

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
28 July, Anno Domini 2019
St. Matthew 5:17-26
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

How righteous are you? How holy do you believe yourself to be? How good do you think you are? Most of us want to believe that we're pretty good, certainly not perfect but pretty good in the balance. Repent. What that really means is that you're not listening to God. You're justifying yourself and excusing your sins. You're shielding yourself as best you can from confronting what the Ten Commandments show you. Or worse, you're ignoring them all together and defining righteousness on the basis of what you want and don't want to do. That isn't righteousness, no matter how hard you try and no matter how many people you're able to get to agree with you.

This is why you must know, not just know about, the Ten Commandments just as much as you must know the Gospel and all the chief parts of the Christian faith. Without these you cannot rightly know your sin because you cannot know what it actually means to love God and your neighbor. Far too many people who would be called Christians simply won't be bothered to learn the Commandments. "That's for the children." But how can we claim to love the Lord our God and believe His Word if we won't learn these things so that they are always before us, etched on our hearts as in stone with an iron pen? The sheer unwillingness to learn these things is arrogance and rebellion against God who gave them and who has commanded us to not only learn them once but to have His Word before us at all times. Such an attitude is far from that described in Psalm 119 "O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way." Who among us can claim these words to be true of themselves?

Righteousness is an all-or-nothing matter. You can't be mostly or partly righteous. You're either completely righteous or you are completely not. Either you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, body, and mind or you don't. Either you love your neighbor as yourself, or you don't. And it isn't enough to say "Well, sometimes I do." What good is that when the rest of the time you don't? Are you okay if your spouse or your children love you some of the time and hate you and insult you and ignore you the rest? Would you be satisfied with a car that worked some of the time but the rest of the time wouldn't start? A car that only runs sometimes is not a working car. How much less is a person at all righteous who only conducts himself righteously when he feels like it? That is not a righteous person at all.

Were you disturbed in your spirit when you heard the Ten Commandments a few minutes ago? Were your sins suddenly staring you in the face? Did you become acutely aware of the ugliness that is burrowed deep in your heart and doesn't want to leave? If you were, good. You need to be. That is the gracious working of the Holy Spirit to save you. He is showing you what is evil so that you may abhor it and seek after what is good - the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. You aren't innately good or righteous no matter how much you or others want you to believe you are. You may outwardly do all kinds of good and nice things but when measured against the perfect holiness and righteousness of God, then, praise be to God if you honestly confess that "I am wholly unrighteous, filled with all manner of unbelief and sin and idolatry and covetousness. Even the best of my works are trash before the holiness of God." This is a right and God-pleasing confession because by it you declare Him to be right and true rather than yourself, you claim no glory for yourself. The Law doesn't arbitrarily call things sin. It identifies as sin those things that are contrary to the holiness of God who is the very essence of good. Thus, when you see them in yourself and don't try to cover them up or hide them but acknowledge and confess them to be evil, you actually give glory to God who has revealed it to you. And then you give even greater glory to God when you open your empty sack and receive in faith the righteousness of Christ.

But if you were not troubled as the Divine Law was held up before you, if you think you came out pretty well unscathed, beware. The truth is not in you. You are denying what the God of heaven and earth has declared and accuse Him of being a liar. You possess the same sinful heart and flesh as the rest of mankind. Either every inclination of your heart is sinful from your youth up or it is not. Either you were sinful from the moment your mother conceived you in her womb or you were not. Either God looked out upon man and saw that there was no one who was righteous, no, not one; no one who understands; no one who seeks for God, or He overlooked you and therefore was wrong. Either we are dead in our sin and our trespasses or we are not. If you think these judgments to be overly harsh or just hyperbole, pray that the Holy Spirit would open your eyes and soften your hardened heart. You are replacing the righteousness of God with the righteousness of your own making. That righteousness may get play among men. But God isn't fooled. It is only unrighteous hypocrisy trying to masquerade as righteousness and inviting God's judgment.

Jesus didn't set you free from the demands of the Law. Jesus very clearly forbids us from imagining that He came to say that the commandments no longer apply. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." That's pretty cut and dry. The demands of the moral law, the Ten Commandments still rest upon us. The First Commandment still forbids us from having other gods. We are still commanded by the Third Commandment to set aside time to gather with God's people to hear the public proclamation of God's Word. The Fifth Commandment still forbids anger. The Sixth Commandment still condemns all manner of sexual immorality. The Eighth Commandment still demands that we work to uphold and protect our neighbor's name

(be he friend or foe). Why did our Lord go down to Nazareth and submit to His parents if the commandments no longer apply? Why did our Lord without fail attend to the hearing of God's Word every Sabbath if the Third commandment was null and void?

Jesus didn't fulfill the Law so that you don't have to. He fulfilled it because you're supposed to. What you are free from in Christ is the condemnation of your disobedience. Because the Son of God took up your flesh and lived the life of perfect faith as you should, He was able to then offer Himself as the true and complete atonement for your failure to keep the Law. True repentance necessarily involves hating the evil that you have done and desiring and striving to do differently, to live according to the commandments. You can't still love your sin and at the same time claim to be a Christian. A Christian hates the sin that he still finds within himself and longs to be free of it, longs for the resurrection to eternal life when he knows that at last his will will be in perfect harmony with God's will, when his flesh is no longer still plagued by sinful desires, and he will be able to say with Christ his Lord "Oh how I love your Law!".

Dear children of God, do not be led astray by those who would have you believe that your Christian freedom entitles you to live in any way contrary to the Ten Commandments, that your faith is your free pass to indulge your flesh. This is a demonic lie that has as its only intent to steal you from Christ's hands. Jesus is not a pass for your anger or your false accusations against one another. Jesus is not a pass for you to despise preaching, receiving His Sacraments, and studying God's Word. Jesus is not a pass for you to treat the faith or His Church as your own private possession. Jesus is not a pass for you to withhold your tithes from the Lord so that you can have what you want.

Jesus IS your forgiveness when you fall to temptation and fail to do these things, when you acknowledge that they are sin and fear His righteous judgment against them. Jesus IS God's mercy who fulfilled the Law on your behalf by perfectly loving His Father and obeying His will which was to sacrifice Jesus and pay every last penny of your guilt. Jesus IS the righteousness of God which exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, which has opened the kingdom of heaven to sinners. Christ alone is righteous. It is He who declares you to be something you are not - righteous, holy, good. In Holy Baptism your Old Adam was put to death with all of his sins and evil desires. In Holy Baptism you have been made dead to sin because you died to sin with Christ. In Holy Baptism the vast ocean of your unrighteousness was covered in the white robe of Christ's righteous which is infinitely more vast. Your righteousness is not a quality in you but a gift that God freely bestowed upon you, something He has declared you to be by His Word.

In Christ, you have been made a new creation, raised from the dead by the glory of the Father so that you might walk in newness of life. In this newness of life the Holy Spirit begins to change your will and your desires so that you actually do rejoice in the will of God, in the Ten Commandments, because they are no longer a millstone around your neck dragging you into eternal death. Rather, they are the life of faith and love, they are

freedom from slavery to selfishness and hatred. You now live, not by your own works, but by faith in the Son of God. In Him, your body of sin has been brought to nothing, so that you might now serve the living God. You are dead to sin. It no longer has authority over you because you belong to Christ. Sin cannot lay claim to you who, by faith, are in Christ, who trust alone in Christ's atoning death and resurrection.

How righteous are you? In Christ, you are perfectly righteous because He has bestowed His righteousness upon you. You are still to keep the Ten Commandments but not in order to be saved. Rather, because they are the good and holy will of God for you. Study and learn them every day so that you may know the will of God, so that you may be armed in the hour of temptation, and so that you may know the true joy of the life of godly love.

In the Name of +Jesus.