

Lutherans Caught Between Rome and Geneva:
The Influence of Catholicism and Evangelicalism
In Lutheran Moral Theology Today

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When it comes to moral theology, it may appear that we Lutherans have little to offer. We don't have Rome's highly developed system of natural law. We can't compete with the Reformed when it comes to biblical principles for successful living. We do have the proper distinction between law and gospel, but it does not seem to apply very well to issues in moral theology. Our conversations about the law can quickly descend into sloganeering about how the theological purpose of the law as a mirror is primary. God's moral law becomes an abstraction whose only value is as a foil by which the gospel is brought into bold relief. And since we Lutherans take great pride in valuing the gospel above all things, we certainly wouldn't want to be accused of subordinating it to the law. So when it comes to the law it seems that we're stuck with a mere function, whereas our Roman Catholic and Reformed friends can wax eloquent on what the moral law actually entails, what makes it right, and how we benefit from following it.

That's the key to their success: how we benefit from following it. The reason both Rome and Geneva win the popularity contest on moral theology is because they can show how the doing of the law benefits the doer. It would appear to be axiomatic that the doing of the law benefits the doer of the law. What kind of a law would it be that provided no benefit for the doer of it? This puts us Lutherans at an immediate disadvantage. Rome and Geneva teach great blessings for the doer of the law. We Lutherans hesitate to do so, not because we do not believe that God "promises grace and every blessing to all that keep [his] commandments," but because we are stuck with the idea that the law is always accusing us. When we do the very best we can do the law condemns us for our efforts. For us, moral theology is always being overwhelmed by the theological use of the law. We cannot say much at all about the law and what obligations it places upon us before we fall back into the law / gospel dynamic and change the subject from moral theology to justification by faith alone.

And I suppose this is what I'll be doing this morning. But to justify myself, let me begin by outlining briefly why, while we may learn much from both Rome and Geneva on the

topic of moral theology, we must be careful to rein in the law by the gospel. The law may not be permitted to assume the gospel's purpose. When the pure doctrine of justification is at the center of Christian theology it serves as a hermeneutical check on moral theology, preventing it from usurping the authority of the gospel in our lives.

The law does indeed promise blessing to those who obey it. Still, we confess with the hymnist, "The law no peace can ever give; no comfort and no blessing." Even as the Lord Jesus promises the lawyer, "Do this and you will live," we confess in the explanation of the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer:

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, nor on their account deny our prayer; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them; but that He would grant them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment.

It's not that divine blessing does not come as God's gracious and fatherly reward to those who obey him. It does. The promise attached to the Fourth Commandment is as valid today as it was when God first carved it on stone on Mt. Sinai. It is rather that, when your theology is focused on that article of divine truth that tells you how God justifies you by graciously reckoning to you the obedience of his righteous Son, you will not be satisfied with a blessing that is contingent on your meeting a condition you cannot meet. For us Lutherans, divine blessing is inseparable from the forgiveness of sins. Every blessing God has to give he gives by grace, that is to say, by him not imputing our sins to us nor on their account denying us our prayer.

We do not do what the law requires for our own benefit. In fact, we are constantly being confronted by our failure to meet its requirements. We do what the law requires for the benefit of our neighbor. A law whose beneficiary is the doer of it is a law of selfishness. We are beneficiaries of God's love, revealed in the gospel. If we are to love him in return, we must love our neighbor. The commandments teach us what this entails. Love does no harm to the neighbor. The law meets its goal in benefiting others.

A critical difference between Roman Catholic and Reformed moral theology on the one hand and Lutheran moral theology on the other centers on this question: Who benefits? If the beneficiary of the doing of the law is the one doing it then the law must be doable. And so the law becomes doable so that it may benefit the doer. When the law becomes doable in order to serve its purpose of benefitting the doer it loses its accusatory function. When the law no longer accuses, there is no more need for the gospel to be proclaimed. Thus, the doability of the law silences the gospel. That happens in both Rome and Geneva.

Roman Catholic moral theology teaches the Roman Catholic what he must do to go to heaven. The old Baltimore Catechism, widely used in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States throughout most of the twentieth century, put it this way:

Q. 154 What must we do to save our souls?

A. To save our souls we must worship God by faith, hope, and charity; that is, we must believe in Him, hope in Him, and love Him with all our heart.

Q. 354 How could they be saved who lived before the Son of God became man?

A. They who lived before the Son of God became man could be saved by believing in a Redeemer to come, and by keeping the Commandments.

Q. 476 Is grace necessary for salvation?

A. Grace is necessary to salvation because without grace we can do nothing to merit heaven.

The soul seeks after the greatest good. The greatest good is God. Moral theology is essential in seeking God. We seek God by doing the things of God. The Christian reaches his goal by means of following the moral law. God gives us his grace to enable us to persevere in the good works that will take us to heaven. Here is how it is put in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Paragraph 1861 – We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will. In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere “to the end” and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God’s eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ.

How can we love him and do his will so that we may, with the grace of God, persevere to the end? The moral law shows us how. From the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Paragraph 1950 – The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom. Its biblical meaning can be defined as fatherly instruction, God’s pedagogy. It prescribes for man the ways, the rules of conduct that lead to the promised beatitude.

Since the moral law is our guide to heaven, it is essential that its precepts be rightly interpreted and understood. This is one reason why the authority of the Church's Magisterium is necessary. As we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Paragraph 2036 – The authority of the Magisterium extends also to the specific precepts of the natural law, because their observance, demanded by the Creator, is necessary for salvation.

If the law is the way of salvation in the Roman Catholic Church, what purpose does the gospel serve? The gospel is the New Law. Again, from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Paragraph 1965 – The New Law or the Law of the Gospel is the perfection here on earth of the divine law, natural and revealed.

Paragraph 1966 – The New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given to the faithful through faith in Christ. It works through charity; it uses the Sermon on the Mount to teach us what must be done and makes use of the sacraments to give us the grace to do it.

Paragraph 1967 – The Law of the Gospel fulfills the commandments of the Law. The Lord's Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing or devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their entire divine and human truth. It does not add new external precepts, but proceeds to reform the heart, the root of human acts, where man chooses between the pure and the impure, where faith, hope, and charity are formed and with them the other virtues. The Gospel thus brings the Law to its fullness through imitation of the perfection of the heavenly Father, through forgiveness of enemies and prayer for persecutors, in emulation of the divine generosity.

Just as it is impossible in Lutheran theology to understand the law apart from its purpose to accuse, it is impossible in Roman Catholic theology to understand the law apart from its purpose to save. The gospel confirms this purpose. The gospel does not, as Lutherans believe, differ fundamentally from the law. It is a higher version of the law. Since the purpose of the law is to save the doer of it, the law must be doable. The purpose of the law in Roman Catholic moral theology makes the doer of it the chief beneficiary of the doing of it.

This is so as well in the moral theology of contemporary Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism today is far removed from the teaching of John Calvin. Calvin taught the bondage of the will. Most contemporary Evangelicals boast of their doctrine of the free will and feature

it prominently in their preaching. Of the five points of classical Calvinism, only the perseverance of the saints has been retained. While Calvin at least attempted to retain the sacraments as means of grace, today's Evangelicals don't even try. It is not accurate to identify modern Evangelicalism with Geneva.

But if it is not identified with Geneva, it has grown from seeds that Calvin planted. Calvin posited the possibility of sacraments without the Spirit. The theoretical severance of Spirit and sacrament grew into the purely symbolic sacramental theology that followed. He also taught that the good works of a Christian strengthen his faith. This seed has also borne its fruit.

The route by which Evangelicalism came from Geneva in the sixteenth century to its current form in America in the twenty first century includes many interesting reactions, twists, and turns making it difficult to define its boundaries. Calvinism has been in steady decline in America for over two hundred years. What has replaced it has mutated into a plethora of forms that bend to the prevailing winds of pop-Protestantism. There are a couple of constants however that pertain directly to our discussion today.

First, it is their denial that Christ's sacraments are means of grace through which Christ gives us the forgiveness of sins and saves us. Second, and related to the first, it is defining faith as obedience and making that obedience the catalyst for God's blessing in our lives. Two famous Evangelical preachers, one from a generation ago and one from today, can illustrate this for us.

Jerry Falwell was one of the most prominent Evangelicals of the 1980's. He was the founder of Liberty University, the Moral Majority, and became one of the most recognizable voices of religious conservatives in America. Listen to how Falwell describes faith in his book, Finding Inner Peace and Strength:

When you totally surrender yourself to the Lordship of Christ in absolute faith you will trust Him with your destiny, your future, your family, your job, your health – your everything. That is not only saving faith, that is keeping, trusting, abiding faith. It is a moment-by-moment, step-by-step, day-by-day faith. When this happens and Jesus becomes Lord of your life, your life will take on a new dimension and meaning. This kind of commitment must be renewed day by day. It is easy to forget God and to dethrone Him from time to time, but you must come to that place where you consciously seek to keep Him the Lord of your life at all times.

Faith is surrender. It is commitment. It is making Jesus the Lord of your life. This is how you will find victory in your life. Falwell writes:

The key to living victoriously, without feeling pressure in a world that is wrapped up in tension and pressure, is having made a full commitment to Christ and desiring above all else the will of God for your life.

Faith is your good work. By exercising faith you determine your own destiny. You choose to establish that relationship with God that will bring order and harmony to your life. Falwell writes:

Man can never know order and harmony in his life until he chooses to establish the right relationship with God and His Son. That this is man's free choice is of grave consequence because it means that man determines his own destiny.

When the sacraments serve as our pledges to God rather than as God's pledges to us, we can no longer look to them as evidence of God's goodwill toward us. When faith cannot be identified by what it receives in the means of grace, it must become identified according to something else just as tangible. That something else is our obedience.

Rick Warren is one of the most recognizable Evangelical preachers alive today. His best selling, The Purpose Driven Life, has been used by millions of Christians – including many Lutherans – as a textbook on personal improvement. He neatly summarizes the purpose of obedience in the life of the Christian. He writes:

Throughout the Bible we see an important truth illustrated over and over. The Holy Spirit releases his power the moment you take a step of faith. When Joshua was faced with an impassible barrier, the floodwaters of the Jordan River receded only after the leaders stepped into the rushing current in obedience and faith. Obedience unlocks God's power. God waits for you to act first.

From Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking to the "name it and claim it" prosperity gospel hucksters to mainstream and respectable Evangelical preachers such as Jerry Falwell and Rick Warren, the obedience of the believer is what brings him blessing, success, peace, and just about every good thing in this life. It is similar to how Buddhism was once explained to me by a young Vietnamese boy: "If you do good, good happens to you." Natural theology can dress up in many different kinds of clothes.

It would seem unlikely that we Bible-believing, Catechism-memorizing Lutherans could find ourselves caught between such obviously deficient understandings of God's moral law. We know that the law does not show us how to get to heaven. It condemns us to

hell. We know that the source of all blessing in our life is not our obedience or our prayers or anything at all in us but the fatherly, divine, goodness, and mercy of our God. What could it be about Roman Catholic or Evangelical moral theology that would attract Lutheran loyalties?

It is the law's doability. When I can do it I become the master of the law and of my own destiny. Roman Catholic moral theology is far more intricate than the Evangelical's list of do's and don'ts. Whether that makes it harder or easier, I leave to your judgment. Some of you may recall the evaluation of that famous Baptist theologian, Miss Lillian, President Carter's mother, who once said that if she had to live her life over again she would like to be a Catholic because then she could drink and play cards. Still, Miss Lillian would have had to admit that she could refrain from drink and she could refrain from playing cards. She could.

For us Lutherans, the fact that the law is undoable in no way diminishes its moral authority over us. It retains every bit of its divine authority precisely as it remains beyond our ability to obey. What makes sin sin is its root in our corrupt human nature that is so deep that reason cannot understand it. God must reveal it in the Holy Scriptures. But while reason cannot understand it, its existence can be known by its fruit. Luther lists some of this fruit under the topic of sin in the Smalcald Articles:

Unbelief, false faith, idolatry, to be without the fear of God, presumption, despair, blindness, and, in short not to know or regard God; furthermore to lie, to swear by God's name, not to pray, not to call upon God, not to regard God's Word, to be disobedient to parents, to murder, to be unchaste, to steal, to deceive, etc. (SA, III, I, 2)

While the Lutheran preacher should identify the sinful nature as the real sin so that the Lutheran hearer doesn't think that he has obeyed God just because he has followed the rules, if the preacher doesn't identify and condemn specific sins there is the likelihood that the law he preaches will become disembodied into a theoretical abstraction. It is true that we cannot know the depth of the corruption of original sin except by the revelation of the Holy Scriptures. It is just as true that we cannot recognize sin as sin except as the outward sin identifies the radical ferment that lies beneath it. Just as the Spirit demonstrates his power through the external means of grace, so sin demonstrates its power through external acts of disobedience to divine commands. There is no sin except where the law condemns it. There is no law to condemn sin without the commandments of God.

How many Lutherans have been lured away from Lutheran preaching to the doable rules of Rome and the Evangelicals because their Lutheran preachers were content to

condemn the sinful condition while remaining silent about many specific sins that are openly committed and condoned by members of their own congregations? The preacher might imagine that preaching against specific sins will get those who don't do them off the hook. He might imagine that since the primary purpose of law preaching is to expose sin, and he surely does not want to miss anybody, he had better stay with a shot-gun approach that simply asserts the total sinfulness and depravity of everyone in the room, without getting into specifics. But if the law is distorted when its demands are reduced to doable precepts by which the doer of the law gains either temporal or eternal benefits, the law is also distorted when the preacher tries to take charge of its accusatory function. His attitude should not be, "How can I get my parishioners see themselves as sinners?" (as if he can get God's law to do its work), it should rather be, "What does God's law say?" God's law does what God wants it to do. As to how it applies and how it accuses, the preacher is never in control of the law he preaches. Not if he is preaching God's law.

The Lutheran preacher should not avoid preaching against sins he imagines his parishioners do not commit. He does not know what his parishioners are doing. The popular notion that preaching is to be kerygmatic rather than didactic is a clerical conceit. Lutheran preachers should listen to Sergeant Joe Friday and stay with the plain and knowable theological facts. Genuine kerygma arises solely from the divine instruction. The law teaches us. It teaches us about God. We do not preach against the sanctification of serial sodomy because a same sex couple might be hiding out there in the congregation waiting for our preaching to reveal their sin to their conscience. We preach against "marriage equality" because it is an assault against the majesty of God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. It is not up to preachers to determine how the law works. It's up to them to preach it. When civil institutions are being systematically corrupted to distort God's creation it behooves faithful preachers to preach God's law as clearly as possible so as to guard Christians against the evil influences of a culture increasingly devoted to idolatry, selfishness, perversion, and other assaults against God's moral law.

Whatever the deficiencies of Lutheran law preaching may be, it would be an error to assume that poor law preaching by Lutheran pastors is the chief reason why many Lutherans are being lured away from Lutheran preaching. It is rather the attraction of the doable law by which the sinner can sanctify himself.

When the law is doable the sinner is in charge. There is a widespread misconception about why legalism is so attractive. It is not out of a devotion to God's law. It is precisely the opposite. Reducing the divine law to rules makes it more manageable. If you know the rules and follow them you are doing your duty. This empowers you. Whether the moral law is set before you as the means by which you can save your soul

and achieve the beatific vision or whether it stands before you as the catalyst by which God's power is unlocked for your blessing here in this world, in either case the law serves you. The chief beneficiary of the law is the doer of it.

This is what lures our Lutheran laymen and pastors to the moral theology of Rome and Geneva. And it lures them to their spiritual harm. To the extent that the law is viewed as the means of bringing us God's blessings it is being silenced. The law that God gives us to preach shuts the mouths of everyone who hears it as the whole world stands guilty before God. If the law is the means of bringing God's blessing to us we must regard it as doable. We can appreciate the practical implications of this teaching and the considerable damage it causes by considering the teaching of Rome on homosexuality and concupiscence.

Rome teaches that concupiscence, or the inclination to sin, remains in the baptized, but may not properly be regarded as sin. Scripture calls it sin but it isn't sin. Therefore, the sexual desire a homosexual has for someone of his own sex is not, properly speaking, sin unless and until he acts on that desire. By this logic, when St. Paul says "Men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their lust for one another," he is not describing sin but when he goes on to say, "Men with men committing what is shameful," he is describing sin. This legalistic parsing of what is and is not sin does serious harm both to the sinner and potential victims of his sin. What is not sin cannot be forgiven. If homosexual lust cannot be forgiven, it cannot be combated, because it is by means of the gospel of the full and free forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake that the Holy Spirit changes our hearts and turns us toward God in sincere faith that bears the fruit of willing obedience to God.

Combine the Roman Catholic teaching on concupiscence with its legal imposition of priestly celibacy. Men who want to serve as pastors in the Church and do not have the supernatural gift of celibacy must act as if they do. This is what St. Paul identifies as hypocritical lying emanating from a seared conscience. In practical terms, it is a recipe for disaster, serving as an open invitation for men with homosexual cravings – who have not received the gift of celibacy from God, but neither can they enjoy the natural conjugal relationship that God has put within marriage – to enter into the priesthood without the power of the Holy Spirit to subdue their perverted desires. This has been the cause of countless sex scandals, the most recent ones rocking Rome to her very foundations. No one knows how many of the alleged pedophile priests are simply run of the mill homosexuals who find young boys easier to seduce, intimidate, and manipulate than older ones.

Concupiscence is sin. Jesus says so. "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies," he says. Jesus

identifies the thoughts as sins. Concupiscence is not just “the tinder of sin,” it is sin for which the sinner is accountable to God.

But Lutherans want to fight the culture wars. They see Rome as their ally against twisted and godless values that have yielded a social consensus utterly at odds with Christian decency. Abortion is reproductive freedom, elective war is patriotism, children are expensive burdens to be limited because of budget considerations, divorce is no fault, homosexuality is God’s fault, civil power is increasingly held by anti-Christian zealots, and self-esteem is the way, the truth, and the life. It is sorely tempting for us Lutherans to think that perhaps quibbling over whether concupiscence is sin or leads to sin might be a bit of unnecessary theological hairsplitting. So we cozy up to Rome in the hope that she might be our ally in our battle against an increasingly godless popular culture. Lutherans join with Rome and Geneva to uphold standards of decency and morality that sustain civilization and promote civil righteousness.

Before we offer up our three cheers for civil righteousness let us stop long enough to listen to Jesus.

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

We cannot disentangle Roman Catholic moral teaching from its purpose in guiding the faithful to heaven. We cannot disjoin Evangelical moral teaching from its view of saving faith as the act of commitment that opens up the heavenly vault of blessings. There is no way to excise out of Roman Catholic or Evangelical moral theology the self-serving purpose attached to the law.

Lutherans do teach the rewards of the law, but we do not define the law according to the rewards it offers. Why not? The law works wrath. We confess that the one who does what the law requires is blest in his doing of it. We also know that Christians and heathen alike believe that virtue is its own reward. Whatever one learns from nature or deduces from his natural knowledge of God is good only for here and now and cannot possibly sustain or improve his relationship with God.

We do not find God in our doing of the law. Here is where moral theology must sit meekly in the backseat and shut up. First God sets you free and makes you his child. That comes first, and that comes apart from the law. The First Commandment makes this clear: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.” First God sets us free. First he delivers us. Before he sets us free from bondage we cannot do anything pleasing

to him. When he sets us free we are free because he has set us free. To attribute our freedom to the law is to argue precisely in opposition to Moses, yet the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes obedience to the Ten Commandments the condition of a life freed from the slavery of sin.

That the life lived in defiance of God's law is a life of slavery is true. Jesus said that whoever sins is a slave to sin. But that the life of freedom is obtained or sustained by means of obedience to the law, whether of Moses or the alleged "New Law" of the gospel or by the commitment of faith or by making Jesus the Lord of your life is a deceit that distorts God's moral law by obscuring the gospel, ripping it out of the center of the Christian life where it belongs. As Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Luther's, "Against Latomus," is as relevant to this issue today as it was in 1521 when he wrote it. Luther distinguishes between grace and gift, with grace being the forgiveness of sins that faith grasps and upon which it depends and gift being the faith within through which God continually heals the believer. Listen to Luther:

A righteous and faithful man doubtless has both grace and the gift. Grace makes him wholly pleasing so that his person is wholly accepted, and there is no place for wrath in him any more, but the gift heals from sin and from all his corruption of body and soul. It is therefore most godless to say that one who is baptized is still in sin, or that all his sins are not fully forgiven. For what sin is there where God is favorable and wills not to know any sin, and where he wholly accepts and sanctifies the whole man? However, as you see, this must not be attributed to our purity, but solely to the grace of a favorable God. Everything is forgiven through grace, but as yet not everything is healed through the gift.

Before we can understand the moral law as it applies to the Christian we must know what a Christian is. A good tree bears good fruit. A Christian is good. This is how and why a Christian does good. It is really as simple as that. Since the Christian is not yet fully healed through the gift, he cannot trust himself to know what is good and bad. The law tells him. When the law tells him it always accuses him. But since the goodness of the Christian does not come from his obedience to the law but rather from Christ's vicarious obedience, suffering and death, the Christian may face down the law's accusations. This is the art of faith. This is true evangelical name it and claim it theology.

That the law is undoable cannot challenge the faith of the one who is not working but believing on him who justifies the ungodly. Why would such a person want to make

God's law doable? What would be the point? He has all the blessings God can give already. He cannot become any more righteous than he already is, he cannot be any more certain of his salvation than he already is, and he could not enjoy any more favor from God than he already enjoys. As the Christian's faith is focused on the grace by which God imputes to him the obedience and suffering of Jesus as his righteousness, there simply is no motivation to alter God's moral law so that it becomes more doable.

This is how the gospel serves as the check on the moral law, keeping it from transgressing the line from its legitimate purpose in disciplining the body into its illegitimate function of lording it over the soul. And that is what the highly vaunted "Lordship salvation" of the Evangelicals amounts to: the law's usurpation of the gospel's authority over us.

"Make Jesus Lord of your life. Unleash God's power in your life." Yes, but what if it does not work? It never works. This is why Evangelicalism spawns revivals. Revivals have nothing to do with the movement of the Spirit. They are expressions of human frustration at the lack of external evidence for the spiritual health of the church. Yesterday, Lutherans listened to the siren song of the Promise Keepers only to find themselves to be promise breakers. Today, Lutherans sign pledges to become Courageous Men, while secretly wimping out. Tomorrow they will fall victim to whatever new and exciting manifestation of Evangelical moralism disguised as spiritual awakening is in vogue. Looking outside of their orthodox Lutheran home for something more useful and spiritually exciting than what they already have they cannot see the precious jewel set in front of their eyes in the Catechisms of their church. They don't need to go out and learn dogoodism principles of Christian behavior from religious entrepreneurs on the make. They can stay home and read their Catechism. Luther's treatment of the Fourth Commandment in the Large Catechism contains this gem of Lutheran moral theology. In a wonderful polemic against the self-appointed and utterly useless works of supererogation that the monks imagined would impress God, Luther speaks to the child who is a Christian:

You should rejoice heartily and thank God that he has chosen and fitted you to perform a task so precious and pleasing to him. Even though it seems very trivial and contemptible, make sure that you regard it as great and precious, not on account of your worthiness but because it has its place within that jewel and holy treasure, the Word and commandment of God. O how great a price all the Carthusian monks and nuns would pay if in the exercise of their religion they could bring before God a single work done in accordance with his commandment and could say with a joyful heart in his presence, "Now I know that this work is well pleasing to Thee!"

Self-appointed and doable rules designed to enable sinners to obtain blessings from God – whether eternal or temporal – are of no benefit to anyone, least of all the doer of them. When God commands it, the Christian knows it is precious. The will of him who has forgiven us all our sins and clothed us in the robe of Christ’s righteousness, making us saints, is and must be a good and gracious will. When he deigns to reveal that will for us as it pertains to our moral conduct, he honors us. It is a holy privilege to do what he gives us to do and to know that he accepts our doing of it and does not despise its lowly appearance. God’s word and command sanctify what the world despises.

Our doing does not conform to God’s word and command when it is judged according to his law. If our doing were valued by God solely according to his law, the sin that permeates all that we do would render it valueless. But who we are is defined by the gospel. This means that the value of what we do does not depend on what we do. It depends on who we are according to the gospel. The true value of the Christian’s work does not derive from the doing of it, but from who the doer is. It comes from our status before God. Our status before God does not depend on our doing. It depends on God speaking. As Jesus says, “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” God reveals to us his will for our behavior. He gives this to us to do. Even while the law is accusing us for failing to meet its demands God himself is trumping the law by the gospel, rendering our sin-tainted behavior righteous by forgiving us all our sins, thus sanctifying everything we do in his name, making our clumsy and inadequate offering pure and holy sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise that bring joy to our Father in heaven. He treasures us and will always treasure us for the sake of the holy and vicarious obedience of his dear Son.

The undoable law condemns us all. But we are bold to do it anyway even though we know we cannot. He who turned water into wine and fed five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two small fish is surely capable of turning the gravel we offer to him into precious jewels.

But worthless is my sacrifice, I own it;
Yet, Lord, for love’s sake Thou will not disown it;
Thou wilt accept my gift in Thy great meekness
Nor shame my weakness.

From the Close of the Commandments in Luther’s Small Catechism – All citations from Luther’s Small Catechism are taken from the “Schwann” Catechism, CPH, St. Louis, 1943.

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Luke 10:28

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Matthew 7:17

Romans 4:5

LC, Ten Commandments, paragraphs 117-118, The Book of Concord, Translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959, page 381.

John 15:3

John 2:1-11

John 6:5-13

“O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken” TLH, Hymn #143, verse 14.