

MATTHEW 22:34–46

LOVING COMMANDMENTS

The Six Chief Parts of the Christian Faith are well known among Lutherans. Martin Luther's Small Catechism is made up of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, the Office of the Keys, and the Lord's Supper as the six teachings of Scripture that all of us ought to know well and even memorize. It's a good practice then, to consider them often, as we do on this Reformation Sunday, considering the first and greatest commandment, and the second like it.

In Exodus chapter 20 and Deuteronomy chapter 5 we find the ten commandments that God delivered to Moses to be presented and proclaimed to the children of Israel. These were not suggestions but rather a list of actions and reactions to stations of life and situations. They were a way of responding in thankfulness for what God had already done for them.

These Commandments are the structure upon which we followers of the Lord Jesus Christ are empowered to live, move, and have our being. Our activities are in keeping with the Father's will if they align with these Ten Commandments.

By studying the Ten Commandments we come to understand that without the structure that they give us, we are without a guiding principle to direct our behaviour. That's exactly what sin does in our lives. It destroys the structure and form of our discipleship, and after a while, our behaviour is indistinguishable from the actions of the people around us.

A simple example is when we're cut off in traffic. Without some form or structure to help determine our response, we're as likely to curse, swear, and seek retribution as we are to pray, praise, and give thanks that the offending driver didn't cause a collision. When our spouse or a friend offends us, if we have no structure to guide our response we may lash out in retribution as opposed to seeking forgiveness if we were wrong, or offering forgiveness when we're offended. Without some structure, we're resentful when we believe someone has more than we do and has come to this gain using some dishonest ways. We look at what they have and think, "That should be me in that house"; "They're driving the car I want." This is all sin, and without some structure holding us up we don't feel the pain when we break relationships or hurt feelings.

Thus we view the Ten Commandments through the cross of Jesus to understand how necessary the suffering and death of Jesus was to save us from our sins, faults, and failures. We cannot keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, and forgiveness is essential to set us free to love God and others even in the midst of our failures.

There are some who say that the Commandments are from the Old Testament, and that they don't relate to people in this new modern age in which everyone gets to do whatever is right for themselves, and decide what is true for themselves. Yet, Jesus reminds us that the Commandments continue to be the heart of the Father's desire for our behaviour, as He encouraged believers in Matthew chapter 5:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17–19).

Our need for this structure is so extreme that Jesus had to come to fulfill that which we lost the capacity to do in the Garden because of the sin of our first parents. The Commandments, this structure, isn't going away, no matter how much people in this world want it to.

God's heart and mind are not changing and shifting. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrew 13:8). He wants people to be consecrated, holy, and set aside for His sovereign purposes. As Jesus said, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). So the Father sends us the One whose righteousness will surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, and through His suffering, death, and resurrection we have access to that righteousness.

We know the Ten Commandments with their "Thou shalt nots," and we understand them to be the baseline for life and all behaviour that is pleasing to our Father. Yet, we know that in ourselves it's impossible to perform these Commandments, and so we need someone to come and save us from our failures and their punishment, which is eternal death. The One who comes to rescue us must be perfect in keeping the Law — must never, ever miss the mark or transgress the Father's boundaries.

We need someone who can step in on our behalf and without fault or failure do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus comes for exactly that purpose. He doesn't come to condemn us for our failures, but to supply what we lack — holiness and total devotion to the Father in all His Commandments.

That means that Jesus must take our failures, our sin, upon Himself and boldly go to the cross of Calvary. He must suffer, bleed, and die to save us from sin, death, and hell. But in death He couldn't stay dead. He must live

again, be resurrected and restored, so that by faith we receive His life and resurrection through which He delivers to us the grace of salvation and resets our broken, sinful lives, restoring our relationship with the Father.

It's at this point that another classic catechetical question posed by Dr. Luther helps bring into focus the impact of these Commandments on everyday life. The inevitable follow-up question is: "How is this done?" The answer is ultimately best summed up in the command found throughout Deuteronomy and given expression by Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39).

Do you love God with all your heart? Do you love your neighbours as yourself? If you honestly acknowledge your sinful nature, you'll answer no. So, when told to love God and love your neighbour you may say that those are good ideas, but you know you cannot do them. To which Jesus responds that He knows that too, and He forgives you, so go love God and your neighbour.

Again, you say that you want to, but you can't, you've tried, and you've failed. To that Jesus says that He has paid the price for our life of failures in His rejection, suffering, and death. In His resurrection, Jesus releases grace, forgiveness, and life unto all who trust in Him and receive His righteousness as a gift. So, go love God and your neighbour.

Again, you cry back that you want to, but you can't, you don't. So again, Jesus says, "I know. I forgave you. I've forgiven you. I still forgive you." These are His encouraging words to you, because you need to be forgiven by God to want to love God and your neighbour. Our love of God and neighbour are going to be faulty and incomplete, but as forgiven children of God this is good love for God and neighbour that we'll grow into as our faith grows.

This is our relationship with the Father into which we're to invite others as they see us living the Commandments by faith. Our behaviour isn't to be like that of our neighbours who lack faith in Christ; but rather, we're witnesses to the mercy of God as we live our lives by His Commandments.

Yes, sometimes we fail. That's why Jesus went to the cross: to purchase the forgiveness we receive by faith in His sacrifice. That's why Jesus rose again from the dead: so that we have authority in Christ to rise from our failures, forgiven and renewed.

Father, bless us as we go forward in Your grace and mercy with the Ten Commandments providing structure for our lives and our relationships with You and our neighbours. We humbly implore this blessing, according to Your promise, in the name of Jesus. Amen.