

Matthew 5:17–26
Trinity VI
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
July 7, 2024

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,

Our Gospel Lesson this morning comes from Jesus's "Sermon on the Mount." Many people hear the Sermon on the Mount, particularly this section, and they think Jesus is simply saying: "Try harder." Jesus says: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." But Jesus isn't telling us to try harder. He's telling us that no matter how hard we try, on our own we can't be righteous in the sight of God. Our righteousness must come from outside of ourselves. Our righteousness must be given us by God Himself. Here Jesus is teaching us the true meaning of the Law and the true meaning of the Gospel. And to understand this distinction is to understand the difference between belief and unbelief, faith and despair, Christianity and every other religion in this world.

Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." The Pharisees and Sadducees looked at Jesus as a revolutionary. They thought His goal was to replace them, to do away with the Old Covenant, and to fight against the ruling classes. People thought Jesus was a libertine. They saw Him hanging around with sinners, with prostitutes and tax collectors, and they thought He condoned their sinful behavior. Jesus would say revolutionary sounding things like: "Tear down this Temple, and in three days I will rebuild it." He wasn't talking about the temple in Jerusalem, but about the Temple of His Body. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. He came to fulfill them.

So what does it mean to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? To fulfill means to achieve something that was desired or predicted. To fulfill means to complete, to bring to a proper end. The purpose of a coffee mug is not to sit on the shelf and look pretty, though that does happen. The purpose of a coffee mug is fulfilled when you fill it with coffee and drink. The Law and the Prophets, the entire Old Testament, is like a vessel. It gives form and purpose, but then something, or better put, *someone*, must come and fulfill that purpose. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament. He is the reason the Law was given and the reason the prophets spoke. The Old Testament is a book of pictures, but Jesus is the real thing. Jesus is the coming one, portrayed throughout the Old Testament in types and in direct prophecies. He doesn't do away with the Old Testament. Instead, He fulfills its intentions for God's people. Jesus does not abolish the Law and the prophets; He fulfills them.

Jesus goes further: "Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." It's like saying "make sure to cross your t's and dot your i's," which means: "pay attention to the details." Not one little detail of God's Law is annulled by the coming of Jesus. He came not to abolish God's Law, but to fulfill it, to bring it to its goal. In fact, Jesus says: "whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven." God's Law is descriptive of how God made us to be. He tells us what to do because He knows how He made us. In that sense, another way to talk about the Law is to say it's a structure or a blueprint for how God would have us live in order for us to thrive. God's commandments are not arbitrary, like speed limits or quiet hours. God's commandments reveal to us the way God has designed this universe and everything in it to operate, like the laws of physics. The 10 commandments are

not 10 suggestions or 10 helpful hints to the good life. They reveal something about the mind and the will of God that we must know if we are to be righteous in His sight, and to live as we were created to be. Whoever relaxes God's commandments or downplays them will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven. That's another way of saying they'll have a millstone tied around their neck and thrown into the sea. God's ordering of creation is no child's play. It's a matter of life and death.

“For I tell you,” says Jesus, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” The scribes and Pharisees knew God's Law and they taught God's Law to the people. If anyone knew the Law's requirements, it would be the scribes and Pharisees. According to the surface level, outward understanding of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees were righteous. Usually. They did the right things. They had an impeccable record when it came to obeying God's Law according to the letter. Yet Jesus says: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” What Jesus is saying is that the righteousness of the Law, doing the right thing according to the letter, is not enough for salvation. The Law is deeper than just the outward maintaining of order. The Law is spiritual. It applies not just to what we do in front of others but what we think in our hearts.

In catechesis, it's common to speak of the three uses of God's Law. The first use of the Law is like a curb preventing your car from running off the road, or like a train track. God's Law, His ordering of this world, is meant to keep people in line, to keep them on the straight and narrow towards a destination, and to prevent chaos. The first use of God's Law tells us to live our lives within the boundaries of God's created order. Don't kill people. Don't steal. Don't cheat on your wife. Basically love your neighbor as yourself. Even pagans living in deep darkness can

begin to grasp that it's generally not good to hurt other people. All that is included in the first use of the Law.

The Second use of the Law is what Jesus is getting at here. That's the use we describe as a mirror. You hold up the mirror of God's Law to your life, to your heart, to see the imperfections. You measure your thoughts, words, and deeds against the standard of God's Law and realize you're wanting. Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But 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."

God's Law is not just about outward actions. It's not just a matter of the body. God created us body, soul, and spirit, and so God's Law affects us body, soul, and spirit. God's Law against murder also includes outward manifestations of anger, like avoiding those we're mad at or having a sullen face or showing indecent gestures. Murder includes the tongue: saying hurtful things or sometimes worse, not saying anything at all. And more than all that, the fifth commandment against murder also includes the invisible thoughts of our heart and mind. Sometimes anger is just being envious of others, or being happy when things go badly for them, what the Germans call "Schadenfreude," taking delight in the downfall of another. God doesn't just consider our outward actions the way civil laws do. God considers thoughts and words as well, soul and spirit, the most inward intentions and movements of the heart. To murder doesn't just mean to kill. It also means to not help those in need, to lash out with our words, to harbor angry feelings in our hearts. That's the true interpretation of God's Law that Jesus brings to the forefront. You could go through each of the 10 commandments, the Old Testament reading for

today, and see that each commandment has something to say, not just about outward circumstances. Each commandment is aimed at the entire person, body, soul, and spirit.

The righteousness of God's Law as Jesus fully explains it is so much greater than the scribes and Pharisees or the natural man would expect. When we truly understand that the Law demands perfection, not just with actions but with intentions as well, then we soon realize that we sinners are not capable of fulfilling God's Law. "Whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10). The Law is like a necklace. One little break in the string, and all the beads fall off. It's all or nothing. Either you keep the Law entirely as God commanded it, or you make even one little mistake in thought, word, or deed and you become a transgressor. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

But there's another righteousness, not the righteousness of the Law but the righteousness of the Gospel, the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The scribes and Pharisees, like the rest of mankind, lived like whitewashed tombs. They could clean up the outside, their actions, but inside, in their hearts, they were filled with death. But Jesus raises the dead. He goes to the tomb of your sinful heart and says: "Arise!" He takes out your old heart, your heart of stone, and gives you a heart of flesh. He gives you new life. He gives you His life, His righteousness. Jesus lived a perfect life according to the Law's letter and spirit. Jesus was above reproach in thought, word, and deed. He didn't think, say, or do anything in anger or against God's Law. He kept the Law perfectly and then died as the perfect sacrifice in our place.

In Holy Baptism, His righteousness covers your unrighteousness. All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the

Father, we too might walk in newness of life. That's what Paul says in the Epistle reading, Romans 6. In Baptism, you are united to Jesus Christ. And for those who are in Christ Jesus there is now no condemnation. "The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2). The perfect righteousness of Christ has exceeded your own righteousness and the so-called righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. His perfect righteousness covers our imperfect righteousness, our sin, and our shame.

And on top of that, with the righteousness of Christ and the new life we have baptized into Him, we truly begin to fulfill God's Law. This is where the third use of God's Law comes in: God's Law as a guidebook for those born again to new life in water and the Word. We no longer seek that surface-level righteousness that the world and all non-Christians strive for. Cloaked in the righteousness of Jesus and forgiven by His shed blood, we are given new desires by the Holy Spirit. We no longer want just the outward righteousness of the Law's letter. We want to fulfill the spirit of the Law. We have a changed heart and mind that overflows with kind words and deeds. In Jesus Christ, we seek reconciliation. We seek to live the true life, the good life. We desire to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven in Jesus Christ. We come to terms quickly with those who accuse us because we love others as God Himself loves us. The peace we have with God in Jesus Christ leads us to live at peace with others.

If you lean on your own righteousness, you will always fall short of God's standard. You will be accused and sentenced as a law breaker because as a sinner that's what you are. But if you lean on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, freely given to you by water and the word in Holy Baptism, then you are free from the accusations of the Law and free to live the new life God has prepared for you in Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory! 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.