

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
Amen.

We have some very interesting readings today. First off, Jesus saying, "If you don't hate your mom and your dad, your brothers and sisters, and anybody else including your own life, you cannot be my disciple." That sounds a little bit harsh and a little bit confusing. I thought Jesus was about loving your neighbor. We have Paul in the Book of Philemon, and that is the entire book, all 21 verses. Paul is writing to Philemon because one of Philemon's slaves ran away and ended up connecting with Paul somehow and became a Christian under Paul and became one of Paul's great companions. But through the process of becoming a Christian, Onesimus realizes and Paul realizes that he should go back to his master. He abandoned his first duty and calling. And so Paul is encouraging Philemon to love Onesimus, to forgive Onesimus, and to bring him back as not just a slave but a brother. Well, that seems to go completely counter to Jesus saying, "You got to hate everybody."

Okay, we need to understand a few things. First, I was reminded of a statement one of my professors used to say, Professor Gibbs. He says, "You need to understand this. Jesus exaggerates. He takes something and He blows it up as big as it possibly can be to prove a point." So let's get to the point of what Jesus is trying to say. And recently I saw an example of this, a YouTube video I was watching about a Muslim individual who started to read the Bible and realized that the Bible was true and he was believing in Jesus Christ, the Word of God was affecting him. But he knew that if he confessed Jesus Christ before his family, he was going to get cut off. They would shun him. In fact, I heard of even one family that had a literal burial service for the individual because they had become a Christian. They were dead to them. So if this person loved his family more than his willingness to follow Christ, he would've lost his faith because he would've denied Christ rather than lose his family.

And then, of course, think of all the martyrs that we hear about in the early Christian Church, the martyrs who had a choice. Deny Christ or get your head cut off. Deny Christ or be burned at the stake. Deny Christ or be thrown to the lions. Do I love my own life enough to deny Christ or do I love Christ enough to give up my life? See, following God is not always going to be easy or pleasant.

Now, we have not come to the point of shedding our blood in America, but there are martyrs for the faith. To this day, there have been people who have been killed for the only one reason, that they'd confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. People have been killed for that confession since Stefan to this day. Never has there been a time in history where Christians have not been persecuted and killed for their faith. This is the cost that we are called to examine. Just like somebody building a tower or

going to war, count the cost. What is the cost? It could be your very life. And in some sense it always is your very life because now when you confess Christ, your life is no longer your own to do as you please. It is now, you are called now to conform your life to the Word of God, to the commandments of God, which is what the Old Testament is talking about. God is calling the people. He has saved the people and now He is telling them they're to obey Him and to obey His commands so that they might dwell in the land.

Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to live a long life in the physical land, but the land that was promised to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, it was not only the physical land of Israel. But more importantly it was the Promised Land that Christ has been building for us that we might dwell with Him forever. That's the land that they were to live long in. That's the land where we are all going to live forever in. It's what He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to all of us. But we are called to obey His commands, to follow His rules and statutes, to take up our cross.

Now we have to understand the motivation behind doing that, and we have to get the horse before the cart. To obey God and to follow His commands is not earning salvation. We need to understand that first. You see, "Faith without works is dead," as James says. But it doesn't mean that your works earn faith or keep faith or bring about your faith. No, it's this. Because you have already been given faith. The natural reaction to that gift is to obey God and to serve Him and to do good works. It is a natural outflowing of your salvation. If we don't get that right, we get everything else confused.

Even the 10 Commandments, the 10 words of God, they start out not with, "You should have no other gods." But the sentence right before that is, "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." In other words, "I have saved you. Now that you are saved, now that you are my people, that I have called you and chosen you as my children, now my children will have no other gods. They will not misuse my name. They will honor the Sabbath day." In other words, it is a natural flowing out of our faith that is given to us as a gift. But we are called to obey God and to serve Him.

Now we could believe in Jesus Christ and then do absolutely nothing. And hopefully we would be saved by the small spark that is still left or the bent reed that's not completely broken off by His word being planted in our hearts. But that faith will do nothing for us or for our neighbors in this world. You have everything that God has promised. You have peace, you have mercy, you have forgiveness of sins, you have gentleness, kindness, self-control, all the fruit of the spirit. All of that is yours, not because you have earned it or done anything for it because it is a gift given to you. But if you don't exercise those gifts, if you don't learn to

understand what those gifts mean in your life, they don't really help you or help your neighbor. It's like if you give a child a computer and never teach them how to operate it, it doesn't do them any good. It just sits on the shelf.

They have the gift, but it's not doing anything. It's the same for us. You have these gifts. What are you going to do with them? How are you going to use them for what purpose? And God has given you a purpose to use them, to serve your neighbor, to spread the word of God to those around you, to be examples of His love and mercy in your life, and also to make your life a little more peaceful and a little more joyful and a little more hopeful. And also to challenge you, to change your behavior from your own personal desires to the will of God, to challenge you in those most difficult of situations, to do better, to speak better, to think better.

Now, I'm not saying that's easy. In fact, just yesterday for that matter, I always use the example of driving on 301 or 75. You've heard that example before. So what happened to me? I'm driving and I'm trying to merge into a lane and they won't let me in. And of course the first thought in my mind is not something I can share from the pulpit. But the second thought was, "Okay, Lord, teach me your ways. Give me your peace. Forgive them for they know not what they do."

But it forced me to think beyond my initial desire, my personal selfish desire. The Word of God forced me and pushed me to think about Him and His will in my life. If we can forgive the driver next to us, how much more peaceful would our lives be if we don't get upset at everything that happens? And also think about even more challenging situations in your life, a difficult diagnosis, a loss of a job, a loss of a loved one, any other stress or trials in your life. How do you manage them? How do you deal with them? How do you react to them?

Well, if you're selfish and self-centered, you react in whatever way feels right at the time. But if the Word of God has been dwelling within you richly, then your response can be one of joy and thanksgiving and peace. And most importantly, it can be a witness to those around you, that even though you've lost your brother and sister or someone else because of your faith in the way that you live, in the good that you do, in the desire to follow after God, you might draw them back in Christ, to be your brothers and sisters in Christ. Just like Onesimus was brought back to his master Philemon, not because of anything that he did, but because of what God did in him, converting him and changing him so that he is willing to then go back to his master and be a slave once more.

Now, you might say, what in the world does slavery and master have to do with us today? But what it does, it comes down to the table of duties in the small catechism. The table of duties are a list of scripture passages that tell us how we are called to live and obey God in our vocation as mother or father, sister or brother, child or parent, citizen or ruler, employee, employer, pastor, congregation,

young, old. We are given these passages to show us how we are called to live, how we are called to do good works in the life that we are living right now. See, we don't have to be creative and try and figure out some new ministry in order to do good works before God. Are you a father? Then be a good father unto the Lord. Are you a child? Then be a good child unto the Lord. And in the case of Onesimus, a slave and a master equates very simply to employer and employee.

Paul wrote to Philemon to encourage Philemon to welcome Onesimus back in love and not to punish him for the wrong that he had done, to recognize that Onesimus had become a brother in Christ and that Philemon, even though he was still Onesimus's master, employer, he could treat Onesimus with respect and love. And Onesimus could then come back and serve his master with joy as unto the Lord.

Now, how about for us? If we are an employer, good work following God's command, treat our employees with respect and dignity, pay them what they deserve. If we are employee, how do we serve God and follow His will? Do the work that we are called to do with the utmost of energy and do it as if unto the Lord. If we are a parent, we could coerce our children to do things and sometimes we have to, but the child doesn't necessarily do it willingly when they're coerced. We don't enjoy it. If we have to tell our child, "Go do the dishes," and they go, "Oh fine, I'll do the dishes." Well, that brings no joy to anybody and it benefits no one really. But the parent desires that the child learns the joy and the satisfaction of a job well done, of service to the greater good and demonstrating their love for each other.

And that is what we are called to do each and every day in each and every encounter that we have. We are called to obey God and His commandments. That is important for us to do, not because we must in order to be saved. Like, okay, you'd better go to church or else. I'm not sure you're going to get a whole lot of benefit out of that. If you're going there, "Well, fine, I got to go to church. I'll sit there and listen to the pastor, but I don't care," you're not really going to get a whole lot of benefit from that. But if you go joyfully to hear the Word of God, that is a benefit to you and a benefit to your neighbor as you witness to them the joy of your salvation and the joy of being able to gather together with fellow Christians and receive the gifts that God has promised, forgiveness of sins, life everlasting, peace that surpasses all understanding.

So yes, obey God. Follow his commandments. Try to be better today than you were yesterday. These are all good and important things to do, but do them not because you have to, but because God has already given you such wonderful and amazing things that this is your opportunity to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true. May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always now and forevermore unto life everlasting. Amen.

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