

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity, A²D 2010

Matthew 5:17-26

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

1 You can't tame the Commandments. They are not easy to keep; they do not require a slight adjustment in your attitude or a minor modification in your behavior. Putting them outside courthouses or in school rooms will not change the behavior of the citizens who pass by them, will not make the courtrooms less busy, will not make the students less rebellious. Through the Law comes knowledge of sin, but not the power to fix sin (Rom 3:21). Where the Law comes, the trespass increases (Rom 5:20). The commandments are impossible to keep. You should know the commandments by heart, not to make you a better person but so you know the kind of person you are: a sinner.

2 That's not how the Pharisees understood the commandments. They wanted a manageable religion. Who is unlike them? They wanted easy commandments and a God who would grade on a curve, who would reward their best efforts, who would give them credit if they tried hard. So have you tried to tame the commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, the summary of the first three commandments becomes "like God enough to call yourself a Christian when it's convenient." Love your neighbor as yourself, the summary of commandments four through ten, gets shortened to "love yourself."

3 Jesus simply will not permit this kind of treatment of the commandments. He exposes the commandments for as furious and full as they truly are. Anytime Jesus' preaching and catechesis begins with "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." as it does here in the Sermon on the Mount, watch out. Jesus doesn't add anything to the commandments; He merely peels back the safe veneer the Pharisees had applied to the commandments that allowed them to think they were adept at keeping them. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets," Jesus preached. "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

4 Then Jesus catechizes on the commandments one at a time, beginning with the 5th commandment. "You have heard it said you shall not murder, 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 hell." Suddenly, your hands which have never shed a drop of any neighbor's blood are stained blood-red. Your heart is murderous with angry and hateful thoughts; your lips have shed innocent blood with words that sting. You have not helped and supported your neighbor in every physical need; you have hurt and harmed him in your thoughts and with your neglect. You can be guilty of murder merely by being unrighteously angry, or by uttering or thinking even a mild insult, or even by thinking yourself wiser and better than others.

5 "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." If you refuse to be reconciled to anyone, there is no room for you at the Lord's altar. To refuse to be reconciled to your neighbor is to refuse to be reconciled to God the Father. To refuse to forgive is to refuse forgiveness for yourself. To harbor anger against someone until he makes amends is to ask God to harbor anger against you until you make amends. You cannot earn forgiveness, but you can reject it.

6 Jesus doesn't come to abolish the Law and the prophets. The Law still stands. Its accusation rings in your ears. Your conscience knows what is required and what is righteous. So how do you deal with the accusation of the Law? You can argue and rationalize. You can think of people whose sins seem worse than yours and so feel better about yourself. You can try to bargain with God, giving up some sin if he'll let you keep another pet sin. You can make excuses and try to justify what you have done or still do. You can try to boil the commandments down to more manageable instructions. You can make up false concepts of God, supposing Him not to be too offended by your sinful rebellion against Him. Or you can acknowledge that the accuser is right and confess your sins. That's the goal of the Law: to get you to quit trusting in your own righteousness, to get you to realize your abject failure, to get you to confess your sinfulness.

7 There is One whose righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, one who was perfect as God the Father is perfect. Jesus did everything the Law requires and nothing it forbids. He loves God His Father perfectly, trusts Him completely, submits to Him without hesitation. He uses God's name rightly, calling upon it regularly and faithfully, praying, praising, giving thanks. He keeps the Sabbath perfectly, living in and loving the Word of God. He honors His parents, even His earthly parents faithfully. He is never angry without cause, never speaks or thinks an insult. His eyes never look lustfully at a woman, his thoughts are never even slightly impure, and He loves His bride the Church completely and perfectly, giving Himself for her completely. He never steals or cheats, never gets anything dishonestly, always gives when anyone is in need. He never gives false testimony, never hurts anyone's reputation. He never covets, never is dissatisfied with the daily bread from God the Father, never desires more than He has been given, never is discontent. He was tempted just as you are in every way, yet was completely without sin. He is perfectly faithful and has perfect faith.

8 And yet the Law condemned Jesus. He is, after all, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for you. So Jesus allowed the Law to do to Him what it should have done to you: accuse you, condemn you, sentence you to death and hell. The only One whose righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees, the only One who was perfect as God His Father is perfect, the divine Son of God, the eternal Second Person of the Trinity, was condemned and killed in your place.

9 Jesus wasn't lying or speaking in hyperbole when He said your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven. He wasn't speaking figuratively when He said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." No, perfection, perfect obedience to the Law, is what's required. And so in Holy Baptism, Jesus gave you His perfect obedience, His complete righteousness. All your sin He claims as His own. And all of His righteousness He declares to be yours. Your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. Your perfection is that of God the Father. You are forgiven and set free. Completely.

10 So the Law takes a different twist. Instead of crushing you with its accusation, it pleasantly announces to you the good works those who wear the righteousness of Jesus naturally do. Perfect obedience to the Ten Commandments is credited to you. So you are free to obey them. Jesus clothes you with Himself. And in His Supper He fills you with Himself. At His altar, he transforms you to match the righteousness you wear. The Body and Blood of Jesus fill you with His life and His righteousness. They set you free from anger, from grudges, from resentment. They fight against the sinful flesh that still clings to you. They give hope to you who struggle against sin. They give comfort to troubled consciences. They give forgiveness to the repentant.

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

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer