

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
23 July, Anno Domini 2017
St. Matthew 5:17-26
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Today's texts from Holy Scripture give us a great chance to meditate correctly on the Law of God, particularly the Ten Commandments. In particular, we have to be constantly on guard so that we don't fall prey to either legalism or antinomianism. Both of these unbiblical teachings end up robbing consciences of the Gospel. And they are equally tempting to our fallen sinful flesh.

Legalism, on the one hand, is probably more easily recognized and understood, though, not necessarily, any more easily avoided. Preachers of legalism are everywhere, as close as your own fallen flesh. It goes something like this: God has given the Ten Commandments and clearly teaches that they must be kept. Any infraction, however insignificant it may seem to us, condemns us. To break the commandments is to reject God and His authority. There are no shades of gray in the eyes of God when it comes to His Law. Either you keep all of it or you keep none of it. If you succeed in keeping every last jot and tittle then you will receive the crown of life. If you don't, if you falter even the slightest, you will suffer the eternal fires of hell.

And where does Jesus come in? He is the one who showed you how to live this life, even dying to show you what real love looks like. That's how God expects you, demands you, to be. If you want to be a Christian just ask yourself the most important of all questions "What would Jesus do?" In legalism Jesus is the example par excellence. All you have to do is do what He did and you'll be fine. Legalism is always begging the question "What more must I or should I do?" And the answer is always the same - more. More being nice to people. More mission trips. More checks mailed in to the guy on television. More volunteering. More, longer, fancier prayers. More holier living. More telling strangers on the street about Jesus.

Legalism is built on the assumption that God would only command something if you are able to do it, if you have the innate power to fulfill the

command. Why would God tell you do something you couldn't do? That seems silly, even cruel. Therefore, if God commands you to do something, you must be capable of doing it. The Pharisees and lawyers of Jesus' day were masters of this. They saw the Law of God as completely within their power to keep and master. All they had to do was apply themselves extra hard, relax the commandments a bit, and they could obey. God very clearly said "You shall not murder" and, guess what? No one has died at my hands. Therefore I have kept the fifth commandment. That wasn't so hard. I haven't walked into the gas station, pulled a gun, and demanded all the money from the register so, again, I have obeyed God's law. Two down. Eight to go."

This kind of preaching produces one of two kinds of people. On the one hand, a person actually comes to believe that he can and even has kept the Ten Commandments. He becomes so blinded by his own righteousness, that he has no need of God's mercy, certainly no need of a Savior to die for him and forgive him. He might make a few mistakes along the way but that's okay, God understands. I am basically a good person and that is why I am going to go to heaven.

On the other hand, a person who believes that obedience to the Law is the true measure of a Christian can become hopelessly filled with despair. Such a person clearly perceives that the perfection of God's commandments is an impossible mountain to climb. After all, who has ever been able to keep themselves from anger or lust or coveting? Who is able to love God with all his heart and soul and mind? Who can say with an ounce of honesty that there is nothing they love in this world more than God's Word? No one. It's impossible. Sure, the spirit may be willing but the flesh is terribly weak. What is left, except to completely despair of eternal life? Even if Jesus did die for me, I haven't kept up my end of the deal. The Law demands what I can never hope to give. I could never do what Jesus did. It's hopeless. I know exactly what God sees when He looks at me. God has heard the hateful words we have muttered under our breath. He has looked on as we have lusted after people on our televisions and computer screens and walking down the street. He has listened as we have made excuse after excuse as to why this or that worldly thing is more important than His Word and His Holy Sacraments and why our fullest attention isn't given to the reading and preaching of His Word.

In legalism there is no Gospel; there is no good news. It's all up to you. You have Moses and now you have Jesus telling you and showing you what to do. Now go do it. Forgiveness is questionable at best and completely absent at worst. And it would certainly be easy to understand Jesus' words this way. He very clearly says that He didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. And, more to the point, Jesus says "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." But it is precisely in these words that Jesus plants the Gospel.

The other dangerous and false idea, which both Jesus and Paul address, is antinomianism. That word is rooted in the Greek word "nomos" which means law and essentially means "no law". Antinomian preaching is a little harder to catch than legalism but no less dangerous. Antinomianism teaches that Christians no longer need the Law to be preached to them because the Gospel has set them completely free from it. The Christian is taught the moral life by the Gospel and thus don't need to hear the Law. This one actually sounds a little nicer, doesn't it? We have Jesus. Why do we need Moses? Jesus has forgiven our sins and by the leading of the Holy Spirit we will organically begin to lead lives filled with the fruits of the Spirit.

This is becoming very popular in some fringe Lutheran circles. The sins of a person's past are being glorified because supposedly the worse the sins of your past the better you are able to understand God's grace. In a twisted way the demands of the Law are cast off because if you've sinned so terribly, all the better, because how great must the love of Christ be! And by no means should there be any consequence to your sin because that would be a denial of the Gospel (which, of course, it's not). Going to prison for stealing doesn't negate God's forgiveness. What this has tended to do of late is create a fascination with shock-jock pastors. The more tattoos, the more cussing, the more dark the past (and in some cases the present) the better. This supposedly gives credence to their false teaching because they REALLY understand God's love and forgiveness and you boring sinners just can't.

But, like legalism, antinomianism, even though it tries to stand on the shoulders of the Gospel, still ends up destroying the Gospel by turning it into more Law and denying the Old Adam that continues to need to be daily drowned. Sin remains sin even after absolution. Coveting, despising the

preaching of God's Word, lusting, bad-mouthing your neighbor are absolutely still abhorrent and damning in the sight of God. In no way should they be minimized or glorified. "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Sin should always be confessed and absolved. Our Old Adam still clings to our flesh and needs to be drowned and die every single day with all of his, OUR, evil desires. The Christian should never assume that just because he is a Christian, his thoughts and desires are now somehow all good and holy and justified. It's not somehow good or okay or safe for you to now watch filth on TV, listen to filth on the radio, disrespect those God has placed in authority over you, degrade your spouse, withdraw from the life of the Church, or anything else which God's holy Law demands of you.

The true Christian absolutely needs the Law, and, by the guiding of the Holy Spirit, desires and rejoices in the Law. The Law is good. The Ten Commandments are filled with truth and wisdom. David prays in Psalm 1 "Blessed is the man that doth meditate day and night in the Law of the Lord." If that weren't true, Jesus absolutely would have come to abolish the Commandments. But He didn't. He came to do them, as we are to do them, for us. The Law is a beautiful light that shows us the perfect will of God of Father. When we look at Jesus and see the perfect life of love for God and for His neighbor, we are seeing the Ten Commandments lived out perfectly. And what is even more glorious is that the end of their fulfillment in and by Jesus is our salvation from sin and death. The problem is absolutely not in the Law. The problem is in us. The Law makes us uncomfortable because we can't do it, because when we hear it preached in all its severity we are left with no place to run, no place to hide, no excuses to make. Like a king in the game of chess desperately running from the impending checkmate, we try to dodge and avoid the Law's righteous accusation. But we can only run for so long. The Law's demands are infinitely deep, accusing not just outward works but the very thoughts and desires of your mind. Check and mate.

Repent. The Law cannot save you as the legalist preaches nor are you set free from keeping the Law because you have been forgiven as the antinomian preaches. Indeed, you have been set free from your slavery to sin. You have died to the Law's accusations that say you have disobeyed. Baptized into Christ's death, you have also been baptized into His resurrection to a new life. Your former life was defined by lawlessness and sin and rebellion against the Ten Commandments. Your new life is defined

by the forgiveness of Christ and a desire to live as God has created you to live in His image, as He Himself lives, to do the good works which He Himself has prepared in advance for you to do.

Certainly, the Law is not the Gospel. But without the Law, without constantly having the mirror held up in front of us to show the evil that still lurks within, seeking to drag us back into the slavery of selfishness and lawlessness, we lose sight of our constant need of God's mercy, the constant need of His absolving and life-giving Word preached to us and fed to us. We begin to despise the great gift of our Baptism, our death to sin. Jesus' minces no words "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." You will never find that righteousness in the Law. But by being cured of the delusion that you do or can live a righteous life, you are drawn to the sweet and freely flowing mercy of Jesus. Your eyes are drawn away from yourself to the Blood that poured out of Jesus' sacred veins into the cup of Holy Communion. There is the only righteousness that far exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees - the righteousness of God's Son who lived a life of perfect obedience to the point of offering Himself as the atoning sacrifice for us sinners.

Now covered and adorned in this robe of Christ's righteousness, we rejoice in the Law's continued instruction. Our wills are drawn to love and desire the will of God. While we still acknowledge that we don't keep the Law as we ought, ever, and are in constant need of the refreshment of Christ's Word of forgiveness, we can also rejoice in the goodness of the Law which lights our path so that we may, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, walk in the ways of life and avoid those things which God has so graciously shown us are harmful to our bodies and our souls. Your Old Adam will certainly rage and scream and try to deceive you. But you are forgiven. You are free. You don't have to listen to him. Learn the Ten Commandments with joy and be a fervent, daily student of God's Word. That Word alone is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path, the path that always leads you back to Christ - your righteousness and your life.

In the Name of +Jesus.