

DEUTERONOMY 5:9 - 10

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Smith

THE HOOP IN THE WREATH

Confirmation Class of 2019:

Five Hundred years ago, Martin Luther was working on his Small Catechism for parents to teach their children about the basics of God's holy word. As a pastor and a teacher, he knew that a long list of short items is much easier to memorize than a short of long items. And as he studied the text of the Commandments, he realized that the conclusion to the First Commandment applies to all of them. And so rather than make the First Commandment much longer than all the others, he took that conclusion and moved to the end of the whole group, naming it "The Conclusion to the Commandments." This is the word of God before us today: Deuteronomy 5:9-10:

I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,¹⁰ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

What do we learn from God's name? Well, consider that while we can learn many things about God from nature and from the world around us, we can't discover who God is or what he has done for us apart from his Word, the Bible. In his name, we learn who he is. God's name was revealed to us to bless us, and to save us: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

But then here God says that he is a jealous God. Since we know that he is holy, and without sin, what can "jealous" possibly mean for God who isn't sinful in any way? Well, it's sort of traditional to transform "jealous" into "zealous," but it means more than just "eager." Jealous means being fiercely protective of what is yours. So God is fiercely protective of the worship that we owe him. He won't share it.

Why? Imagine that a Doctor's degree doesn't just get given out to people when they reach a certain age. That takes special training, ability, talents and even responsibilities. I wouldn't want to go to the Doctor's office and find a Bunny Rabbit there with a stethoscope around its neck waiting to give me a checkup. In the same way. God will not share his title and the honor due to him with anyone else, because no one else has the abilities or responsibilities God has. As Brooklyn's confirmation verse teaches: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

That's because he has removed our sin.

To better understand the relationship between God and sin, let's use a picture that the Bible uses: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5). When we sin, we become darkness; and light does only one thing with darkness. Light obliterates darkness. If we remain in our sin, we can never approach God; we can never exist with him in heaven. It is God's nature to destroy sin and those who are sinful.

But in our verse from Deuteronomy, God tells us something important about himself. He says, "I am a God who is showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me." In that sentence, there are two different words for love, and the first one is almost always understood as the word "grace." God shows grace, a kind of love no one expected. Grace is God's undeserved love, the love that covers over our sinfulness by the blood of Jesus Christ.

This is why Martin Luther, who wrote his Small Catechism five hundred years ago, did something special in the Catechism with this verse. You see, in Deuteronomy and in the identical passage in Exodus 20, these words come at the end of the First Commandment. They remind sinners like you and me that God is merciful to us who are sinners. Without that, we would never want to read the Ten Commandments, or study them, or even try to learn them the way you have learned them. Without God's grace, we would only hate the Law and be frightened by it. The Law would hold us in terror, because we deserve only God's wrath.

What's the consequence of every sin I commit? God's wrath. "Punishing!" God says, "Punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me!" My punishment becomes the world my kids and grandkids and great-grandkids will grow up in. It's the punishment that will wreck their lives, ruin their health and their marriages and their futures, all because of my sin? My sin. Your sin does that.

But God has made a decision only God can make. God has chosen to be merciful. His mercy doesn't just cover over a couple of people, as if only Moses and his kids and great-grandkids knew about it, and it was their secret. No—God wants to show love to a thousand generations. His love is so big and vast and all-embracing that he wants to share it with everyone.

That's why Luther took this beautiful verse that preaches the Law and the Gospel both, convicting and reassuring us, and he moved it to the end of the list of the Commandments as we learn them, because it applies to each and every commandment, not just to the First. Luther called it, "**the hoop in the wreath**," the wire ring you attach everything to when you make the wreath. Everything is connected to that ring or hoop; everything touches it and is twisted and tied and intertwined to it.

Remember that in class we learned that the Law of God has three uses. One of those is mostly for the unbelieving world, one is for everybody, and one is only for Christians.

The first use of the Law of God is as a **Curb**. This is written in our hearts, and it the basis for most human laws. It keeps society in check, for the most part. Almost all people understand that murder is wrong, and governments even agree with the Law of God and make murder not only forbidden by the Fifth Commandment, but by their own local laws, too. This also helps us to understand why abortion is sinful, since it takes the life of a child.

The second use of the Law of God is as a **Mirror**. This is where the Law shows us all our sins. We look into the law at any point, and we realize that we have sinned, and we need a Savior from that sin. For example, God has shown us that only in his Word, only in the Bible, do we learn his name; who he is, and what he has done for us. And yet there are many people who get out of the habit of coming to church weekly, and what do they miss? They miss being reminded who God truly is, what God truly has said in his word, and that his forgiveness truly covers over the guilt of all of our sins.

Finally, there is a third use of God's Law, which only applies to Christians: This is the Law as a **Guide**. This is where, as God's forgiven children, we learn to obey him and show our love for him out of thanks for what he has done for us, especially through Jesus on the cross.

On the front of your bulletin today is a picture of a cross. Try to cover it up with your hand or your fingers. You might still see some of the cross's shadow, but the rest of the cover doesn't tell you much, does it? Don't cover up Jesus in your life. Keep your Savior part of every day, part of your prayers, part of your thoughts, and the motivation for the things you do. Think: Will this praise God and give him glory? Or would this make him angry, and cover me in darkness?

If it's a sin, turn away and turn back to Jesus. If it gives Jesus glory, then do it as well as you can, and he will bless what you do. Remember that this conclusion to the Commandments is the hoop in the wreath, the gospel promise tied to every single Commandment in the Law. Through Jesus, your sins are forgiven today and forever. Through Jesus, you have the promise of eternal life. Amen.