

Matthew 5:17–26 (Trinity VI)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
July 24, 2022

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

There are two kinds of righteousness. The first kind is outward righteousness, which all respectable children of this world know and understand, for the most part. You can see and measure outward righteousness. It is understood by our reason. Outward righteousness is summed up in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Jesus was not the only teacher who articulated outward righteousness in this way. Ancient Egypt, India, Greece, Persia, and Rome all had their versions of the Golden rule because it is a rule that accords with our human reason and understanding. It is a rule of natural law to treat others the way you would be treated. It’s a principle codified in civil law the world over. Our natural reason understands this outward righteousness, even if we have a difficult time putting it into practice.

The second kind of righteousness, however, is an inward righteousness, a righteousness that is hidden, a righteousness that cannot be seen by others. This inward righteousness is a righteousness of the heart. It is having the right motivations and just intentions at all times. Inward righteousness is the driving force behind outward righteousness. Just like a good tree will bear good fruit and a bad tree will bear bad fruit. That is to say, a righteous person will act in righteousness. An unrighteous person will act unrighteously. The intentions of the heart make a huge difference. What we say and what we do flows from our heart, and if our heart is defiled, then it overflows with evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander (Matt 15:18–19). Inward righteousness translates into acts of outward righteousness. Inward unrighteousness translates into acts of outward unrighteousness. The two kinds of

righteousness, the outward righteousness and the inward righteousness, are intimately related to each other.

In our Gospel Lesson this morning, Jesus speaks about these two kinds of righteousness. In fact, the two kinds of righteousness is one of the main themes of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The scribes and Pharisees were masters of outward righteousness. They tried to obey every jot and tittle of the Law of Moses. They even went above and beyond the Law of Moses by setting up a protective hedge around God's Law. They added their own regulations to make absolutely sure they did not violate God's commandments.

For example, God commanded ritual washing before entering the Tabernacle and Temple (Ex 20:17). The Pharisees took that a step further by washing their hands before meals to make sure they were not unclean (Matt 15). They would wash cups, pots, copper vessels, and dining couches for the same reason (Mark 7:4). Another obvious example would be the Sabbath. God commanded the Israelites to rest on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees then came up with 39 categories of work, along with many sub-categories, which would forbid taking too many steps or writing too many letters on the Sabbath day. People are often attracted to order, wanting "12 rules for life" or "10 steps to a better marriage." The scribes and Pharisees were all about laying down helpful rules for living a good Jewish life. Their outward righteousness was spotless.

The issue, however, is that the scribes and Pharisees honor God with their lips while their hearts are far away. They worship God in vain, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matt 15:8-9). The rules the scribes and Pharisees established to protect God's Law end up overshadowing God's law. The hedge of human commandments chokes out the commandments

of God. Ultimately, God's Law is all about loving God and loving those around us. As Jesus teaches: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:37–40).

God's commandments are all about love, and love is a matter of the heart. Love is a matter of inward righteousness. It's so easy to put on a loving and righteous facade while having an unloving and unrighteous heart. That's why in Matthew 23 Jesus says the scribes and Pharisees are like "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt 23:27). Outwardly they appeared righteous, but within they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Before the world they seemed spotless. But they lacked the right motivations and just intentions. The scribes and Pharisees could claim an outward righteousness, in a sense, but Jesus points out that they do not have the inward righteousness that God sees.

To illustrate the distinction between the outward and the inward righteousness, Jesus uses the example of anger: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'" That's the letter of the law, the 5th commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai. To refrain from murder is part of outward righteousness. If you transgress this commandment, there is punishment. Human reason can understand this. It's written in the natural law, which is why there are strict punishments for murder throughout human history and in all human cultures. Justice says: "you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Ex 21:23–25).

“But”, Jesus continues, “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.” Jesus is equating anger and angry words with murder. That’s because God does not just consider outward righteousness. God also considers the inward righteousness of the heart. You might very well not kill somebody, and that’s a good thing. But Jesus is getting at the source of murder. In 1 John 3:15 we hear that “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” So it’s not only outright murder forbidden by the 5th commandment, but also every cause, root, and source from which murder arises. It’s our sinful heart that condemns us, a sinful heart that overflows with sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. This inner righteousness, or unrighteousness, remains hidden from the eyes of the world. But God sees and God knows what is really going on in our hearts.

With Jesus’s interpretation of the Law, the interpretation straight from the mouth of the one who gave that very Law, there is no room for human effort or achievement. Here we see that the Law is used as a mirror to show us the internal reality of our sin. If you look into the mirror of this Law, you will see your sinful heart. If anger is considered murder in God’s eyes, then who among you is not a murderer? Sure, you might not be on death row or serving a life sentence for killing someone else, but before God your anger is equivalent to murder.

Just think about the last week, or the last month, or your entire life. How often has anger gotten the best of you? Even if it remains below the surface and invisible to the world, you can’t help but have angry thoughts. Our anger can boil over even at the most trivial slights. And how often do those angry thoughts manifest themselves in angry words, curt insults, or snubbing someone else? How often do we insult others, whether to their face or behind their back, or from

the safe distance of a keyboard. Anyone who honestly looks at their life will see anger in some form or fashion, and in God's eyes, our anger will be judged on the Last Day as much as the deeds of a murderer. God sees deeper than outer righteousness. God looks at the inner righteousness of the heart, the righteousness that is invisible to the world. When God looks into our hearts, is it not shameful what He finds there?

So if that's how severe the Law treats our outward and inward righteousness, who on earth can be saved? If the standard is perfection, then won't all of us be liable to judgment? Won't all of us be liable to God's council? Won't all of us be liable even to the Hell of fire? Yes! But remember, the point of the Law is to show us our sin! Jesus interprets the Law in this way to show you how utterly incapable you are of fulfilling the Law. You are a sinner, and so you do not measure up to the standard of God's holy Law. You fall short not only in outward righteousness, the righteousness everyone sees. You fall short even more so when it comes to inward righteousness, when it comes to your deepest motivations and desires, which oftentimes only God can see.

But there is yet another righteousness, a righteousness that comes apart from the Law, a righteousness that comes in Jesus Christ alone. In Romans 3[:21–23], the Apostle Paul says “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” The Law condemns both our outward conduct and our inward disposition, showing that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And that is as far as it goes. The Law cannot save us because we cannot keep it. But “God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do” (Rom 8:3). And that is where the Gospel comes in. “By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement

of the law might be fulfilled in us” (8:3-4). We sinners cannot be righteous, least of all before God, unless God accounts us righteous in Jesus Christ. We are justified, we are accounted righteous, not by works of the Law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. It is faith in Jesus Christ that makes us righteous, faith which clings to the promises won for us in His death and resurrection.

The point of the Law is not to make us better people. The main purpose of the Law in this fallen world is to reveal our sin so that we recognize our need for a savior. The Law shows us how unrighteous we are at the very core so that we despair of trusting in ourselves. Instead, we turn to the Lord, the only place where help is to be found. God then accounts us perfectly righteous for the sake of Christ. And the righteousness of Christ far exceeds any outward or inward righteousness we could ever achieve on our own. God’s Law demands perfection, and only Jesus is perfect. But in Jesus, you too are accounted perfect before God, until that day when you finally obtain the full outcome of your faith, salvation in both body and soul. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.