

Leviticus 18:1-5; 19:9-18

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C, Proper 10)

Lessons for the Day: Leviticus 18:1-5, 19:9-18; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

There, But for the Grace of God...

July 10, 2022

*“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.”*

*“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God. “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Back in June, for the first time since the founding convention in 1987, delegates and pastors from all the congregations of Lutheran Church–Canada gathered together for our Synodical Convention. This was also the first time in 5 years we have been able to gather and to do it under the new structure we adopted in 2017. We came together to share in the work of the church and to find encouragement and support from one another for the challenges of being the Lord’s Church in this day and age. Our theme was, “Stand Firm in the Faith”. For us, that means standing firm on the truth of God’s Word. Jude wrote: *“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”* (Jude 3, ESV) He wrote this because false teachers were leading the church into ideas that were not from God but from the world. We face that same struggle today, as many false voices call us to do what everyone else does; to be what everyone else is. Yet God reminds us we are different, because we are His.

When I was younger and wanted to do the things that other youth were permitted to do, my defence and argument was, “but everyone else is doing it. Everyone else is going.” That didn’t work, because my dad would look at me and say the same thing I’ve said to my children over the years: “I don’t care what everyone else is doing. You are my child, and you will do as I say.” God does the exact same thing in our text today. God told Moses: *Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God.*

The psalmist says: *“Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”* (Psalm 100:3, ESV) That makes us different from the world. Paul reminds us *Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.* (Ephesians 4:17 - ESV) Jesus tells us: *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.* (John 15:19 - ESV) We must live in the world, but we are not to be of the world. You have probably heard the expression, “there, but for the grace of God go I”. It is normally attributed to preacher John Bradford, who saw a man being led away to his execution, and who said, “There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford”. The truth is, without the grace of God we would be not only in the world, but of the world. We would also be subject to the same condemnation and fate that awaits the unbelieving world. But we are different. We are set apart, for we have been redeemed through the precious blood of Christ. We have been freed from sin and death and worldliness. Neither the devil, nor the world around us, nor our sinful flesh are to control our hearts and our minds. We have been set free from that attitude of selfishness and a self-serving life that puts ourselves at the centre of the universe. Free in Christ, we live in Christ, remembering what St. Paul tells us: *You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - ESV)

In good Lutheran terms, it is fitting to ask, “what does this mean?” Being a Christian is not simply a matter of going to church on Sunday. It is the life we live in and under the Word of God. It is the life we live under the cross, as those who have died and risen with Christ through our Baptism. It is a life that often puts us at odds with the rest of society.

First, we hear God say that we are not to do what everyone else does. We are not to believe what the world says when it contradicts the truth of God. We took our grandchildren to the Royal Tyrell Museum yesterday. We can marvel at the wonder of God’s creation, for He did make the dinosaurs and the great beasts that swam in the sea. Yet a father and his children were looking at a display of skulls that were supposed to show the evolution of human beings. The father was pointing to one of the early ape skulls, and said to his children, “that is what your great, great, great (etc.) grandfather would have looked like. I was tempted to jump in and say, “no, that’s not your relative. God made you to be you. With the psalmist we can say: **“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.”** (Psalm 139:14, ESV)

The world believes things that are not true. We buy into evolutionary teaching and leave God and His Word out of our lives. Like a stack of dominoes, so many other things begin to fall. That is why the world can set the blessings and benefits of marriage aside for an attitude of what was once called “free love”, and with it we get rid of the truth of gender to satisfy our own desires. Or we devalue life so that we can abort it in the womb, end it when it is hard or treat the lives of others with great disdain. Without the guidance of God’s Word, each and every person thinks they are able to determine truth for themselves; that they can determine what is right or wrong based on their own standard. We are right back to the devil’s temptation in the garden of Eden: ***Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”*** (Genesis 3:1 - ESV) That is exactly what he still asks in so many ways, although today he may whisper in unbelieving ears, “Don’t worry about that God stuff. Do what you want. You can be your own God.”

Again, we hear God say: ***I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God.***

God doesn’t only say, “don’t do what everyone else does”. He also tells us what it means to live as His people and to show our difference to the world. The rest of our text is really a commentary on the Ten Commandments, especially on what we refer to as the Second Table of the Law, our duties to our fellow man. These commandments are summed up as God says: ***but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*** In a world where most people only look out for themselves, God calls us to a very different way of living. There were no food banks, but the people were told not to strip their fields bare, leaving some things to be gleaned and gathered by the poor and the travellers going through the land. They were not to steal or lie or make false promises. They were to be aware of the needs of the disabled. They were to act in integrity, especially in court. In all things they were to realize, “there, but for the grace of God go I”. As they were blessed and cared for by God, so they were to be a blessing and care for others.

God has given us His Word to guide us in the life we have as His children. If it were not for the grace of God, we would follow blindly the ways of the world, and suffer the same eternal punishment in hell that awaits those who deny God and His truth. Thankfully, God has come to our rescue. That was our focus this week in our Vacation Bible School. We shared with the children all that God has done to rescue us from sin, from death and from hell. We assured them of what God does to care for us each day. We spoke of Jesus as our Lifeguard, who saves us from drowning and danger. We were dying in sin, drowning as it were, with no hope of survival. We are saved because Jesus, our Lifeguard came to be one with us, and to take all our sin into Himself. He suffered and died for us on the cross. He brings us safely to the heavenly shores, as He gives us life through His own resurrection from the dead.

Paul tells us in our epistle: ***He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*** (Colossians 1:13-14 - ESV) In that new life in Christ we are different from the world. We follow God’s Word. We show love for our neighbour, as did the Good Samaritan in our Gospel lesson. We continue steadfast in God’s truth, and live to show others the hope that Christ has brought to us. Where once we could say, “there, but for the grace of God go I”, we can now say, “there, by the grace of God I live!” Amen.