

## WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT ALL THESE COMMANDMENTS?

Exodus 20:5-6; Lent Midweek 4; March 13, 2024

This Ten Commandments series ends tonight with the Close of the Commandments. Actually, what Luther called the Close of the Commandments comes immediately after the First Commandment, **You shall have no other gods before me.** The “Close” is God’s commentary on the First Commandment, which applies to all the commandments. In Exodus 20, God says that we should not make images of things created by God, which are not gods, and worship them as our gods. God is jealous of anything that would take His place in our hearts and lives. Let’s review the *Small Catechism* Close of the Commandments as it appears in responsive form in our bulletins.

**P** What does God say about all these commandments?

**C** He says: **“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.”**

**P** What does this mean?

**C** 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.

God tells us what kind of God He is, One who punishes children for their sins, and One who shows love to those who keep His commandments. Luther explains. Those who break God’s commandments should fear His wrath, and those who keep His commandments should expect God’s grace and every blessing in life. These are law and gospel statements and, as Lutherans, we know that it is very important not to mix law and gospel because, if we do, what is always lost is the gospel.

An example of mixing law and gospel is thinking that God will punish us for our sins but will give us grace if we keep His commandments, that is, we are saved by our good works and obedience. That is false doctrine and false belief.

But isn't that what Luther says? God "promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments." So that we don't confuse law and gospel, we need to understand that the Bible teaches God's wisdom for living in His creation. In general, if we do the right things, life will go better for us. If we follow God's laws, our lives in this world in will work out the way God intended.

Since we are all sinners, the reality is that the law also always accuses and condemns us as sinners. This is the primary theological purpose of God's law. It humbles us before God in our sins so we will realize how utterly lost and hopeless our lives are. Then, we can appreciate what it means to be saved by God for Jesus' sake. When God threatens to punish us for breaking His commandments, it is not that He enjoys seeing us squirm under His thumb, but that He wants us to turn from our sinful ways and trust in Him to save us.

Confronted with our sins, the distinction between law and gospel might be confusing. We start to think of the law as something "bad" and the gospel as something "good." This is false. Both the law and the gospel are good. The problem is not that God's law is bad, but that we are not good. God's law always accuses and condemns sinners, but it is always intended for our good, both to lead us to repent of our sins and receive God's forgiveness, and to receive God's blessings by living according to the law.

God's promise of "grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments" has been in place from the very beginning and does not depend on our ability to keep the commandments. God is good and wants good things for us. At the beginning, everything God made was good, and to that good and perfect creation He gave a blessing, "**Be fruitful and multiply**" (Gn 1:28). God did not withdraw that blessing after the fall into sin. God is good, but our sinfulness often gets in the way of and rejects God's good blessings for us.

The devil wants us to believe—and our sinful flesh is eager to accept the devil's lies—that God is holding out on us and, if we obey God, we will miss out on something good—at least, what we think is good. We go with our feelings rather than trust God's Word; we satisfy our physical desires rather than "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And we forfeit God's blessings in the process.

With this understanding, what does it mean when God says, **"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."**

**"Punishing the sin of,"** or in the old way of speaking, **"visiting the iniquity...upon,"** reminds us that God is just and deals with us sinners according to His justice. If we go against God, we should expect His righteous anger and wrath. God will punish sin no matter what we think. Our rationalizing what it means for God to be **"loving"** and **"merciful"** in order to downplay His **"jealousy"** won't change the outcome of His divine justice. God has warned us.

**"Punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation"** highlights two aspects of God's justice. One, His wrath is directed toward those who sin against Him, not those who are innocent. But, if we think we will get away with sin because there are no consequences so far, we are fooling ourselves. Two, God's justice and wrath might be delayed a generation or two, but it will come on those who despise Him and His Word, that is, **hate** Him.

This can cover generations. The sins of the fathers continue down through the generations. Families disintegrate through self-destructive behaviors that are inherited. Adam set the basic pattern. He sinned and passed on his sin to all his descendants. Sometimes children suffer the bad consequences of their sinful parents but, when those children continue in those sins, God in His time will deal with this evil, the punishment warning those tempted to join in participating in the sin.

Despite our sinfulness, God remains merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving our iniquities and transgressions against Him and His law (Ex. 34:6-7). God shows **"love to a thousand generations of those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments."** God threatened Adam with death for sinning, which happened to him and his children, yet, more so, God promised that the Seed of the woman would defeat Satan, death and hell by the Son's suffering and death. God's love for His sinful creatures was shown when He carried out in His righteous judgment and wrath, not against us as we deserved, but against His own Son.

Since God's law threatens to the third and fourth generation, and His gospel promises to a thousand, this has implications for our families. We need to hear and heed these threats and promises, and we need to teach to our children this Word of God. We must repent of our sins and believe that God is loving and gracious, not holding our sins against us—the very sins He held against His own Son, thereby forgiving our sins.

The worst sin against God is to reject His steadfast love shown to us in Jesus Christ and to not repent. If we imagine or make the self-righteous claim that “a loving God would never be so mean as to condemn sinners to hell,” then we have demeaned the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, God's Son, as a worthless gesture of an abusive Parent. Or we can take God at His Word and in our sins fear God's wrath as real. We will love God for always loving us as he showed in giving His only-begotten Son to death on a cross as our Savior. And we will trust that obeying God's commandments promises grace and every blessing to us. We will “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” Amen.