

*“Covenants and Promises”*

A problem that has beset the Church ever since Christ commissioned the disciples to go forth has been legalism. Jesus himself confronted it in his many conversations with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes.

Legalism had its roots in the Exile, also known as The Babylonian Captivity. That series of events, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem, the sacking of the Temple, and the forced removal of the king, the leaders, the artisans and an entire generation of Israelites, raised significant questions in the minds of God's people. Questions like: *“Are we God's people?” “If we are, does that mean that the gods of Babylon were stronger than Yahweh, our God?” “What led to this catastrophe that we have been removed from the land God promised to us and our ancestors forever?” “What shall we do in this foreign land with no throne, no temple, no hope?”*

As they searched for answers, they harkened back to the messages of the prophets (messages they had totally ignored before the devastation of the Exile). They found there a host of condemnations for behaviors at a personal, social, and national level. Dr. Harry Wendt writes: *“Eventually, the people faced up to the bitter truth. They had shut their ears to the prophets! They had not listened to the Word of the Lord! They were not even sure what the Word of the Lord was all about! They had broken the covenant. They deserved everything that had overtaken them.”* [Divine Drama, p.101] What to do? In the decades and centuries that followed, the scribes codified the many law codes and commandments they found throughout their writings all the way back to Moses. The upshot of this was the idea that keeping the rules would be the salvation of the people.

All legalism begins with the message that God is angry and that you better do something to appease His anger. So here are the rules . . . obey them and you'll be safe from His wrath — you will bridge the gap between God and you. It is a contract and contracts are based on

earning merit or satisfying terms. A contract involves doing things to the satisfaction of the one with whom you enter the contract. For example, I contract with you to paint my house for an agreed fee. That contract is mutual; you do your part: you paint the colors we agreed would be used, you do the job in a timely manner, the job site is left clean and ready for use; I do my part: I pay a fee up front, the remainder is paid upon completion.

All that is fine, until you think about it as a relationship with God — then it becomes horrid religion. Religion is doing things that you think will bridge the gap between your safety and God's anger. In that sense, all religion is horrid — for two reasons: 1) You are never quite sure that you've done enough. 2) You are always sure that what you've done makes you better than others (maybe not better than *all* others, but certainly better than "*him!*").

Contrast that to the Gospel. It is announced today by Jeremiah: ***"I will be their God, and they shall be my people."*** That's it!!! No conditions are set forth; there's no "if . . . then": If they follow all the rules, then ... If, if, if ... NO! — just ***"I will be their God, and they shall be my people."***

In the Bible there two kinds of covenants.

Covenants of Divine Commitment reflect God making the promise to do certain things without regard to what is done or not done in response, for example: he told Abraham that he would make of him a great nation; he told David he would establish his throne. Neither Abraham or David had to do anything for that commitment to be completed.

Covenants of Human Obligation reveal God's actions that then begged for a response, for example: at Mt. Sinai he reminded the people that he had chosen them and brought them safely out of bondage in Egypt; he then gave them the Ten Commandments to guide their response to that outpouring of love.

As is the case with Divine Commitment covenants, there is nothing in these Human Obligation covenants that are conditional. That is, there is no suggestion here of something we must do in order to get God to do what God does. Take note of the sequence: It is not *conditional*, but *conditioned*. God is always the first actor; what he does sets the stage, conditions *us*, for our response — and a response is expected. What we then do does nothing to change God in any way (we don't need to!); St. Paul: “**...no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law...**” [Romans 3:20]

What God has done should be changing us in every way. We sometimes have trouble embracing this. For example: I have often been asked (not so much here at St. Thomas) about the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness in the Lutheran Book of Worship. The opening liturgy reads: “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” Now that is not what appears in our bulletins, and it is not what I say in worship, so the question has come to me, “*Why don't you read what's in the book?*”

What is in the LBW supposedly comes from 1 John 1:8-9, which I have looked at most carefully. It is not conditional. The very nature of God is to forgive. His forgiveness does not depend on the nature, the frequency, the quality, the intensity, nor the sincerity of our confession. So you hear me say (and you would hear me say if I had the LBW or our bulletin in my hands): “*God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” Pastor, you're nitpicking. (That's always a possibility, but I don't think so here!)

Jesus says in today's Gospel: “***If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.***” To me that still sounds suspiciously conditional (Oh, so now you're going to question Jesus? No, it's just that “if...then”

language always has that impact on me). Eugene Peterson has paraphrased that: *"If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you."* (Better.)

It is not how we become disciples, but what discipleship can mean for our lives. It is not about scoring points for the merit badge; but rejoicing to live free. *"But how is this free?"* you may want to ask. *"Doesn't God 'make' us behave?"* If that were so, then Jesus did what He did for nothing.

Let me come at this on a different tack: Our church body some years ago came out with this statement: *"Christian Stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God's family, the church, in managing all of life and life's resources for God's purposes."* That, to me, is response language, not conditioned. Whether we do so formally as a congregation (we do not), most people make pledges of their financial giving — maybe not in writing, but you have an idea of the amount you intend to give (I'd like to suggest to you that the New Testament talks about that in terms of proportionate to the blessings received).

Whether given on a pledge card or just in your thoughts, these are not contracts. Here's the dilemma: When you measure all the ways God has blessed you — we will do just that in a moment as we join in Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Creed: *"He has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil."* — you can do nothing to bridge the gap between God generosity and your response, even if the proportion you choose to give would be 100%.

How so? Luther goes on: *"All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on*

*my part.*” So we can decide to do nothing, period? (No, that is known as the sin of quietism). Luther knew there is a response: *“For all of this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him.”*

At that point we have to be careful of the Leaven of the Pharisees. This is that longing embedded by the Father of Lies deeply in us calling us to fall back into religion (it’s why this is so insidious). It begins with an attitude of entitlement which grows into the myth of rectitude we see on display in John 8 when Jesus tells the Jews who believed on him: ***“We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone.”*** These are people who have conveniently disregarded their history! “Never been slaves”? The history of Israel has been nothing but an ongoing series of enslavements: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedonians, Seleucids, Romans. That’s in common with the old joke about the man who went to heaven and St. Peter was showing him around, when they came to a room and Peter said, *“Okay, be very quiet as you pass by here.”* When they got past a distance, the man asked why the quiet? *“Oh,”* said St. Peter, *“Those are the Lutherans, they think they’re the only ones here.”* It shows up today in the phrase: *“God Bless America.”* George Carlin appropriately asked, *“Is that a command? Is that a wish?”* We should be careful with that! Why not say, *“God bless the whole world”*? Why not (as Jesus taught us) *“God bless al Qaeda”*?

Here’s the problem: We are led to believe that Christianity is one of several religions; we happen to believe that it’s the best of the bunch, but the others are, depending on to whom you’re listening: “noble” “kind” “generous” “peace-loving” and (shudder) “basically lead to the same place.” I believe the response to that is “horse hockey.” First, Christianity is not a religion ... it is the antithesis of religion. Second, if it were a religion, then the practitioners of it are among the worst in the lot; Muslims take their religion much more seriously than we do. Third, Christianity is a faith that involves living in the freedom of Christ — not, as the character Dan Fielding in the TV series *Night Court*, explained: *“I don’t have a life; I have a lifestyle.”*

There are two topics that Jesus addresses more often than any others (and that we talk about least within the Christian community). American Christians seem to get hung up on: morality, values, worship styles, interpretive methodology; Jesus focused on bad religion and money. To me, it seems to be a principle that, the worse the religion, the more money gets thrown in its direction (e.g. Joel Olsteen, Pat Robertson, Jim Baker, Creflo Dollar, Peter Popov, *et alia*). So much of it predicated on the idea that, *IF* you keep to certain rules, send the right amount of money, pray the right kind of prayers, live the right lifestyle, *THEN* you will have ... prosperity, blessings, success, a mansion or two, a fleet of jet planes, fame, and glory.

With deep humility, we need to go to the cross, there see the Savior, and find in that deepest sorrow of all humanity our hope, our consolation, our joy, and our reason for being. It is to be found nowhere else. There we see: He is God. He *is* God. He is *our* God, and we are his people — people he considered worth dying for, and now people he delights to live through. That he will indeed live through us is our response.

It is his promise to us: “... *you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*” It is the truth of God’s unconditional love found in Christ Jesus — not pledges, not rules, not contracts — this covenant, graciously bestowed, joyfully embraced, that sets us free “*to thank, praise, serve, and obey him.*”

Amen.