



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

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**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

**July 10, 2016**

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## **“Livin’ the High Life”**

*(Lev. 18:1-5)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statues. You shall follow my rules and keep my statues and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statues and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD” (Lev. 18:1-5).*

**COLLECT:** Lord Jesus Christ, in Your deep compassion You rescue us from whatever may hurt us. Teach us to love You above all things and to love our neighbors as ourselves; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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The title of this sermon is, “Livin’ the High Life”. No, this doesn’t have anything to do with a Miller product. And it certainly has nothing to do with cannabis or the High Life Smoke Shop. Rather, it has everything to do with living according to God’s commands.

God didn’t hand down some random rules just to test us and see whether we would obey him or not. And he didn’t give us the commandments to diminish joy in life. No, God gave us the commandments so that we could enjoy life through them. With the commandments God protects us from ourselves and others (curb). He reminds us who we are and who he is (mirror). But with them also guides us into the life he intends us to live in response to the saving work of Jesus (guide).

Let’s get right into it. The first thing we notice in our lesson is the repeated use of phrase, “I am the LORD.” It comes up eight times in our Old Testament Lesson. “I am the LORD.” Of course, that means you are not. He gets to make the rules because he’s the Lord. We don’t get to make the rules, or rewrite them, because we are not the Lord. God makes no attempt to justify these rules, arguing for example that they are good for the community. No, he simply says, “I am the LORD,” and that is sufficient motive for keeping the commands.

In verse three it says, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God.” They had left the land of Egypt. They must also leave the customs of Egypt behind them, the gods of Egypt, the superstitions and many of the values and beliefs of Egyptian culture.

Passing through the waters of the Red Sea, they became God's people, and that is a totally different life.

Same way with us. Passing through the waters of Holy Baptism, we became God's people. That claim on us is stronger than any other. We belong to the Lord before we belong to any culture or society. And besides, the commands and expectations of our society are morally inferior to what God intends for us. So we shouldn't fit in with American culture. We shouldn't be in synch with society. There should be an uncomfortable dissonance between our life in Christ and the values of our society. Jesus said to his disciples, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, for I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). And in James 4 we read this, "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (vs. 4).

Last year I was visiting with one of the religion teachers at Lake Country Lutheran High School, and I asked him "What changes in general have you seen in high school students over the years?" He said, a lot of kids come to LCL already knowing what they believe and it's not necessarily what they were taught in confirmation or Sunday School or in their Christian day schools. It's what society has taught them, the law of the land as opposed to God's law, and the values they've learned from screens (movie, T.V., computer, smart phone). "This generation comes in knowing what they believe, and wanting God's Word to conform to it. And they're willing to bend God's Word to make that happen." But of course, God doesn't give us that permission. Instead Jesus warns us, "Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn. 10:35). We cannot pluck things out of context in order to make Scripture fit into our preexistent beliefs and values.

"I am the LORD your God." He gets to make the rules, not us. But it would be a mistake if we thought of this refrain as God simply pulling rank on us. No, there's much

more to it. With this refrain he's also reminding us of who he is and what he's done for us.

Remember when God, from within the burning bush, told Moses, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." Moses doesn't like the sound of this at all and at first tries to wiggle out of this calling. Eventually he says, "Suppose I'm asked, 'What is the name of the God who sent you?' what shall I say? And that's when God gave us his name. "Tell them I AM has sent me." This name was likely pronounced "Yahweh." And every time our text today says, "I am the LORD" it is literally saying, "I am Yahweh." So the Lord is reminding them of who he is and what he has already done for them, and promises to do. In Exodus 6, he says: "I am Yahweh, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm . . . and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God . . . I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you. I am the LORD. [I am Yahweh]." (vv. 6-8). Any God who did all that for them wasn't about to start abusing them with senseless and oppressive laws and decrees and commandments. That's not his intent for them or us. We can trust his commands are given for our welfare, because God has been working on our behalf from the very beginning. He's earned our trust. With these commands he's not trying to manipulate us. He's trying to make life better for us.

Our text says, "If a person does them, he shall live by them." But this doesn't mean just a physical existence. Rather, we could also translate it this way: "If a person does them, he will enjoy life through them." Envisioned is a happy life through obedience to the Law.

Sometimes we think sinners get to have all the fun. But it's really not the case. General rule of thumb: if you ignore his commands, life will probably be very difficult for you, tumultuous, miserable, even impoverished. Steal from

your work place, lose your job. Cheat on your spouse, lose your marriage and probably a good portion of your assets. Refuse to respect the authorities (for example by resisting arrest), and feel the debilitating sting of a stun gun. Slander your neighbor, and lose the respect of people you care about. Refuse to forgive, and stew in the juices of your own resentment. Let money become your god, and you'll never know a moment of contentment and peace, because if you love money you'll never have enough of it. You see how transgressing his commands generally leads not to happiness, but to misery? It's not necessarily because God is sticking it to you, but because you're sticking it to yourself. The world ordered in such a way that there are natural consequences to breaking God's laws.

Conversely, want to be happy and content and live a peaceable life? Your best chance at that is to live according to God's commands. I say chance because there's no guarantee, no guarantee in Scripture that obedience will always lead to a better life in this world. In fact, some Christians are oppressed and hated precisely because of their obedience. So there's no guarantee, but in general, the world is also ordered in such a way that life goes much better for us when we obey God's commands. Again, he keeps saying, "I am Yahweh". He soliciting our trust, and reminding us his intent for us has always been good.

"I am the Lord" or "I am Yahweh." This refrain also gives us another motive for observing God's law. We keep the law not merely as a formal duty to a demanding God, but as a loving response to our merciful Father.

Remember, the one who gave us the Law is also the one who gave us his Son. Paul wrote, Jesus "was born under law to redeem those under law" (Gal. 4:4). Jesus lived in such a way that he never transgressed God's law. This made him a lamb without blemish or defect, and therefore a suitable sacrifice for your sin, whoever you are or whatever you've done. John wrote, "The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7). That is, there is no sin in you that is so sticky that his blood isn't up to the task of cleansing you

of it. Because he's God's Son, his sacrifice was sufficient not just for one person or one family, but for the world. John wrote, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). So, just as he freed his ancient people from Egyptian slavery, so also he has freed you from slavery to sin, death and the devil.

Therefore our first and ongoing response to the Lord's grace in Jesus Christ is one of gratitude, gratitude not just spoken with our lips, but lived with our lives. We live out our gratitude to God by living according to his commands. After all, they are not impersonal laws that he cares little about. Rather, every infraction against his commands are a sin against him, a little rebellion, another bite of the forbidden fruit. So when tempted, we can ask ourselves, "How could I do such a thing against the One who has been so good to me?"

Remember how Joseph was being seduced by Potiphar's wife? Gen. 39:6, "Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." (She certainly cannot be accused of being indirect or ambiguous.) And indeed, Joseph was tempted. But he replied, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" He's not just thinking about Potiphar, or Potiphar's wife, and he's certainly not just thinking of it as a sin against some impersonal decree. No, Joseph is most concerned about sinning against God, about openly rebelling against God with such an act. Joseph was remembering how good God had been to him, and therefore he had no stomach for sinning against God.

We can ask the same question. After all that God has done for us, the prosperity and peace he's given us, the health and life, family and friends, the forgiveness he's given us, along with faith and hope for the future, after all of that, how can we go forward and sin against him so brazenly? So, one way to avoid sin is to simply start counting your blessings. That said, we'll never be successful at avoiding

sin. No, we rack them up every day. Thankfully God is equally generous with his forgiveness every day!

Eight times in our text he says, "I am Yahweh." It's no accident he keeps saying that while giving us his commands. With this short refrain, God is reminding us who it is that is giving these commands, who we are that are receiving them. He's soliciting our trust. He's also reminding us what he's done for us and promises to do for us, particularly in Jesus Christ. Amen.

