

Sermon Trinity 6 2020

July 19, 2020

Matthew 5:17-26

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This morning we meditate on the gospel lesson, previously read.

I know those of you who have been around Lutheranism for a long time have heard that old go to phrase over and over of “Law and Gospel.” I know I’ve even joked about how Jessica teased me when I went to seminary that I started sounding like every Lutheran pastor she’d ever known as I would talk about this Law and Gospel distinction. And of course as we hear that in our day, it can be easy for our eyes to glaze over and we start to drift off thinking of things less abstract. Because it is fair to say that when we speak of these terms “Law” and “Gospel,” we are talking about conceptual things. We are talking about things that are not concrete. No they’re ideas, they’re abstract. This abstract idea about this Law, these commands that God speaks to us, and the abstract idea that this Law is given that we would be restrained in going too far in sin, but be helped by it to maintain some order in society. Then that this Law would come and show us our sin, also abstract. Finally, that it would tell us how we ought to seek to live our lives as Christians. All of this is very abstract. Then, the Gospel is very abstract too. This abstract idea that Jesus, who is very God in the flesh of a man, would take the punishment for sin upon Himself that we could live by His resurrection.

This is all abstract, it’s conceptual, and didactic. In our day, I think that’s hard, because we have a mindset that is grounded in concrete pragmatism. And to be a pragmatist as a Christian can be great. After all, Jesus was often pragmatic. He often would teach very concretely. Look at His parables. Those are often quite concrete. But today’s Gospel Lesson is one is very abstract in a lot of ways. It’s about concepts. So in view of that, I’m going to talk about this abstract idea of Law and Gospel in light of what Jesus says about it in the Gospel Lesson. I ask for your patience, and your effort in concentrating to follow me as I do so. I will try to make this as concrete as I can, but sometimes we have to follow our Lord’s lead in dealing with things conceptually.

So to start, I think that we need to look at what Jesus says about the Law, about God’s commands—and as we see the Old Testament reading is the Ten Commandments, we have a good opportunity to make the point that this is the epitome, the summary of God’s Law. If we want to know all that God commands, we can look there. Look at the Ten Commandments. Know them as Christians. Know the order, the numbers, learn Luther’s explanations of them from the Catechism. This is what God calls us to in His will for us. He takes it most seriously. Look, in fact, at what

Jesus says: **For 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. Therefore 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.**

So, hopefully you hear the first point I want to make here about the Law: God takes the Law seriously. He takes it so seriously that He says that if anyone lessens it, he will be called the least in the Kingdom Of Heaven. Now, to give some context, you see this was a problem for the Pharisees who were in Jesus' hearing for the Sermon on the Mount here. We're going to talk more about them here in a second, but you have to understand that the Pharisees were viewed as the uber-pious folks. The Jews who wanted to be faithful at that time likely were watching the Pharisees to get their cues for piety. But the problem was that they lessened the Law. On the surface it didn't look like it. It looked like they tightened it. They added rules here and there, and made laws where God hadn't. So, it looked like they were especially strict, but what that actually proved was the opposite. It proved that they were making less of God's Law. How's that? Because they were treating it like it was something you could attain. They were creating their checklists and their rules of how many steps you could take on the Sabbath so they could assure themselves that this Law of God was something they were keeping.

And this is a problem for us now too, isn't it? Think about how many churches are out there giving series on Twelve Steps to a happy marriage. Now that's great to give good marriage advice. It's great to encourage healthy marriages. God has given us marriage, but when that becomes the focal point of my sermons as a pastor, I've ultimately missed the point of the Law. The Law isn't given to us that we can have a happy and fulfilled life with our spouse. Don't get me wrong, the Sixth Commandment telling me to not commit adultery goes a long way in teaching me how to love my wife, which helps to make our marriage a lot happier. But that's not the goal. The goal finally is that we would live how our God calls us to live—which to be clear is to love. Or beyond that, the goal is to see my sin. Paul says in the letter to the Romans "No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the Law"—that is, no one's getting to heaven by their good works—"rather through the Law comes consciousness of sin."

You see, now that we're fallen in sin, God makes sure you hear His commands and He does so to the point that you would see how sinful you are and that you would turn to Jesus for help. Twelve steps to a better marriage, that's still Law, but it's law that's lessened. It won't kill you that way that it should, it won't stab your delusions of being good enough to get to heaven right in the heart. As a professor of mine from seminary

always said, it will just gum you to death. It will be slow and soft and maybe you won't realize what it's done till you've become self-righteous or despaired that you're not following the twelve steps as well as you ought.

This is the lessening of the Law. Don't do it. And as I say this, I haven't forgotten to make the point that of course pretending things that are sinful aren't is a problem too. Pretending it's OK to harm our neighbor, or sleep around, or steal, that's lessening the law too, but it's a bit clearer that way. Jesus wants to make the point that we can't lessen it to think we can attain it.

And we can see that in how Jesus doesn't soften murder but ratchets it up to where you can't think you're innocent even if you've only spoken harshly to your neighbor in anger. We can also see it in what He says next: **I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**

If you remember, I just said the people saw the Pharisees as examples of piety. You can imagine, then how this would be heard. "I've got to be better than those guys? I've got to be more pious than they are? I'm in big trouble!" In our day it might be like how people often view pastors. "I'd have to be more pious than the pastor?!" Of course, if you've ever known a pastor well, you know that we're not special when it comes to holiness and piety. But there's that perception.

But what's Jesus saying? Well, He's making the point that because the Pharisees have lessened the Law as I was just describing, they're not righteous as they're called to be. We can see something similar to this today in the calls of righteous indignation that flood the internet. There is a call for a righteous standard. And portions of it align with the righteousness of God's commands. When we hear of justice for all peoples, that's consistent with God's Law. But our righteousness must surpass those calling. Our righteousness in fact must far surpass that. It must align with God's righteousness.

And here is where we'll loop back to the purpose of the commands: to give us a mirror that shows us every last pimple on the attempts we make to stand before God as though we've been good enough. Who has never been angry with someone? Who has never in that anger spoken harmful words, or at the least thought them? You too stand liable to judgment. Your righteousness does not surpass that of the Pharisees.

And lest you think that it's possible to attain this if you try hard enough, look at when the Law fights with itself. Look at how the Fifth Commandment has been at odds with itself with the Coronavirus. You want to love your neighbor? Love him by not getting him sick. Good. Now love him by caring for his needs, which God provides through economic structures. Now love him by caring for his mental health in the midst

of all this. And these can't all be done. It's impossible the Command itself is pulling you every which direction, and you can't always keep it.

Now you see where the Gospel comes in. **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.** Now to be clear, Jesus is talking about fulfilling the Old Testament here. He's making the point that He is what the Old Testament is all about. Look in your Old Testament and see it's about Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate King David, the ultimate Moses, the ultimate and best Adam. How? Because He fulfills it all. All of those commands that we heard in Exodus 20, those commands summarized by the command to love, as Paul says, **"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."** That command to Love, that fulfilling of the Law is found in Jesus. And it's found where you haven't done it.

Your righteousness is to surpass the Pharisees. It doesn't. But His does. His does in that perfect life He lived, and it does in the death He died for your sin. The wages of sin is death. He didn't deserve that, but in His love, He suffered that death, even the eternal death of hell on the cross, that you wouldn't have too. That's the perfect righteousness. That's the perfect love. That's the love of the Perfect Lover loving the perfectly un-loveable.

And in even more love, He gives that righteousness to you. He baptized you in it. He speaks it into your heart as He forgives your sin. He feeds it to you on your very tongue.

And in this we see this abstract concept made concrete. It's concrete in the death of this body of Christ. It's concrete in how He gives you this righteousness in concrete means. Word. Water. Bread and wine. And furthermore, as He gives you new life, He calls you live in the life of the commands He speaks. He calls you to this baptismal identity Paul spoke of in Romans. And that's concrete. Love God by not having other gods, not misusing His Name, honoring preaching and His Word. And loving your neighbor, honoring authority, honoring marriage, honoring property and reputation. That's all concrete. But it's all Law and Gospel. And it's all Jesus' Word, and in His grace done for you by Him. Finished, not abolished, but fulfilled. Amen.