

“The Good Life”

“I am the Vine, you are the branches.” That’s the Gospel we heard last week – speaking of our life IN Christ. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” He says. Apart from Him we wither and die, we perish. But abiding in Him – that is, united to Him by faith – we have life and salvation. This Gospel of our salvation is our greatest treasure – we live in it, we abide in it – we guard, treasure and “keep” it.

Today, the life-giving words of Jesus the Vine continue to flow to us, His branches – but now – His Words direct us to one another. “Abide in my love,” He says. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Don’t confuse these words with His words of salvation! He’s not demanding perfect obedience to His commandments, and then He will love us. No, that’s not the Gospel. When it comes to your salvation, that’s all Christ’s work – and it is His free gift that flows to all who are united to Him by faith.

Today, He’s telling you what it means to abide in His love. Today, He speaks to you of the good life that God desires for you to live. And that’s what His commandments do – they show us how to love one another – they show us what is truly good for us, and for our fellow man.

In the beginning, after God had created all things, He declared them to be “very good.” He created all this “for you.” That is the life He desires for you.

What God created as “good” – man’s sin has destroyed. And yet, His design and creation are still “good” for you. We don’t set aside His commandments because we have fallen short in our obedience. No, we repent – believing that we are forgiven for Jesus’ sake – and we return to the life God has created us to live.

Having been made new by the blood of Christ, we abide in His love. We live in it. We listen to our Lord, holding His Word sacred, and gladly hearing and learning it. We “keep” His commandments – guarding and treasuring them as “good” gifts from our Lord – leading us in the good life the Lord desires for each and every one of us.

With these words of our Gospel reading, the Lord is answering our petition in the Collect of the Day. There we call upon our God who is the “giver of all that is good” – asking that He would grant us to “think those things that are right and by [His] merciful guiding accomplish them.”

When we hear this language of “keep my commandments” – we think simply of obedience to His commandments – but that doesn’t fully get at what Jesus is saying. He wants us to “keep” His commandments in the sense of treasuring them – seeing them as “good” – and therefore guarding and “keeping” them.

The Lord gives His commandments to you because He wants you to love one another – to sacrifice yourself for your neighbor. To use the vine and the branches imagery – you are united to Christ by faith so that you may bear the fruit of good works – so that your neighbor may pick you clean – benefiting from your fruit.

This is the life that God wants for you to live – not as a slave – but as a friend. Not coerced by the fear that if you don’t do these things you will not be saved – but rather, by the freedom that comes through faith in Christ the Savior, you willingly love and serve your neighbor, as Christ has loved you.

As I mentioned before, sin corrupts all that God has created as “good.” So also the world in which we live, distorts the love of Christ. What the Lord calls good, the world often says, “that’s not good.” What the Lord forbids, the world celebrates.

Take the Fourth Commandment, for instance. The Lord commands us to “honor your father and your mother.” Parents are “good.” Mothers are good. Fathers are good. They are God’s gifts to you – His representatives, who work on His behalf – for your benefit.

They, and “other authorities,” are not given in order to “keep you down” – to “keep you from being you.” No, they are commanded by God to love you, like Christ – which means, they sacrifice of themselves for care for your needs.

Through them God is giving you food and clothing and a roof over your heads. Through them, the Lord is protecting and defending you. Through them He teaches you, and leads you in the way you should go. Through them, He shows you the good life.

But our sinful nature is tempted to go our own way – to say that our parents and other authorities are not good – to rebel, to not listen, to despise what they do for us. And so we pray, “O God, the giver of all that is good, by Your holy inspiration grant that we may think” of our parents as Your good gifts to us – and grant that we might love them as Christ has loved us.

So also, with the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not kill.” The gift of life is so mistreated in the world – even despised because it’s full of suffering – speaking of life as “unwanted” – treating our bodies and that of our neighbor as disposable – playing God by trying to control the beginning and end of life, and everything in between.

Your body, your life (and that of your neighbor) is “good.” So, we pray – Grant us Lord to guard and “keep” your commandment, treasuring the life you have given.

The Sixth Commandment deals with God’s “good” gift of marriage and sexuality. God created you as “male” or “female” and He says this is “good.” The world is confused, deceived – and many are manipulated by various voices that replace God’s GOOD with their own definitions of “good” and what it means to “love one another.”

Dearly beloved, it is good for you to be male, or female – it is good to be sexual beings with sexual desires – and it is good to find the fulfillment of those desires as one man and one woman, united as husband and wife. This is the Lord’s good and gracious will.

The world doesn’t know what to do with God’s “good” gifts – so the Lord reveals His good gifts and tells us how to use them with His commandments. He gives His “good” gifts to you, and He wants you to abide in them – to guard and treasure them – to “keep” them. For like the Gospel by which you are saved – they are for your good, now and forevermore. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.