

Matthew 5:17–26
6th Sun. after Trinity
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
July 16, 2023

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's a common misconception that Jesus came to make God's standards easier for us. The people of the Old Testament were commanded to do or not do so many different things. From dietary laws, to festival observances, to ritual washings, and the observance of the Sabbath, Hebrew life was lived under God's Law. Or at least it was supposed to be lived under God's Law. In reading the Old Testament, you can become overwhelmed by the amount of legal regulations God prescribed for His people. It wasn't just the Ten Commandments, but hundreds upon hundreds of laws dealing with every aspect of life.

In the New Testament, the Scribes, and the Pharisees and Saducees were always getting onto Jesus and His disciples about working on the Sabbath, or eating with tax collectors and sinners, or not washing properly before meals. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, the fulfillment of the Sabbath rest for God's people. Jesus eats with sinners because He came for those who are sick, not those who think they are well. And Jesus teaches that it's not what goes into a man that makes him unclean, but what comes out of a sinful, unclean heart. That's what defiles a person. So on the surface it might seem like Jesus does make God's standards easier or more doable for God's people.

In our Gospel reading for today, however, we learn that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. God did not become man to do away with the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. It's important to keep in mind that all the laws in the Old Testament can be organized into

three categories. There's the civil law code for Israel, the ceremonial laws for Israel for worshipping the Lord according to good order, and there's the natural law, which applies to all people at all times because it is written into the order of creation. The civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were meant to preserve the people of Israel and keep them distinct until the coming of the Messiah. All the dietary laws, festivals, washings, and so forth of the Old Covenant separated the people of Israel from the surrounding nations and pointed ahead to Christ. The Lord doesn't relax these regulations; He fulfills them in His very being. And since the LORD fulfills these laws, they no longer bear on the lives of Christians. You can eat pork and blood sausage, and you can worship the LORD on Sunday, the Lord's Day, instead of on the literal Sabbath, that is, on Saturday. Jesus fulfilled these laws of the Old Covenant.

The natural law, however, that law written into creation itself and into men's hearts, remains in effect until the end of time. It's the law by which God creates and sustains the universe and the law by which God measures righteousness. This law, the natural law, is valid for all time and it is best summarized in the Ten Commandments. We divide the Ten Commandments into the two tables of the Law. The first table, the first three commandments, deals with our relationship with God. The second table, commandments four through ten, deals with our relationship with other people. In summary, you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:40). The Law and the Prophets simply expound upon this law of love, which is the measure of righteousness. To be righteous before God and man is to love the Lord and to love your neighbor as yourself, not only in word, but in deed and in truth.

Jesus says: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The scribes and Pharisees and those who followed them believed they were righteous because they fulfilled God’s Law to a t, to a jot or tittle. They obeyed all the civil and ceremonial laws of Moses. They celebrated the feasts and festivals and kept themselves pure from unbelievers. They obeyed the 10 Commandments according to the letter. But then Jesus interprets God’s Law not only according to the letter, but according to the spirit. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’” The scribes and Pharisees, like most people, believed they fulfilled the Fifth Commandment by refraining from murdering other people. Nobody could accuse them of murder in the first, second, or any other degree. Their hands were free of innocent blood.

Remember, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Jesus did not come to weaken the Law, but to interpret it according to its true sense. And when the Law is interpreted according to its true, spiritual sense, it becomes not easier for sinful man to keep, but harder. Most people can honestly say they haven’t murdered somebody else. But Jesus says: “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.” The Fifth Commandment doesn’t just forbid murder; it forbids anything that leads to murder, including its inception with thoughts and words arising out of the sinful heart. When you’re angry with someone, you’ve already committed murder in your heart. And God looks not only at the outward action, but at the heart. Even if your outward behavior is above reproach and nobody can hold anything against you, God sees much deeper. He will judge you not only according to

what you do, but according to what you think and say. Jesus doesn't make the Law more bearable. He interprets it truly, to the point that a sinner can't bear it.

Jesus interprets the Sixth Commandment in a similar way: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." It's not enough to simply refrain from cheating on your spouse, or to refrain from having sex before marriage. The Law actually condemns the thoughts, desires, inclinations, and words that occur long before the shameful act of adultery. "The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Someone might live an outwardly righteous life, as did the scribes and Pharisees, but that won't stand before the God who knows all things. God is an impartial and all-knowing judge. His verdict is based not just on blatant outward transgression of the Law, but on the thoughts, words, and deeds which otherwise remain hidden from the world.

All of the Ten Commandments, that perfect summary of the natural law, are rightfully interpreted in this way. The reason Jesus isolates the Fifth and Sixth Commandments is because they seem like the easiest to follow in an outward way. When you examine your life in light of the 10 Commandments, keep in mind that God is not just looking at outward actions; He is also looking at your heart. It's not enough to refrain from worshiping false gods. The question is: Do you fear, love, and trust in the true God above all things? It's not enough to refrain from taking the Lord's name in vain. The question is: Do you honor God's name by using it rightly, in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving? It's not enough to go to Church every Sunday and Festival Day. The question is: Are you holding God's Word sacred, and *gladly* hearing it and learning it? Or does your sinful flesh grow bored with the things of God? Go through each of the Ten

Commandments and reflect on how they are truly fulfilled. And soon you will despair of that false righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus doesn't make the Law more bearable, but unbearable. He interprets it truly, to the point that a sinner can't bear it. A Christian delights in the Law of God in his inner being, but realizes that he is captive to the law of sin that still dwells in his members. The chief function of God's Law for us sinners, then, is to show us our sin, like a doctor telling us our true diagnosis. Nothing is to remain hidden, because without the proper diagnosis, proper treatment cannot follow.

So what are we poor, miserable sinners to do in light of God's perfect and holy Law? Wretched sinners that we are! Who will deliver us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Jesus doesn't reveal the Law so clearly to us that we might be left in despair and misery. He reveals the Law to us the way it really is that we might despair of ourselves and of our own righteousness, that we might learn to see that we truly are sinners. The Law in this sense shows us the true root of our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, namely, a sinful and corrupt heart. By grace Jesus reveals to us our sin and opens our eyes to see how sick we truly are that we might turn in faith to our LORD who takes our sin upon Himself and nails it to the cross. Jesus is the great Physician, who came not for those who think they are just fine, but for those who know they are desperately sick. Jesus reveals the depth of your sin so that you realize there's nothing you can do on your own to get rid of it. Only God can soften your hardened heart. Only God can give you a new heart, new inclinations, by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in God's Word.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is speaking not about the righteousness that comes by following the Law. He's speaking about the righteousness of faith. Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, is your

righteousness. He kept the Law perfectly in your place because you couldn't do it. He died as an innocent victim because a perfect sacrifice is required by God's justice. Your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees because it's more than a righteousness of the letter of the Law. Your righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, fulfills the spirit of the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of Christ is perfect righteousness, given to you freely by grace alone, through the gift of faith alone. On your behalf, Jesus accomplished everything required by the Law according to its true interpretation, not just what it requires on the surface. From God's perspective, everything required of you and more has been accomplished and you are perfect in His sight because of what Jesus has done for you.

God's Law, truly interpreted as Jesus does, condemns all sinners. All are under sin, all are condemned by the law, all are without excuse. And all are accounted righteous, or justified, because of the perfect righteousness of Christ. "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" (Rom 3:21–22). Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law (Rom 3:31). Now that you know the correct interpretation of the Law, you know what a serious matter it is to be angry at another person, created in the image of God, just like you. Now you know why words can be so painful. The tongue is the most common murder weapon there is!

Jesus's interpretation of the Law not only reveals the seriousness of your sin that you might turn to your Savior, but Jesus's interpretation of the Law also shows you a better way. As the Psalmist (37:8) says: "Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil." Enough with the anger, no matter how justified you think it is, "for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Don't use your words to tear others

down, but to build others up, to proclaim the love of God to all. And if your brother or sister or anyone for whom Christ died has anything against you, be reconciled. Come to terms quickly. Forgive as you have been forgiven, and ask for forgiveness as you have been forgiven. In Christ Jesus, you are accounted righteous in God's sight. If God can look past your faults, you can look past the faults of others and see the righteousness of Christ in them. So expel anger from your hearts, and make room for the Holy Spirit. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Rom 8:11). Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:57)! 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.