

23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Year A
Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Leviticus 19:1,2,15-18
Pastor Paul Horn

October 19, 2008

Faith

Be perfect. Love your neighbor. I am the LORD.

The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy. ¹⁵’ “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. ¹⁶ “Do not go about spreading slander among your people. ”Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD. ¹⁷ ”Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. ¹⁸ ”Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Let’s imagine for a moment that you are the owner of a new *Chick-fil-A* restaurant here in Radcliff. This national chain expects high standards from each store. As a Christian business owner you have no problems upholding that reputation. You treat all of your employees fairly. You give generous bonuses and offer good benefits. As with all *Chick-fil-A* establishments your store is not open on Sundays so that your employees can go to their house of worship, a true day of rest. However, you have that one employee that does not reflect the *Chick-fil-A* philosophy. She is rude to customers, complains about her hours and pay, argues with her fellow employees in front of customers. How would you feel as the employer? What might you do? You might talk to her first about her behavior. Then you may have to fire her if she does not shape up. A standard has been set. She has not lived up to that standard.

In the lesson from Moses’ fifth book, Leviticus, the LORD says to the people of Israel, “This is what I expect of you: be holy.” He does not say, “Try to do your best and that will good enough for me.” But rather, “I want you to be flawless in your thoughts, words and actions, just as I am, now and all the time.” Like a parent who tells their child, “Be good in church. Stop running in and out.” That parent doesn’t mean, “Do this sometime later,” they mean, “Do this now and for the rest of the time in church!”

The LORD has good reason to make this demand of the Israelites. He says, “Be holy because I the LORD your God am holy. I am the LORD. I am perfect and holy and without sin. I expect nothing less from my people.” The LORD repeated this command over and over again to his people because the Israelites were about to go into the land of Canaan. Their neighboring nations were godless people who performed the grossest worship practices. The LORD wanted to set his people apart as different, special. He did not want them defiled by the habits of these pagan nations.

You and I also live in a world surrounded by unbelievers and we are influenced by their pagan beliefs. All the more reason for the LORD to say to us also, “Be holy.” In Leviticus 19:15-18 the LORD tells us how we can be holy. **Love your neighbor as yourself.** Ah, but we love ourselves and our feelings more than we love our fellow

citizens. Yet, the LORD says, “Be holy.” Some people have as their motto: “If you can’t say anything good about a person, let’s hear it.” Too often that’s our motto. But the LORD says, “**Be holy. Do not spread slander among your people.**” We shake our heads in disgust at politicians when they launch the missiles of animosity through negative ad campaigns. Yet we run the very same campaigns against each other. But the LORD says, “**Be holy. Do not seek revenge. Do not hate your brother.**” We are puzzled why the Ron Goldman family still has so much outward hatred toward O.J. Simpson. Yet we mark each other as targets for our dagger eyes and snide comments because they offended us. But the LORD says, “**Be holy. Do not bear a grudge.**” We let our anger boil over like an unattended pot of water on the stove. But it is the LORD who boils over with anger because of our lack of love.

Like a frustrated employer who has had it with his disappointing employee, the LORD ought to fire us, actually, send us to the hell fires, lock us up in its gloomy dungeon and throw away the key. It’s what he should do, and it’s what we deserve. We can say, “No one’s perfect!” To which the LORD replies, “Exactly! That’s why I have to do something about it. I am the LORD.” The LORD in the original Hebrew language is Jehovah, Yahweh, the God of free and faithful love, the God who graciously redeems. Throughout the Old Testament the LORD reminded the Israelites who he was and what he had done for them. I am the LORD, the God who brought you out of Egypt, who set you free from the bondage of slavery, who carried you on eagle’s wings, who lovingly provided for you, who protected you, who will keep his promise to send the Messiah to set you free from the slavery of your sins. This was their motivation to love him and to follow his commandments.

This is the same LORD who through his Word and Sacraments reminds you of who he is and what he has done for you. He was perfect. Remember when Jesus was lifted up on the cross and the Pharisees and teachers of the law mocked him saying, “If you are the Son of God, come down from there!” Jesus didn’t seek revenge on his enemies. I know that if you or I had the power to do it, we would have. We would have come down off that cross and struck those bad guys with lightning. But Jesus didn’t. Instead he stayed there, nailed to a tree, slowly dying, and paid for their sins. He never hated anyone or held a grudge. It would have been very easy to hate those people who rejected him as the Savior. It would have been very easy to hold a grudge against Judas or even Peter, who both betrayed him. He never spread nasty rumors about other people, and he could have, he knows all things. But... be perfect as I am perfect. He followed that rule to the letter.

Since we have not, the LORD says, “Let’s make an exchange. I’m going to put your sinful life on Jesus and take his sin-free, holy, perfect life and give it to you. I’m going to do this to free you from your slavery to sin, to Satan and to death. I am going to enslave my Son with the burden of your sin, your death and the sufferings of hell. And then he’s going to destroy Satan, death and sin by his death and resurrection.” And he has kept that promise to each and every one of you.

Luke records these words from your Lord, “**I have come to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, to release the oppressed.**” (Luke 4:18,19) Jesus came to do more than preach freedom and good news. He accomplished

that release for us. Through holy Baptism Christ has come into your life. Satan is no longer your master. Jesus is your Lord and master. Through baptism you receive Jesus' crushing victory over that ancient serpent. Sin no longer dominates your every word and action. Through the washing of water and the Word the Holy Spirit created in you the desire to speak and act for your Lord and Savior. Death no longer holds its terror over you. Through the waters of baptism Jesus Christ has brought you life eternal. Through his word he reminds you, "I am the LORD. This is what I have done for you." Through his Sacraments he does the same, "I am the LORD. This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins."

Let's say that you are that great supervisor at *Chick-fil-A* who treats his or her employees right. How will your employees feel about you? What will be their work attitude? In the same we when we look at all our LORD has done for us, since Christ has made us perfect, we will live for our LORD, we will obey his command and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Here are some ways we can do that... someone once said, "So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip." When you go home this morning, read James 3 and listen to how the apostle tells you to tame your tongue. Dust off your catechism and read Luther's explanation to the 8th commandment: Defend your neighbor. Speak well of them. Take their words and actions in kindest possible way. In regards to the matter of hatred and dislike of others...listen. I know that during our building project and stewardship campaign, there will be disagreements. We all have different personalities and different opinions. But remember who it is against whom you have unhealthy feelings for: a brother or sister who has been made perfect through the blood of Christ. Speak the truth in love. If someone does sin against you, Jesus tells you that instead of brooding and sulking over the matter, discuss it with your neighbor openly (Matt 18:15). You will save them from sin and yourself from sinful actions. King Solomon says in Prov 9:8, "Rebuke a wise man and he will love you." Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

The restaurant business is tough. Everyday people expect a high standard. The food must be great not just good every time it goes out to the table. Employees must be kind to the customer, and serve with patience and humility. That does not always happen. Being a Christian is tough business. Our employer expects perfection in everything that we do. We fail miserably everyday. But the LORD reminds us, "I was perfect for you. I am holy. I am the LORD. Now, live for me. Love you neighbor." We earnestly pray to the LORD to be faithful to his promise, to strengthen us through his Word and Sacrament to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. May the Holy Spirit grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.