

The Fourth Commandment — Obedience (Gloria In Excelsis, Epistle, And Gospel).

Text: Exo 20:12

1) The Gloria in excelsis

Suggested Hymns:

2) The Gospel

264, 171 R&S, 262, 294, 266

3) The Epistle

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Exodus 20:12, ¹² *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

You come to church and worship God because you are children of God, and you know that you are most blessed when you are with God's family in the Father's house. Over the last three Sundays we have been speaking about the Ten Commandments, the Law of God.

Laws are meant to be obeyed, and the Laws of God are certainly no exception. God intends that His will should be done — especially by us who more than any other people know, what that will is, and why we should do what God says.

So we have said on previous Sundays that God must be loved and trusted above all things, that His name must be kept holy, and that His day, Sunday should be used as a day of worship and rest.

We come now to the Fourth Commandment, which says that God has not only given us laws directly from Himself but that He has also ordained certain human agents who are to announce these laws. They are to do everything they can to see to it that these laws are kept.

These human agents warn of the punishment in store for the transgressor, but they also promise blessings for the obedient. In this respect you may think of the Australia Day awards or something similar.

These people who are God's mouthpieces on earth are the parents in the home, the officers of the state (e.g. Policemen and teachers), and the pastors of the church. These people stand in the place of God who gave the Ten Commandments.

That is why they are to be obeyed. When the people whom God has placed over us tell us what to do, they are not simply informing us of their own ideas of how things should be done, but they command us in the name of the Lord Most High.

When father or mother tell a child to do some chore in the house, they are not expressing some arbitrary whim, but they are training the child to observe God's Word, *If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.*¹

When the Government tells us not to kill or steal or commit adultery, it is simply repeating the commands of God. The pastors of the church do the same when they say that we must pray, come to church, receive the sacrament, etc.

When school-teachers warn us not to cheat while taking a test, they are only applying God's law about being honest. Whenever, then, any of us, young or old, are called on to obey our superiors, we must observe their rules as those of God Himself.

When we disobey, either in the home, the church, or the state, we are dishonouring God from whom all just laws proceed. God speaks to us through people in positions of authority, except, of course, if these people would command us to do something contrary to His Word.

Now, none of us by nature likes to be obedient. We don't usually enjoy being told what to do, and still less do we take pleasure in doing it. We like to be free and independent and to live as we, and not someone else, think is proper.

To be ordered about makes us resentful. Sometimes we refuse to do what we are asked to, and do the things we are asked not to. Even the apostle Paul discovered himself to be like this. Yet at the same time, if we have any sense at all, we realise that rebellion is not good.

It is indeed very foolish to cast aside what generations of people have found to be wise. You will only hurt yourself. What is more, such behaviour hurts the Father of love, who gave us His laws, not because He enjoyed ordering His creatures about but because He wanted them to be happy and to live forever with Him.

What, then, shall we do about this? On the one hand, we discover ourselves to be rebels, impatient of restriction and intolerant of any will but our own.

But on the other hand, we know deep down in our hearts that to be like this is very stupid. Caught between these two feelings, the great apostle exclaimed that he was a wretched man indeed and asked who would deliver him from his dilemma.

The answer that he found may be ours too, so let us examine how the church constantly gives it to us. For the church makes plain the only possible path to obedience. She instructs us concerning it through the liturgy. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Gloria In Excelsis

Toward the beginning of every Worship Service the Gloria in Excelsis is sung. Before the sixth century, historians tell us, this was not sung at every Service but only at the midnight Christmas Communion. No doubt you can guess at the reason for this. The Gloria begins with the words of the angels' song heard by the shepherds the night our Saviour was born, "*Gloria to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*"²

Even today each singing of these words is a reminder of Christmas and the great miracle of God descending from heaven to become Man. At every celebration of Holy Communion we think of this, not just at Christmas, for the story is too wonderful to be confined to any one day.

It is well, too, that we are reminded of it so repeatedly, for Christ's becoming Man indicates to us the first step to obedience. Why is it that children sometimes disobey their parents and that older people also transgress the laws of God and of man?

Is it not because we think that we are well able to conduct our own affairs without any advice or interference from someone else? Another name for this is pride: that mistaken idea that oneself is the center of the universe, about whom everything else should revolve.

Small babies have that notion, and many people never grow out of it. They remain disobedient to everything but their own desires. What they want is the most important thing. They never learn that there are other people to be considered, above them all, the God whose will, must be done. The process of growing up is

largely a matter of becoming less and less self-centred and more and more God-centred and other-people-centred.

It is exactly this of which the great *Gloria* speaks. Why did the Son of God humble Himself to be born of a woman and to live and die on this earth? Certainly Jesus did not do it to please Himself; it was no pleasure for Him to be in this sin-cursed world and to suffer what He did in Gethsemane and on Calvary.

The reason, then, must have been what the Bible states it to be. Jesus was obedient to the will of His Father, and He Himself loved those whom He came to redeem. There was no pride in Him, no insistence on His own rights, no childish and selfish rebellion against the necessity of obeying a higher law than His own pleasure.

All this Christ put away from Him, and what was left was only an infinite humility which took our yoke upon Himself so that we might be free of it at last. This was the will of the Father of love, and our blessed Lord did not rebel against it. This is the first part of the *Gloria*, the part which the angels sang on the night Christ was born.

The second part is a kind of *Kyrie* (Lord have mercy!), and since we spoke at some length about the *Kyrie* last time, not a great deal need to be said about this section. But this should be said, in it the atonement is spoken of, just as the incarnation is the subject of the first part. So the two great truths about our Saviour are put together, namely, His wonderful birth and His saving death.

And if the former was an act of humiliation, the latter is even more so. In both, Christ demonstrated His great faithfulness to a higher law than His own pleasure. Scripture says in Philippians 2:7-8 ⁷ *but [He] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.* ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*

How different is this from the self-centred impulses that drive us to be wilful, irritable, and rebellious! The image of the cross shames us when we become impatient of restraint. Our Lord was not like that. And it is because people are not like Him that they become unhappy and bring upon themselves all sorts of evil consequences like war, which plunges the whole world into suffering.

If people would follow Christ's way of obeying God and serving their fellow neighbour, war would never occur. Nor would any of us ever feel inwardly disquieted if Jesus' ideals were ours. There is a difference between us and Christ, that is for sure.

And that is the reason why we cry, in the second part of the Gloria in Excelsis, *"Thou who takest away the sin of the world, have mercy on us. Thou who takest away the sin of the world, receive our prayer. Thou who sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us."*

Now, this prayer for mercy is one that will surely be heard. For our Lord is no longer a humble carpenter; no longer does He hang on a cross. He sits at the right hand of God. He is the holy Lord. Therefore we respond by chanting, *"For Thou only art holy, Thou only art the Lord, Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Spirit, art most high in the glory of God the Father."*

This is to say that from His throne in heaven Christ is in a position to grant our requests. His is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. He is not any more the meek and patient Sufferer who will not defend Himself when men seize Him and drive nails through His hands and feet. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess.

As such Christ pours out His strength to those who acknowledge Him now, giving them power to become the sons of God. The obedience which would not be possible for them unaided is supplied by the Holy Spirit which He sends. ***"Without Me,"*** Jesus said, ***"You can do nothing."***³ But the apostle spoke of the other side of it, ***"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."***⁴ Through our Lord we can be obedient sons of God. There is no other way.

Think, too, of what happened to Christ after His time of obedience was over. ***"He learned obedience by the things which He suffered,"***⁵ and so must you. But when the suffering and the death were ended, came the resurrection and the glory.

This is the very opposite of what happens to the children of disobedience. The reformatories and the prisons are full of them. The bodies of many such people lie at the bottoms of rivers, in gutters, and in graves that are as ugly as their own lives were. The path of disobedience always goes downward.

It was because God knew this that He gave us the Fourth Commandment because His gracious intention is that we should always be going up, and the

example of our Lord shows us how it may be done. He, ***“for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”***⁶ It is always that way.

If you want joy, — true joy, not the fake kind that people so easily mistake for the real thing — you must be ready to pay a price for it, as a mother must suffer before she knows the joy of having brought a baby into the world.

Likewise, if you want to be in a position of honour and authority, you must first learn to take orders. Every soldier knows that. The Christian soldier knows it even better because he has seen how it works in Christ. Like the Son of God, we sons of God must bear the cross before we wear the crown. We must obey before we can command. We must keep the law of love before we can hear the ***“Well done”*** of the Master.

2. The Gospel

Now the Christ who once was here and is now enthroned in glory has left behind certain instructions to be followed by all who are His. These are written down in a book, and every Sunday parts of this book are read in church. The two New Testament lessons that we read are called the Epistle and the Gospel.

The Gospel is the more important of the two, because the church could announce the commandments of God and tell people to obey them again and again, but nobody would do it unless they did it for the very reason the Gospel brings home to us.

The Gospel is the “Good News” that ***God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.***⁸ In other words, it sets before us a love the like of which has never before or since been seen on this earth.

People may respond to this Love by loving in return, Jesus who first loved us, or they may turn away from it and forget it — or try to. They may be obedient or disobedient to the heavenly vision, and it makes all the difference in the world which course they take.

For the message of the Gospel is that in Christ God has done all that He could possibly do for our redemption. He has poured out all His grace, He has emptied Himself of every ounce of mercy. If, then, a person does not receive this, if he refuses to believe in the Christ that died, there is no hope for him.

There just is no more love; every last bit of it is in Christ. Nothing remains but the Judgment. Hell is something which a person chooses by not having faith in Christ. But the offer is still open to all who are alive. Sunday after Sunday, day after day, the church preaches the Gospel. In the Saviour's name she invites all people to come to Him and find rest for their souls.

It is the constant theme of all her teaching, for on this depends man's eternal destiny. That is why the reading of the Gospel is always attended by special ceremony. The people stand when it is read. They sing, "*Glory be to Thee, O Lord,*" at the beginning and, "*Praise be to Thee, O Christ,*" at the end.

Here is the record of the very works of the Saviour of the world, and nothing is of higher importance than to hear it, believe it, and be saved. Apart from it one cannot even make a beginning at keeping the commandments.

The first thing, as Luther repeatedly says, *is to love God*. We shall never obey properly if we are driven to it, but only if we want to out of respect for the one who commands us. God, too, will not be obeyed unless He is loved; and He will not be loved unless the Gospel of His love has been accepted in faith and becomes the centre of our living, as St. John said, "***Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.***"

3. The Epistle

Even so, even with the Christ of the Gospel in our hearts, the requirement of obedience seems too great for us. It is indeed. No person except Christ has ever kept the commandments perfectly. But some who were very close to Christ discovered how to live in spite of this repeated failure. They knew what to do about their sins, and they carried out victoriously the tasks which God had given them.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, some of these men wrote small books which are called the New Testament Epistles, and a part of their writings is read at every Worship Service.

The Epistle is no less God's Word than the Gospel; yet there is a certain humanness about it which is most encouraging to us who try to live like God's children but constantly fail. In the Epistles is found not only a divinely sent message, but also the record of how the saints who wrote these letters met the same difficulties that confront us and how they triumphed over them.

You must not think of St. Paul, St. James, St. John, and the rest of the Apostles as perfect people. They were not. They were sinners like ourselves. They had the same inner conflicts, and they lived in the same evil world. They were not supermen; they were ordinary mortals.

Some were uneducated, and all of them made mistakes. Yet we call them saints today, and their writings have been read in the churches every day for almost two thousand years. They are the greatest men of history. What made them so? Most of all, that they kept their eye on what was truly great. They were not people who don't know what they want. They had seen supreme greatness, a greatness so infinitely wonderful that they perceived in it nothing less than the holiness of God Himself.

After seeing this, they no longer bothered about other things. The one passion that ruled their lives was to be like Christ, to do His work, to build His church, and to live in His everlasting kingdom. As they looked at Him, loved Him, were fed by Him in the holy sacrament, they learned what a man may become if only he will let God take hold of his life.

In Jesus was God to be adored; in Jesus was also man to be imitated. In glad thankfulness for the privilege of being His brothers and co-workers, who might call His Father their Father and who might be with Him in the Father's house at the last, they strove to be like Him, to have His virtues for their own, namely, love, joy, peace, gentleness, strength, self-sacrifice, faith, and hope.

The Epistle, then, suggests to us to follow the path they took, and it assures us that such a life is not impossible, for these men have lived it. Listen to it as it is read; listen to it attentively. Remember what someone wrote to the Hebrew Christians long ago, ***"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."***¹⁰

So the church teaches us how to be obedient children, first, by announcing to us the Gospel of the love of God poured out in Christ, our Saviour. And second, by setting before our eyes the example of Christ, how He was born in humility and died in shame that He might do the Father's will and bring us to God. And finally,

by reminding us of people of past times who were so filled with the wonder of this Gospel that they literally lived and died for Jesus.

In the pledge that we shall speak after the offering we shall say to God that we propose to do the same. May He give us grace to fulfil it! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 2 Thessalonians 3:10

² Luke 2:14

³ John 15:5

⁴ Philippians 4:13

⁵ Hebrews 5:8

⁶ Hebrews 12:2

⁷ Matthew 25:21

⁸ John 3:16

⁹ 1 John 4:11

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:1-2