

15th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B
September 13, 2009
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff , KY
Deuteronomy
4:1,2,6-8
Pastor Paul Horn

Practice Proper Arithmetic with God's Word
Do not add, do not subtract, keep the commandments

Hear now, O Israel , the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you. 6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." 7 What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? 8 And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

Did you know that in Kentucky , it is illegal to transport an ice cream cone in your pocket? What kind of fine would a police officer give me if I walked out of Baskin Robbins with a double fudge chocolate sugar cone in my blue jeans? It's just plain silly. We shake our heads and laugh and quickly dismiss these ridiculous laws.

But we do sit up and pay attention to laws that carry serious penalty. The Uniform Code of Military Justice, section 892. ART. 92. states that any person subject to this chapter who (1) violates or fails to obey any lawful general order or regulation; (2) having knowledge of any other lawful order issued by any member of the armed forces, which it is his duty to obey, fails to obey the order; or (3) is derelict in the performance of his duties; shall be punished as a court-martial may direct. An employee of the armed forces knows this law well and the severity of its consequences.

How about God's law? It's not silly. It's serious. There are severe consequences for those who fail to obey it. God even says in our lesson this morning, "Do not add to or subtract from my law." In our lesson this morning in Deuteronomy 4, Moses and the Israelites had just completed wandering in the Sinai Peninsula for 40 years. If you recall... the people of Israel did not trust the Israelite spies who had returned from the Promised Land, informing them that the inhabitants of Canaan were scared of the Israelites because they knew the LORD was with his people. For their failure to trust, God promised that this rebellious generation would not step foot inside the Promised Land. Now, 40 years later, Moses addresses their children and grandchildren who are about to cross the Jordan River to take possession of the land. Moses reminds the people

of God's laws. He reminds them to obey God's laws. He says, "If you obey these laws, you will live. So don't add or subtract from them." (vs1,2) Isn't that true – that if we listen and do God's commands, and not do our own thing, life will be better for the most part?

But what is at the heart of obeying God's commandments? What's the motivation? It's more than a matter of common sense. It's more than living a good, ordered life. Jesus said in the Gospel this morning from Mark 7, "These people (Pharisees – hypocrites) honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Jesus wants hearts that are motivated by his love for sinful human beings. The love the LORD showed his people Israel – his pardoning, his patience, his determination to keep his promise, would drive their obedience to obey his commands.

But like Paul Harvey, you know the rest of the story. Despite his goodness and mercy to them, Israel chose not to listen. In vs3-5 of Deuteronomy chapter 4 Moses reminds the people how their fathers and mothers disobeyed God and the ugly consequences that had followed. Since this is a family show, you can read Numbers 25 for yourselves tonight after the kids go to bed. It's somewhat graphic. To summarize, the nation of Moab seduced the Israelites into worshiping false gods and as a result 24,000 Israelites died from a plague. They added to God's First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods." But LORD, we want to worship these gods, too.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day added their own rules and regulations to God's laws. From the Gospel this morning in Mark 7, the Pharisees were complaining that Jesus' disciples didn't practice the "washing of hands," a tradition of the elders. These were meticulous rules invented by Jewish Rabbis to govern everyday life and burden the people. Jews today still subtract from God's Word by not recognizing the New Testament and deny that Jesus is the Son of God.

Even today religious cults add writings to the Scriptures: the book of Mormon, the New World translation from the Jehovah's Witness, the Koran of Islam. All of these religious groups take away from God's Word and teach that Jesus was just a man and not the Son of God. Other religious denominations bend and twist the Scriptures to "say what their itching ears want to hear." (2Tim 4:3,4) Preachers flood the minds of their people and tell them that they're basically good people and that God will excuse their sinful behaviors. Some preachers don't even talk about sin and the threat of God's punishment because after all, that will make you feel bad and we don't want to do that. They teach that God wants you to be successful in life. The Roman Catholic Church even teaches that people are saved not by faith alone, but by faith and good works you can earn heaven.

I'm not here to bash other denominations. I want to show you how serious this sin is against God's Word, when people add or subtract from his law, to show you how far away from the truth a person can stray, even to the point of denying Christ as true God.

What about for you? How well do you know God's law? How well do you understand the severity of its consequences when you add to or subtract from it? What's that? You say that you do not add or subtract from God's law? Let me ask you... are you currently holding a grudge against anyone? God says in his Fifth Commandment not to murder... and in his Word he tells us that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer. But you excuse it and protest, "But this is what they said/did to me!" Is that not adding to his law? When you give your offerings, and your time and abilities here at church are you giving "to the church" rather than giving back to the Lord? Do you give the leftovers rather than your firstfruits, the best of what you have? Isn't that adding and subtracting from what God says in his 1st, 3rd and 7th commandments, by putting yourself first, rather than him and his Word, and by stealing from him and being rich toward yourself? In the Second Lesson this morning from James 1:17-27 we were directed to "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." God's 8th Commandment tells us not to give false testimony against our neighbor which means not to gossip and speak hurtful words, but to defend and build up. Don't we add and subtract from this commandment when we try to excuse the words that come out our mouths by saying, "I didn't really mean that," or "I wasn't thinking," or, "I was really angry."

We do it, too, don't we? We add and subtract from God's laws and do our own thing, make our own excuses, or ignore God's law. But God's law shows us that we are law-breakers. God's law acts like a mirror. Just as the MPs at the gates of Fort Knox might pull you over and search your car, they will use a mirror to look under your vehicle to make sure there are no explosive devices hidden there. In the same way God's law exposes our sins. The MPs at Fort Knox will quickly arrest you if they find a block of C4 packed under your vehicle and the JAG will prosecute you to fullest extent of the law, which means you'll be locked up for a long time. For us who break God's law, he demands that we be punished to the fullest extent of his law; which means eternal death, locked up forever in the gloomy dungeons reserved for Satan and his angels.

Not too long ago a man by the name of Bernie Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison. His two sons discovered that he had been defrauding thousands of investors of billions of dollars. Client loses are estimated at \$65 billion. That's more money than any of us can fathom. Imagine that you are Mr. Madoff. There you are in the courtroom, convicted, sentenced, ready to be hauled off by the bailiff. But a man bursts into the courtroom and shouts, "I will take his place. I will sit in prison for him. I will even pay back the money he owes those investors." The bailiff and the judge would look at each other and laugh. No one would ever think of doing such an act. You are the one who caused so much grief. You are the one who deserves to be punished for your actions. And yet, this is what Jesus has done for all of you, even for Bernie Madoff.

Isaiah 53:5 says, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed." Jesus endured the suffering of hell, our punishment, taking it away from us. The wrath and anger of God the Father against our guilt of adding and subtracting from God's Word caused Jesus to be crushed, not us. Why did he do it? He did it because he

loves you, because he did not want to see you sit in death's prison forever, because he wants you to be with him forever.

Not only did your Savior Jesus suffer and die in your place, he obeyed the law of God. Not once did he add or subtract from God's commandments, but was a perfect law keeper. Jesus credits your account with his perfect life. Paul says in 2Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God."

Do you see how God's law and the gospel work hand in hand? The law acts as a mirror and shows us our sin, it exposes us. The gospel, the good news message of Jesus, shows us our Savior and what he has done to save us from our sins. The law returns, this time acting as a guide, like a road map. It shows me how to get to where God wants me to go. It guides me. But it cannot get me there, just as a GPS device cannot make my car go. It needs fuel. The gospel is the gasoline needed to power the vehicle. The gospel alone can and does energize me and you to move in the direction God shows us through his law.

Someone once said, "True obedience to God's laws has no lead in its heels." Now that we have heard the gospel and have taken it to heart, we will "get the lead out." Motivated by the good news of Jesus, we will become familiar with all of God's law by listening to his Word. We will then do what his law requires of us. We will not add nor will we subtract from God's laws to suit our own sinful desires. We will be law-keepers out of thanksgiving for his Son Jesus.

Did you know that it is illegal for pigeons to fly over Bellevue , Kentucky ? Did you know that the city of Frankfort , Kentucky makes it against the law the shoot off a policeman's tie? Those are silly laws. Who's going to enforce them? Our God's law are not silly. They carry serious consequences when we fail to obey them. Thankfully, his Son Jesus obeyed them all perfectly in our place. Thankfully, he took the punishment as our substitute. We will follow his laws motivated by his gospel. May he grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.