

SERMON FOR TRINITY VI – JULY 11, 2021 – MATTHEW 5:17-26

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ²¹ You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The letter or the spirit of the law. That’s the question that we’re seemingly confronted with at the bottom of this text for this morning’s consideration. We’ll see that there’s much more involved as we journey through this chosen Gospel reading for this Sixth Sunday after Trinity. It’s not enough to not murder our brother; we’re required by the Law that Jesus further clarified for us in the Sermon on the

Mount to not wish him harm, or even speak anything against him in anger. Jesus takes it to the “nth degree”, and says that if we have a grudge or a division against our brother, we are to rectify it before coming to the altar with our gift. The main idea of this text from St. Matthew’s Gospel is that if we insist on living our lives and thinking that our good deeds are going to get us into heaven, He’s going to show the futility of this pursuit, painfully and openly if He must. It’s impossible for us, because of our sinful nature, to live a perfect life – the only perfect man to walk this earth was Jesus Himself. The only way for us to get to heavenly glory is through the merits and sacrifice of Christ our Savior on the cross of Calvary, and His resurrection from the tomb on the Third Day. That’s it – nothing else will save us.

But, we’re also given these words from the beginning of our text; indeed, the theme of this day in the church year with the Old Testament reading being the decalogue, or the Ten Commandments. Jesus didn’t come to get rid of the Law, but to fulfill it. He didn’t come to say that the Law had no point anymore; it just has a different purpose. Rather than being the way that we earn our way into heaven, as it was before the fall into sin, it now is a guide for Christian living.; we don’t keep the Law of God because we’re afraid of the result if we don’t, but because we love Him and want to please Him with our actions in this life. As James tells us, “faith without works is dead,” after all. We don’t know how many works faith will produce in our lives, but there will be SOME! The number of these good works usually increases throughout our lives, as the Holy Spirit gives them birth and utterance.

All three purposes of the Law are presented in this Gospel text – the first, as a curb to stop violent outbursts of sin; the second, as a mirror to show us our sin; the third, to serve as a guide for Christian living. You can see why the Savior had the disciples sit down with Him on the grass for the Sermon on the Mount – He had a lot to share with them, and it was going to take a while! They had been victims of false teaching for a long time at that point, and it’s always easier to teach to a blank slate than to “unlearn” before “relearning”. Let’s point out a few false theories on the Law and the

Gospel that we find in our world today, and what this text has to say to debunk them, all in the name of a greater understanding of the Word of God and the living out of our lives in light of His teaching.

Some people say, “We don’t live under the Law anymore, ever since Christ came; rather, we live under the Gospel. So we don’t need to worry about the Law going forward”. This is a dominant theory in the Christian church today, even as dangerous as it is. Believe it or not, you’ll actually find it preached from some Missouri Synod pulpits! Folks think that God is abounding in grace, and will always forgive us, no matter what we do to transgress His Law. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace”, which he condemned along with St. Paul. When Paul was asked if we should go on sinning so that grace may increase, his response was resounding and absolute: “Certainly Not!” People think we can live our lives however we please; when the end comes, we can just repent, and be ushered into heavenly glory. After all, God loves us – He doesn’t want to stop us from enjoying life in His kingdom. Some even go so far as to posit that hell doesn’t exist, except for the devil and his evil angels after the fall – it’s mere hyperbole, exaggeration, scare-tactics if you will, that the Bible ever mentions a place where those who live their lives as if there was no Law will go without repentance

What does this Scripture have to say about this? Jesus didn’t come to abolish the Law – not in the least! If the Law was just intended for folks of old, and the Gospel was the only Scripture we needed to worry about going forward, then why did Jesus come and die and rise again? He came to follow the Law perfectly and rise again on the Third Day, after receiving the ultimate punishment – death on the cross of Calvary. He even said that not one jot, not one tittle, of the Law, would be changed. In order to understand this, you have to know a little bit about how the Scriptures were passed down through the generations from the earliest days of Moses until today. There was a group of transcribers called the Masoretes – they were the ones whose job was, day in and day out, to copy over and over again the Hebrew letters of the Old Testament. This was a slow, laborious process – it wasn’t like the copier that we have today in the church office, that copies, staples, collates, and folds automatically – I’m waiting

for the function that will make a bologna sandwich! They were so careful that no changes be made, that if they had a question about a letter or a word, they would record whatever the word was, and put the question in the margin, rather than change the original text. When Jesus mentions “jot” and “tittle”, these were little marks on the Hebrew letters that designated one from another, that might not look like anything by themselves, but had great significance when it came to distinguishing Hebrew letters. It would be like saying today that we “dotted every I and crossed every T” – Jesus wanted to make sure to note here that the Law of God remains in effect, because it is His perfect will for mankind. Jesus paints the picture here that the Law continues to be crucial for us sinners to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. Rather than being passé, the Law helps us understand the mind and desire of God, and enables us to endeavor to please Him, as our love for Him compels us to do.

People say, “I’ve kept the Law of God pretty well – better than most. Won’t God be understanding on the Last Day if I’ve slipped up just a couple of times?” We are told that the standard that God uses is perfection – “Be perfect, as the Lord your God is perfect.” Jesus spends time in this Sermon on the Mount showing us that not only must we keep the Law of God in its entirety, but even keeping the spirit of the Law is part of keeping the letter of the Law. He makes many statements in which, “You have heard it said...”, and then He responds by making the Law much harsher. It’s not enough to avoid killing someone, but we must not even wish them harm. It’s not enough to avoid committing physical adultery with someone, but we must keep our minds pure and far from thoughts of such unsavory actions. If we wish to be saved by keeping the Law of God, perfection is what is demanded. That’s why there’s absolutely no hope for sinful men according to this standard – the Law of God is simply unattainable for us because our every thought, word and deed is stained by sin

In our text, Jesus tells us that anyone who loosens the Law of God will be least in the kingdom of heaven, but anyone who does and teaches the Law of God in its entirety will be greatest. Jesus has a high view of the Law of God. He came to free us from that Law, but that doesn’t mean that the Law is

somehow skewed, or relaxed, in any way. “The Law of God is good and wise, and sets His will before our eyes,” according to the hymn – the purpose for the Law is different, but the necessity of it still remains.

As we learn from Rev. Dr. C.F.W. Walther, the first President of our LCMS, in his book entitled Law and Gospel (which I’d encourage each and every one of you to read – it’s not that difficult! We used it as a training manual for preaching, but I’ve heard of some pastors even using it for youth confirmation instruction) one of the main purposes of the Law is to lead us to the Gospel, the full forgiveness of our sins by the work of the One, Jesus, that could do something about our sinful state. He has come and fulfilled the Law of God perfectly in our stead – something none of us could do. He has come and shed His blood as the sacrifice that our sins deserve – there must be death; blood must be shed; but instead of our total and eternal condemnation, He did it in our place. Because He was and is God, He could come back from the dead – the grave could not hold Him. But because He was man, like us, He was able to die and cause His shedding of blood count for the guilt of all of our sin.

This charge, to teach rightly, is important for us to hear today. We are told the truth of the Law and the Gospel in the text of Scripture, and are charged to hear it, teach it, learn it, and follow it. Just because we live after the resurrection doesn’t mean that it doesn’t apply anymore – both the Law and the Gospel parts. To contradict those today that just don’t like what the Law has to say, we can’t just set it aside because we want to – we have the command of God to be familiar with, and follow, the Law as well as the Gospel, because it is His very Word.

Further, Jesus addresses this theory that we can earn enough “merits” to enter the kingdom of heaven – we can’t! Even if our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the scribes (of which no one was holier in all Israel, at least so people thought), only then will you enter the kingdom of God. This was a slap in the face to the religious leaders – they prided themselves on keeping every aspect of the Law of God, and thought that they were going to at least get into heaven because they devoted their lives to right living. But, it was also a reminder to the folks listening – they never thought that they’d

measure up to these guys that devoted their lives to never breaking any of God's Laws. If these guys couldn't be saved through the Law, then no one could.

Jesus' purpose here wasn't to destroy His listeners, or make them think that they were utterly condemned – He just wanted to change their focus, away from themselves and toward Himself, the Savior. It's only when we despair of thinking that we can get into heaven on our own, that we are open to the possibility that the ONLY way is through Christ and His merits. Or, to put it more simply, good Law and Gospel preaching preaches the sinful man down to the depths of despair of his sin, in order to then raise him up to the highest heights of appreciation and trust and faith in the Savior through the Gospel

This used to be the normal mode of preaching – it was common for pastors to deliver these Law and Gospel sermons every week, and the hearers would learn from various passages of Scripture the ways in which God Himself wanted them to appreciate these two aspects of the Christian faith. But, alas, much has changed: Pastors are under pressure from their listeners to deliver sermons that are more “uplifting”, more “positive”, less dwelling on “negative thoughts” – and, they abandon pure doctrine and emphasis on the depravity of man and the blessed gifts of God in Word and Sacrament, in favor of what the world loves – talking about ourselves. Instead of preaching about what the text says, many pastors are tempted, and fall into the temptation, to talk about what the hearers want to hear, and find Scriptures that back up these preconceived notions. Or, they change the meaning of the text subtly and slightly, to emphasize the “positive” things, and deemphasize the “negative”

Let's face it – things are not good! Our nation is plagued with decadence; even within our church body, malaise has set in, and our spiritual muscles are atrophied. We don't have an urgency or desire to hear the Word of God, or study what it actually means; we'd rather settle for a cursory understanding of a passage, and then get on to whatever else fills our Sundays. We're not delivered from the Third Commandment just because we have other things to do; the directive to have an answer

for the hope that lies within us is not only a joyful summons to share our joy, but also a command to live out our vocations in view of the cross of Christ every day

I didn't even have time to get into the whole discussion of the result of not carrying the burden of grudges with us before receiving the gifts of God at the altar; that'll have to wait for another time. But, there's a lot to process in this text, more than immediately meets the eye. Jesus tells us, in a clear display of Law and Gospel, that He didn't come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. This means that He is a God that doesn't change His mind; therefore, we need not fear. He takes sin seriously, and so should we, as His children and His ambassadors. But immediately after delivering this sobering reality of the Law's continued dominion, He also gives the hope that He has fulfilled them. You see, this Law and Gospel stuff is really in every passage of Scripture!

If we think that we have any hope at all of being saved based upon being "good people", Jesus immediately disabuses us of this false theory. First of all, we don't have nearly as many good works as those who made it their purpose in life to be outwardly righteous, like the Pharisees and the scribes. Secondly, even if we were able to keep the letter of the Law of God (which we aren't), we'd never be able to keep the spirit of the Law, which completely rules out any wish of harm or THOUGHT of sin. We're completely sinful and unclean, hopeless, dead, in our trespasses and sins. Jesus wants us to understand the gravity of this, and speaks many words in this passage to reinforce His point.

However, thanks be to God, that's not where Jesus leaves us. The Law of God is indeed still in force, but He has overcome and fulfilled it. He kept it perfectly, knowing that we could not, because of our sinful nature. His love is that strong! He taught us His Word purely, instructed us to continue to do the same, and pronounced the punishment for those who either refuse or are unwilling to do the same. He truly loves and cares for us as His children. He has done everything for our salvation! Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.