

2 Thessalonians 2:1-8, 13-17

I. Law and Lawlessness

The sin of our epistle lesson is lawlessness, defined in dictionaries as iniquity, gross injustice or inequality; as wickedness or sin. It brings to mind, perhaps, the Western frontier town where the bad guys brawl until there's a new sheriff in town, or maybe a faraway region of Africa where no one is safe as warlords sweep back and forth. But lawlessness isn't far away in time or place: it is a sin that's working long before a place descends into chaos, and one for which we must watch here and now.

Lawlessness begins as soon as people reject a part of God's Law. It might not look like it right away, but it has already begun. It's not chaos, but it is lawlessness. I pose to you the situation where two young boys are playing a pick-up game of basketball on the playground. The rules of one-on-one basketball are well known. However, when one begins to pull ahead, the other announces, "It's okay if I travel with the ball." "No, it's not!" says the other. "That's against the rules!" "It's a new rule," says the first one, "and I'm not going to play anymore unless we do it my way." Lawlessness has already arrived: even though most rules are still in place, someone's saying, "Forget the rules that I don't like. I'm going to do it my way."

Discussions of law and lawlessness lie at the heart of many debates in our nation today. Has God established laws that govern all people—sometimes called natural law or absolute truth, or do men make up moral law along the way? If God makes moral law for all, then we know—for instance—when life begins and how marriage is defined. If man makes it up along the way, then anything goes.

At any rate, as soon as you reject one part of God's Law, you've arrived at lawlessness. In for a penny, in for a pound. Like the kid on the playground, you've already said, "Forget the rules that I don't like. I'm going to do it my way." That means you're willing to change any rule you don't like. No law is out of bounds. You've arrived at lawlessness, and trouble's coming. It happens in the realm of civil government, when the tyrant says, "I will rule in such a way that benefits me and mine. I will favor some and hurt others. If you help me, I'll help you. Get in my way, and I'll destroy you. That's my law." Actually, that's lawlessness.

It happens in the realm of marriage, where an unfaithful or abusive spouse announces by word or deed, "I'm setting aside the vows I made before God, the rules I agreed to follow. I'm going to do what suits me, not what serves you or helps us." That's lawlessness.

It happens in families, where a youth decides, "The 4th commandment says I should honor my parents. I'll honor them to their face, but I'll go behind their back to do what I want." Once again, that's lawlessness.

It happens in the school hallway, where the in-crowd says what's cool. In some high schools, the "in"-crowd makes the rule that you sacrifice your virginity or you're ostracized. God's Word doesn't apply; the group with social clout has decided you have to defile yourself to be popular. Lawlessness.

It happens in the Church, which is especially what Paul warns against here. If someone says you can keep God's Law, he contradicts God's Word with his own message. If he says you can earn or work your way to heaven, he has made a new rule that contradicts God. He's said, "Forget what God has declared in His Law. I'm changing it so that the Law saves you." That's a frightening lawlessness indeed. It doesn't just defy God's Law: it also defies His Gospel. It says Jesus didn't really have to die, because we can save ourselves.

It happens in you. Each sin of yours is Old Adam's bid to defy God's Law and live by your own rules. This is where little sins become very dangerous: see, you and I reach a comfort level where we avoid the really nasty sins, but accept some little ongoing ones because "that's just the way we are." But even little sins are big, because to sin in one part of the Law is to break the whole thing. It's like popping one part of a balloon. It's not just bending the rules. It's lawlessness. It's saying, "Forget the rules. I'm going to do things my way, and God will just have to play my game."

Lawlessness appeals because, by nature, we all want to do what we want to do, and God's Law rubs Old Adam the wrong way. But what your blind sinful flesh doesn't tell you is that not everyone can have his way. This should be obvious: but as 2 Thessalonians 2 declares, with lawlessness comes the strong delusion that this is

actually going to work out. However, only one can be a tyrant: if it's not you, then you've got to play by his rules, and he decides what you're worth. The only way that the "in-group" at school can be "in" is if there is also a group that they keep "out." When a spouse becomes selfish, he says, "I'm more important than you." When God's Law is rejected, inequality abounds—and when everyone is saying, "We're going to play by my rules," they're also saying, "we're not going to play by yours."

God's Law equalizes all, and He has the final say. He doesn't say that some are better than others in His sight. Rather, 2 Thessalonians 2 declares that all are equal—they're equally condemned in sin because they've all rejected His commandments.

You and I are numbered among them, too. But that's not the end of the story. God gives us His Law, but not for the end-goal of showing us who's boss. His desire is to save us, to bring us and keep us in His kingdom forever. He declares His Law to show us our lawlessness, our need for forgiveness. Having made that need clear, He declares to us the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ our Savior. This is what He declares in the second part of our epistle.

II. Gospel and Grace

Dear hearers in Christ, rejoice! You are beloved by the Lord, and He loves you with a sacrificial love. In the words of our text, He has chosen you as firstfruits to be saved—not a second-rate, inferior, unequal, half-decent part of the harvest that barely makes it in the door. No, He has poured out salvation upon you so that you might be His beloved children. How? By giving you the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Gospel: Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, became flesh like you and me. He did so for the purpose of our salvation. Because we human beings deserved judgment for our sin, the glorious Son of God became a human being to take our place in judgment. On the cross, He suffered God's judgment for our sin—He suffered all of God's judgment for our sin. Because He has taken our sin upon Himself, He now shares with us this glory: before God, you are clothed in Jesus' righteousness. When God looks upon you, He does not see sin and lawlessness; He does not see one who daily says, "I'm going to do things my way." Rather, He sees you clothed in the righteousness of His Son, who said to His Father, "Thy will be done" and then went to the cross for you.

By His Word, the Lord has declared this Good News to you and called you to salvation. By this Word, He makes you holy—He sanctifies you by the work of the Holy Spirit. By this Word, He gives you faith, "belief in the truth" of Jesus' death and resurrection for your salvation. And by that faith which He gives, you have the certainty of God's love, that He works all things to your good. You have the eternal comfort that deliverance and salvation are yours forever. You have the good hope, the certain hope, that the Lord will not forget you, because Christ has redeemed you and made you His own.

You have witnessed the Lord's work many times—twice last month. By water and the Word, He called a little child into His keeping. He has declared, "long before you were born, I went to the cross to win your salvation. today, in Holy Baptism, I've given that salvation to you. I've written My name on you. I've given you the Holy Spirit, and I've sanctified you—made you holy in My sight. I've given you faith and grace and comfort and the good hope of My faithfulness to you. I am with you now; and I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

That was the Lord's promise to you on the day you were baptized, and He will never leave you nor forsake you. This salvation is rescue from lawlessness. Sinful man declares, "Forget God's Law! I'm going to follow my own rules. And since my rules are just fine, I don't need this Jesus and forgiveness, either." In response, the Lord declares, "Whether you acknowledge it or not, My Law still stands. You live under it whether you want to or not. But My Gospel stands, too: Jesus Christ has died for your sins. I desire the death of no one: confess your sins and lawlessness, and be saved by My grace!"

Sinful man declares, "Rather than God's way of salvation, I will make up my own. I will establish rituals and traditions and doctrines that I like; and then I will impose them upon God and say that He should do things my way!" The Lord responds, "Your way is not holy, and leads only to destruction. My way has already won your salvation at the cost of My own sacrifice for you, My own suffering for you. Hold fast to My teaching that I have handed down to you in My Word, the news that Jesus has died for you. Turn from your ways and be saved!" So you have, and so you do. By the grace of God, you trust that Christ has died for your sins. You rejoice that He has washed you clean in Baptism, that He still sanctifies you by His Word and Supper. You rejoice to stand firm

in these traditions, these doctrines of God, for by them He gives you salvation. Rejoice, dear friends in Christ: lawlessness could not save you, but Jesus has. His righteousness and comfort and hope and grace are yours, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen