

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
19 July, Anno Domini 2020
St. Matthew 5:17-26
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

Jesus asked the rich young ruler “What are the commandments? How do you read them?” There is most certainly a right way that leads to eternal life and a terribly wrong way that leads to eternal death. One comes very naturally. The other is completely unnatural to you and must be taught to you by the Holy Spirit. So let us pray that today the Holy Spirit would teach us to rightly hear the Holy Law of God in such a way as it may bear good fruit in us that leads to everlasting life.

First, let us understand the right way to hear the Law. And in this case we are speaking of the narrow sense of the Law - the moral Law of the Ten Commandments rather than the broad sense of the whole Word of God. Our Lord is teaching us the right way to hear the Law when He says “Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish them but to fulfill (or, perhaps even better, accomplish) them.” The Law of God is good and wise. The Law is that for which God created us - to live and be as He is, beings whose every thought, word, and deed are selfless love. The Commandments are what human beings are to be. they are what is good and beneficial for us. They reflect the nature and character of God and therefore what is to be the nature and character of us who are created in His image. If you would be perfectly happy and stress-free and filled with peace and have a clean conscience, do them. Keep the commandments. Love God with all your strength and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love every neighbor as yourself.

Do you? Have you doubted God’s goodness? Have you lived in fear of death? Have you brought your every concern before the throne of grace in the full confidence that God will give you good more than you even know how to desire? Have you kept the Sabbath day faithfully, setting aside one day a week to gather in your Father’s house to be taught and fed by God? What about your neighbor? Have you honored even those in authority with whom to disagree? Have you put your neighbor’s needs above your own and looked out for them and sacrificed your comfort for theirs? Have you rejoiced in their blessings?

If not, why not? It’s not because the Law is bad. It’s because you and I and every other person born of flesh and blood are not good. The Law is good. You are bad.

This is the right way to hear the Law. It is to let the Law of God reveal how good you really are. You're not. At all. You're a sinner. Your heart actually hates to hear the Law. Perhaps that's why we are so reluctant to learn the commandments by heart. Perhaps that's why we can't say with the psalmist "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." The presence of the Law is a testimony against us because we have not kept it.

When Jesus expounds on the commandments in the Sermon on Mount he is putting us in checkmate. The great depth of the Law is such that it attacks us and leaves us no escape. Everywhere we turn, we are guilty. We are guilty of rebellion against God. We want to find excuses and justifications that will free us. They don't exist. Repent. You are guilty. The Law is good. You are bad. Your sinful flesh is the problem. The commandments aren't too much. Your flesh just hates them and will fight with every ounce of strength to avoid them or redefine them in such a way that they don't accuse you. "I have a Bible so I love God." "I haven't murdered anyone so I haven't broken the Fifth Commandment." "I haven't had an affair so I haven't broken the Sixth Commandment." "I haven't hurt my parents so I've kept the Fourth Commandment."

This is the second way, the wrong way, to read the Law. The Law is not how you can save yourself. Even if it were, it demands absolute perfection. Can you measure up to that? Our righteousness doesn't even come close to the scribes and Pharisees who were very careful to keep the precepts of the Law in an outward manner. We hardly make a pretense of even trying. More often than not, we simply ignore the commandments as though they no longer apply, as though Jesus has set us free to live according to the dictates of our own desires. After all, didn't St. Paul say "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more..."? More sin, more grace - right?

Of course not! You have died to sin in the waters of the font, having been joined to Jesus in His death to sin. How can you live in the very thing to which you have died? Would we not rightly mock Barabbas as a fool if he had walked back to the Roman soldiers and asked to be put back in chains? Jesus' death didn't destroy the Law. It confirmed that the Law is good and that those who break it deserve punishment. That's what His death was - the just punishment of your rebellion against the Law. If the demands of the Law were unjust, then there would be no punishment necessary for disobeying it. But Christ did die, and you with Him in your Baptism. You have died to sin. How wretched our condition must be if we desire to return to the very things that harm and destroy us eternally having been once set free from them by the mercy and forgiveness of God!

You are not righteous. You have no righteousness of your own any more than did the Pharisees. The honest heart only says "Amen" to the Law's 100% guilty verdict. It recognizes that there is no safe place to run and hide. It confesses "I am a sinner. There is absolutely nothing good in my flesh." Woe to any man who dares to stand before the throne of God claiming any amount of his own righteousness. To do so is not only a lie, but it is to mock and reject the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered up His perfect righteousness as payment for our unrighteousness. This is exactly what Jesus meant when He said that He had come to accomplish the Law. He came to do the whole Law as one of us. It's why the saints have long bowed the head and bent the knee when confessing in the Nicene Creed that Jesus "became man." Holy God counted Himself a sinner, became sin, in order to save sinners. The mystery of all mysteries. Not simply that God came in the flesh. That wouldn't be so surprising if we were all still perfect. But we are most certainly not. We are miserable, obstinate, proud sinners who imagine that we are something when we are nothing. And the holy, righteous Son of God was numbered among the likes of us - unholy, unrighteous sinners.

And in so doing Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. Not only the commandments but also the promises of God. For the Law and the Prophets are filled with God's mercy and deliverance of sinners just as it is with the Law and warnings of divine judgment. God provided the sacrifices. He provided the preaching. He provided circumcision. Moses and the Prophets all pointed to the One who was to come, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the accomplishment of the Law and Prophets. Jesus is the content of the Old Testament. This is where the condemnation of the Law is meant to drive you - to the cross, to the pulpit, to the font, to the rail where the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus is bestowed upon you and you are reconciled to God who had everything against you and every reason to punish you but endured it in His own flesh instead. In your Baptism, just as surely as you have died with Christ, you have also been raised to newness of life. You have been given the Holy Spirit who through the Word and Blessed Sacraments has grafted into your heart a love of God and your neighbor. He has taught you the true religion - Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of sinners. He bestows upon you every good and perfect gift of His kingdom that you might remain and not return to the sin and death from which He has once delivered you. This is your righteousness, true righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is bestowed upon all who believe and are baptized. This gift calls you away from selfish, self-centered, self-serving sin which is filled only with unrest and anger and hopelessness. This gift calls you to the life of peace - peace with

God and peace with your neighbor. To those whose trust lies in the righteousness of Christ, the commandments of God are sweeter than honey from the honeycomb. They are true freedom. They are not the way to heaven. They are the very life of heaven.

Let us pray: O Holy Spirit, teach us to rightly understand and receive the Ten Commandments so that we might despair of our own righteousness and seek instead the righteousness of Jesus. Strengthen us in the hour of temptation that we may delight in walking according to Commandments. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

In the Name of +Jesus.