

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
4 September, Anno Domini 2022
2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Baptized of the Lord,

There is a strange paradox in the proper distinction between the holy Law of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Both are God's Word. Both are given for all people. But the paradox, which St. Paul speaks of in his second letter to the Corinthian Christians, lies in how they are given. And the paradox is actually central to helping us make the proper distinction between the two and apply them faithfully. And we must be trained by the Holy Spirit to distinguish and apply them faithfully in our own lives and in the lives of others. If we do not, if we are not careful with these two words from God, then we will be led away from salvation either through despair or pride.

First, notice the Law. God had just gotten glory over Pharaoh and the Egyptians by bringing ten devastating plagues upon Egypt, demonstrating that He alone is the true God, not Pharaoh or the false gods of Egypt. God is sincere when He says that He will not share His glory with another. He led Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground and used those same waters to destroy hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host.

At God's command, Israel then proceeded to Mt. Sinai. This is what they found there: "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled... Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly." (Exodus 19:16,18) This was an act of mercy. For an unholy, unrighteous sinner to look upon God's face was death. God told Moses "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." (Exodus 33:20)

What a glorious sight! Not the kind of glorious that brought excitement but the kind of glorious that melts the heart and strikes terror into your soul. The Law was not given in peace. It was given under the threat of death. This is no coincidence, of course. The Law brings terror and death. There can be no peace when sinners come into contact with the Law and God's holiness. There is only death. When we encounter the Law, we return to Sinai and we are confronted with the perfect holiness of God. And that same Law shines like a million candle power flashlight right down into the darkest recesses of our minds and hearts and reveals just how unholy, impure,

and wicked we are. Whatever good we thought we were can only melt in the heat of the pure fire of the Commandments. The Law always accuses you and its accusations are always true. And because the Law always accuses, it is nothing more than a minister of death, a constant reminder of the burning hot righteous anger of God which should rightly destroy you and cast you into eternal punishment. This minister of death came with such glory that the Israelites couldn't even look at its reflection in Moses' face after he came down from the mountain.

Because of the great spectacle that attended the giving of the Law, sinful minds remain captivated by it, assuming that surely something given with such incredible signs of power and majesty must be the means of our salvation. This must be the highest Word from God because of the great glory with which it was given. Glory-centric reason teaches that God wouldn't give a Law that was impossible to keep. Surely, that would make Him unjust. We must be able to summon up the strength in order to do our very best and demonstrate our good intentions. Surely, we must be able by our works to glorify ourselves before God and recommend ourselves to Him.

And so we sweat and toil and strain to keep the Law. We lust after it in the empty hope that it will bring us salvation. Our reason and wisdom pummel us with the Law and drive us with whips, promising that if we just try a little harder we will be able to obey. "Do this" the Law thunders and we vainly cry out "I will do it!" We stand in awe of the perfection of the Law and its lofty demands and foolishly imagine that we can keep it.

Yet, as the apostle teaches from the Holy Spirit, all the glory and splendor that attended the giving of the Ten Commandments, the ministry of death that is satisfied with nothing short of perfection, that brings terror to guilty consciences, that glory is no glory at all when compared with the glory of the Gospel! That's the paradox. As we measure glory, the full revelation of the Gospel doesn't seem all that glorious, certainly not as glorious as Mt. Sinai. If the angels of heaven had not filled the night sky when the Lord Jesus Christ drew His first infant breath, we wouldn't have given a second thought to the mother and her baby in the stall that night.

And that is true of the vast majority of our Savior's earthly ministry. It was a ministry defined by humility, compassion, and gentleness. With the exception of a few punctuated events, there wasn't much glorious about Jesus. The prophet Isaiah even said "He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him." (Isaiah 53:2) The divine nature didn't shoot out from Jesus like a bright light. He didn't ride around in a golden chariot wearing a crown and carrying a magic scepter. He didn't live a celebrity life. Rather, the Son of Man had no place to lay His head. He was mocked. He was rejected. He was hated by the most powerful

and seemingly religious people of the day. His attendants were fishermen and tax collectors. He sat in the midst of the most despised sinners of the day and called them His friends. And to cap it all off, He was nailed up on a cross as a blasphemer and an enemy of the state. By every earthly measure, the life and ministry of Jesus were anything but glorious.

This is the paradox. That thing that by every outward measure has no glory, God calls the most glorious of all things. Indeed, the glory of the work of Jesus is a glory that so far surpasses the glory of Mt. Sinai that the glory of Mt. Sinai might as well be no glory at all. That is because what Jesus did saves sinners from eternal death - taking human flesh into the divine nature, walking in perfect obedience to the Law, drawing sinners to repent and believe in the promised atonement of God, dying the death of one condemned by God and man. The quaking of Mt. Sinai only brought terror and trapped all men hopelessly in death and the grave. But the quaking of Mt. Golgotha when salvation was accomplished, when the sin of the world was atoned for, and the Son of God hung lifeless from the cross, that quaking opened graves and gave life to those whom Sinai had killed. The Law could never do that. It can only put sinners in the grave.

God takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner - not in yours or anyone else's. This is true glory, the true glory of God! That God is merciful and through the incarnation and humiliation of His Son, God has reconciled the world to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us. Instead, laying them all against the innocence and holiness of His only Son, letting Him bear the terrible burden of God's righteous wrath and judgment, which the Son did willingly and gladly for the joy of saving you. Is there anything more glorious, than the holy God who would be justified in consuming us sinners in His wrath, instead, drawing near to us in Jesus, joining Himself to us, and forgiving us, raising us from the dead?

This is glory. This is the glory that causes the angelic host to sing - peace between man and God such that man can approach God in the joy of God's mercy, such that man can look upon the face of God by looking at the face of Jesus, such that all of the Law's accusations, as true as they are, no longer stand against us because we have been washed in the Blood of Lamb, cleansed in the waters of Holy Baptism. Now, instead of cowering and trembling in terror because we have in every way failed to serve our Lord, we are invited to sit at the Lord's table and be served by Him, to feast on the most precious heavenly food of our Savior's Body and Blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. So glorious is this good news that God did not entrust it to a mediator as He did the Law, giving it to Moses by an angel. Instead, He Himself, with His own lips and His own voice, came to man to proclaim the Gospel, the forgiveness of all sin through His own death.

By this paradox, then, we are better able to behold what is truly glorious in this world. It is not, like Mt. Sinai, great shows of power and strength or causing others to stand in awe of you. It is not personal accomplishment or the ability to make others conform to your will. That is not glory, not godly glory. That is weakness and death because it is driven from the belief that, fundamentally, God is impressed by you as well. Rather, humiliation, servitude, weakness, selflessness - these are truly glorious in the sight of God - bearing your cross patiently in faith, seeking no glory for yourself (which the world treasures above everything else), pouring out your life to raise up the fallen, to strengthen the weak, to comfort the hurting, to be weak and foolish before God so that He may show His perfect power through your weakness.

So do not be dismayed by the glory of the Law or deceived into thinking that it can help you. Repent in its presence and then behold the true glory of God, the crucified Jesus, your Savior who has forgiven you all your sins.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pr. Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.