

In the Steps of Luther

The Sermon on the Mount reminds me of Peter Seeger's antiwar song of the 60's "Waist Deep in The Big Muddy". As you get deeper and deeper in the Sermon you get more and more in trouble. You seek firm footing and the only thing you seem to find is the Law. In the song the captain is the big fool who pushes on and eventually drowns. We will too unless we follow in the steps of Luther when he discovered the Gospel, or better stated when the Gospel discovered him.

Well, don't start thinking the way out of being waist deep is to drain the river, i.e. think that God became Man to loosen the Law. The KJV even goes farther translating "destroy". "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets:". Our NIV insert translates 'abolish' as ESV and NASB do. Even the YLT has 'throw down'. There is a decisiveness about the word, but it's in the construction used. It's, "Don't even start thinking Jesus came to loosen the Law." "Don't go there." "Don't you dare." The word can mean destroy, but it's also used of travelers laying down their burdens. Jesus didn't come to loosen the load of the law on you by fiat.

The Devil, World, and Flesh, think He did. In the Great Temptation that's what the Devil will tempt Jesus to do: loosen the Law about what it means to trust God. The World today lives here. You want to live in fornication go ahead, just come to Church too. Choose whom you love, how you love, there's enough room in the 6th Commandment for that. Even the church plays along. The liberals call it accepting everyone. Even conservative Reformed have a time limit on the 4th Commandment; it doesn't apply after the age of majority. You know why: it's impossible. For Roman Catholics lusting in the heart is not sinful but the 'tinder' the 'kindling' that a spark of sin can cause to be sin. Of course, you know why they say that. It's impossible to not lust; God reveals in the Flood that man's first thoughts are evil. Jesus doubles down on this point after our text, i.e. He takes us deeper into the Big Muddy. They'd been taught if they committed murder or adultery they were subject to judgment, but Jesus says even anger or lust in the heart makes them guilty. The world says: Book a cruise on the Lust Boast or be 1 angry man. No harm no foul.

Jesus is emphatic here; can't you feel the waters rise? As long as heaven and earth stand not a scintilla disappears from the law. The figure is this: not only not one letter but even a piece of a Hebrew letter disappears. "Not an I or the dot of an I" (AAT). The Law won't pass away "until everything is accomplished." That foreshadows something big. Like the song we start with our feet on dry ground; move to knee deep; then waist deep, and then?

Jesus came to fulfill the Law, but a fulfilled Law by Jesus doesn't mean no Law for you. See how drop dead serious the Lord is about the Law. In Leviticus read how the son of an Israelite woman with an Egyptian Father fought with an Israelite. In the struggle he "blasphemed the Name and cursed." They held him in custody to make sure the Lord really meant misusing His name deserved the death penalty. It did; "they brought the one who had cursed outside the camp and stoned him with stones" (Lev. 24:10-12, 23). Read Numbers 15: "While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day." Again they kept him in custody to make sure they're clear on what God has said in His Law. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.' So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded" (32-36). I could tell of the prophet who was killed by a lion because He didn't obey the Lord's Word to the T (1 Kings 13). Or of how a Son of the Prophets was killed because he didn't obey the prophet who commanded him by the word of the Lord to hit him (1 Kin 20:35-41).

Let me see: You misuse the Lord's name, you die. You break the 3rd Commandment, you die. How many would die on Sunday in their sleep in bed on in a pew? Or how about King Jehoiachin? He was either 8 as most Hebrew texts have it or 18 as the Greek and some Hebrew has it. The Lord judged this king as doing evil and so gave him up to pagan captivity. You know why the 10 year difference? People are more comfortable with an 18 year old being judged guilty than an 8? Are you? How many 8 year olds abide by God's Laws? See 2 Chron. 36 and 2 Kings 24 but read to the end of both books to see Jehoiachin's ultimate end.

The way out of the Big Muddy is not to ho, ho, ho away the Law. Or to think Christ came to abolish the Law. Can't get rid of the Law by lowering the standards, by, "I don't think God would or I think God would." I don't think God wants me to stay in a marriage where I'm not happy. I think God wants me to choose what I think best."

Or make a hybrid system between faith and law. Luther warned of this saying in his 1535 Galatians lectures: "He who falls away from faith and follows the law is like the dog in Aesop which snapped at the shadow [of a dog carrying a piece of meat] and lost the meat" (LW, 26, 404). He's using an ancient fable to illustrate an eternal truth revealed in Galatians: "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4).

You can't go to heaven based on the best righteousness fallen mankind can work. Luther came to this point, and hated God for it. Hear his own words. "I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter 1: 'The righteousness of God is revealed in it [the Gospel].' I hated that word, ... which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand... that righteousness by which God is righteous and by which He punishes sinners and the unrighteous. ... I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners.'" (<https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111luth.html>)?

These are the pictures the Bible gives: The Law is like a bowman with a drawn bow aimed at your face. God chases you with the Law like the man who runs away from a lion and a bear only to put out his hand breathlessly once he gets home and find he's put his hand on a snake. This is the man in bed, cold, with a too-small of blanket to cover himself. No matter which way he turns the Law pulls off of him and exposes him. Or we're the High Priest covered in filthy garments or in Isaiah's words we stand before God thinking we have our Sunday best on with all our church going, Bible reading, helping others, serving the church, and we look down to find all our righteousness is filthy rags, soiled by the Big Muddy of the Law.

What relieved Luther's despair is finding out that the righteousness God required, He accomplished and won for sinners by Who Jesus is and by What He did. As Scripture plainly says, "Christ is the end of the Law through Faith" (Rom. 3:12). Christ, the God-Man, alone never broke the 2nd commandment. He never took the name of the Lord on His lips as an expression, as an exclamation, or carelessly. He alone kept the Sabbath. He never fell asleep in church; never worshipped at St. Mattress rather than attend Divine Service. He never was sinfully angry or lusted. Never, no never, not once. Yet God whipped, slapped, and beat, and tortured and crucified Him. Then He sent Him to hell, abandoned Him for 3 hours, an eternity. As the centurion says looking at the dead Jesus: "Surely this was a righteous man." And He was. But still: the drawn bow nailed Him in the face. The bear of the Law's punishments mauled Him, and lion of the Law caught Him, and just when He thought it was through, the Snake of Eden bit Him in the heel. And Jesus didn't hang on the cross with too small of a blanket but naked before God and His judgments against you. And so covered with our filth, the world's filth was He, that as Isaiah prophesied He no longer looked like a human being.

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were meticulous at keeping the Laws of God as they saw them. Everyone thought: if anyone's going to heaven they are. Well, Jesus says you need more righteousness than they have to go to heaven. And you have it: In your Baptism, you drip with the righteousness of Christ. When I absolve you the righteousness/holiness of Christ covers you head to toe. Not one of your sinful deeds, words, or thoughts show in an absolved Christian. Yes, it's true as we sing: "I am all unrighteousness; False and full of sin I am;" But, "Thou [Jesus] art full of truth and grace" (TLH 345), which He imparts to sinners in the 3 holies: Holy Baptism, Absolution, Communion. This is how Luther said it: "For [Jesus] is not digested or transformed [by us] but ceaselessly He transforms us, our soul into righteousness, our body into immortality. So the ancient fathers spoke of the physical eating [of the Lord's Supper]" (LW 37, 132).

"Clothes make the man" is a quote that goes at least back to Erasmus, but Mark Twain furthered it with "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." Stephen King observes in a novel that it is very difficult to fight well naked (*Drawing of the Three*, 163). In Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion training, the hardest part was when right away the captors took all our clothes. How much worse to stand naked before God with nothing to cover our sin and sinfulness. Luther found himself there but his hatred was turned to worship when he saw that God had solved the problem of our nakedness revealed by the dirty, cold Big Muddy of the Law. He clothes us with

Jesus active and passive righteousness. Jesus keeping the law in our place and His bearing our punishments. So clothed Luther didn't stand or fight naked before God or Man and we don't have to either. Amen

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