

Matthew 5:21-37

February 12, 2023

**“Jesus Reveals the True Meaning of the Law”  
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (A)**

**Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.  
Pastor Peter Adelsen**

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is possible to twist the good news of God’s love into something perverse. Have you heard it said: *“I can do whatever I want because Jesus died for me”*?

This is what Jesus is warning us against in today’s Gospel lesson. Today, we are continuing Jesus’ most-famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount. He is continuing where He left off last week as He said, ***“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”*** (Matthew 5:17) and ***“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”*** (Matthew 5:19).

You see, God’s Law is not evil or arbitrary. God’s Law is good. His Law embodies and expresses God’s good and gracious will. His Law is for our instruction. The Law teaches us about God and about us. Despite our fallen nature thinking the Law is harsh, it is still very good. God’s Law has not been abolished and it cannot be abolished. It can only be fulfilled. Due to our sin, we are unable to fulfill the Law, but we have the Savior who has fulfilled it for us. However, this doesn’t mean that we can ignore the Law.

Jesus alone has fulfilled the Law by His active and passive obedience. His active obedience is that He did not sin. He lived according to the Law. He did not engage in any sins of thought, word, and deed. He loved His neighbor as Himself.

Even though Jesus was without sin, He suffered the full punishment for the sin of the world. Passively, He accepted the punishment meant for us. He fulfilled all of what is demanded of us. He fulfilled the Law by doing everything it said to do and refraining from all that it forbid. He also fulfilled the Law by allowing it to do to Him all that it should have done to us. So through Christ’s passive obedience, He ended the Law’s accusations against us and won our salvation to give to us grace without any merit or worthiness in us.

However, Christ fulfilling the Law did not end the Law or make the Law meaningless. The Law never passes away, because the Law is good. Through Christ, we learn how Christians are to live, according to the Law.

This morning, Jesus teaches us, His blessed disciples, the true meaning of the Law, because if you think you have done them, you are in for a revelation as He focuses on four of the Ten Commandments.

Now, Christ's disciples have heard these teachings. The teachers of the Law, the Pharisees and scribes, asserted that ***"it was said"*** by Moses, the lawgiver, ***"to the people long ago"*** at Mount Sinai.

By saying ***"it was said,"*** these teachers of the Law claimed that they were in full agreement to what God inspired Moses to teach God's people. But was it?

To each statement, ***"it was said,"*** Jesus responds saying, ***"But I say to you."*** So, is Jesus introducing a new way on interpreting the Law? Is Jesus introducing a new Law? No and no! Rather, Jesus is leading His disciples back to the true meaning of the Law.

So, what was the problem? Well, through the influence of the Pharisees and the scribes, God's people had actually perverted God's Law by giving each Commandment a watered-down meaning in order that we could possibly obey each command.

Jesus says: ***"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"*** (Matthew 5:21-22a).

According to the Pharisees and scribes, all a person needed to do to fulfill this commandment was to refrain from the taking the life of another. I never murdered anyone. Check. Easy and done! However, that is only one aspect of the Fifth Commandment as Jesus points out. ***"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"*** (Matthew 5:22).

So, murder is more than the taking of someone's life. We can murder someone in our own heart with our thoughts, words, and deeds.

From the very beginning, God’s intention in the Fifth Commandment was to prohibit not only the outward, fully grown sin of murder, but also the malice in the heart against one’s neighbor, and especially one’s fellow believers. Christ speaks of reconciliation, because that is the sign that we belong to Jesus, and the refusal to be reconciled is the sign that you no longer belong to Jesus.

Jesus continues: ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart”*** (Matthew 5:27-28).

The Pharisees and scribes condemned the act of adultery, but they did ***not*** teach that sexual lust – *the intense sexual craving for anyone other than one’s wife or husband* – was included.

This is the temptation that continues on to today. I’ve heard it said, *“That’s only normal and natural. I can’t help it if my desires are aroused in my heart at the sight of a beautiful woman.”* This may be true, but this also does not make it right. Men and women are naturally attracted to each other. We are attracted to each other because men and women complement each other. But the issue is lust – that longing for anyone other than your wife or husband.

The fallen world promotes lust. It teaches us that lust is good. Just look at what is promoted on TV shows, movies, commercials, and magazine covers. We see women scantily dressed. We see social media influencers encouraging lust, and pornography is just a click away. Today, there are barely any safeguards to pornography. Those adult bookstores on the side of the interstate have now taken the form of computers and smartphones. The fallen world surely promotes lust to the fullest.

Lust is powerful. This is why Jesus says, ***“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away”*** and ***“If your right hand causes to you sin, cut it off and throw it away.”*** Now, it’s been said that Jesus is being figurative here. Does He really mean this? Would you not hesitate to have a cancerous tumor removed before that cancer destroys your whole body? So, wouldn’t removing a treacherous member of your body be a small enough price to pay to save your soul from the eternal torments of hell?

The point Jesus is making is that maiming the body would not be the real solution. If your right eye and right-hand cause you to sin and you get rid of them, would not the left eye and left hand cause the same problem? The issue is not with our eyes or our hands. The solution is the cleansing of the heart. We need to pray for clean hearts and a right spirit, just as David did. You see, Jesus reveals that it is God's intention that His people lead a life of purity that begins in the heart and extends out to relationships with others.

Jesus continues: *“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery”* (Matthew 5:31-32a).

I believe this commandment hits closest to home, since we all know people who have divorced, maybe even you. Married couples often quarrel and fight, arguing about money, or their own clashing personalities. They argue about how to best raise their kids. Let's face it, Christians have the same challenges in our families as unbelievers do.

The subject of divorce used to be taboo. It was never talked about and rarely done. But Christian marriages often come apart and end in divorce. Today, nearly half of all marriages in America end in divorce. Before the introduction of no-fault divorce in the 1970s this wasn't the case. The world has certainly changed.

Divorce is a difficult situation to address today since it is so prevalent. As difficult as it is, Jesus settles this dispute. He simply teaches: *“Do not divorce.”* Jesus, too, acknowledges that divorce may be allowed where sexual unfaithfulness has occurred, but He never commands divorce, since divorce was never God's will or intention.

Instead, God created marriage to be a holy union of a man and a woman who declare their lifelong commitment to God and to one another and for the procreation and raising up of children in the Christian faith. Divorce destroys this holy union.

In the First Century, the common presumption was that divorce was not a big deal. Yes, divorce was frowned upon, but divorces were easy. A Jew could divorce his wife for almost any reason at all. All it took was a certificate of divorce and an official testimony that the divorce had taken place. But none of this was ever God-pleasing.

Lax laws and popular immorality do not make divorce and sexual sins God pleasing. The laws of the state may express the will of the people, but as Christians we submit to God's Law, and when we fail, we repent and ask God for forgiveness.

Jesus concludes our text with the Eighth Commandment. *“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all”* (Matthew 5:33-34a).

In recent years, taking oaths for political office have become a show. I remember one congressman swearing to uphold the Constitution of the United States upon a comic book. Well, nothing is new under the sun. Back in the First Century, Jewish teachers were going around saying: “Be sure to honor the oaths that are sworn directly to the Lord, for these oaths actually have a binding force than oaths that are sworn by something else.”

The “something else” here meant that it was fine to break oaths if they were not sworn to God. “I swear on my mother’s grave” is an example of this. But Jesus says here that any oath is a promise to God, because all things in creation belong to Him, so let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’ Even if we would swear an oath without a Bible, that oath has the same weight as if it were sworn on the Bible.

Jesus’ words this morning appear to be penetrating and disturbing Law. External conformity is not enough. God demands internal purity as well. But remember how today’s sermon began? God’s Law is good. God’s Law is for our instruction.

But despite God’s Law being good, we come to the danger of despair knowing that we have not lived up to God’s Law. But don’t despair! You see, through repentance and faith, Jesus has offered us a refuge of pardon. He says, “Come to Me!” as He is quick and glad to forgive. The Law has been fulfilled in Him for you. But we should not take His mercy for granted. Instead, set your hearts and minds to be free of sin and bear fruits of repentance. But rest in the pardon bestowed constantly through the crucified and risen Lord, who is every bit as serious in His promises of grace as He is in His holy Law. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**