

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Luke 16:1-13

What is the eighth commandment?

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

Another way to speak about the eighth commandment is that God gives us the gift of reputation or a good name.

The manager in today's parable rightly earns a reputation for wasting his master's possessions. Public charges were brought against him. This wasn't gossip, but actual charges. The rich man fires the manager but does something really unexpected. He lets the manager put the books in order. When the manager speaks to the sharecroppers, he's speaking with the full authority of the rich man. The sharecroppers rent land from the rich man and grow olives and wheat. They owe the rich man proceeds from their crops. They are free to sell or use the remainder. The manager lessens what they owe the rich man and they have more at their own disposal. This gives the rich man a reputation of mercy and generosity with the local community.

On a side note, you should ignore the section headings in the Scriptures. They are not part of the inspired Scriptures. Jesus calls the manager unrighteous. He doesn't refer to him as dishonest. The translators have made an interpretation decision here. They equate unrighteousness with dishonesty.

Dishonesty is certainly unrighteous, but being unrighteous means more than merely being dishonest. The manager here is better labeled the unrighteous manager. That is, he is an unbeliever.

Even though the manager was unrighteous unbeliever, he understood the character of his master, the rich man. He knew that he was a generous and merciful man. He knows that the rich man wouldn't be upset about what he had done with the accounts. Jesus actually commends the unrighteous man.

God, our Father, is like the rich man. He wants to be known for His mercy. God has many characteristics. He's powerful. He's a God of order. He's wrathful over sin. He's longsuffering. But most of all, He is merciful. He wants to be known as merciful above all things.

God has a reputation. How many of the Psalms instruct us to meditate upon and pronounce the wonders that He has done. By this, His reputation is known. But God, like the rich manager, does something funny. He puts His name on you. In your baptism, God puts His name on you so that you bear His name the rest of your life. God doesn't put His name on people who deserve to have His name. Only Christ is worthy of that honor. But you just rightly confessed that you are a poor miserable sinner. If you got what you deserved, you would be dismissed just like the unrighteous manager. But thanks be to God, you don't get what you deserve; you get what Christ deserves. Your sins are washed away and you are given God's name. God risks His reputation by letting you be a little "Christopher," or, Christ-bearer. Another way to say it might be that you are a bearer of God's reputation.

Think about that next time you make the sign of the cross and remember your baptism! If that doesn't humble you, I don't know what will!

And this makes so much sense when we read Scripture. Think about Psalm 23. "God leads you in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." (v. 3b) He doesn't lead you in paths of righteousness for your name's sake, although that is a by-product. But He vindicates His name. And since He places His name upon you, He will vindicate you. What a wonderful gift that is.

You know God's mercy. God wants you to show His mercy to others.

But to understand God's mercy, you must first understand His wrath. God's wrath is not a popular subject nowadays. People only want to talk about God's mercy and goodness and the like. Those are amazing qualities of God, but God's wrath must be dealt with first. And God's wrath is not like the wrath of man. It's a righteous wrath. We may have a righteous anger when we or a loved one are violated, but we can't even do anything right with a righteous anger. (James 1:20) God's wrath is a wrath that we deserve because of our ungodliness and unrighteousness. (Romans 1:18)

And God's wrath doesn't just go away. We sometimes act like God doesn't care about sin. You can do whatever you want, and God just loves you anyway. One of the worst sayings that's come out of well-meaning Christianity is that "God hates the sin, but loves the sinner." Actually, God hates the sin AND the sinner. What does God say to the goats in the final judgment? "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41) When Paul says that "death spread to all men because all sinned," he means an eternal death. (Romans

5:12) The sinner must find a way to deal with God's wrath or he will be damned eternally. And God is just in His judgments. Everyone that goes to hell deserves it.

Part of the reason we're uncomfortable with God's wrath is because we know we deserve it. Since we have the old man still with us, God's law always accuses us. And you have the Holy Spirit who convicts you of your sin. If the solution for God's wrath was dependent on us, we wouldn't have any hope. Penance is so laughable when you understand God's wrath. Penance is a system that attempts to soothe God's wrath and it's something that not only Roman Catholics fall into. Many Lutherans fall into this by inventing their own list of penance instead of getting a list from a priest. There's nothing we can do about God's wrath. Thanks be to God, He solved the problem of His wrath Himself.

The reason I say that the "God hates the sin but loves the sinner" is well-meaning is because there's some truth to it. Jesus loves sinners by dying for them. As Paul says, "while we were still weak, [that is, while we were poor miserable sinners,] Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6) You don't get the wrath of God appeased without the cross. Isaiah describes Jesus on the cross and says that it pleased God the Father to smite God the Son on the cross. (Isaiah 53:10) It pleased God because He made a way for poor miserable sinners to be His people. This is called justification. Listen to how the Apology of the Augsburg Confession describes the faith of justification: "Faith freely receives forgiveness of sins. It sets Christ, the Mediator and Atoning Sacrifice, against God's wrath. It does not present our merits or our love. This faith is the true knowledge of Christ and helps itself to the benefits of Christ. The faith regenerates hearts." (Ap IV, 46)

The Christian understands that the works and love of Christ is set against God's wrath. We are saved from something, aren't we? Indeed, we are saved from the wrath of God. This is one of the reasons Lutherans love the crucifix. We know that right there God reveals both His wrath and His mercy. And this highlights the other important thing we need to know about God's mercy. To receive God's mercy, you need to know where to find it.

Christ appeased the wrath of God about 2,000 years ago. He won mercy for all men and women and children and babies on that cross. For several thousand years, God had been teaching His people that His wrath was only satisfied with blood sacrifice. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he had 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep sacrificed! (1 Kings 8:63) Can you imagine the rivers of blood that flowed from the side of the temple? I can't even begin to estimate how many animals from oxen, sheep, pigeons and turtledoves, that were sacrificed over the years. It boggles my mind. But God was teaching His people that sacrifice was required. And not just the sacrifice of animals. Through Abraham and Isaac, God taught Israel that a first-born promised Son must be sacrificed. This was before He established the tabernacle or temple. With the tabernacle and temple God taught His people that the Messiah must come to save His people with blood pouring out of His side in His death on the cross. The promise of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 would come as promised and only His blood could appease the wrath of a righteous, holy God. Again, God solved the problem of His wrath so we wouldn't have to.

Here's an interesting question for you. Why do you think God was teaching His people for several thousand years that His mercy was found at the temple of God?

You know that we must go to Christ to obtain His mercy. But where is Christ to be found with His mercy?

In Matthew 28, Jesus established baptism and preaching to obtain His mercy. You'll recall from our confessions that preaching and teaching are equated. Teaching apart from preaching is really a modern innovation. This doesn't make it bad, it's just new.

In John 20, Jesus established private confession and absolution to obtain His mercy.

In Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 6, 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, Jesus establish the Lord's Supper to obtain His mercy.

In other words, Jesus taught His people for centuries to go to the temple to obtain mercy and He intends for His people to go to church to obtain this mercy.

The once and for all sacrifice of Jesus ended the sacrificial system located at the temple. But every aspect of the temple was not destroyed by His sacrifice. Just like the early church in Acts 2, we are meant to gather around preaching, also known as the apostle's teaching, the mutual consolation of the brotherhood (and sisterhood), the Lord's Supper and prayer. The mercy we receive at church in faith gives us the motivation and power to show the graciousness and mercy of God to our neighbor in loving acts of service.

As Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You receive grace upon grace and know where to lead others to God's grace and mercy.

And a final warning. You come into the kingdom of Grace by God's mercy through faith. You stay in it the same way. You continually need to receive God's grace through faith. Apart from works. Too often, we fall into the trap of thinking God saved us through grace and mercy through faith and now I must add my works to stay in His grace and mercy. The grace and mercy of God is only found in the cross of Christ. That is, it's only found through Word and Sacrament through faith alone. Our works are meant to serve our neighbor and show them God's love and mercy. That neighbor also needs God's grace and mercy found in Word and Sacrament and not our works. Christians make other Christians the same way they are made, either 1) by having babies, baptizing them and raising them in the church or, 2) by hearing about God's grace, be baptized, and continue to receive nourishment of God's grace in the church.

So, continue to be fed with God's grace and mercy. God is not stingy with His grace. He continues to pour it out in churches around the entire world. Receive God's grace and believe that by it you have eternal life.

In Jesus name. Amen.