

Practical Principles of Preaching on the First Table of the Law

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I have a confession to make. When I was assigned this topic many moons ago, the first thought to cross through my mind was, "You've got to be kidding? I'll have everybody asleep by the second page." As I began my research for the paper, my opinion didn't change. I found plenty of sources on such subjects as preaching law and gospel, commandments 1-3, practical principles for preaching, etc., but I found nothing about practical principles of preaching on the First Table of the Law. Now what? It didn't take long to figure out that I wasn't going to be able to make someone else's work my own. I was going to have to attempt the dreaded original thought. What you have before you is something that has become a work in progress. I'll attempt to explain as we go along.

I have always tried to follow a certain pattern for preaching. I have always tried to exhaust the text, find the malady, locate specific law and gospel, search for appropriate illustrations and applications, determine how this text fits into the church year, etc. This is something we all do. We were all taught to prepare our sermons in this way. There is a reason for it.

The worship service is our opportunity to reach the most people in our congregations at one time, therefore, the proximity to ministry demands that sermon and worship preparation be given the top priority in our work schedule. To be able to stand up in front of those we serve and to be able to say, "This is what God's word says, and this is what it means today for you and me," is certainly an honor and privilege. It can also be quite humbling. Sermon preparation is hard work. Sermon preparation requires time and commitment. Some weeks, due to time constraints and the press of other duties, I have not always been able to give my sermon preparation the attention it deserves. On more than one occasion I've stepped into the pulpit and prayed that the Holy Spirit might continue to work, despite my inadequacies. There is great comfort in knowing that he can and will.

I had mentioned earlier that this assignment has become a work in progress. It has given me the opportunity to look in the mirror. The process became cathartic. It has caused me to examine how and why I preach. It has also caused me to review the First Table of the Law and God's meaning behind it. More specifically, it has caused me to review how I preach on the First Table of the Law. It has taken a while, but maybe I'm getting closer to what the Program Committee had in mind when this paper was assigned.

I decided to handle the assignment by first of all reviewing the First Table of the Law. I then intend to share some practical principles for preaching. And finally, Lord willing, I hope to bring everything together.

A Good Review

As pastors, we have the opportunity to review with our confirmation classes the First Table of the Law on a regular basis. We teach that God has written his law on man's heart (Romans 2:15). We explain that God also wrote his law on two tables of stone (Exodus 20). We teach how God gave the people of Israel the Civil, Ceremonial and Moral Law. We go to great lengths to explain how God's law works in the following ways: curb, mirror, and guide. We teach how the law is meant to show us our sin and need for a Savior. We look for opportunities to proclaim and apply God's law in proper ways. As we share that message with our confirmands, in our Bible classes, counseling sessions, and in our sermons, God is glorified and we are blessed.

I've always thought that I had a fairly good handle on how to present the message of God's law. As the years go by, I feel as if I am getting better at knowing what God's law is saying to me. I am continuing to learn

what God's law is saying to others. To my surprise, however, I had not fully thought of what the First Table of the Law can say to me as a preacher, hence the work in progress. I'm still learning.

Jesus says that the law of God can be divided into two parts. When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment, he replied, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" *This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.* 'All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).

We have traditionally taught that the First Table of the Law is comprised of commandments one, two, and three which emphasize *our relationship with God*, while the Second Table consists of commandments four through ten which emphasize *our relationship with others*. The division of the two tables lies in our relationships - with God and with our fellow man. However, it should be noted that we cannot say how many commandments were written on each of the two stone tablets.

Commandments 1-3 Our relationship to God - the One who made us

The First Commandment: "*You shall have no other gods before me*" (Exodus 20:3).

What does this mean? Martin Luther explains, "We should fear, love and trust in God above all things"¹

The First Commandment emphasizes our love for God. We are to love him more than anyone or anything. He is to take first place in our hearts and lives. Martin Luther wrote, "*When the heart is rightly disposed toward God and this commandment is observed, all others follow*"²

This is God's command to us. As sinful human beings, we are forced to admit that we have not always given God first place in our lives. All too often our own sinful thoughts become more important than our Lord and his will.

As preachers, we're forced to admit we haven't always given God first place in our lives either. So many other "things" are competing for that top spot: the job (running around carrying out the office of the ministry that we can lose sight of the "big picture"), our families, hobbies, and the list goes on. May we recognize our sin, repent, and strive to give our Lord the place of priority in our lives.

The people we preach to don't have the ability to put God first in their lives and keep him there either. This is the chief flaw of human nature. We are born sinful (Psalm 51:5). By nature, all human beings are ignorant of God, hold God in contempt, lack the fear of God, trust in God, and the ability to love him.³ Scripture makes this perfectly clear. Sinful human beings are dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1), have made God their enemy (Romans 8:7), and are blind to spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:14).

We cannot keep the first commandment, which Jesus says is the greatest (Matthew 22:38). Since we can't keep the first commandment, we can't keep the others either.

The Second Commandment: "*You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God*" (Exodus 20:7).

What does this mean? Luther explains, "We should fear and love God that we do not use his name to curse, swear, lie or deceive, or use it superstitiously, but call upon God's name in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks."⁴

As we all know, this commandment speaks of love for God's name. We are to make sure our Lord's name is being used in a God-pleasing way. The second commandment plays an important role in our lives as preachers. When we stand in the pulpit, we say, "This is what the Lord says." Therefore, when we call upon God's name and speak in his name, we had better make sure we are speaking the truth.

¹ Luther, Martin, Small Catechism, Kuske edition, p.1.

² Luther, Martin, Large Catechism, Concordia Triglott, p.593, 48.

³ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article II, The Book of Concord, p.102:14.

⁴ Luther, Martin, Small Catechism, Kuske edition, p. 1.

The Third Commandment: *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy"* (Exodus 20:8).

What does this mean? Luther explains, "We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy, and gladly hear and learn it."⁵

The third commandment focuses on our love for worship, and our love to hear God's word. We encourage our members to be faithful to the means of grace, to be faithful in their church attendance. We encourage them to be faithful in their prayer life, which is a form of worship. While we encourage others, it is very important that we as preachers make every effort to be in the word ourselves. We need to keep this commandment. We need to grow in faith. Someone might argue, "But I do keep this commandment. I'm leading in worship every week."

That may be true. As preachers, we have the opportunity to be in the word on a daily basis. It is our privilege to prepare sermons, devotions and Bible classes every week.

The question is, do we practice what we preach? We must be very careful that we do not fall into the devil's trap and think that the degree we earned from the seminary, or our years of experience guarantee that we've learned it all.

I once sat down and talked with a man with over forty years of experience in the pastoral ministry and shared with him how I am constantly amazed by the fact that the more I read and learn the Scriptures, and the more experience I gain sharing that message with others, the more I find out I don't know. I guess my question was, "Hey, am I ever going to get it?" The experienced man laughed softly and replied that he, even after all these years, still experiences the same thing.

I have to admit that I often find myself caught in the whirlwind of ministry. It's easy for me to get caught up in meetings, budgets, programs, counseling, visiting shut-ins, and dealing with minor catastrophes. I find that I am often driven by a schedule; that without much effort I can lose sight of the purpose or mission of ministry. Am I in the word on a daily basis? Yes. Do I set aside time for personal growth in the word? Every year that's my new year's resolution. Every year I say I'm going to set aside time each day just to spend a few quality minutes in the word - just for myself. I have to admit that my personal study and my prayer life are nothing to brag about. As I look in the mirror, this is what I see:

- Don't always put God first in my life - guilty;
- Have been known to misuse God's name - guilty;
- Have not & do not take full advantage of the opportunities the Lord provides for me to worship him as I ought (personal study and prayer) - guilty.

The scorecard reads 0-3. I've also been known to go about my work less than eagerly. I haven't always been glad to hear and learn. I've been too busy, too tired, too sinful. It has become obvious to me that I fall under the category of Unable to Keep the First Table of the Law. Romans 3 comes to mind, *"For all have sinned and, fall short of the glory of God"* (v.23). By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, the First Table of the Law does what God intended it to do, show me my sin and need for a Savior.

As preachers, it is imperative that we preach first to ourselves, before we preach law to others. We need to hear the law. We need to hear that we have not given God first place in our lives. We need to hear that we are sinful human beings who deserve nothing but God's wrath and condemnation. We need to heed the words of Jesus, *"First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"* (Matthew 7:5).

Once we have been led to recognize our sin and need for a Savior, how much easier and genuine our preaching will be. We stand before those we serve as sinners, just as they are. We know the temptations our members face - we face them too! I believe it would be a huge mistake on our part to set ourselves apart from those we serve, as we preach, especially when we preach law. We can't shy away from preaching the law in all

⁵ Luther, Martin, Small Catechism, Kuske edition, p. 1.

it's force and fury; however, we can make sure that we're included. Make a concerted effort to say, "These are your sins and *mine*." Don't always point out, "This is what you did or did not do," rather say, "*we*."

The greatest experience in all of preaching is that after the law has dropped us to our knees, the gospel is there to pick us back up. We know what comfort we find in knowing that Jesus Christ has atoned for all of our sins. We know the significance of the cross and the empty tomb. Our job is to make sure those we serve know it too. A basic principle of all Lutheran preaching is that the gospel is to be predominate.

We cannot preach on the First Table of the Law and leave our people feeling lost, alone and doomed to eternal life in hell. We need to tell our people about a Savior who kept all of God's law perfectly. We need to tell them over and over again about a Savior who suffered and died for their sins, ours, and the entire world's. We need to remind them again and again about this chief truth of all Scripture and that of Lutheran preaching: all those who have been led to believe in Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation have been justified. We have been declared "not guilty" of our sins by grace through faith (Romans 6:23). If we neglect to bring that message out clearly and passionately *every time we preach*, we fail our Lord and those we serve.

Practical Principles of Preaching on the First Table of the Law

By no means are the principles listed below meant to be comprehensive. There are many others that could be added. I have simply tried to provide a snapshot. Most other principles could easily fit within those listed below.

1. Know Your Purpose - Let the Word Speak

What is our purpose in preaching? In every sermon we try to accomplish many things. We want to share the message of Christ. We want to proclaim law and gospel. We want to lead sinners to the cross and then to an empty tomb. We want to "*prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:11,12).

Simply put, preaching is an opportunity for us to serve as God's tools to touch human hearts. Erwin J. Kolb, editor of the *Concordia Pulpit Resources* puts it this way, "*Preaching is more than an academic experience, more than history, textual study and exegesis. Preaching is applying Law and Gospel to the lives of people, to their hearts and needs, to help them cope with life and learn to live a life of Christian love.*"⁶

2. Proclaim Law/Gospel - Let the Word Speak

- It is important in our preaching to point out that when we fail to put God first in our lives, we sin.
- It is important that we preach specific sin. Preach to the sins of the First Table of the Law: worry/doubt, selfishness, lack of piety, idolatry, misuse of God's name, lack of prayer, failure to be in the word, etc. We cannot be timid about preaching the law and its consequences. Prof. John Jeske writes:

According to the Lutheran Confessions, the primary purpose of God's Law is to expose sin. "The chief function or force of the law is to reveal original sin with all its fruits, and to show man how very low his nature has fallen," Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles (III,II:4). Preachers often make the mistake of not going deep enough in diagnosing the sinner's malady. When analyzing the human predicament, it's a mistake to focus only on obvious transgressions of the Second Table. God's big problem with us is not that we're proud, or that we drink too much, or that we cheat on our wives or on Form 1040. Those are symptoms of sin, just as a fever is a symptom of an infection in the body.

⁶ Kolb, Erwin, J., "Concordia Pulpit Resources", Volume 8, part 4.

Stealing is not primarily an offense against the person whose property I have taken. Stealing is telling God: "You're not taking care of me, and so I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands." Sins against our fellow human beings are invariably rooted in our failure to fear and love and trust God as he alone is to be feared, loved, and trusted.

Applying the Scripture's uniqueness in our ministry of preaching means, first of all, refusing to mute or to muffle the thunder of God's holy Law. Christian people, no less than heathen people, need to hear that God demands a perfect heart, a heart that is in tune with God's will, a heart that instinctively loves what pleases God and hates what is evil. They need to hear that God is in terrible earnest about the demands of his Law. Coupled with his absolute *demand* is his absolute *curse* over the person, over every person who does not give God what the Law demands.

How easy it is for the preacher to mask the uniqueness of the Scripture by forcing God's Law to conform to the canons of human logic or to human standards of fairness! How appealing it is to our old Adam when we view God's law as little more than common-sense suggestions which will make our life easier and our contacts with people more pleasant. How easy it is for a preacher, especially if he loves people and doesn't like to hurt them, to blunt the cutting edge of God's law with statements like: "Now to be sure, God hates sin, but don't forget: he loves the sinner." How utterly misleading! On Judgment Day is God going to send sin to hell, or *sinner*s?⁷

- After the law has done its work, follow that up with the gospel. Our members must hear over and over again that their sins have been forgiven for Jesus' sake. They need to hear that the relationship between God and man has been restored, made possible by Christ's atoning work.

3. Preach to Yourself First - Let the Word Speak

As previously mentioned, we haven't always put God first in our lives. As preachers, we need to understand that we're just as guilty of sin as those whom we serve. We need to hear the Law so that it might knock us to our knees. We need to recognize our own specific sins - our sins against the First Table of the Law: worry/doubt, selfishness, lack of piety, idolatry, misuse of God's name, lack of prayer, failure to be in the word, etc. Once we have been led to recognize our own sins, repent of them. Only then will the gospel pick us up and then better equip us to better share the gospel message clearly and enthusiastically.

4. Know Your People - Let the Word Speak

It is important to understand why our people come to church. They may come for a variety of reasons:

- to be near the means of grace
- to find spiritual rest
- to leave their baggage
- to be strengthened in faith
- to be edified
- to be able to cope with a sinful world
- to be able to cope with life's problems
- to be reminded that perfection exists (through Christ) even in imperfection
- to leave knowing they are forgiven
- to leave knowing that on the Last Day, they will be on the escalator going up

⁷ Jeske, John, Essay: *Applying the Scripture's Uniqueness in the Ministry of Preaching*, DMLC, April 15-17, 1993.

Do we provide our members with the answers for which they seek? Do we provide the answers in our preaching? Does our preaching supply that for which they came?

While we need to know our people, there is also something they need to know. They need to know about their broken relationship with God due to sin. They need to hear that their failure to be in contact with the means of grace is a sin. They need to hear that because of sin, they deserve to suffer the consequences. Even more importantly, they need to hear of a Savior who suffered, died, and rose for them.

5. Remember: All Glory Goes to God!

When you think about it, we have a great job. We have the opportunity to be in the word on a daily basis. We have been enabled to equip, train, and encourage others for works of service. We get to see the light bulb of faith and spiritual understanding begin to flicker and grow into a steady flame in the hearts of all we serve. We get to speak the truth in love. We get to proclaim law and gospel. We get to pronounce forgiveness to those who are repentant. We get to tell people about a Savior who died for them. We get to comfort those who have lost a loved one with the assurance that their loved one is now in heaven. We get to do all these things, and the amazing part is ...we get paid for it!

As we go about our calling, we need to remember that it's not about us. In keeping with the First Table of the Law, all glory goes to God. He demands and receives top billing. When we remember to put God first in our lives, it will show itself in our preaching.

To God alone be the glory!

Worth Noting:

- Since preaching is a significant aspect of our work, I highly recommend to everyone the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Summer Quarter. Almost every year there is a course that focuses on sermon preparation.
- *Preach the Word* is a bi-monthly newsletter designed to help preachers continue in the heritage of well-crafted, Lutheran sermons. It is prepared by the WELS Commission on Worship.
- A roster of WELS preaching consultants is posted on the WELS worship website: www.wels.net/sab/frm-cow.html.