

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
St. Matthew 5:17-26
24 July, Anno Domini 2022

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

Dear saints of God,

So often when we talk about the Law, we talk about it in its negative connotations - that it accuses and condemns us. And that is most certainly true. But that isn't because the Law is bad. Quite the opposite. The Law is good. It is the Divine Law. It is not a series of arbitrary rules that God picked out of a hat. The Law shows that which is good. It shows what life as those created by God is supposed to be, how we are created to live. God promises blessings to those who love Him and keep His commandments. To be human is to keep the Law perfectly - it is to love God with your whole heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. The Law shows us what pleases God. In that sense, the Pharisees' zealotry for keeping the Law was good. We should all so fervently desire and strive to keep the Ten Commandments.

The Law is good. We are bad. And we know that because we look at the good Law of God and we do not see ourselves reflected in it. When we look at the Law, we see precisely what we are not. We see how corrupt we are and how filled with what is evil. God rightly says that every inclination of our heart is only evil from our youth. Every inclination. No exceptions. Our love of God is never pure and neither is our love of our neighbor. We are reluctantly merciful to our friends let alone our enemies. We doubt the promises of God when earthly misfortune befalls us. We are slow to pray and slow to forgive. We are more infatuated with the pleasures of the world than with the treasures of heaven.

That doesn't mean that we don't keep the law outwardly in some ways or that such keeping of the Law isn't beneficial. Thanks be to God when we are able to stop our anger from becoming murder or our covetousness from becoming stealing. The fact that we can agree that such things are bad and ought to be punished is evidence that God's Law is written on our hearts. If it was not, the world would be infinitely more chaotic than it is now. Try to imagine a world where every man is a law unto himself and accountable to no one. We are all well-aware that sometimes the evil desires of our hearts do bear fruit in hateful and unkind words, help not

given to someone in need, insults and disrespect shown to those in authority over us, not hearing God's Word and receiving the Sacraments when they are offered.

The problem is that we think, like the Pharisees, that just keeping up a good outward face with the Law is enough for God or that the Law demands no more than that. We console ourselves with the fact that we haven't murdered or stolen and we come to church fairly regularly. That is the righteousness of the Pharisees and anyone else who imagines that they are a good person. "That's not good enough," Jesus said. Your righteousness has to exceed that. That kind of righteousness, what some call "civil righteousness," is only beneficial among men. Civil righteousness is what our legal system is based upon - the outward manifestation of hatred towards one's neighbor. If you're caught stealing through insider trading, you are punished. If you purposely damage your neighbor's property, you're punished. This is how evil is kept in check among men. Civil righteousness encourages the protection of the neighbor and provides for his defense. Civil righteousness serves to hold our anger and greed and covetousness in check to some degree.

But civil righteousness is insufficient before the throne of God. Mere outward civil righteousness doesn't make you good. I can serve my neighbor and still hate him. I can help my neighbor while at the same time tearing down his reputation or lusting after his wife. That is not the righteousness of God. The Law says you shall not murder and Jesus teaches that anger is no different than murder. The Law says you shall not commit adultery and Jesus teaches that looking with lust in your heart is no different. None of us is righteous. Not one of us can claim a pure heart before God in our duty to love and care for our neighbor. But that isn't all. There is more.

The first table of the Law, which our courts have no interest in, show us the heart of true righteousness - a pure heart toward God. We must fear nothing more than His righteous wrath against disobedience of His Word. We must find no greater pleasure than carrying out His good will as expressed in the commandments. We must love God with every last fiber of our being and despise everyone and everything else in comparison. We must trust completely in the good and gracious will of God without a shred of doubt because it and He are good. We must without doubt and ceaselessly lift up our voices in prayer and praise and thanksgiving, confessing that God our Father alone is the fount and source of every good and every perfect gift. We must joyfully and faithfully set aside the Sabbath Day to enter into the rest of God, the rest of His mercy and His presence, even if that means our bosses don't understand or we miss time with friends and family. We

must love Him and His Law and rejoice in keeping all the commandments in all things at all times.

Here is where the righteousness of all men falls flat on its face and is shown to be nothing more than filthy rags. The Law of God is not simply about doing good on the outside. It is about orienting your love completely and wholly in the right direction. It is about the purity of our heart and intentions. The Pharisees took care of their neighbor but they did it because they thought doing so would make them good in God's sight. They thought the commandments were easy to keep. Their neighbors were their stepping stones to heaven. Jesus described them as pretty white-washed tombs that were filled with dead men's bones. They were hypocrites, not because they were crass, immoral sinners but because they believed they actually were as holy and righteous as God Himself, when, in fact, they were as filled with as much lovelessness as those whom they so desperately hated.

No one can make themselves righteous. That's not why the Law was written down. Instead, the writing down of the good and holy Law of God was a gracious act to remove the blinders from our eyes and show us our true condition - lost and condemned creatures who are incapable of making ourselves righteous before God. To know that is to be blessed because then you can see your need for God's mercy which His loves to bestow upon each and every sinner. The righteousness of Jesus is the only righteousness capable of exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees. The entire life of our brother Jesus was a life of perfect obedience to the Law - a perfect love of His Father's word and will and a perfect love of His neighbor, even those who crucified Him. He actively kept every jot and tittle of every commandment and then passively suffered the divine wrath against our utter failure to. This is the chief purpose of Jesus' perfect life - to suffer and die for sinners and bestow upon us His obedience and righteousness as pure gift. All who believe this, all who repent and cling to Christ alone and are washed in the waters of Holy Baptism, are declared to be what we could never make ourselves - pure, righteous, undefiled.

But our salvation isn't the only purpose of Jesus obedience to the divine Law. He is also our example of what it means to be a Christian. Thus He submitted Himself to the authority of His parents and the Pharisees and Pontius Pilate so that we would be taught how to do the same. He kept the Sabbath Day not simply out of obligation but because He genuinely loved the Word of God and drew life and hope and peace from it so that we would learn to do the same. He never failed to help those in need nor did He count any cost too great, even His life so that we would be encouraged to do the same. He resisted every temptation to teach us how

to do the same. He reconciled us to the Father while we were on the way to eternal judgment so that we would not have to be thrown into hell's prison where we would never be able to be free so that we would forgive those who trespass against us.

We are called to do likewise. We have been saved from the eternal wrath of God and the deadly sins that so easily entangled us. We are called to resist sin, to fight against it, to pray for strength. We are called to forgive our brother as many times as He sins against us. We are called to count everything in this world as loss and be willing to sacrifice all of it that we may know Christ and the blessings of His kingdom. For the Christian, the Law has lost its accusation and now stands as a faithful guide leading us to Christ and away from sin. As Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, He says to you "There is no one to condemn you. Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." Children of God, you are free. Only do not use your freedom as a cloak and excuse for unrighteousness. You are righteous because God has declared it to be so in Christ and you have been freed so that you might hate sin, flee from it, love the Law of God, and rejoice in knowing what is good and pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Father.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.