

The Law is Spiritual, But I am Carnal

Romans 7:14-25, October 26, 2014

Trinity XIX

Beloved of the Lord.....Every Lutheran should know October 31st, is Reformation Day. While most consider this day as Halloween, and their focus is on ghosts and goblins, death and the devil, Lutherans would do good to remember and celebrate the great Reformation God brought about by way of His chosen servant, Martin Luther. By the way of the Gospel given to this one man, the pure Gospel was restored throughout the world, and hundreds of thousands, if not millions were saved. It is a good tradition and practice then, though not binding, that every October we read a book or two concerning Luther and the Gospel. Today especially, since our text reveals the great spiritual struggle within each Christian.....between the Old Man and the New Man.

Concerning this struggle Luther taught that we must remember to pray in our Lord's Prayer "and lead us not into temptation." This means when we battle with temptation, the temptations of our own flesh and blood, we need the Lord's help in these struggles against sin. Luther said "our prayer is that we do not fall into them and be entirely overwhelmed by them. There is then, a great difference between feeling temptation and yielding to it, saying yes to it. We must all experience temptation, though not to the same degree; some people have more and stronger temptations than others.....But since this feeling is against our will and we would rather be rid of it, it can harm no one. If we did not feel it, it could not be called a temptation. But to consent to it is to give it the reigns and not to resist it and pray against it."

Do not then dear Christian think lightly of your temptations or make excuses so that you yield. The devil is a cunning adversary who can trick us into doing this or that sin, but then our conscience will be smarting later. As Luther said, do not consent to sin or let sin rule you. You must resist sin and continually fight. But in today's lesson also let us not overlook the truth, that sin will always be there in our bodies, and our bodies will never stop being sinful until the day we die. In other words there is no way to remove our sinful nature from our own bodies, though we would if we could. Thanks be to God, there was no sinful nature in Jesus Christ our Brother. When we inwardly believe and trust Jesus is our Savior, God judges us and looks upon us only through the holy nature of Christ which clothes us and covers our sin. Christians then are different from Non-Christians. Sin still clings to Christians, but Christians cling to Christ. Unbelievers however cling to sin and they don't cling to Christ. Therefore do not yield to sin or give in, but also let it be said if you do foolishly fall or yield do not despair but cling to Christ. "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God."

As we begin this morning, let us consider God's Word in verse 14, "we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin." Our FIRST question is.....

1. How is the law spiritual? This means the Law of God which comes from God, is holy in and of itself. The Law of God is the will of God, hence it comes from God. It is therefore holy in and of itself, and His will is that all His angels and all mankind do His holy will. This is why Christians have learned to pray "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Yet so often we fail to do this don't we? And does our sinful flesh every really do God's will at all? The answer is No. It doesn't then mean anything to God, when ourwardly or externally man keeps this or that commandment. "The law is spiritual". Did the keeping of this commandment come from a willing spirit in man? God wants His commandments to be performed gladly and willingly. Luther said if a man has "no joy in doing [good works] and the right will and motive are absent, they they are dead in God's eyes. Such work is riddled with errors; it is service under compulsion, necessity, and duress and is not pleasing to God." For example, "God loves a cheerful giver". If you give because you have to, does God love this work?

For example, we might obey our boss at work but it is only so we don't get fired and we keep getting that paycheck. Or we might be good and kind to other people, but inwardly we loathe them and wish not to be around them. Or we might control our temper, but it is only so we won't be embarrassed by losing it. Or we might say "Lord willing" or "Thank God", but it is only because we want to appear good Christians to others. Luther therefore said concerning the true love for God which should move us to keep God's commandments, "Such gladness, love, joy, and willingness are not found in the heart of any man on earth. As far as our nature goes, we are all sinners. We do not really want to be righteous; we only pretend because we are afraid of being punished or disgraced, or because we seek our own ends and pleasure in these works. And no one is righteous solely and alone for God's sake, the way it ought to be" (Luther's Works, Vol. 44, Fortress Press). The natural man inside us all does not find contentment in Christ, but he either works to gain righteousness before God, or he does the right thing because he fears punishment. Clearly then the law of God is spiritual, but as Paul said, "I am carnal, sold under sin."

2. What does it mean to be carnal, sold under sin? The word "carnal" means "pertaining to flesh". It has to do with mortality, the temporary nature of our earthly life. We find the word "carnal" eleven times in the Bible. The primary passage is Romans 8:7 which says, "the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." All who are carnal, flesh and blood...the carnal mind, such are not subject to the law of God. This means we don't listen or obey what God commands. The carnal mind can't obey even if we tried. Its very nature is NOT TO OBEY, no matter what. This means your own human nature, your body, even your mind which wills the

body to move and do or not do... this carnal mind is at war with God. Even when we as Christians are moved by faith and love, a cheerful heart to keep God's law, we never reach 100%, nor do we even come close. If the holiness God requires of man is compared to shooting a basketball from the free throw line 1000 times, on our best day we by faith might make that basket five, ten times. This is why Isaiah says "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags". That means all the good works which Christians do, they are still bloody or stained by sin in God's sight. Let it also be said that if the Holy Spirit was not helping us Christians and working within, we would make zero baskets, because the carnal mind is enmity against God. If God commands us to shoot 1000 free throws perfectly, our carnal flesh drops the ball and says "No Lord I will not do it." This is why we deserve nothing good from God, but we only deserve punishment. This is also why Paul says "For I know that in me, (that is in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing."

The Old Adam, or Old Man within each one of you dear Christians, will ever and always be carnal, "sold under sin". As long as you live your body is a slave to sin and cannot do otherwise. So Paul writes in the frustrating battle between his flesh and spirit, "I find then a law, that when I would do good, evil is present with me." Paul delights in the law of God after the inward man, but evil is always present within. So it is for all Christians, though you want to be free of all sin, and free from sin's power, again and again you will find you are not. Christians experience within distrust of God, hardness of heart against God, they get angry with God, and we hate ourselves for loving this world and being so attached to it. Likewise we loathe our pride, but we find no way to rid ourselves of it. We are selfish too, and when someone complements us for doing this or that, the glory goes straight to our head. We do not deflect the compliment away from ourselves toward God, but we absorb the compliment, accepting it to our glory. Truly it is frustrating and very discouraging, this sinful flesh we retain in life. If we could tear our sinful heart out of our flesh to solve the problem we would do it. But we can't, for that would be suicide. We agree with Paul, yet we do not despair. "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

3. Where does temptation fit into all this? There is then within each believing heart, a continual war going on, and this is the battle between the Old Man and the New. If you don't feel this war, if you have no battle within against sin and temptation, you are not a Christian. But if you see your sins, and you feel the tug and pull, the power of temptation, and you don't want to yield, you certainly are a Christian. Regarding this difference between Christians and non-Christians, Luther said a Christian "is nevertheless flesh and blood as other people are. But he battles with sin and evil lust and feels what he does not like to feel; but the others are not interested and do not battle with sin and evil lust at all.....That is why [a Christian] must not judge according to his feeling, as though he were lost because of it. Rather he should work throughout his life against the sin which remains and which he feels. He should let the Holy Spirit work and should sigh without ceasing that he would like to be rid of this sin. Indeed this sighing never ceases in believers and goes deeper than can be expressed...." (What Luther Says, #710, Ewald Plass). This agrees well with what the Apostle Paul said concerning his own sins which

he despised, “Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” In other words, “that was my flesh, but that wasn’t me the Christian.....I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”

That is what it is going to be like throughout your life dear Christian, the flesh lusting against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, but that certainly does not mean you are lost or will perish, for “God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved!” In this life then, sin still clings to the Christian, but the Christian does not cling to sin. We cling to Christ, and through Christ all our sins are cast into the depths of the sea. Our Lord says in Micah 7:19 “He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” That prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus suffered and died for us on the cross, and rose again the third day. Though we all have sins in our past we wish we could undo and erase, and we all have sins in the present that we daily struggle with so that we are weary, at the end of each day we can still say “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord”.....God has put all these sins away. All sins are now forgiven. Therefore “serve the Lord with gladness” and don’t pay any attention to your flesh. Your soul is very precious to Jesus, and His Spirit will do you no harm. Indeed His Spirit has revealed to you the stairway to heaven. Christ is that stairway, and He and His angels await your coming. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds and faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.