

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity | St. Matthew 5:20-26
July 23, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord God enter not into judgment with us, who have not from the heart kept Your commandments, but still regard the precious merit of Your dear Son, and let us ever be partakers of His righteousness. Enable us also by Your Holy Spirit to walk in Your fear, true faith, and holiness of living, and to beware of pride and security, that we may not be cast into everlasting prison, but enter into Your eternal kingdom; through Your dear Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 145)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. / “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. / “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. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, our Righteousness, who has taken from us what is ours and given us what is His, dear fellow redeemed:

Those of you who have played team sports know that confidence is not equivalent to ability. You may have a teammate who is supremely confident in his or her ability to be a game changer. They are always looking for the ball, for the tough assignment, for the challenge of crunch time. The problem is that they are unaware of what they lack. They routinely trip and fall down, miss the big shot, or commit an ill-advised penalty. To make matters worse, then they act surprised, as though the outcome was beyond their control. When the next game or match rolls around, they show they have learned nothing about the game or themselves.

As a child of God through faith in Jesus, you are a member of the holy Christian Church. But what kind of member are you? Are you the kind that is well-attuned to the plans of your own life, but care little about the lives of others? In sports terms, you might be called a “ball hog.” Do you attend church from time to time but neglect to read or study God’s Word during the week?

Then you might be called a “benchwarmer.” Are you the kind of Christian that talks a good game but fails to back it up with any meaningful actions? Then you would be like the teammate I described who is high on confidence but poor on the follow through. Or do you seek to make the lives of your neighbors better through acts of kindness and prayer? That would make you a “team player” and a great asset to the church.

The truth is, these descriptions have applied to each of us in the past, and they no doubt will again in the future. Sometimes we are selfish, sometimes we are weak in the faith, sometimes we are overconfident of our spiritual strength, and sometimes we are a great blessing to our neighbors. The danger is when we think we have Christian living all figured out, when we no longer recognize how the devil is tempting us, and how we “fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

I

This is the predicament the scribes and Pharisees were in. They had two major problems: 1) They were not righteous before God, but 2) they thought they were. Though they lacked the spiritual ability that God requires, they were confident they had it. But how could they possibly have imagined that they were right with God through their own works?

Well, imagine that everyone in your neighborhood and surrounding community claimed to be Christian. But then they publicly and regularly break God’s Commandments. They loudly take His name in vain. They often choose family outings and entertainment over attending church. They sneak over and take their neighbors’ things. They tell lies and gossip about others. But you stand out. You watch what you say. You attend church every Sunday. You freely share the good things you have. You try to anticipate your neighbors’ needs and volunteer to help.

Wouldn’t it be tempting to judge the level of your righteousness in comparison with others? Wouldn’t it be obvious that you take God’s Word seriously, and are therefore a better Christian than they are? This is what the scribes and Pharisees thought. They were the Jewish people who were serious about God’s Word. They wanted to live according to His Ten Commandments, and follow all the Old Testament ceremonial and civil regulations besides. After all, God hadn’t made His law optional. He told His people to keep it, to conform their lives to it.

But as hard as the scribes and Pharisees tried, they could not meet the standard God had set. Jesus told the crowd gathered to hear His preaching on the mountain, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees had not done enough. Not even those holy people! God requires a righteousness that *exceeds* this level.

What would you be thinking if you were a scribe or a Pharisee standing in the crowd that day? You would have probably been offended. Because you could look at the people around you and say to yourself, “I’m not good enough!?! But I have always kept the Sabbath, unlike so-and-so over there! And I respect and honor my parents, unlike them! And I have never cheated on my spouse, like she has and he has!” Your whole concept of righteousness would be built upon the notion that if you could only show how you were better than everyone around you, then you were good enough for God.

But Jesus was not finished. He explained what His statement about righteousness meant. He cited the proper teaching that a murderer is liable to judgment. But refraining from murder does not mean the Fifth Commandment has been kept. He explained that *“everyone who is angry with his brother,”* or *“insults his brother,”* or wrongly says *“You fool!”* will be *“liable to judgment”* – even *“to the hell of fire.”* Jesus said that the same goes for the Sixth Commandment. Not just the unfaithful spouse, but *“everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent”* (Mt. 5:28), has committed adultery. In other words, no natural born human being is capable of the righteousness God requires. As King David was inspired to write 1000 years earlier, *“there is none who does good, not even one”* (Ps. 14:3, 53:5).

So what now? God demands righteous living and speaking and *even thinking* according to His law, but no one can meet the standard. This seems like producing a doggy treat for your pet but holding it way above his ability to reach it. The goal is within view, but the task is impossible.

II

Rather than some cruel exercise, God’s standard of righteousness is actually a blessing. Can you imagine life without the moral law of God written on every human heart? No, you can’t. The world would be a terrifying place, and you wouldn’t live very long. Nothing would be in place to restrain the sinful impulses of mankind. God’s law can be a heavy burden on the guilty conscience, but it is a far better burden than unchecked wickedness.

Besides this, God’s law provides the picture of what true righteousness looks like. It consists of perfect love and communion with God and perfect love and communion with one another. The law’s standard is not *“try your best,”* be *“better than,”* or *“pretty good.”* This would be the same as having no standard at all, because everyone would decide for himself and herself what *“try your best,”* *“better than,”* and *“pretty good”* mean.

No matter how confident we are that we can keep the law, it is far beyond our ability. Today’s chief hymn explains why: *“By Adam’s fall is all forlorn / Man’s nature and his thinking, / The poison’s there when we are born, / In sin yet deeper sinking”* (ELH #430, v. 1). As much as we want to be righteous and as hard as we may try, we still fail. We fail because we are sinners, who inherited the propensity to sin from our parents, who got it from their parents, and so on. Adam and Eve had perfect righteousness, but they threw it away because the devil convinced them that they could have something more. It was the greatest lie of *“the father of lies”* (Jn. 8:44).

But God speaks truth, and He promised a Savior from this unrighteousness. The Son of God became man, so He could do what nobody on earth could manage to do since the fall into sin. He kept the law of God perfectly. He met that high standard. He achieved perfect love. His life was not simply *“good enough.”* It was flawless, holy. He told the crowd, *“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”* (Mt. 5:17). That’s quite a statement! But He could say it with confidence knowing He actually had the ability to back it up.

But what good does Jesus’ perfect life do? Is it just another example along with the law to show you how much you have failed? No. Jesus lived His life for you, for your benefit, on your behalf. He lived a perfect life according to the law, so that it could be credited to you by faith. The Apostle Paul writes, *“For as by the one man’s disobedience [that is, Adam] the many were made*

sinners, so by the one man's obedience [that is, Jesus] the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). Again, he says that the Christian life is not about "having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil. 3:9).

Since you freely receive this righteousness from God by faith, there is no reason to compare your life with others or try to make yourself out to be more than you are. You are nothing more than a humble recipient of God's grace. Though you have not deserved it, God has given you every spiritual blessing, including the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life.

This is why you now seek to help and befriend your neighbor, and to reconcile with a brother or sister in Christ when you find yourselves at odds. You don't do these things out of a desperate attempt to please God. He is already pleased with you in Christ. You show kindness and love to your neighbor because God loves you. You forgive one another because God has forgiven you (Eph. 4:32).

So what do you say? **Are You Good Enough for God?** Not *"unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees."* And by your own efforts, it does not. But you are righteous and holy and pure in God's sight through faith in His Son. Put your confidence in Him who was able to singlehandedly win the victory for the whole team—for the world of sinners—through His death and resurrection.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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