

Sermon for Trinity VI – Matthew 5:20-26

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

In his letter to the Romans St. Paul said “...the law is written on [mans’] hearts, while their conscience also bears witness...” The Law is hard-wired into creation, even written on the hearts of all people. The Ten Commandments aren’t some foreign standard inserted into the world to help it run better. They are at the very root of what it means to be human. They exhibit the original intent of all creation. The fallen world groans when the Law is transgressed, even without knowing the intricacies of that same Law. Want proof? You don’t need the Bible to tell you that breaking the 6th commandment causes grief. Adultery and sexual impurity cause jealousy, fragmented relationships, and damaged emotions. You don’t need God’s Word to tell you breaking the 8th commandment about gossiping causes pain and hurt feelings. You don’t need Moses to say in the 5th commandment that hurting and harming you neighbor causes regret, remorse, and guilt. The Law is not something that we can ignore. It just is.

However, this Law, spelled out so utterly and completely in the Ten Commandments and even written on the hearts and consciences of all is twisted in sinful mankind. The Apostle would say “... [mans’] conflicting thoughts accuse [them] or even excuse them ...” And so we have the scribes and Pharisees. They lived in strict outward observance of the Law. One could say that they even considered themselves righteous before the Law. Many thought of them as the epitome of keeping God’s commands. The Lord said that the righteousness required to enter the kingdom of heaven must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. How could this be?

Keeping the law was more than just an outward show; it had to be an inward reality. The Lord cuts straight to the point: “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.” Jesus’ interpretation of the law makes it far more penetrating and dreadful than the commandment appears. The law says more than simply, “You shall not murder.” Only be angry with your brother, or insult him, and you have already murdered him!

The 5th commandment forbids more than murder, it’s the thoughts and words that you think and speak every day. Have you hurt or harmed your neighbor by physical hitting or destructive words? Have you murdered your neighbor’s reputation by speaking harmful words about him? Have you held grudges? Have you not forgiven when you should have? Simply leaving your neighbor alone does not fulfill this commandment. Have you helped your neighbor in every physical need, or only when

it was convenient, if at all? Have you passed up the opportunity to do good to your neighbor out of laziness, comfort, indifference, or on purpose? Repent.

The Law requires what you cannot give. "Who can say, 'I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?'" The Law requires a holy, untarnished nature; yet you are by nature a child of wrath. The Law requires a pious heart and thoughts, but your heart issues forth evil and impure thoughts. The Law requires complete and pure righteousness, yet all your righteousness is as a polluted garment. I ask you, how can anyone have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, so as to enter the kingdom of heaven? As Christ came into creation, not to destroy it, but to redeem it, so Christ came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus not only "did the Law" actively, by keeping the moral and ethical requirements, by not hurting or harming his neighbor, by not speaking hurtful words or holding grudges, by loving His neighbor literally to death on the blood-stained cross. Jesus "did the Law" passively by suffering the punishment of the Law required of sinful man. His passive obedience is the most important thing for you. He received the punishment of sin that you deserved. Jesus is your substitute. Unlike the Law, this truth is revealed to you nowhere else except in God's Word.

Christ kept the Law and suffered the consequences of not keeping the Law for you. In this you find the righteousness of God for you. But how does that righteousness come to you today? Is it a righteousness that comes from inside you? Is it an internal thought? Or, is it an external reality from outside yourself? The salvation that your Savior won for you on the cross comes today through His Body and His Blood in the sacrament of the Altar. This is the righteousness of God that exceeds any righteousness of man. This is the righteousness that "exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees," because this Sacrament is God's self-sacrificing love for sinful man. Here, you are joined in the most physical way to your Savior. His righteousness is your righteousness. You live, not by keeping the commandments, not by your own works, but by faith in Christ.

Cling to Christ only and His righteousness and abandon trust in your own works. Not the Pharisees' righteousness. Not the scribes' righteousness. Not your own righteousness can stand before the throne of God without being consumed like stubble. Only Christ's righteousness can stand before God's judgment seat. Only those who are joined to Christ may enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever continues to seek righteousness within himself does not seek it from Christ. "For our sake [the Lord] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠