

After seeing Jesus perform an amazing miracle, feeding five thousand households with just a few pieces of bread and fish, the crowd wanted to take him by force and make him king. They preferred to have Jesus as an earthly king, one who would rule them with worldly tactics. Perhaps if he freed them from the Roman occupation and rearranged the balance of powers, then they could see for themselves the measure of his reign. They didn't want to rely on Christ's heavenly promises or put their hope in his heavenly kingdom. Instead, they would rather be under the law, looking to those things they can see and figure out for themselves. St. Paul was dealing with the same kind of people in his Epistle to the Galatians. They did not want to rely simply on God's promise in Christ. Instead, they would rather measure their righteousness by their own works. If they could follow the rules, get circumcised, avoid certain kinds of food, and follow the other regulations outlined in the Law of Moses, then their righteousness would be more in their grasp. They could see it and measure it, or so it seemed.

To think this way is to be under the law. Those who want to be under the law are those who would rather rely on worldly power and human works than on God's gracious promise in Christ. We all naturally prefer to be under the law. That is to say, we would rather deal with those things that appear to be in our control, things we can see and weigh out for ourselves. This is why people are naturally more interested in politics than they are in theology. When we are dealing with human behavior and government policies, the solutions seem to be more in our control.

People naturally want to be under the law. Of course, people don't want to be oppressed by tyrants. They don't want to suffer at the hands of bullies. No one would say that he wants to be a slave. But at least tyrants, bullies, and taskmasters can be replaced. A tyrant's power can be overturned by someone promising more freedom and justice. You can stand up to a bully or get someone bigger and tougher to stand up to him. And you can run away from an abusive master, find a different job, or any number of things. Of course, we know that these evils are never completely abolished. There are all sorts of tyrants and bullies all around the world and at different levels of society. Slavery still exists in many places, and even where it is abolished there are always overbearing and unfair bosses who overwork their vulnerable employees. And yet, as long as we live in this world, the possibility is always there to have a better leader and a more understanding boss or master. You can imagine it. You can visualize it. You can see it happening, at least in your head.

But you can't imagine heaven. You can't see heaven. The kingdom of heaven is completely beyond any human understanding. You can't weigh or measure God's promise in Christ. You can't predict how the Holy Spirit will work. He creates faith where and when he pleases in those who hear the gospel. God's Word does all the work in the kingdom of Christ. All human manipulation is completely excluded.

So while everyone will admit that this life on earth could be better, that we could have better rulers, better leaders, and better acts of justice, our sinful nature would rather stick to the devil it knows. Folks complain about earthly rulers all the time, but at the end of the day, they are going to seek their security in earthly rulers. People complain about others looking down their noses at them and thinking they are better than they are. But at the end of the day, they are going to try to be accepted by the crowd, even if they have to find a different crowd. The poor want to be rich just as much as the rich do. The underprivileged want to be privileged. The have-nots want to be the haves. When God comes and promises them something much better, they don't want this. Why? Because they can't see it in this life. So they'd rather just keep striving for more power, more money, and more praise from the world, because these are things they can see and touch right now. It's like that quarter machine at the liquor

store. You can see the quarters. You rarely get more quarters than you put in. But at least you can see them.

The promise of righteousness in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ is not something we can grasp with our eyes. We can't bring it to a financial planner or a stock-broker and try to control how much it grows. No, it is only received by faith. Only faith lays hold of God's promise. Only faith enjoys the reign and kingship of Christ. Only faith can say yes to what God says.

The Law of Moses was never given to make us righteous. Even circumcision was simply an outward sign of what faith clings to. God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision after he already declared him righteous through faith. And God gave the Law of Moses over four hundred years after this. The law never made anyone righteous. Whether we are talking about the Ten Commandments or the various regulations outlined for the people of Israel, the law was meant to teach the people to recognize their sin and their need for God's promise. If you have an unjust ruler, an overbearing boss, a bully, or anyone who is difficult to love, the law tells you to love them. You learn through this how sinful you are, how lacking in love you are, and how much of a burden you are. And this is all so that you would not trust in what your eyes can see. Don't trust in what appears to be in your grasp. But cling to what God has promised you in Christ. Because he has fulfilled it for you. His suffering and death has rescued you from this present evil age. His resurrection declares light and eternal life to you through his gospel. His blood cleanses your conscience so that you are not ruled by all these worldly troubles and worries.

Yes, the law gives a certain amount of earthly order. It is good to ask God for a good government and vote for good and godly rulers as you do your civil duty to promote order and peace as well. It's good to insist on certain moral standards as you oppose the popular trends of this dying culture, which promote sexual deviancy, drunkenness, murder, and greed. It's good to work toward strengthening families and to pray for peace and security for your children and your grandchildren. Those of us who enjoy these things in our homes did not receive them out of the air. If your great-great grandparents didn't fornicate, were faithful to each other, went to church, and strove to live orderly lives, then this has benefited you to this day. Throughout the generations, God has worked through good rulers, good laws, and good parents, homes, families, and neighbors to bless us.

Now we see how much the culture around us has degenerated. And I'm not just talking about the insanity going on in the wider culture. No, I'm talking about our own church culture. There used to be Lutheran schools all over this area. Most of them have closed. Churches used to be much bigger. Now they are a lot smaller, and many are either very much struggling to keep the doors open or have already closed the doors. Children grow up to think that church is optional as they learn morality from the world.

What can be done? What has God given us to do? Train your children to fear God and honor his Word, to seek a godly spouse, and be open to the gift of godly children. Teach them not to be like the heathen, but to desire to please God more than to receive praise from the world. Support Christian education. We could even start a Lutheran High School if we wanted to. I'm not talking about a big one with lots of fancy programs, but one for our children, which teaches them to study and think, work and play like Christians. If we ask God for it and we prioritize our time, money, and energy toward it, it is certainly within reach. We can get together with one another more often, commune with each other more often, work together more often. Look at what God has blessed us with already! Last week we had a bunch of Lutherans gather at the camp to pray, eat, sing, and work together. These kinds of things are what

make up a good culture. If we strive for these things, then we will be able to enjoy them even in this life.

But starting a school, a camp, or other good things, which promote an orderly Christian culture – having strong families, strong congregations, and other things that promote strong friendships – these are only temporary, serving to help us focus on what will never fade away. The goal we have in God's promise is much greater, even if our eyes can't see it yet. Jerusalem had its glory days. The Missouri Synod had its glory days. Who knows what God will let us see in the coming years? But simply trying to get the glory days back is not what our faith rests in. Paul says that Jerusalem in its present, earthly state is in bondage. It might have an orderly government. The U.S. Embassy may be there. But there is no eternal promise attached to the earthly Jerusalem, nor to any other earthly kingdom. As long as people do not find their righteousness in Christ, in his obedience, suffering, and death for their sins, then they remain in bondage. Our Motherland is not some earthly state. No, our Mother is the Jerusalem who is above. We have been born from above through the promise of our baptism. We are members of the kingdom of heaven. She is the church, the bride of Christ, and her children are all of those who have received new birth and new life in his promise. She is free, not staking her hope on regaining some lost earthly glory, but looking forward to the glory God has promised to reveal in his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who died to give us eternal life.

Hagar and Ishmael were slaves in Abraham's house. Sarah and Isaac were free. Paul uses this as an illustration to teach us about our lives as Christians. Hagar was able to give birth to a son, because her body was healthier, vibrant, younger and more fruitful than Sarah. But Sarah was able to give birth to a son because of God's promise. In herself, she was barren. But God's promise brought about Isaac. Through Isaac, God continued the lineage that led to Christ, who gave himself as a sacrifice for us all. Isaac walked up the mountain to be sacrificed by his father, and he was spared. Jesus walked up the mountain as the sacrifice provided by his Father, but he was not spared. And he who did not spare his own Son will certainly give all good things to us. This is his sure promise.

If we strive to make a better culture and more orderly life for ourselves, this is not a bad thing. But if we do so for the sake of having more stuff, more influence, and more power in this world, then we are no better than the cultural degenerates who want wealth, influence, and power just as much. And we are just as much under the law as those who saw Jesus as an earthly ruler. They wanted to place an earthly crown on Jesus' head. Jesus withdrew from them and received instead a crown of thorns. His kingdom is not in the glory of this world. No, his kingdom is the glory of God hidden under his cross.

As God calls us to our duties, to support order, peace, and safety, and to promote a good and godly culture, he is calling us simply to love. Love God with your whole heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the fulfillment of the law. But such love can only come from faith in God's promise. It is fruit, which this world can't see, and even our eyes see only dimly.

We can't see Christ's kingdom, but we trust it. We can't observe his righteousness. But he credits it to us. He even attaches it to tangible things that our eyes can see and our hands, heads, and mouths can touch. He feeds us with his body and blood in bread and wine, even as he washed us with his Word joined to water, forgiving us, strengthening us, and establishing us forever. As Ishmael mocked Isaac, the world also mocks the church for relying on the promise. But this is our inheritance. And though we might not see full pews today, though the world may count us as dead and barren, we remain fruitful with the precious gospel and sacraments. We have God's promise. And we are free. Amen.