

In our Lutheran tradition we can sometimes get uneasy  
If we hear people talk about the Lord's commandments.  
One of the reasons we can get uneasy  
Is that we think that if we talk about the Lord's commandments  
Then we'll fall into legalism,  
And we know that legalism is a bad thing,  
And so we think that it's safer to err on the side of the Gospel  
To make sure that we don't become modern day Pharisees.

But then we get readings like today's where we hear words like this:  
**For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.**  
What are we, as Lutheran Christians, to make of this?

Well, let's start by talking briefly about legalism,  
Because legalism is a real problem,  
And, what's more, we are all natural legalists  
Unless God steps in and frees us by the Gospel.

Put simply, legalism is using God's law,  
To prove before him that he should accept us –  
That we really are his children, that we belong in his family.  
We know that we are falling into legalism  
When we water down God's commands:  
Like when we take the command 'Do not murder'  
And think that as long as we have not actually killed someone  
Then we can present ourselves to God as wholly acceptable.  
Jesus was no legalist – he didn't water down the law –  
Rather, he gave it to us in its full strength  
Teaching us that even our anger with our brother or sister  
Can render us liable to God's judgement.

We also know that we are falling into legalism  
When we compare ourselves with other people:  
Favourably or unfavourably.  
We are falling into legalism when we compare ourselves favourably:  
When we think, although we may not be perfect  
At least we are better than the common rung of humanity -  
So, pride is a big marker that we are falling into legalism.

And we are falling into legalism  
When we compare ourselves *unfavourably*:  
When we think we should just give up,  
Because other people are so much better than us –  
So, despair is a big marker that we are falling into legalism.

Of course, Jesus gave a parable about this:  
The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector:  
They both come to the temple, the place of sacrifice.  
The Pharisee thanks God for how good he is,  
And compares himself favourably with the Tax Collector,  
But the Tax Collector, in a rightly ordered humility,  
Compares himself to *God* and *his commands* in their full strength,  
And pleads for mercy, for the sacrifice that will atone for his sin.  
As Jesus says at the conclusion of the parable,  
It's the Tax Collector who goes to his home *justified*, right with God.  
So, humility: the humility that comes from  
taking God's commands seriously  
from letting go of comparing ourselves with others  
from receiving atonement as a gift from God,  
This is the marker that God is saving us from legalism.

And God does save us from the sort of Pharisaical legalism  
That Jesus talks about, and that should be rightly concerned about,  
Through the atoning death of Jesus:  
Jesus pays the price, he cleanses,  
Jesus calls us through death to life,  
And all this comes as a gift: we don't earn it,  
We simply have open hands to receive.  
And he brings us into his family where we have a new way of life,  
Where we have commands from him how to live together  
So that we experience that he is love,  
And that we share in his love as we show his love to each other.

So, just as children are born into a family, or adopted into one,  
So, we are adopted into God's family through baptism into Christ,  
And just as dearly loved children receive and obey  
The commands of their parents not to *become* members of the family,  
But because they *are already* members of the family,  
So, we can receive God's commands not to justify ourselves –

That's the legalism we rightly want to avoid –  
But to grow in the fullness of life as we love each other.

So, with this in mind let's listen again to what St John has to say: **Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been *born of God*, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.**

There it is: we are not born from above by keeping God's commands,  
But by trusting that all Jesus has done, he has done for us.

And we know that what Jesus has done for us, he has done for all,

As we hear in perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible: **For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.**

This is, of course, God's work: as we heard last week:

We love God because he first loved us

And gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

But also like last week, we hear that there is a natural connection  
Between God's love for us and our love for each other:

As St John writes: **everyone who loves the parent loves the child.**

That is, since we love God, so we love our brothers and sisters.

But then St John goes on to write something that is a bit different.

Listen to what he says: **By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.**

OK: we know that we ought to love each other:

That just as Jesus loved us, so we ought to love one another.

But now St John is saying that we love each other

*When we love God and obey his commandments.*

This is really not so surprising when we think about it:

When the children in the family love mum and dad,

And when they do as mum and dad say,

Then it builds the whole family up and they live in harmony.

So, brothers and sisters in a family show love for each other

As they love mum and dad, and as they live in the loving rules

Set out by mum and dad in family life.

Listen to how St John builds on this: **For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.**

Imagine observing a family where the children

Disregard or disobey the commands of the parents.

We know that we would be watching a dysfunctional family  
Marked by self-seeking and complaining and disharmony.  
We know that we would be watching a family where the children  
Think that they are not brothers and sisters  
But individuals in competition with each other  
For the family's resources.

This is what can happen in the Christian church when we think  
That we have to justify ourselves:

That God has a limited amount of good to share with us,  
That God is holding back from us status or pleasure or freedom,  
That we have to grab for ourselves or we will miss out.

If we have this attitude then God's commandments  
Can feel so burdensome that we will do anything to escape them.  
But God saves us from this by the victory that he has won for us  
In our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to what St John says: **And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?**

Jesus is the one who came as a real flesh and blood human being,  
Who in his very human body suffered, died, and rose,  
To bring us into unity with God and each other.

In fact, this is how St John ends today's reading: **This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.**

There are many complementary ways to interpret these words

But today I'll close with one path of interpretation:

Jesus came with his gift of water, of baptism,

So that we can be adopted into God's family

And live as brothers and sisters of the one Father.

And he came with blood, with the gift of the Sacrament,

So that we can, in keeping Jesus' command

To do this in remembrance of him,

We can grow in the sanctified life

As we together receive the gift of the forgiveness of our sins,

As we experience the blessings that come from keeping his commands,

As we mature in love for one another,

And as God's name is glorified when people see the good works

That he produces among us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.