

Matthew 5.17-26 & Romans 6.1-11
The Sixth Sunday after the Feast of the Trinity
23 July 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Oremus: sint placentes sermones oris mei, meditatio cordis nostri in conspectu tuo, Domine fortitudo mea et redemptor meus. Ps. 19.14 [19.15 ꝛ iuxta hebr. alt.]

Every year on this Sunday I almost cringe when it comes time to read the Gospel. This is how it ends: "Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." All Law. All the time. The curse and wrath of the Almighty God.

And then as soon as I'm done saying that, I say, "This is the Gospel of the Lord," and all of you sing: "Praise to You, O Christ."

It's hardly Gospel. In fact, it's crushing Law. Have you been angry with your brother? Insulted him? Called him a fool? Shown up at the altar on Sunday morning for the meal of reconciliation between God and men quite unreconciled with a fellow-believer? "Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

But it doesn't stop there.

Jesus goes on to say that even looking at a woman with lust in your heart means you've broken the 6th Commandment. That it's better to lose your eyes than have them fall on porn. That it would be better if your hands were stumps than that they should have done the things they have done.

That if you divorce, you're causing your ex-spouse to commit adultery.

That personal truthfulness—keeping the 8th commandment—must be as simple as a straightforward yes or no. No protests. No explanations. No prevarications.

That any attempt to retaliate and take justice into your own hands is to rob God of what belongs to Him, who says, "Vengeance is Mine."

That you must love everyone. Including your enemies. Including the person who's scuttled your career. The wife who made you a cuckold. The person who divulged a secret that could never be divulged.

And all the while, as those words pour over our ears. As those words lay a finger on just how poorly we've lived up to the promise of the new life in Christ given us in our Baptism—All the while, they come with the refrain: "Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

For the Law of God brooks no breach. What's broken must be fixed. What's been lost must be recovered. What's been ruptured must be sewn back together.

And no wonder. The Law wasn't given for our curse, but for our blessing. Show me the person who lives in thought, word, and deed according to God's holy Law, and I'll show you the happiest, most blessed

person on the face of the earth. That person could live in a cardboard box in the middle of a slum in South America and be far happier, far more blessed than anyone of us in the luxury of our own homes. The man of Psalm 1, who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord. His constant meditation day and night. And in all that he does he prospers. No trail of lies. No true enemy. No broken marriages. No wedding vows broken before they've been made. No scurrying to slip Hustler under the couch cushion when *she* comes in the back door. No angry words exchanged. Enough humility to reconcile before it's too late even when it's not his fault. The ability to go bed at night without the sins of the day plaguing him—either by continuing to nurse them or regretting they were ever committed.

It's what we all want.

Until we don't.

Right?

And that exposes the problem for what it is. Your problem isn't out there somewhere. You know you can bite your tongue. You know you can walk away from a tense situation. You know you can gut it out and tell the truth, no matter how humiliating. You know you can refrain from flipping off the crazy driver behind you. Heck, you know that driving doesn't even have to make you angry. You know that!

And doesn't that show where the problem is. It's not out there. It's in here. Because a good tree brings forth good fruit; and a bad tree brings forth bad. You can't pick apples from an osage orange. When you see bad fruit, you've got a bad tree.

And that's a huge problem. Even in the conscious effort to suppress sin in the heart, it's almost impossible not to sin.

And that's exactly where the problem lies. In the heart. The fruit—the lies, the cries of fool and foul, the adulterous glances and actions, the angry reactions—you can maybe suppress that. It's called civic righteousness. But you can't tame the motions of your heart.

You can't tame the motions of your heart, and the Law of God can never be abolished, relaxed, or pass away. You can't tame your heart, and yet unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

That's where we live, fellow-redeemed. Under the crushing Law of God. Sure, you've been given new life in your Baptism. But the Old Adam is still there, hard at work. Doing the evil you would not. And not doing the good you would.

And so you still need Jesus.

You know, there are some Christian groups out there who pretend that conversion is such a thing that the Old Adam is entirely drowned through Baptism. But Scripture and experience teach entirely differently. He keeps coming up for air.

And that's why Paul calls on us to live in our Baptism. Why? Because that's where the Old Adam is put to death. And a daily death is what he needs, because until this life is over he does the same thing over and over again. He goes under the water for a little bit; but he holds his breath. And as soon as you let go of him, he's back. And up to his old tricks.

But much more happens in Baptism than the daily drowning of the Old Adam. When Adam's put to death, Christ is raised to life. So that what lives in your Baptism isn't the Old Adam, but the Second Adam, Christ Himself. Isn't that what Paul says: "We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing." Nothing! And then notice what he says: "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him."

And that's good news.

Because the same Christ who allows no relaxation of the Law also *fulfilled* it. For you. The same Christ whose word won't let the Law pass away also *accomplished* the Law. And He did it for you. That's called His active obedience. And the same Christ who demands reparation for breaking the Law—He paid the last penny. In blood. In His holy, innocent blood. That's called His passive obedience. An obedience unto death. Even the death of the Cross.

And that's what's made yours in Baptism. Christ's perfection is made your perfection. Christ's fulfillment is made your fulfillment. Christ's payment in blood is made your payment in blood. To the last penny.

It used to be in the olden days that those who had just been baptized were wrapped in a white robe. Today the custom still survives a little bit. Sometimes you see babies here at the font all dressed in white.

But the old custom showed what was happening in Baptism. The baptizand would arrive in street clothes and leave in a white garment. The street clothes represented the Old Adam's clothing—his excuses and lies and lusts—and the white garment represented Christ Himself—*His* good works. *His* life. *His* death. *His* resurrection. The symbol of the clothing told the story of what's actually happening in Baptism.

Fellow-redeemed, make no mistake about it: what God did for you in your Baptism is He put Christ on you. He doesn't see the raggedy old clothes of the Old Adam, but the brilliant white garments of Jesus. He doesn't see a lying, lustful, angry, hate-filled, fool-calling sinner, He sees Christ. Why? Because the Old Adam has been put to death. And the new man—the man who trusts in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for his salvation—that new man has been brought to life. A new creation. God's creation by water and Word. And you remember what God says about the things He creates: "It is good. It is very good."

Words that echoed over Jesus at His Baptism: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased," and echo over you each time you exercise your own Baptism: "This is My beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well-pleased."

Why? Because Christ came not to abolish the Law. But to fulfill it. And He has fulfilled it for you. Where the Law requires perfection, Christ met it. Where the Law requires blood for sin, Christ spilled it. Where the Law requires death, Christ died it. And He did it for you. That you might die to sin and live to righteousness. That He might take you, a bad tree, and make of you a good one. That in the power of your Baptism, you might day by day put off sin. And present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life—as indeed you have. And your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

God grant it to you all for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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