

The mercy and compassion of God is meant to give you joy. The Holy Spirit makes your heart glad by planting his Word of grace into your heart, giving you the assurance that your sins are forgiven and God is at peace with you for Christ's sake. The law can't give you this same joy. Of course, if you have this joy from the gospel, then you will also rejoice in the law. After all, God's law is good. But this doesn't mean that God's law gives you this joy. No, only the mercy of God in Christ can give you heavenly joy. Such heavenly joy strengthens us when the law shows us our sin. When our works become overwhelming and we see how weak and unworthy we are, only the joy of the gospel can warm our hearts with a sure and certain faith in God's mercy. If we think we can get this joy from our own efforts of following the law, then we will only be driven to despair. We will only grow cold in our hearts and lose hope in God's mercy, while the works God has given us will only burden us with how much we fall short.

At the beginning of our Gospel lesson, Jesus is rejoicing. The Holy Spirit is filling him with joy. He had just finished telling his disciples to rejoice that their names are written in heaven. Now he rejoices that his Father has revealed the heavenly treasures to little children. The gospel, the good news that God has become a man, that he would bear in his own dying body the sin of the world, that he would be raised from the dead, and that he gives knowledge of his Father to unworthy sinners – this is what Jesus is rejoicing in. This is a great mystery, which is hidden from our human reason, hidden even from the smartest and wisest people. It is good news, which changes everything. It means that your sins are forgiven, that you stand righteous before God through faith in Jesus' shed blood, that you stand on a firm foundation, and that you may live with God forever. This message of the gospel should give you the same joy it gives to Jesus. When you talk about how faith is given to you as a gift, this should bring great comfort and joy. When you talk about the fact that God graciously calls you to himself, not by your own works or willpower, but by the power of his Holy Spirit, then this should make you rejoice. When you consider that you are not righteous before God by your own works or virtues, but only through faith in Jesus who made full satisfaction for your sins, then this should give you a joyful confidence. Because you're talking about God's mercy. And there is nothing happier, nothing more delightful, nothing more encouraging, than knowing that God has had compassion on you for sake of his Son.

So Jesus rejoiced. He rejoiced that the Father has made known his salvation to small and forgotten people. He rejoices that the Father has put everything into his hands. He rejoices that, even though no one can see or know the Father, he has made himself known through his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus rejoices in this. And he again turns to his disciples and shares this great joy. He says, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." He reminds them that many prophets and kings longed to see and hear what they were seeing and hearing, but they couldn't see it in this earthly life.

Jesus therefore invites us to rejoice. Abraham rejoiced almost two thousand years before Jesus came. He rejoiced that he would someday see his coming. And now here we are, two thousand years after the Son of God came to earth. All things the prophets said about him have come true. The atoning sacrifice, promised by God from the very foundations of the world, has been accomplished. And here we stand on the other side of history, the other side of our Lord's saving death and glorious resurrection. Here we are, baptized into this very death and resurrection. Here, in this place, from this altar, the Word of our Savior delivers his body and blood under the bread and the wine, right into our mouths. Here, in this place, we hear the very voice of Jesus from the Scriptures, the voice of God in the flesh, speaking peace and good will to us. It is the good news of great joy, which is for all people. And here we get to hear it, sing about it, eat it, and talk about it.

But our sinful nature is incapable of rejoicing in this great truth. As we sing in the hymn, “Human reason, though it ponder, cannot fathom this great wonder.” Our sinful nature can’t find any joy in the gospel at all. Instead, fallen reason, with its carnal wisdom, tries to find joy in what it can see and understand. So folks find their joy in what they are able to accomplish rather than in what God has graciously accomplished for them. This is why they often find conversations about Christian doctrine boring and not relevant to what they think they need. What can I do? That’s the only question they can ask, because they look for their joy in their own powers and abilities. To the naked eye, they accomplish great things. They throw benefit dinners and cheer themselves on for raising money and awareness for all sorts of good causes. Or they will put on some kind of religious show and cheer for the great powers they appear to have over the spirits. But their joy is not that God is the giver of all good things. They are not rejoicing that God has written their names in heaven. They can’t rejoice in this. They are by nature incapable of it.

Jesus was filled with gladness by what only his Holy Spirit can give. He took joy in the promise and fulfillment of the gospel, the salvation of souls. At that point an expert in the Law came along and interrupted Jesus’ act of rejoicing. This man wasn’t interested in the joy of which Jesus spoke. No, he was only interested in testing Jesus. This is because he wasn’t interested in the gospel. He therefore wasn’t really interested in the law either. He was interested only in what he thought he could accomplish by his own works. This is why he asked Jesus, “What do I do to inherit everlasting life?” What do I do? That’s what interests him. That’s what gets his blood moving. That’s where he finds his comfort and joy. But such comfort and joy never last. They relies on his own works, which are never good enough. So no matter how excited he gets about talking about his own accomplishments, it will always grow cold.

Again, this is how it is with the fallen human nature. It’s why people are more interested in politics than they are in theology. They are more interested in what their vote can accomplish, what their money can buy, and what people they can influence than they are of what God, by his bitter, undying love accomplished in the death of his Son.

If this expert in the law were truly interested in the law, if he truly wanted to rejoice in the law, then he would not try to justify himself. He would let the law speak. He knew outwardly what the law said, but he wasn’t willing to allow the law to have its way with him. As an expert in the law, he sought to be the master rather than the student of the law. In order to convince himself that he was good enough or capable of fulfilling what the law demanded, he needed to hold the law at an arm’s length. So when Jesus asked him what the law said, he was able to answer correctly like the expert that he was. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus had nothing more to add. The man knew what the law said. So Jesus simply told him to do it. If you want to be saved by what you do, then do this. Love perfectly. Love God. Give up everything for him. Submit your entire life, you whole heart, soul, strength, and mind to his will. And love your neighbor as yourself. Treat him as you would treat your own flesh and blood. That’s all you need to know about the law.

But if you can’t rejoice in God’s love, if you can’t find your comfort in God’s mercy and compassion, then it doesn’t matter how much you know about the law. It doesn’t matter how much you know about ethics and morality and politics and economics. It doesn’t matter where you stand on social issues or what kinds of good opinions you have. If you don’t know the love of God, then you cannot truly know

the law. This lost man was an expert with no sense. He wanted to justify himself. So instead of taking the law for what it says, he asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

You don’t decide who your neighbor is. This is why the first table of the law talks about God. The first table of the law teaches you that God is God and you are not. God is the one who makes it rain, not you. You can’t save the world. You can’t turn evil into good. Only God can do that. As Psalm 100 says, “Know that the LORD, He is God. He has made us and not we ourselves.” The second table of the law teaches you to love your neighbor. Your neighbor is literally the one who is near you, the one whom God put near you. This could be your wife and children. It could be the one you are getting along with or the one who is being difficult. It isn’t some imaginary friend or hypothetical person who might exist somewhere out there. No, this is the one whom God has put into your path and into your life. The love you show toward God must drive you. The mercy you imitate from your Father must motivate the way you act toward your neighbor.

Jesus illustrated this by telling a story of a man coming from Jerusalem down to Jericho. He fell among robbers who beat him up, stripped him of his clothing, and left him half dead. Jesus himself would be taken out of the city of Jerusalem, stripped his clothes, beaten up by Roman soldiers, and left to hang dead on the cross. There is your neighbor. There is the one who received no compassion from this sinful world. But he isn’t just some guy from thousands of miles away who lived a long time ago. No, this Jesus, who was stripped of everything he had and nailed to a cross, is nearer to you than you could ever know. He comes in his Word and Sacraments right here as true God dwelling among his people. And he identifies with the least of your fellow Christians so much that whatever you do to them you are doing to Jesus.

This man lying half-dead on the side of the road did not receive help from his neighbors. His nearest kin, men from Jerusalem, priests and Levites, just passed on. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, his own countrymen cheered it on. They rejoiced in the works of their own hands while they killed the neighbor God gave for them to love.

But here is the great mystery, which causes hearts to rejoice. That man, hanging on the cross between two robbers, was drawing all people to himself. By bearing the sin of the world, he was making every man his neighbor. There, he became your neighbor, loving you as himself as he gave his entire heart, soul, strength, and mind in obedience to his Father.

So Jesus tells of a Samaritan, a foreigner, one who doesn’t live next door. But as he walks down the road, with the poor, beaten-up man in his path, God has made him his neighbor. And he is moved with compassion. He treats and dresses his wounds, puts him on his own animal, carries him to an inn, and pays for his stay. Jesus has become our neighbor. Jesus has been moved by compassion. Jesus has paid the entire price for our souls. Jesus has shown mercy.

Now, you go and do likewise. This is what the law says. You don’t need to make the law say anything else than this. To those near you, to those in your path, do what Jesus has done for you. Show mercy. And don’t expect your sinful nature to rejoice in this. Let your human reason weep over how much it falls short. Let the law have its way with all your self-serving desires. Let them die. So be it. But find your joy in what gave Jesus joy. Rejoice in the compassion of God in Christ, which is hidden from human wisdom but revealed to poor sinners. Only then will you and your neighbor find joy in the work God has set before you. Amen.