

✠ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good evening.

**Last** Wednesday, we reflected on James & John's mother asking Jesus for a favor—for her sons to be the greatest in his kingdom. But we found that the only way to climb the greatness ladder of the kingdom of heaven is by climbing down and serving one another—just as our Lord Jesus did.

“Because of Jesus, Servant is now the greatest of the titles we are eligible to receive. And that means, no matter your age, no matter your status, no matter your circumstances, no matter your agility, no matter your intelligence, you are—still!—in the running for greatness in the Kingdom of God.” For every single person has the great ability to serve—and to be served.

**On** Sunday, we heard that it is not enough merely to hear God's Word; we must also keep it: “*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*” And it is not enough that we have kept his Word before:

“We can use no excuses to avoid keeping his Word, especially this congregation who made the costly choice to continue keeping God's Word. When God confronts us with his Word, we must listen to him. We must *fast* from those voices, those desires, those pleasures, those comforts, which seek to keep us from listening to Him.”

*For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*

“The stakes really are this high—the loss of the inheritance of the kingdom of God. This is the danger that awaits those who encourage sexual immorality; this is the danger that awaits those who practice sexual immorality.”

Notice though that sexual immorality is only one of the dangers to our inheritance. So, too, is covetousness; so, too, is idolatry. The dangers to our faith continue to be, therefore, persistently, unrepentantly, deliberately breaking the Ten Commandments.

**This** evening we get into the heart of Part II of the Ten Commandments. These are the two halves to the commandments: (1) Part I: that God alone is God; that idolatry is forbidden; that we must not take the Lord's name in vain; and that we are to keep the Sabbath holy. These are, in practical terms, how to love God. (2) Part II: the commandments we heard—to honor our father and mother; to not murder; to not commit adultery; to not steal; to not bear false witness; to not covet.”

We can think about the first three as commandments about *loving* God; we can think of the last seven as commandments about *loving* our neighbor. Keeping these ten commandments therefore is how we love God and one another—and how we *avoid* being unloving towards God and towards one another.

Throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, we see these Ten Commandments spelled out even more precisely—yes, I mean the laws about the sacrifices, the priests, and the rest. The Ten Commandments are universal; the application of the Ten Commandments in the Torah are special—specialized for the Priesthood & Nation of Israel.

**Consider** our Gospel. The laws found throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy, weren't the only laws that were held sacred by the priestly class. In fact, what was happening was that *tradition* was elevated to the status of—or even above!—the law of God.

To help, consider a shopping cart. Or buggy, if you prefer to call it that. It's not illegal (yet) to not return shopping carts. Yet, it's culturally a crime to not return the shopping cart to the cart return. Chances are, just the mere idea of me bringing this up as *possibly optional* is making you frustrated and making you want to begin

arguing that it's simply *always* wrong. I'm not saying that you shouldn't do it, but this is one of the social phenomena that seems to have risen to the status of moral law. If you do it, you are a good person. If you don't do it, you are a bad person. That is, rightly or wrongly, how our culture views the *tradition* of shopping cart return. There's no law against it, and yet—there's a very strong cultural tradition against it.

It's very important to understand that what the Pharisees were accusing Jesus of was sin—sin because Jesus and his disciples were not keeping their tradition. These were traditions that were handed down—that the priestly class demanded the people follow. But as Jesus makes clear, these *traditions* were being kept at the *expense* of keeping God's law. These traditions were kept *instead* of God's law.

**The** big question for us this evening is this: What rules or traditions or laws do we have that keep us from obeying God's law? Are there *any* rules or traditions or laws we follow that keep us from obeying the Ten Commandments? Are there any rules or traditions that we elevate *above* the Ten Commandments?

I doubt our culture elevates the shopping cart return to the level of the Ten Commandments, though it certainly strikes a nerve. And I wonder how much grace is there for those who are less-physically agile and those with children—cart return is much harder in these situations. I remember growing up where it was always the case that the bagger of the groceries took the cart out, loaded the groceries, and returned it. We are in different times. And with different times, come different rules.

Even before Covid, I remember the rising use of hand sanitizers. I didn't follow that trend; I've always preferred old-fashioned soap and water. Our post-covid society would fit right in with the Pharisees of our passage.

It was simply unbelievable for the Pharisees to see Jesus and his disciples eat dinner without first washing their hands. It would shock almost all of us, too, to see Jesus and his disciples, after a day ministering to the sick, the poor, and the demon-possessed, start dinner without washing up.

Borrowing from Mark's Gospel for context:

*[3] (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, [4] and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) (Mark 7:3–4, ESV)*

The problem, of course, is that the Pharisees were accusing Jesus and his disciples not of bad hygiene, but of sin—that going against this tradition was sin. To not wash hands was to sin. I think the ancient world was well aware that hygiene had consequences. But even though bad hygiene can kill the body, it cannot—as is the point here—kill the soul. But that's the very thing of which the Pharisees were accusing Jesus. As if to say, the souls of Jesus and his disciples were in danger of being killed—over hand washing.

Washing dishes and hands is a good thing to do. We know about germs and bacteria and all the rest. But I don't think we can just dismiss this kind of passage and say, "See, now we know better." I am not so sure we do know better. If we did know better, we would know—provided we are repentant—that the Eucharist is always spiritually good for us to eat and drink. Dirty hands or not, dirty bread or not, it is spiritually good for us.

We, like the priestly class of the Pharisees, tend to be too quick to elevate *earthly cleanliness* to the level of *spiritual cleanliness*. We prioritize avoiding germs to avoid what can kill this body—which is important!—and we perhaps de-prioritize what may kill the soul—the persistent, unrepentant, breaking of the Ten Commandments.

And yet, this is what the Pharisees and the priests had been doing all along—willfully breaking the commandment to honor one's father and mother—and teaching the people to do the same!

**Jesus** shows that the priests and Pharisees refuse to care for their fathers and mothers through an elaborate rule they've created called, "A gift!" One of the ways it might work was like this: their mother and father are getting up in years and now need care and provision. It just so happens that the son has plenty of money at his disposal to care for his parents—but he refuses. To justify himself, he says to his parents that that money is "a gift," meaning that its set aside to put into the treasury of the Temple. You

can all guess what's really going on here—just as Jesus illustrates. First, often the son would say this simply to avoid giving the money to his parents, and he would also not put the money into the treasury. He would just use it as an excuse. Second, even if he did give the money to the Temple, Jesus points out that this still would be disobeying the commandment to honor his father and his mother.

(So, yes, it really is as straightforward that you can tell your children, provided they have the means, that they need to provide for you.)

**I'm** not telling you not to return your shopping carts or not to wash your hands. These are good things to do. What I am saying is that we must not elevate the rules and traditions we have received over and above the commandments which we have been commanded to keep. We don't want to be in the business of feeling righteous because we always return the shopping cart and we always wash our hands, if all along there is some unrepentant sin we are harboring.

There is something for each of us to hear.

We may indeed have something as serious as some unrepentant sin—something that breaks one of the Ten Commandments, something that we have yet to give up, from which we need to fast, for good, for the sake of our souls and our faith.

It may even be necessary to tell your own children to provide for you, should you need it, because that's their privilege to do so in honoring you. Or it may be as straightforward as always coming forward to receive the Eucharist. Or, I suppose, it may be as simple as helping someone to return the shopping cart, instead of being upset that they have not.

However these lessons apply to us, let us return to keeping these ten commandments, for the purpose of loving one another well, and for the purpose of loving God well.

For Christ our Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever.

**Amen and amen.**