

Above the Law

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: If I were to say of someone, “He acts as if he’s above the Law”, I’m guessing that most everyone here would understand it in a negative sense. You’d take it to mean that the person I was describing seems to think that rules apply to other people, but not to him; and that he is free to break them as he pleases without any concern about consequences. Something like that, right? Well, this morning, inspired by St. Paul’s comments in the Epistle lesson we heard a short while ago, I’d like to encourage you to think of living above the law in a *positive sense* because (as we shall see) it’s the right way – really, the *only* way – for Christians such as ourselves to live.

What do I mean? Well, to explain I have to back up a bit. For the last several Sundays the Epistle readings we’ve been hearing have all come from Paul’s magnum opus: his letter to the Christian congregations at Rome. And what Paul does in the first eight chapters of this letter is to lay out very thoroughly and in a logical sequence God’s great plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. To begin, in the first couple of chapters he demonstrates that all people, whether they are Jews who have the law of God given to Moses or Gentiles who don’t have the law but nevertheless have consciences that tell them the difference between right and wrong – that *all people*, it doesn’t matter who they are, are similarly under the wrath and condemnation of God on account of their sin.

Then, having condemned everyone and cut off all avenues that we might use to claim at least some tiny bit of worthiness or exception for ourselves, he presents the wonderful Gospel message that Jesus, God’s own Son, having taken on himself our humanity, did what we couldn’t do: namely, live a perfectly God-pleasing life free of sin. And then he offered himself as the sacrifice of atonement upon the cross, taking upon himself the punishment we deserved. He took our sin and its consequences – but that’s only half the exchange. The other half of it is that God counts to our credit the perfectly righteous life that Jesus lived. It has nothing to do with what *we do*. Paul already demonstrated that what we do is always wrong. Instead Christ’s righteousness is counted to our credit by *faith*. It’s ours simply by believing in who Jesus is and what he did for us.

All right: so far so good. This is basic Law and Gospel Christianity. Ah, but the question comes up, “What do I do now? Now that I have been redeemed from sin and death through faith in Christ, how am I to continue on from here?” It’s a good question; and anticipating the wrong answers people are likely to come up with, Paul spends the next three or four chapters of Romans heading them off.

For example, someone might say, “Let me see if I’ve got this straight: it’s my faith in Christ that saves me. It doesn’t have anything to do with me or what I do. All my sins are forgiven in Jesus, even ones I haven’t committed yet. Well then, since that’s the case, obviously it doesn’t make any difference what I do now. I can sin as much as I like. In fact, when you get right down to it, the more I sin the more God’s love is shown in his forgiving me. The bigger my offense, the more grace I receive and the better God looks for giving it to me. So really, we’re both better off if I sin as much as I can.”

And before you go shaking your head thinking to yourself, “That’s ridiculous” let me say this: if the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been accurately presented, this is indeed what seems to be the logical deduction. As a matter of fact, we Lutherans who take our stand on the pure Gospel as we do, are often accused of teaching exactly this: that the Gospel frees us to sin as much as we please. Now, we don’t say that; but when those who still want to cling to some kind of legalism or self righteousness hear the Gospel presented in all its sweet comfort, it’s the natural conclusion to which they come.

But Paul anticipates this line of argument – someone saying that the Gospel is a license to sin. He says, “No! Sin brought you misery and death. It enslaved you. Why having been set free from it and its consequences would you want to go back under its bondage?” Elsewhere he compares people who behave this way to freshly washed pigs who go back to wallow in their filth or to dogs who turn around and eat up their own vomit. How much sense does that make? It made them sick the first time; what makes them think it’s going to sit any better the second time around? It’s just dumb. Paul says don’t do that. Instead, he says, that having been raised with Christ to a new life, we ought to walk with him in righteousness.

“Well then”, you might think, “if that’s the case, having now become a disciple of Jesus, what I ought to do is redouble all of my efforts to obey the law. I mean, if sin is the problem, I’d better do all I can to avoid it.” And so now the law becomes the standard to measure the progress and quality of my discipleship. Negatively, I can see how far I’m getting along in terms of what nasty old sinful habits I’ve given up, and positively I measure it in terms of whatever new praiseworthy habits I cultivate and good deeds I accomplish. And all that seems to make perfect sense. Unfortunately, it’s just about as wrong as it can be.

“What?” you ask, “You mean the Lord *doesn’t* want me to strive to obey his law?” At the risk of being called a heretic, no, strictly speaking, he doesn’t want you to strive to *obey* his law. “You’d better explain that, Pastor.” All right. Here goes:

It’s necessary to understand that the law of God was originally presented as a covenant – sort of like a contract. It said, “Here’s what you must do in order to live and be blessed. But if you don’t do it then it’s all over. The curse of God falls on you.” It was the old carrot and stick approach to behavior control: Do what’s right and win the prize. Do what’s wrong and get whacked. And the thing to see here is that it’s all *external* control. It has nothing to do with what you think or want or how you feel about it. Recall too that the law was given after the fall into sin, so it was given to people who are born sinners. By nature, we don’t want to obey the law – it goes against our natural inclinations. But I want the prize, so I must obey. And I don’t want to get whacked, so I must not disobey. The law puts me in a situation in which it is in my best interest to do what I don’t really want to do.

And it is for that reason a form of slavery. It was designed to be that way. And don’t get me wrong: the law itself is perfect and good and holy. It describes what God wants us to do. The problem is that *we are not* perfect and good and holy. So, the law makes demands of me that go against my nature and that I cannot even hope to fulfill. Imagine having a nagging spouse who was never happy with anything you did and only pointed out your shortcomings and failures, or having a boss at work who was always making unreasonable demands and then blaming you when you couldn’t meet them. (Maybe some of you don’t have to imagine these things.) Anyway, that’s what the law

was meant to be: a bitter and unbearable burden for us sinners from the day we're born until the day we die.

And death is the key. That's the point Paul is making in this morning's reading from Romans. No contract can hold you accountable after you die. The example he uses is marriage. That's a legal and moral contract to which a person is bound until "death do us part". But after the death of a spouse the surviving partner is free – no longer bound – no longer under the terms of the contract; but free to marry or not as they please. This is the situation we are now in with respect to the law. Before we came to Christ, we were under the terms of the perfect contract that we couldn't keep. But now – and you can look at this two ways: either as having died with Christ in Baptism to the law or through faith in Christ the law having died and lost its power over us (the analogy isn't perfect, but you get the idea—either way) we are now free of the covenant of the law. We are no longer under its authority. And now just we don't want to become again the slaves of sin, neither do we want to become the slaves of the law all over again.

And I need to tell you that it's a very real temptation. It's an easy trap to fall into. And sadly, this is where the vast majority of what's called Christian teaching takes you at this point: now that you are a believer in Jesus, here's what you must do. Here are the rules to obey. Here are the commandments to keep. Here are the guidelines to operate under. And *under* is the operative word. If I'm under, then the law is up here over my head directing me against my will. I'm a slave. It happens whenever I'm obeying the law either out of fear of punishment or hope of reward because it's then that I'm obeying against my will only out of self interest. And as we've already seen, that's always a dead end.

Well, *what* then? If I'm not to live under the law, how am I to go on from here? I'm glad you asked. The answer is that now we are to live *above* the law and *under* God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus. Easy enough to say; but what does it mean? Perhaps an illustration will help. Picture if you will a deep ravine. You want to get across it, but the only way is by a wooden beam that's been thrown across as sort of a foot bridge. That beam is the cross of Jesus. That's the means to cross over to the other side. We take our stand on his righteous life and his death for us. That's the *only* thing that can hold us up. Now, on one side (let's say the left), we want to avoid falling into temptation and sin. The sin nature in us would like nothing more than to do that. On the other hand, we want to avoid falling off to the right, that is, back under the law. And believe it or not it's the inherent pride and self reliance of our sin nature that would have us take a jump in that direction. What I'd have you see is that either way, it's the same hole.

And let me unpack this a bit further. Paul writes that the sin in you and me seizes the opportunity through the commandment to deceive and kill. This can be understood in two ways. On one hand, when God gives a command, "Thou shalt not *whatever*", the first thing we are inclined to do is ask, "What's that I'm not supposed to do? Why not? I don't see any harm in it. Looks like it might be fun." Because we're sinners we tend to gravitate toward what's been forbidden. Or, on the other hand, we might go the opposite way. The self-righteous Pharisee abiding within us says, "Don't do what? Oh, heavens no! I would never do that. No, not me. I'm a good person." Either way, I fall off the bridge of Jesus' Cross. Though the law of God is a good thing, our sinful natures always use what's good in the worst ways.

So, what's the solution? How can you keep from falling back under the power of sin and/or the law? We've already heard the answer: it's death – and by that, I mean the death of repentance. Whenever you see yourself falling or indeed having fallen to one side or the other you confess it and repent of it. That's the death of the sin nature that sets you free from the slavery of sin and the law. That's too what puts you back on the cross where Jesus died for your sin. But he didn't stay dead and neither do you. After the death of repentance and receiving again his word of forgiveness you rise with him. You stand in his perfect righteousness, not your own. And there is reborn in you a new person who by nature does what the law demands without external compulsion. The new person raised with Christ behaves like Christ automatically without having to think about it. You don't need the law to tell you what's right and wrong or to influence you because now what's written in the law is the internal desire of your heart.

Or say it another way, you're operating under a higher law: the law of love that the Spirit of Christ works in your heart. And because your motive is now love not law, the last thing you are thinking about is yourself. There is no fear of punishment. You trust that Christ endured it all for you. There is no hope of reward. Living with Christ and in his forgiveness is its own reward. At that point you are truly free to live for others without thinking about yourself. And this is the fruit that God has purposed you to bear for him.

One final thought: this walking on the beam of Christ's cross over the deep ravine can sound pretty hazardous. It's like we sang earlier, "I walk in danger all the way." Is there any way to make it less hazardous? Let me suggest this: we can't make the beam any wider. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is what it is and nothing we can do will change it. But what we can do is make ourselves smaller. That's what humbling ourselves before the Lord and repenting of our sins and pride will do – shrink us down to HO scale or smaller – and then the beam will seem pretty wide by comparison. It will certainly be a lot harder to fall from.

So, let's make that our goal while we're still making the crossing from this life to the next: to humble ourselves, to take our stand on the cross of Jesus, and to live above the law. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!