

Joshua 8:30-35

August 1, 2021

The Blessing and the Curse

We are going to Joshua chapter 8 today.

There are a lot of people who make ruin of their faith and Christian life. Who start out well, who seem to grow, who make wise decisions, but then reach a crisis point where they deny or give up on the Lord. Sometimes dramatically so.

There are two main types of situations when people might forsake Jesus and make shipwreck of their lives. Proverbs 30:7-9 says it like this:

**Proverbs 30:7-9 “Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die:
8 Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that is needful for me,9 lest I be full and deny you
and say, “Who is the LORD?”or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my
God.**

There’s a risk when we are poor and desperate and stressed out. Life isn’t going how we wanted, we don’t have enough to get by, we don’t have the life we thought we would have when we were young and optimistic, life following Jesus hasn’t gone as well as we had hoped, we’re terrified about what the future holds, and in that moment of want and poverty, and faced with the choice of trusting the Lord or taking matters into our own hands, we forsake the Lord and sin to secure ourselves. We steal and profane the name of God.

But there’s another season of temptation that we might not expect, the time when things are going well: you got into the right school, the career is on track, you got the house, you got the family, you can afford some recreation on the weekends, and the future looks secure. You look around and say, “I really don’t need anything.”

And the risk then is that we (as Proverbs says) become full and deny Him. God was a priority when we needed him to build a life: to find a spouse, to get into the college, to get the job, to graduate, to start the business, to take the risk. He was a priority then when we were praying for his blessings, but then once we have His blessings and don't sense our need for Him, we deny Him.

Maybe we out and out deny Him and deconstruct our faith like the cool kids around us, but more often we deny Him with our priorities. We'd still say we're Christians, we just don't think much about Him. We give in to more temptation. We live lives without Christ at the center. We allow our prosperity to wean us from Jesus.

But we're here because we don't want that. We don't want that for ourselves or for our families. We're here on a Sunday morning in the summer in a pandemic to not forget the Lord. To start our weeks by worshipping Him with His people. To show our children He's the first thing in our lives by making His worship the first thing in our weeks. To be reminded of how important He is. We don't want to deny Him. We don't want the pressure of our poverty or the subtle allurements of our prosperity to draw us away from Christ.

And in Joshua 8, Israel is now, for the first time, prospering.

This passage is what one commentator calls the pinnacle of Joshua.¹ Another called it the "high water mark" in redemptive history.² This is a big moment for these people.

God had promised them the promised land. They took Jericho. They lost to Ai because of hidden sin, but then once that was resolved they circled back around and won that battle, too. Now they were really rolling and beginning to take the land.

And God had told them this day would come. They had been promised this land hundreds of years ago. They got a flat tire on the way there and had to spend 400 years in Egypt and 40 years wandering in the wilderness. But now they're finally there.

They are going to enter into a new era of prosperity, owning a land that flows with milk and honey. But it would also be a new era of temptation: the temptation to be full and deny the Lord.

¹A. Gelin, *Josue*, p. 57.

² Kim Riddlebarger

There would be surrounding nations with gods and worship practices that would allure them.³ They'd feel secure and rich, and in need of nothing, and there would be real temptation to forget the Lord.

And in Joshua 8, God gives them, and by extension, us, some guidance on how they could face the temptations of prosperity and success and security. He was going to chisel in stone the guide for their lives so that they could stay on the straight and narrow.

God had actually told them through Moses what they were supposed to do once they came into the land - they had been prepared for this day before Joshua became the leader:

Deuteronomy 27 “2 And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. 3 And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you. 4 And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. 5 And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; 6 you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, 7 and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God. 8 And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly.”

He says, “When you come into the land, yes, throw a party - rejoice before the Lord your God. It's good to enjoy and be thankful for the good things God has done for you. When God gives you a good thing or a good season, you can rejoice in it without guilt or sorrow.

³ Deuteronomy 18:9-13 “9“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. 10There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, e anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer 11or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, 12for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. 13You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, 14for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

And worship, offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, give credit where credit is due for your success.

And,” He says, “carve God’s law into stone and display it on a mountain.”

So they were to take the law of God, the commands God had given his people, put it on stone on a mountainside. They were to display it for all, put it above all. They were to make it permanent so that even when they went through times when their priests denied the law, it was displayed for all to see. It made it public so there was no excuse for sin. This made it prominent so that if people entered the land they’d see the law of God that governed them.

One of the keys to not forsaking God in our prosperity is to be continually reminded of God’s word and God’s commands. Make them prominent. Don’t get away from reading the scriptures, from gathering to hear them taught, carving them into your schedule. Let God’s commands have the prominent place.

So Joshua did what he was told to do:

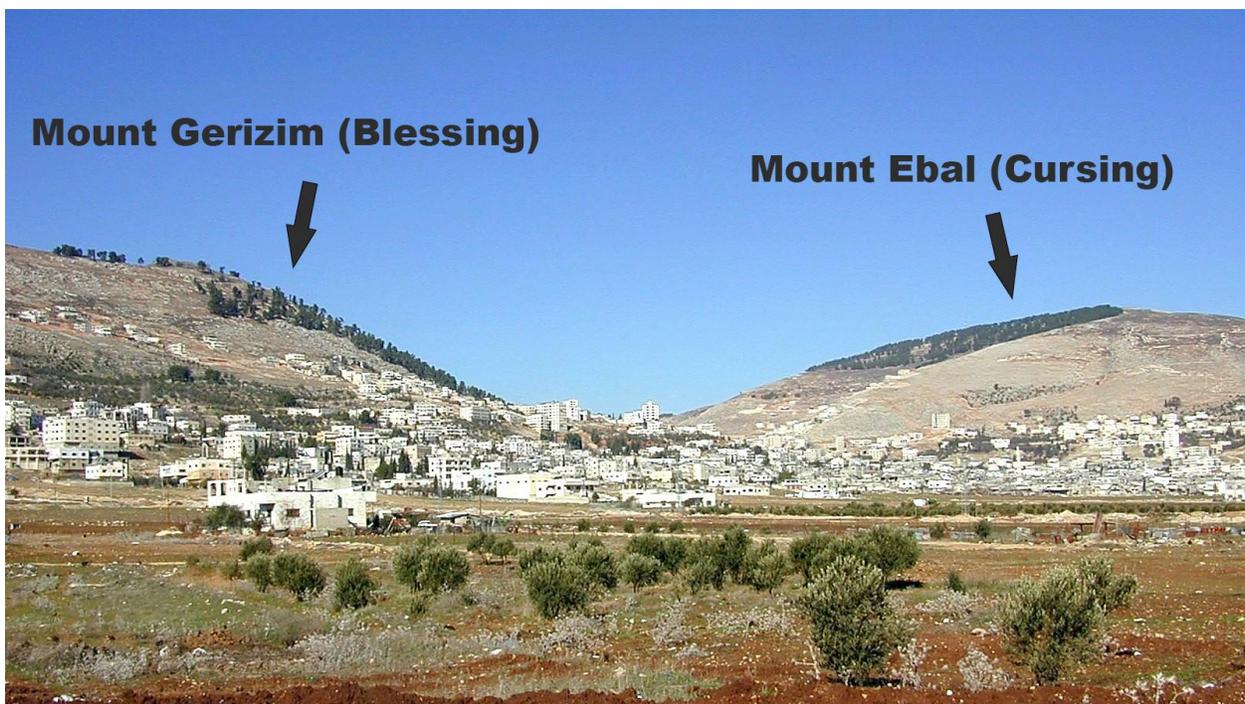
Joshua 8 “30 At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, 31 just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, “an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.” And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings. 32 And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. 33 And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. 34 And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. 35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

So Joshua makes an altar. It was supposed to be a rustic temporary one, not one carved out of stone but built out of uncut stones. (This anticipated a more permanent and enduring altar, Jesus, who would be the final sacrifice.)

This altar was to be a temporary piece of furniture, like putting lawn furniture in the family room of your first apartment, you do that anticipating a day when the real and permanent thing will be there, when you get a real couch. For now, you have something, and that primitive something is a reminder that something better is coming.

So this altar wasn't the permanent thing, sacrifices weren't to be made forever, Jesus would come and be the final sacrifice, the final altar, would give Himself on the final table (symbolized by the bread and cup today). This altar was a temporary piece that pointed to Him.

And they got everybody together, native Jews and foreigners, because there was one law for everybody. And they came to this place between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal with the ark of the covenant. This is a picture of the place today:



So they got all the people together down between these two mountains. And they put half the tribes up on the side of one mountain, half on the other, and Joshua read all of the words of God's law. So they all got together to hear God's law read.

And it says that he read the whole law, the blessing and the curse (verse 34).

According to Deuteronomy 11:29, it seems that the priests on Mount Ebal read the curses of the law, and the priest on Mt. Gerizim read the blessings of the law.

One mountain represented all of the good God would do for his people if they kept his commands. The other mountain represented all that God would do if they broke his commands.

And here, at the beginning of their occupation of the land, Joshua is reaffirming that covenant and saying, "Let's be a people who obey God, even in our prosperity. And if we are not going to be that people, we can expect God to be against us."

He was setting up the law over the land of Israel. He said that the way that they were going to be a God-centered nation was going to be by doing what God said.

If they were going to be people who would be faithful to God, they would need to know and recognize God's good law. And so at this point, they are celebrating, they are thankful, and they are committed to following God.

They respond, like we often respond at first, with a lot of joy at the thought of obeying and following God. They have resolved that even in their prosperity they would obey God's law.

Which is a great plan. But you keep reading through the Old Testament, and it doesn't go well. The people turn from God's law, they worship the gods of the nations around them, and eventually they receive the curses that come from breaking God's law.

This is a great start, a great celebration, but it is going to all end badly. They now had it all - the land, the power, the wealth, the nations feared them. They started from the bottom now they're here. Ready to follow God and be a light to the nations, the law of God is their guide, it is prominent in their lives.

Mt. Gerizim announced that God would bless them if they obeyed. Mt. Ebal announced that God would curse them if they disobeyed.

And they fell. The commands of God, as good as they are, were not enough.

If you could turn to Romans 7.

So as important as it is to value God's commands, to make God's commands prominent, to carve time into our lives to read His commands, that's not enough.

If all we have is a knowledge of what God commands and a resolve to do right, we will inevitably follow in the steps of these Israelites and do wrong.

Because we need more than God's commands, more than his guidance, and more than resolve if we are going to withstand the temptations of prosperity.

God's commands are good. And resolve to keep them are good. And they are important for sustaining the Christian life. But they don't solve the big problem with us apart from Christ:

Romans 7:5 For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

Before we had been made new by Jesus, the good law of God, by itself, actually made us worse. He says that our sinful passions were "aroused by the law." He isn't saying only that God's commands showed us how bad we were, which they did. He is saying they made the problem worse because of our rebellion against God. Not only did they not work as medicine for us, they actually exacerbated the condition.

God commanded us, and because of our sinful hearts, we rebelled because of the commands.

I grew up in a home without a lot of rules. My mom seemed to trust me, and through high school I didn't have a curfew or bed time. I was pretty free. Then I got to college at a very strict bible college and they told us curfew was 10:00. And bed time was 11. Bed time? I was a grown man, paying my own bills, I'm renting this dorm room, and you're going to tell me when I have to be in by and when I go to bed. So I did all kinds of things to skirt that law: I got work passes, stayed late at work because that was allowed. I got a head lamp to read under the covers. I was rebellious against them, and their law made me stay up later.

Today, I don't have a curfew or a bed time. I'm totally free - I can do whatever I want. But I usually go to bed by 10. I actually like sleeping now that there's nobody telling me I have to do it. The law didn't make me better, it made me worse. It stirred up rebellion in me.

A focus on the law, because of our natural rebellion against anyone telling us what to do, typically makes us worse.

I have this built-in rebellion against God. And when God comes and says do something, it makes me not want to do that thing. I go farther away from him because of my sin.

God tells us not to do something, and we think, "That's probably because it's fun." From the days of Adam, once a fruit is forbidden, it becomes attractive.

The law doesn't cure the sinner. It radicalizes the sinner.

God gave a perfect law, a universal law, written in stone. The problem wasn't the law, it wasn't that it wasn't absolute. It was that the law was given to people with hearts of stone - hardened against it. They couldn't receive it, and in their rebellion it even made them worse. So God made a promise:

Ezekiel 36:21 "But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. 22 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. 23 And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. 24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. 28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

So God's law, those letters in the stone, didn't fix the people with hearts of stone. So God promised that He would one day do a work not on them, but in them, to cause them to obey His laws. He would give them a new heart, a soft heart. And He would put His Spirit in them.

That was going to be the solution.

And look at what Paul says next in Romans 7:

6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

Paul says that new way, with the Spirit in us, has come! We have a new covenant with God, new hearts, hearts of flesh. The law doesn't just smack us from the outside, but not with the Spirit we are being shaped into people who walk in those ways from the inside.

When Christ came, he perfectly kept the law of God. He obeyed all of the commands, from a heart level. He was the only one who deserved the blessings written on Mt. Gerizim. But instead He went to the cross.

And on the cross he took the curse of the law so that we could receive its blessing. We had all of the words on Mt. Ebal written as an indictment against us. But Jesus took the curse in full, drank the cup of God's wrath all the way to the bottom.

At the cross we receive the blessing of the law because Jesus received the curse of the law.

What we need to truly walk with God is not just his guidance, not just his commands, we need more than that His Gospel. We need not just new laws, but new hearts, and those hearts are only given to us when we come to Christ by faith.

Which doesn't mean we no longer need moral commands from God.

Here's what the law does:

1) The Law Exposes Our Guilt

Romans 7:7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

So he says "Here's what the law did for me. It exposed me."

And he focuses in on this command not to covet. This is interesting. Because you can read most of the ten commandments and feel OK about yourself. You can convince yourself that you don't lie to people, that you don't steal, that you haven't murdered or committed adultery. When it comes to the externals of the commands, they are keepable.

You might read them and think, "I just deserve the blessings of the law, and none of the curses."

But the tenth commandment: do not covet, is levelling. Because it says that what goes on in our hearts matters. It doesn't only matter if I steal my neighbor's stuff, it matters if I covet it in my heart.

And if God cares about heart level obedience, I haven't kept the other commands either.

We murder out of hatred and anger. And in me, the hatred and anger has stayed contained in my heart. In a murderer, the same junk spilled out. But what is in our hearts is the same.

Jesus expanded this idea in the sermon on the mount. In Matthew 5:27-28, for example, Jesus taught, **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."**

God wants not only outward obedience, but inward obedience. His law demands it. And that wrecks us. Because now there is no looking at the law and saying, "I should be blessed for my obedience."

So the point of the commandments is to show us how far we are falling short of God's holiness. God gave the law because it's good and it reflects his heart and his desires. And when we see it for what it really says, it diagnoses our problem so we can run to him for the cure.

A FATAL MISTAKE, that keeps us from being Christians, that keeps us from a right relationship with God, that keeps us from life, is made when we can take the commandments, which were meant to diagnose us, and try to use them to cure us.

That's the essence of religion, and the essence of what often passes for Christianity: you've been bad according to the commandments, so now keep the commandments and you'll be all set.

But that is a fatal error. Because commands diagnose, they don't cure.

This is the difference between a stethoscope and an open heart surgery. The stethoscope might reveal that there's a problem. But the solution to the problem is not "more stethoscope." The cardiologist doesn't say, "Here, just tape this stethoscope chest-piece to your chest and you'll be all set. Put two of these eartips in your ears and call me in the morning." Because it's a tool that is meant to diagnose, but never cure.

It's great at what it does, but bad and what it was never meant to do. The stethoscope sends you to the surgeon. It doesn't cure you - it was never meant to. It doesn't give you life, it tells you your life is in jeopardy.

And the point of the commands of God is not to cure us, it is not to give us life. They're meant to diagnose us so we can run to Christ, our divine heart surgeon, who alone can take out the heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. The law can only expose. And in a sense, it kills us.

Romans 7:8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

The law came, and because I was rebellious against God, I rebelled against his commandment. Then the law indicted me as guilty and killed me.

10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

Remember in the garden of Eden how God gave a command: don't eat from the tree? Then Satan came and deceived - "if you break the commandment it will make you like God, it will make you wise." And they ate? Sin came and used a good commandment to deceive - and the sentence was death.

That's been happening ever since. God gives commands, and sin uses those good commands to stir up our rebellion, to increase our guilt, and to kill us.

12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

So the good commands come and expose us, they stir up our rebellion, and sin produces death in us.

The rules don't save. But they are vital. To expose our guilt.

2) To point us to Christ

The fact that a stethoscope can't fix our heart doesn't mean we don't need stethoscopes. We don't chuck them and say "what good are they then?" We say, "I'm glad there are stethoscopes so now I know to go get surgery."

And Paul hears the law: do not covet. He never knew how bad he was before. But now he sees that from the heart he has anything but conformed to God's perfect standard. He is a wreck, undone! Sentenced! Dead!

And in desperation can now call out to Christ.

Galatians 3:24-26 "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

The word guardian here is literally "schoolmaster." This was the strict disciplinarian teacher in a classroom. The law is a teacher, a disciplinarian, who shows us our guilt and our need for Christ.

So do we need the law? The ten commandments? The do's and don'ts of scripture? YES! They point out our need for Jesus. Without them we don't see how desperate our situation is.

The existence of grace doesn't mean there's no use for law. We need the diagnostic tools. The existence of heart surgeons doesn't mean we don't need stethoscopes - the stethoscopes show us our need for heart surgery! We wouldn't be doing any heart surgeries, nobody would be cured, were it not for the work of stethoscopes.

That desperation that the law brings sends us running to Christ. So we need the commands. We need to teach our kids the commandments, morality, right and wrong. Because you have to see you fall short to run to Jesus.

"God commands what we cannot do that we may know what we ought to seek from Him"⁴ - Augustine.

3) The Law Makes the Gospel Really Good News

When the law exposes us, shows us our sin, shows us that we deserve to spend eternity under God's wrath, how much sweeter does Jesus become when we know what He saved us from?

How much greater is His love to us when we know how unlovely and unlovable we were on our own? How much better is our redemption when we see what we were redeemed from.

And maybe spreading the Gospel doesn't seem like a useful thing to us because we don't know what the law says about us apart from it.

When you read the commands, you realize that everybody's biggest need is forgiveness. We need to be saved. And the power of God for salvation is the message of the Gospel.

The message that Christ came, and perfectly kept the commandments. That he died on the cross, suffering the curse that lawbreakers normally experience even though He wasn't a lawbreaker Himself. And three days later He rose again, showing that He had defeated death, He had broken the curse. And whoever trusts in Him will not perish like the law says they deserve to, but will have life.

The commandment brought death, but the Son brought life!

"In the precepts of the law, God is but the rewarder of perfect righteousness, which

⁴ Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will* 16.32.

all of us lack, and conversely, the severe judge of evil deeds. But in Christ his face shines, full of grace and gentleness, even upon us poor and unworthy sinners.”⁵ - Calvin

So the commands of God point us to Jesus, they make the Gospel really good news.

4) The Law Teaches us God’s Nature to Guide Our Lives

It’s true that as Christians, we have died to the law, and it no longer has the same condemning authority over us. It’s true that we don’t depend on the law to make us right with God. It’s also true that we don’t have to struggle to obey it in our own strength because we now have the Holy Spirit.

But the law was given by God to teach us his heart. They teach us what God, who doesn’t change, is like and what pleases Him.

Each law that God gives tells us something about God’s character.

I was a telemarketer in college (somehow escaping with my soul), and I remember managers saying, “Don’t lie, just imply” with a wink and a nod. From that command that they gave, I knew what kind of boss I had. I knew the heart and nature of my boss by his command.

But if on the first day of work, the new boss calls you in and says, “First, we never lie to customers. Even if it costs us a sale, integrity matters more than a buck.” You know something about that boss - he’s got integrity.

And when God gives commands, we learn something about God - the law’s our tutor in that way.

We can’t see God, but we know he said “don’t lie”, so He must be true, He must be a God we can trust, He must tell us the truth.

He said “don’t steal”, he must be a God who would never cheat us out of anything, and He must be a generous God. He must be a God who is not out for himself, but to overflow in kindness.

⁵ Calvin as quoted in Doug Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 441.

That's what God is like. The law of God shows us something of the beauty of God.

And so we need, if we will continue to walk with God in prosperity or in need, to look to God's commands and to look to the cross, where we see God's grace.

Let the law do what it can do.

In Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians he called the law a Hercules that God sent to kill the monster self-righteousness. So allow the commands to do that for you, allow them to humble you, allow them to show you who you really are. Keep them prominent so that no matter where your life goes, you can be constantly reminded of what God requires of you.

And allow them to send you desperately running to Christ. Allow them to remind you how utterly dependent you are on the gospel of Christ.

Allow them to show you how kind and loving and scandalously merciful God is to you in Jesus. Allow them to drive an appreciation for the cross deep into your soul so that you can't possibly be self-righteous, arrogant, convinced that you're a law-keeper and the bad people aren't. Allow the law to drive you again and again to God's grace.

Let them make you desperate for a Savior so that you can spend eternity worshipping Him for the salvation He is for you.

If, crushed and declared guilty by God's law, we run to Christ for mercy, we'll find it and be saved.

And the continual need in our lives is to look to God's law for guidance and for seeing where we've failed, and to then confess our sins to Christ, come boldly to his throne, and be renewed by his gospel again and again.

The law has power to condemn, but the Gospel has the power to save, and change us, and keep us, and sanctify us, and keep us walking with Jesus, whether it be in plenty or in want.

Sermon written by Kevin Maloney with contributions by Abbey Sitterley. Prayer of confession used at the end of this sermon was adapted from a prayer entitled "God's Law" in the prayer book, Streams of Mercy by Barbara and Iaian Duguid (p. 60).

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do you give God's commands a prominent place in your life?
- 2) How do you respond when you know you've broken them?
- 3) Look up the definition of antinomianism. Do you think that is ever a problem in your life?
- 4) Is the law of God good or bad? How so?
- 5) How do you give the Gospel a prominent place in your life?
- 6) How does the Gospel sustain you?
- 7) How do the law and gospel partner to help us persevere in the Christian life?