

The Great Exchange

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Isn't this weather something? The heat and humidity weigh you down. It is hard to breathe, and your energy level is sapped by the heat and heavy air. I had just a few errands to take care of on Friday. Little tasks that were not that hard but when I finished them, I was completely exhausted. I felt like I had been moving cement blocks all day. I fell asleep early in my recliner before Jeopardy. I was beaten and had done hardly anything. And throughout all those little errands, I felt weighed down and oppressed by the heat and humidity. You may have felt the same way.

Sometimes that is the way we feel as Christians. God expects us to be obedient to Him all the time. We know what we are supposed to do and what we are not supposed to do. But trying to do what God commands is a heavy burden. Trying to be obedient to God is like running errands in 100-degree heat with air you can wear. It simply wears us down and often we simply give up under the burden.

In our very short Gospel reading today from St. Matthew, Jesus speaks to us about the rest that He provides us. He invites everyone who is burdened down and weary from their heavy loads to take a break and rest. He talks about yokes. That reminds me of some jokes. How do you know there is an elephant in the refrigerator? You see its footprints in the butter. How do you know there are two elephants in the refrigerator? Two sets of footprints. How do you know there are three elephants in the refrigerator? The door won't close. How do you get four elephants in a compact car? Two are in the front and two are in the back. How do you know there are four elephants in

the refrigerator? There is a compact car parked outside. Elephants, refrigerators, and compact cars are all visible images that help tell a story or a joke. Jesus liked to use visible images to tell his stories, his parables, and lessons for people. Today, in the Gospel reading he used the visible image of a yoke.

A yoke is a wooden cross piece placed over the necks of animals, usually oxen, to share the work of pulling an implement. The yoke forced the head of the animal down, so they were under the command and control of the one who was driving them. In the Bible, a yoke was often used as a metaphor for submission. Humans were under the yoke of God's Law – they have to submit to it. Now, Jesus invites us to take his yoke. He describes His yoke as easy and the burden He has for us is light. Jesus' listeners probably chuckled when he said his yoke was light. Yokes were not meant to be light. They were meant to be heavy to make the animal submissive. Jesus' yoke is the Gospel. He says we can find rest in Him.

Earlier in the reading, Jesus thanked God that He had hidden something from people who were wise and revealed it to children. Did you realize who those children were and what it was God had shown them? Those children are all of us. We are the innocent and trusting souls that have been shown the Gospel in Jesus Christ. We have been shown the saving grace for our sinful selves by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. His work of salvation and redemption and justification for our woeful and failed attempts to be obedient to God. We had a harsh, heavy yoke already. It is the Law of God. All the obligations God expects us to fulfill in obedience to God and for our salvation. The Law is found in the Ten Commandments summed up as love of God and love of our neighbor. NOT love of self and love of this world. Talk about a

heavy burden! Talk about a yoke and the power of submission. The Law of God is a yoke that is a heavy and harsh yoke on our necks.

According to Leviticus 19:2, God told Moses to tell His people, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord, Your God am holy.” The Hebrew word for “holy” is “*kadosh*” which means “pure, morally blameless” and its Greek equivalent is “*hagios*” and it means the same thing. The word holy is used 431 times in the Old Testament and 180 times in the New Testament. With this much repetition, God is telling us something. To be holy is to be obedient to the Law of God. And to be disobedient to God is to sin. We all know this that is why we made a heartfelt plea for forgiveness here this morning at the beginning of our service. (At least I hope it was heartfelt.) And we reflected on our sins quietly, not out loud so we would not embarrass ourselves, our spouses, our families, or our friends with our sinful behaviors.

So, those of us who are believers know what God expects and we know why. You would think, as believers, that we would all do what God wants and be pleasing in His sight. How many of you want to do what is right in the sight of God – to be righteous in the eyes of God? How many of you have done what God demands and can say you are righteous in the sight of God this morning here in His house? Notice, my hand was with yours. I agree.

We all want to be holy, pure, and morally blameless, in the sight of God. We all know this in our heads conceptually but not one of us here says that we do what we know intellectually we should do. And none of us will dare to say we are righteous in the sight of God based on our thoughts, words, and actions.

The second reading this morning is from Romans and helps us understand why we face this dilemma. St. Paul clearly describes this situation in his own life. That would be SAINT Paul. A saint is fairly high in the eyes of God, yet SAINT Paul describes the same dilemma you and I face in the eyes of God. We are not pure, and we are not morally blameless by what we have said, by what we have thought, and by what we have done in our lives this week.

Indulge my history bent here for a moment. Bible scholars tell us that the Book of Romans was written by St. Paul in Greece between 55 and 57 A.D. while he was on his third missionary journey. This is verified in Acts 20:1-3. He was probably in the vicinity of Corinth because it seems he asked a Christian woman, named Phoebe, to take his letter to Rome for him based on Romans 16:1. Phoebe lived in the town of Cenchrea about 8 miles east of Corinth. St. Paul, himself, went to Jerusalem for the last time where he was arrested, tried, and eventually sent to Rome and was martyred.

In our reading today, Saint Paul describes his struggle as a believer. You remember that Jesus came to him, named Saul at that time, directly as he was on the way to Damascus to arrest and kill Christians. Jesus converted Saul who took the name Paul and became one of the greatest missionaries of the early church.

How many of you have about the little engine that could? What is the signature phrase from that story? “I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” The story teaches children the value of optimism and hard work. Saint. Paul says just the opposite about himself and being obedient. He says, “The good that I would...the good that I would...oh the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.”

Saint Paul was describing himself. The same man, who met Jesus and was converted by him, described himself as a failure at being holy. He probably did not hear one of those motivational speeches that purport “You can do anything you want if you put your mind to it...if you put your mind to it...it if you put your mind to it.” Saint Paul says, No, you cannot!” And we all know that’s true about being obedient to the Law of God. As hard as you and I try to live a holy life, a life that is pure and morally blameless” before God we fail. We fail miserably. We want to follow God’s Law and we cannot.

Instead, Saint Paul says we follow the law of sin in our bodies, “in our members.” Saint Paul writes, “for I know what is right.” He knew how he was supposed to behave and all of us do, too. We acknowledge what we should do intellectually, but we are caught in these sinful bodies, these bodies that were created by God but have been infected by sin. The worst thing is that sin was inherited by us from our parents and their parents and their parents all the way back to Adam and Eve. Now, it’s hard for me to think of my Grandpa Hintzmann or my Grandma Labuhn as sinners because I loved them dearly. It is even harder to say they were complicit in my sinfulness. But that is true, and it leads to my plight and yours as well.

Now, here is the kicker, according to Saint Paul. If God had not made the Law (the rules for us to live by) and written it on our hearts (we call it our conscience), we wouldn’t know when we did something wrong. We would be oblivious. But because God wrote the Law, the rules that we are supposed to obey in the sight of God, on our hearts, we know how bad we are and what failures we are in being obedient to the Law of God.

I asked you before about how well you did following the Law of God and none of you raised your hand and neither did I. Saint Paul says,

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Jesus answers that question posed by Saint Paul. Jesus lifted the burden of failing to obey God’s Law from us. Our sinfulness. Our Jesus took that burden on Himself on the cross on Calvary. He took the immense burden of all the sin of all the people of the whole world and let it fall right on His sinless, holy, law-abiding neck and died.

Our sins (our disobedience) died with Him. He has made us as holy as He is. In the words of Luther, a great exchange has been made. He took our sins and gave us His holiness, His righteousness in the eyes of God. We received His holiness in return for our unholiness. We can never keep the Law and be obedient to God, as hard as we try. The cards are stacked against us. However, Jesus did keep the Law. For us, His brothers and sisters, He conquered sin (disobedience to the Law), death (the punishment for sin), and Satan (who brought sin to us).

And now, the Gospel of that sacrifice and that great exchange which we hold in faith is ours. It is a new yoke. It is a much easier yoke than the yoke of the Law and offers us peace and rest which we can find nowhere else. It is the Gospel that relieves us of our dilemma of sin. It lifts us from our frustrating struggle with our mortal bodies. It is like a drink of cool, icy water on a hot, hot humid day. It is the grace of God for us that saves us from hell and damnation. It is the Good News that we believe in faith to help us keep on going and trying. It is a spirit of “I think I can” even though we know we can’t because Jesus not only thought He could, but He did.

And He did it for you and me. So now, with Saint Paul, we are both saints and sinners with the hope of eternal life with Jesus. Jesus has

eased our burden. We are submissive to Him and His Gospel of salvation. The Law still exists, and God still expects us to be obedient, but when we fall, Jesus is there to help us get back up.

Now we could leave it there with us all feeling uplifted and at peace and smug in our Christian faith. But that same friend we have in Jesus reminds us that we have had the good fortune of being children of God by virtue of someone who led us to Him and with the power of the Holy Spirit made us His trusting little children in faith in the Gospel.

There are many others in our personal orbits who are burdened down by their sin and their anguish over failing to be upright and good. They feel the weight of the yoke of Law in their lives. They try to be obedient because the Law is written on their hearts, even, if they do not know God, because He wrote it there. They know they sin, and they want to do better and can't. They may suffer despair and depression because they hate themselves. They hate themselves for who they are – sinners. Sinners like you and me. Unlike you and me, they do not know about Jesus and what he has done for all of us sinners no matter who we are. They haven't heard the Good News, the Gospel, the new life under the yoke of Jesus. They don't know the peace that passes all understanding. And we all do.

Jesus says to each of us, go out and teach them and then baptize them. With the help of the Holy Spirit, lift that burden, that yoke, just as Jesus has lifted it for you. Help them to learn what you have learned, that Jesus' yoke IS easy and His burden IS light for sinners who because of Jesus are saints.

In praise and thanksgiving for Jesus and His love. Amen.