

Sermon: Proper 22A

Title: The Gift of the Good Life

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When I was in the Air Force, I learned that discipline and punishment were not the same thing. As a public health officer, much of my work was about preventing problems before they happened. We dealt with things like tick-borne diseases, mosquitoes, tuberculosis, dog bites, and hearing loss from loud noises. We tried to understand the risks and take reasonable steps to keep people from getting sick in the first place. We didn't want to wait until there was a serious problem and then try to figure out what went wrong.

Over the years, that experience has helped me think about the Ten Commandments differently. We often hear the commandments as a list of things God tells us not to do. But they are also a gift from God. They show us how to live a good life — not a perfect life, and certainly not an easy life, but a life that is good for us and good for the people around us.

There is something important about the way our reading from Exodus begins. Before God gives Israel the commandments, God reminds them of what he has already done: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God saves them first. Then God gives them the commandments. God does not say, "Obey me, and then I'll love you." God says, in effect, "I have already loved you. I have already set you free. Now let me show you how to live as people who *are* free."

That is an important part of our faith, too. We don't obey God so that God will love us. God loves us first. God gives us grace first. Our obedience is our response to that love. Martin Luther understood this when he explained the Ten Commandments in his Small Catechism. When he came to the First Commandment, he said that we should "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." That brings the commandment into our everyday lives. What do we really trust? When life becomes difficult, where do we turn? We may trust our money, our job, our family, our health, our abilities, or even our own opinions. These can all be good gifts, but none of them can carry the weight that belongs to God. The First Commandment calls us back to the one who can.

The same is true of keeping the Sabbath. We live in a world that is always telling us to do more. There is another email, appointment, errand, or problem waiting for us. But God tells us to stop. Take time to worship, pray, rest, and remember that our worth does not come from everything we accomplish. We are more than our work or our responsibilities. We are children loved by God.

Then the commandments turn toward our neighbors: honor your father and mother; don't murder; don't steal; don't lie about other people; don't take what belongs to someone else. But these commandments are about more than avoiding bad behavior. They teach us how to love our neighbors. Not murdering means caring about another person's well-being. Not

bearing false witness means speaking carefully about others, protecting their reputation, and giving them the benefit of the doubt. God is teaching us how to live together.

And yet, if we are honest, none of us does this perfectly. I know I don't. I don't always put God first. I don't always speak as carefully as I should. I can be impatient or selfish, and sometimes I fail to notice what someone else needs. Perhaps you have had some of those moments, too. The commandments can be like a mirror. They show us what God wants for us, but they also show us where we need God's forgiveness.

And that brings us to grace. We don't have to earn God's love. We couldn't earn it even if we tried. God's grace is a gift, given to us through Jesus. But grace does not mean that how we live doesn't matter. Grace gives us a reason to live differently. We love God because God already loves us. We forgive because we have been forgiven. We care for our neighbors because Jesus has taught us to love them.

The *Book of Common Prayer* puts it superbly when we ask God to forgive us so that "we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways." I think that's what the Christian life is all about: learning, each day, to walk in God's ways. We will stumble. We will make mistakes. Sometimes we will hurt people. But the Christian life isn't about getting everything right. It's about staying close to God and allowing God's grace to help us start over.

That brings me back to public health. I learned that small things matter. A problem that is ignored can become a bigger problem. The same can be true in our spiritual lives. Dishonesty can damage trust. Resentment can wear away a relationship. Envy can turn into bitterness. And when we neglect our relationship with God, we can become spiritually empty without even noticing it. The commandments help us pay attention and recognize these things before they cause more harm.

The commandments don't promise that life will always be easy. Christians still get sick. We will still experience grief and disappointment. We will still lose people we love. But the commandments give us a way to live faithfully in the middle of all those things. And when we fail — we won't have to give up. We can confess, receive forgiveness, and begin again.

So we come to church today with our successes and our failures, our joys and burdens. We come to hear God's Word, receive forgiveness, and receive Jesus. Then we go back into the world and try, with God's help, to love God and each other a little better than we did yesterday.

We won't do it perfectly. None of us will. But we can do it faithfully, knowing that God's grace goes with us.

That's the gift of a good life.