods...will not create the harmonious world God intended. Even those who have been showered with success and wealth often worry that in the end it won't be enough. So, they continue to seek more and more.

That leaves other people without enough. Everyone becomes either a winner or a loser. And everyone becomes a slave to a system that deep down doesn't really work for anyone.

And Sabbath? Who has time for Sabbath? You've got to keep working or you'll fall behind.

You've got to keep your kids busy or they won't be successful. How many families spend all their time driving from one activity or sporting event to another? Again, kids' activities are not bad things in and of themselves.

But if they occupy an over-sized amount of focus, they feed our devotion to our false god.

In this Exodus version of the commandments, God grounds the sabbath in creation. Creation brought order out of chaos. It brought a rhythm of work and rest. But when we fail to observe the rhythm built into creation, we let chaos back in to rule us.

And the rest of the commandments? The commandments about how we treat each other? The worship of money and success can lead to breaking literally all of them...we covet...we lie...we steal – maybe not overtly but with systems that keep some people poor while others get rich.

Aging parents aren't well cared for. And worst-case scenario, chasing after money can even lead to murder.

Other people become either a means to our own success or they're an obstacle that needs to be overcome.

If you look around, you can no doubt see the consequences all around us.

We get the first commandment wrong and the rest fall too.

But the good news is that actually practicing the second and third commandments can help us get back on track with the first...and the rest.

When we truly practice Sabbath we intentionally opt out of productivity for a day...we break the economic chains that keep us enslaved. We are also setting free those who serve us for a day.

We begin to find our way back to trusting that God has provided enough for everyone. We can breathe easier and freer. And we will likely be more generous and willing to ensure that all have enough.

When we call on God's name in honest prayer...when we use God's name to proclaim justice...when we love in God's name, even if we're not feeling it, we are finding our way back.

And when the commandments hold up a mirror to us, when we can see what our actions have done to others and to God's world, we are drawn back to God and God's mercy.

Jesus of course summed it all up – love God and love your neighbor as yourselves.

Because in the end, what God intended was for a world steeped in love.

The commandments are a practical way for us to help create and live in that kind of world...a world that Jesus will later call the kingdom of God.