

Sermon Trinity 6 2021

July 6, 2021

Matthew 5:17-26

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson which was previously read.

As Lutherans I'm guessing you all know Ephesians 2:8-9. Some of you might not know the reference, but I'm guessing you know the verse, **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."** That's at the heart of our message, isn't it? You can't get to heaven by being good enough, so you are saved by God's grace. In other words, your sin is always more than you can overcome, even your good works don't earn God's favor and so He sent Jesus to die for your sins, so that you go heaven by trusting in that work that He did and not in your own works, at all. In light of that, then, what is always the accusation that people make? "Well if you don't have to earn your way to heaven, then you can do whatever you want and still get there? That's horrible!" Or to put it another way, people will say, "if you tell people they can't and won't earn their way to heaven, then you're just encouraging them to sin!" Is that true? Do I get up in this pulpit and encourage you to sin because I tell you week in and week out that Jesus died for your sins? Or as Paul put it in the Epistle Lesson, **"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"** That's the logic here isn't it?

In fact, I remember a friend and I talking about this once, and he jokingly went on this whole monologue about how he had decided that since Christ had died for the sin of every man, woman, and child throughout time, then it would be logical to "maximize the grace efficiency," and sin all the more. Now, he was clearly joking, but, again, that's the logic people assume goes with this, isn't it? Isn't that how we think as people? "If I am guaranteed the benefit from x, then I should maximize that benefit." "If someone is willing to give me money, I should maximize my benefit of that." The reality is that we see how this falls short eventually in an earthly context, but our sinful brains often assume that this is how it must work with God too. And as I keep asking if that's true, I am expecting that in your head you keep thinking, "No, Pastor, that's not how it works! We don't just keep sinning to maximize the benefit of God's grace!" Or as Paul says it in the Epistle Lesson, **"Should we continue sinning that grace may abound? Mē genoito! May it not be!"**

So then why do we continually act as though that's what we're trying to do? Why do we continually live as though this doesn't matter? Well, from a theological perspective the answer is easy. Because we are still sinners. And that can sound overly simple, but it's true. Just after our passage in the Epistle in Romans six, Paul has a whole discussion about God's commands, about the Law, and its relationship to the Christian. He says things like that we were held captive to the Law, to God's commands. That these held us prisoner to sin, to death. And how these commands even aroused sinful desires in him. Which this is what my pastor who confirmed me always called cookie jar theology. You know, if you make cookies, put them in a jar, and set the jar on the fridge, the little kids probably aren't going to think a whole lot about them. But if you explicitly say to them, "I'm putting the cookies here, don't eat them," where do their brains go? Thinking about how to get some cookies, right? That's what the Law does to us, it provokes our sinful desires. So, then, are those commands bad? Is the problem in the command? No! Paul says it's good, it's righteous. So, what's the problem? Us, right? We are the problem. Our sinful nature is the problem.

In light of that, then, we see what Jesus tells us about this Law. He says that **"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."** He says that you need to hear the Law to the fullest extent, and He explains that right after this verse. As an example, He looks at the command not to murder. He connects this to what the rabbis and teachers at the time taught, that they would tell you a murder is liable to judgment. But what does Jesus say? He makes the point, this isn't just about the action of murdering, even if you call your neighbor, "Raca, fool!" you're liable to hell. And why? Why does He do this? Because your righteousness has to exceed the Scribes and Pharisees if you want to get into heaven. He's saying, "look at the best person you know. If you want to get to heaven, you have to be better than them." And what's He really saying? He's really saying is that when God gives these commands—these commands that are good!, these commands that you heard in the Old Testament lesson—when you hear those, you better be trying to do them. In fact, you better be trying to keep them to the fullest extent. If not, your righteousness has failed. And what's the point of that? Your righteousness has failed. It's failed and you're liable to hell for it. That's what the Law brings. There is a promise to the Law. If you keep the Law perfectly you'll live. But we don't keep it perfectly and we see this because we die, and the wages of sin is death. We're bound to it, we can't help it, it's like a prison for us.

To come back to Paul, he even acknowledges this problem again in Romans seven. He talks about wanting to do good. **"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do**

not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." He says, "I'm trying to do the right thing, and I keep messing it up." And maybe you can identify with that. Hopefully, you can identify with that. Hopefully I tell you to keep these commandments, and your brain says, "Pastor, I'm trying! I'm trying but I keep messing it up!" Or maybe you're thinking, "I know Pastor, I know I should try to be better about the commandments." But hopefully, you're not thinking, "that's true, but we're all human." You see, as true as it is that as fallen humans we can't keep it, that's not our justification. We don't just make that excuse. The commands come and tell us, "You might be right, but that doesn't excuse you from it." Yeah it's true that you can't do it, but I can't loosen the Law and tell you, "by golly that's just OK." That's not in my call to do that. No, but I can tell you exactly what Paul says to finish his thought about not doing the good he wants and doing the evil he doesn't want. And what's that? Hopefully you know. Maybe not word for word, but hopefully you know. That said, word for word what Paul says, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."** You are not condemned by this Law because of Jesus. You have freedom from that Law because Jesus set you free from it.

I was reading this week about what Luther said about this letter to the Romans. And I don't know if you know, but Luther wrote all these prefaces to the books of the Bible; little explanations that tell about what's in each book, and that sort of thing. And his preface to Paul's letter to the Romans is famous because he talks in it about how salvation by grace through faith isn't this thing that excludes good works, because faith does good works without thinking about them, and that sort of thing. It's great stuff. Hopefully you've heard it. But he also says this great thing about being set free from the Law, as Paul put it here, the "law of sin and death." He says, *"To be without the law is not the same thing as to have no laws and to be able to do what one pleases. Rather we are under the law when, without grace, we occupy ourselves with the works of the law. Then sin certainly rules [us] through the law, for no one loves the law by nature; and that is great sin. Grace, however, makes the law dear to us; then sin is no longer present, and the law is no longer against us but one with us."*

In other words, when we are in Christ, then we can actually love the Law, we can actually love the Commands that God gives us. Now, without Christ we can pretend that we like to be good, and we like to do what the Law says and all that. But the reality, he points out, is that we don't love the Law by nature. We might like to do things that

appear to keep it. We might like to not actually murder people. We might like to not actually steal their stuff. But the reality is that we like these things because we feel bad when we do them, or because we like to feel good about how well we do those things. But then when Jesus tells us that if we are angry we deserve hell, when we hear that the whole world, from the tiniest unborn child to the oldest and sweetest old lady, that one and all deserve hell, especially ourselves. That sets something off. We don't like it. It's unfair, it's unjust and too demanding. Who could be saved?

But that's where Jesus comes in and tells us, **“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.”** No, He didn't come that we'd throw these commands out. Instead, He came that they wouldn't be that burden that we couldn't carry. He came to carry that burden to the cross, having kept the commands perfectly. He came to be crucified for them and raised for the forgiveness of them. And this is why I'm always harping about being in Church week in and week out, because this is where that life is in Him, that forgiveness is in Him, that fulfillment is in Him. Our faith is in this work of Jesus, not our own, and here is where He gives that work to us. Here is where He speaks that sin forgiven, speaks that fulfillment into our ears. Here is where He feeds us with its perfection. And here is where He has baptized us into that death, that we could be raised in His resurrection.

Christians, as we wrestle with how this salvation by grace through faith thing works in conjunction with these commands of God, I think this imagery Paul gives about baptism is the best way to understand it: **“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.... We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.... For the death [Christ] died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”** You are alive in Christ, so you love God's commandments. Love them, do them, keep them. Do so because they aren't what gets you to heaven. No Jesus takes care of that. He has come not to abolish, but to fulfill. And in that fulfillment you truly are saved by grace through faith, not by works so that you can't boast, but you can be God's workmanship made anew in Christ doing what He has given for you to do. Amen.