

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'

Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'

This is the Word of the Lord...

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

The escapees from Egypt who are following Moses around in the desert, and the generations of people after them hearing the stories of their wandering through the wilderness, were surrounded by people and cultures who worshipped more than one god.

Do we need the commandment's call to monotheism in 2017?

Reading the culture, it seems our post-modern problem may be more atheism – the rejection of the idea that there is a God - than polytheism. But Scripture never asks, “Is there a God?” Scripture asks, “Who is the God who is there?”¹

What about agnosticism? Or as a professor of mine at Princeton Seminary calls it: “benign ‘whatever-ism,’” the mild belief system of today that lets us shrug our shoulders and say, “I don’t care what someone believes about God, as long as they’re a good person; as long as they’re nice.”

The #1 understanding of God in the Reformed tradition is that God is sovereign. The forefathers and mothers in the reformed faith would claim that agnosticism is a result of Christians breaking the first commandment, attempting to reduce God to a problem of belief, rather than a call to worship. This first commandment is clear – God does not want simply our belief.

God wants all of us.

All human wonder, awe, veneration, praise, honor, acclaim, and worship points to the glory of God; simply put – we are made to glorify God.

From Isaiah 66

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them... and they shall declare my glory among the nations.

And from Romans 5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Soli. Deo. Gloria.

To the Glory of God alone.

In 1505, a former law school student, named Martin Luther, entered a monastery. He was an Augustinian monk, an order that followed the teachings of the Apostle Paul. He was taught that God is perfect, and demands absolute obedience and unwavering faith. That sounds about right for now, too. Like Paul wrote to the Philippians, Luther kept working on his understanding: *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Some of the other things he learned were different from our current Protestant Reformed understandings. In the 16th century the church taught that the burden of maintaining a right relationship with God was on the sinner. People had to obey God with their own strength in order to receive grace. Sinners needed to repent fully and also perform acts of penance. Those acts of penance, however, could never catch up to the sin before you died. And so, by the grace of God, the church then taught, there was purgatory. Purgatory was a place for maturing spiritually before entering into the holy presence of God. If you wanted to help your deceased relatives get out of purgatory and into heaven faster, you could buy what were known as indulgences.

Frustrated both by his own inability to work off his sins, and the church's use of indulgence money as part of a capital campaign for a new cathedral, Martin Luther undertook an intense study of Scripture, specifically the book of Romans which says: *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (1:17).*

It was not Martin Luther's intention to break off from the catholic church, and certainly not his intention to be the catalyst for what are now over 35,000 denominations from one. When he posted his 95 theses on the doors of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, all he wanted was a debate.

At the top of the page in German it said:

Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter.

English Translation: Bring. It. On.

Here is one of my favorites, #32: *Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.*

That's a strong statement, but what I find fascinating about the 95 *Theses* is Martin Luther's clear respect for the church and for the Pope's authority, even though he thinks it's being misused. He also is very clear that good works should remain a part of the faithful Christian's life. One of his concerns with indulgences is that people will think that buying indulgences is enough to satisfy God, and they will no longer do good works.

#41: *Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love.*

#42: *Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.*

#43: *Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.*

But if we are saved by grace, and not by works... then why the focus on works of love, and works of mercy?

For the glory of God alone.

We respond to the glory of the God who created us, by living in such a way that our very lives celebrate God's sovereignty.

The Ten Commandments are law. They are also a revelation of God's character. God reveals God's self with thunder and lightning, the people react with fear – either of God, or of the revelation of the law – the text is unclear. What is clear is that this sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient God... wants a relationship with us.

The Matthew text, which we didn't read, but the children's Sunday school classes will study/studied today is the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-43). A landowner plants a vineyard and then leaves tenants to care for it. When he sends his slaves to collect his produce, the tenants beat and kill them. The landowner then sends more slaves and they are treated the same way. Beginning in verse 38:

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

(The Chief Priests and the Pharisees) said to (Jesus), 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes"?

This is a parable of the people's rejection of God's son, Jesus Christ. And yet "God does not simply get reasonable revenge; God's ways are not our ways. Humans may reject God's son, even killing him, but God is not bound by human actions." One of the commentaries I read said, "Humans may block, but God will parry and even advance (God's) causes through the inadmissible human action."ⁱⁱ

A sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient God... wants a relationship with us?

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How do we respond to such a love as this?

It's the first question in the Westminster Catechism.

What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

And the second instructs us:

What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.ⁱⁱⁱ

Psalm 96:1-3

*O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.*

We are made to glorify God.

How do we glorify God?

We are created in God's image. God is love. God is just.

What would the church look like if we loved each other as God loves us? What better way to glorify God?

God's love is universal.
God's love is unconditional.
God's love is faithful.
God's love is a reconciling.
God's love is costly, self-giving love.
God's love is helping, renewing love.

God's love is just.

forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Soli. Deo. Gloria.

To the Glory of God alone.

Amen.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments and Christian Life*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1999), 28.

ⁱⁱ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, After Pentecost 2*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 73.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Book of Confessions*, 7.001, 002.