

Rev. E. Kampen

Key elements for the Liturgy

Opening Song: Ps. 108:1,2

Song after the Sermon: Ps. 115:2,5,6,8

Song to Conclude worship service: Ps. 73:8,9

In afternoon: Creed Hy. 1A or 1B; or if Creed is read: Hy. 58:1,2

Additional songs if needed: Ps. 62:1,3,4; Ps. 135:1,7,8,10; Hy. 7:1,2,9
(if used in the A.M. after the law)

Scripture Reading: Deut. 18:9-14; Hosea 2; Text: Lord's Day 34

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ:

A big mistake we easily make in dealing with the law of God is that we think it begins with the first commandment. It doesn't! It begins with the words, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." This makes a world of difference. This gives warmth to the law. Back at Mt. Sinai the LORD first of all reminded his people that they were his redeemed people, his holy nation. The commandments he was about to give to them were not for their justification. They were for their sanctification, for their growing in holiness, so that they might more and more become the image of their holy God.

We have to be clear on this matter of sanctification. Fundamentally, it is the work of God the Holy Spirit. This, however, does not mean we are inactive. It is part of the marvelous work of regeneration that our heart and will are made alive. The LORD addresses us as new creations and his words no longer fall on deaf ears. We need to keep in mind Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12). This is the call to the covenant congregation.

The law thus has a sanctifying purpose. Of course one of the results of hearing the law is that we notice our own weaknesses. That is very sanctifying for it humbles us and drives us to Christ for forgiveness. But just because it exposes our many weaknesses and sins does not make us shy away from it. On the contrary, the Spirit makes us hunger for the law as we grow in eagerness to glorify our God.

In this frame of mind we can thus begin to deal with the 10 commandments. They are God's tool for our sanctification. They will help us grow in showing our thankfulness for the great gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. This afternoon then we turn to the first commandment. Its sanctifying message is summed up as follows:

In the first rule for sanctification the LORD teaches us to be totally devoted to him alone.

We consider

1. The dangerous sinful practices exposed by this command
2. The sanctifying practices proposed by this command

1. The dangerous sinful practices exposed by this command

You will sense from what has been said so far that the law actually is our friend. We are not inclined to see it that way. It is a matter of perspective. Compare a situation where you are on a hike and you come to a point where the path is very narrow. On one side is a steep mountain and on the other a steep drop. You see that someone has built a very solid fence on the steep drop side. How do you look at that fence? Are you not actually very glad it is there? The fence helps keep you on the narrow path.

We have such a safety fence in the LORD's opening command, let's call it the first fence, where he says: "You shall have no other gods before me". The LORD emphasizes the exclusive nature of our relationship. You step across this fence and your whole salvation and well-being can disappear as fast as someone on a hike who walks on the outside of the fence loses his footing and goes tumbling down the cliff.

It would appear that this command is pretty straightforward. We can notice in Scripture, however, that the LORD elaborates on this command and becomes very specific. We read in Deuteronomy 18 how Israel was told not to tolerate in its midst any one "who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist who consults the dead" (Deut. 18:10,11). Likewise, the LORD made it very clear that they had to break down the altars and sacred stones and the Asherah poles (Deut. 7:5).

Notice the command to concretely destroy anything to do with the religious practices of the nations round about. The LORD did not suggest that Israel collect religious memorabilia and put them in a museum beside the Tabernacle. He wanted them destroyed. Their presence would be a snare to the people because they were so visible, so concrete. Here is one of the weaknesses of our human nature, namely, that is visually oriented. It is drawn to what can be seen. Israel's faith was so cerebral, so heart oriented in comparison. We can read in Scripture how Israel time and again was drawn to the gods of the nations. Not that Israel forgot the LORD. Rather, the LORD became one among the many. After entering the promised land, Israel soon looked to the Baals for food. Ironically when they did that the food supply tended to dry up. Repeatedly they looked to the mediums and wizards for answers to the questions of life (cf. Saul and witch of Endor; Isaiah 8:19).

Perhaps we look back at our O.T. hrs. and srs. somewhat condescendingly. Are we not way past that! Are we not more enlightened? If only it were so. At times you hear of practices that have the smell of witchcraft on them. For example, it can be heard at times that people dabble with Ouija Boards. These things are sold as games in the toy stores. Can it be excused as being just for fun? Did the LORD not command that all remnants of witchcraft be removed from the midst of his people because they are so seductive? Why does a Christian even want to play with such sort of things? Another example is the reading of horoscopes. Again, the argument will be that it is just innocent fun and they never come true anyway. But did the LORD not

forbid his children in the O.T. to remove all traces of idolatry because they are so seductive? And then there is that practice of sending children out to join in the feast of ghouls, ghosts and goblins on the very night of the year that we commemorate Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the Church door in Wittenberg. Somehow it is acceptable to dress up as, or be in the company of those dressed up, as characters from the domain of the prince of darkness when on that night of the year the theme should be the victory of the Prince of Light, Jesus Christ, over the prince of darkness. How does this fit in with the fact that our children are baptized to distinguish them from the children of unbelievers?

Besides these practices which associate one with the domain of darkness, we also have to keep in mind the basic mind set of idolatry. The Catechism reminds us that "idolatry is having or inventing something in which to put our trust instead of, or in addition to, the only true God...". We should ask ourselves: Where do we put our trust? Do we have a collection of gods? Is the LORD the God of our soul, but we have others where we place our trust for our body, just like Israel time and again turned to the Baals?

You see, it is so easy to begin to place our trust in the means the LORD uses to look after us so that we turn the means into our idols. The Lord Jesus warned us about Mammon, that is, placing our trust in money. But, money is only a means used by the LORD to provide for us. Perhaps this shows up most with respect to our future where security is sought in our well managed portfolios, a government or private pension, a good and solid contract at work, a good insurance policy. Not that we should live fatalistically, but we should ask ourselves: where is my trust?

We can also think of the words of the apostle Paul that "all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16,17). Yet, there seems to be a growing dualism where the Word of God is trusted for the answers to questions of the soul but the wisdom of humanistic psychology is trusted to provide the answers for daily life. It seems that often people prefer the chirping and muttering of the modern wizards who manage to sprinkle their oracles with a few pasted on Scripture texts rather than personally immersing themselves in the teachings and testimonies of God and trusting what is taught there.

Please realize well, brs. and srs., the intent is not to ignore the means the LORD uses. The LORD's intent in this command is for us to take stock and to ask if he, our redeemer in Jesus Christ, is the one and only in our lives. The intent is to remove any competitors from the scene for the LORD knows that competitors will distract us, drawing us away from the only one who truly can provide. Here is the protective fence. You cross it at the very peril of your soul's salvation and blessedness because you can't serve two masters.

We see things that need to be avoided and fled. We would make a big and dangerous mistake if we would leave it at the negatives. We would be left with a vacuum in our lives. Once the house has been swept

clean of the wrong ways we must re-furnish it with the good ways. So we come to our second point.

2. The sanctifying practices proposed by this command

The vacuum that comes because we sweep out the old has to be filled with activities and attitudes that focus our attention on our gracious God. How do we begin? We begin by rightly coming to know God as our only God. The Lord Jesus says that eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3). Keep in mind that in Scripture knowing is not mere academic knowledge. Knowing implies intimate association, devotion and commitment. Coming to know thus also includes acknowledging, confessing, that we know him. We are to give the LORD the glory and honour due his Name. If he is the only one, show it, make it known by word and deed. You can sense in this a call to concrete activity.

How do we rightly acknowledge him as our God? Fundamentally, it comes down to trusting him. Trust is what faith is all about. Trust typifies our whole relationship with the LORD. It shows the relationship is not formal but intimate and warm.

It is quite an act to entrust yourself to someone. It is one of the great challenges for young ladies, for example, to find a young man to whom they can entrust themselves, with whom they will feel safe to serve the LORD in his kingdom. The first commandment calls us to entrust ourselves to God. Trust is a common theme in the Psalms, as the Psalmist time and again will sing about the LORD in whom he trusts in all the troubles and difficulties of life. In many of the Psalms you will notice that trust means the psalmist is leaning upon God, who is his rock, his refuge, his shelter in the day of trouble.

Trust is easy to talk about. It is easy to exhort someone else to trust. Trust is not easy, however, when we face the crunches of life. At times it may seem that suddenly the Lord pulls the rug out from under our feet and yet he tells us to keep on moving our feet, to keep on trusting. When life is faced with difficulties it is tempting to grab onto things you can see, just like it was for Israel. Yet in trust, in faith, though everything is dark, though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails and the field produce no food, it is confessed unequivocally: The Sovereign LORD, who sent his Son for me, is my strength, I shall not be in want (Hab. 3:17-19; Ps. 23; Rom. 8). In our trusting we humbly and patiently wait for his deliverance, not questioning his ways, not looking either to the left or to the right but straight up, to him! Though we use the means he puts at our disposal, our trust is in him.

When we speak of such trust we realize, brs. and srs, that in the first commandment the LORD does not call for a mere formal response from us. Trust is no formality. Formal trust is only fair weather trust. Such trust requires a whole life commitment, as we hear in the call to love the LORD with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Notice well, brs. and srs, the God who has shown his affection for you wants your affection!

It stands to reason that part of recognizing the Lord as the only God also will show in the way we fear and honour him. Fear can mean that we are afraid of someone. We should be afraid of God if we mock him. Fear also means to show respect, to revere. Our holy God, our Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, Provider, is worthy of reverence in all that we do. He is worthy of honour. We can think here especially of formal worship although we can also extend it to our whole life which is our spiritual worship. We are to show the LORD that he is at the center of our lives. Just like no wife will appreciate it if her husband barely casts a glance at her because he is so busy with 101 other interests, the Lord does not appreciate it if we barely give him the time of day or place him on the second rank. That can easily happen! We can be so ready to accommodate our schedule for anything under the sun, but when it comes to honouring the Lord, well, sometimes we are too busy and the Lord will just have to wait for a while, till we have time. Then we have to ask ourselves whether we have other gods beside the LORD our God? Is it showing reverence and honour to let the LORD wait? We might not be able to see the LORD but he is not someone you keep waiting!

When you reflect on all these aspects, do you see, brs. and srs., that the law is your friend, that it is there for your sanctification? The LORD by his fences graciously raises all sorts of red flags and says: my children, avoid this and that like the plague. So many things are deadly! At the same time, he calls us to love him wholeheartedly, to trust him, knowing that he loves us and is faithful to his covenant promises as is clear from the beginning of the law, namely, that he has redeemed us from our sin and misery in Christ.

Be busy then in your life sweeping out the old ways, the competitors, and fill your lives with the furnishings of the Holy Spirit. You will find much old furniture over which you will stumble. Don't make excuses for that. Go to Christ with them and seek forgiveness. Without ceasing be diligent and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit to make progress in this command. And observe God's marvelous work of sanctification as by his Spirit he makes you heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him. Amen