

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
St. Matthew 5:20-26: "In What Do You Put Your Trust?"
July 8/9, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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In Thee, Lord, have I put my trust;
Leave me not helpless in the dust;
Let me not be confounded.
Let in Thy Word
My faith, O Lord,
Be always firmly grounded.

With Thee, Lord, have I cast my lot;
O faithful God, forsake me not,
To Thee my soul commending.
Lord, be my Stay,
Lead Thou the way
Now and when life is ending. *Amen.* (ELH 524, vv. 1, 6)

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

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses 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, who gives the rich blessings of salvation to sinners at no cost to them, dear fellow redeemed:

When you see a penny on the ground, do you stoop down to pick it up? A recent survey (YouGov) indicates that older Americans value the penny more than younger Americans do. 70% of people over age 55 said they would pick up a penny, while less than 40% in their teens and twenties would do so. Overall, more than half the people surveyed said they would not bother with a penny. They figure it isn't worth the effort. It is not valuable enough to them.

This is similar to the way many people think of the Gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus. For many, the Gospel is not worth more than a passing glance. It has no great effect on their daily lives. It hardly figures into their work and plans. For those that do bother to take a closer look at it, it is often easily set aside or forgotten. Even by many Christians, the Gospel is not seen as essential for our life. "What Jesus did was important," they say, "but what matters the most now is how I live." Instead of seeking refuge in the Gospel, these individuals try to find comfort in the Law.

I

This temptation to draw our confidence from the Law instead of the Gospel is something that every Christian has fallen for. We look to separate the so-called "good Christians" from the "bad Christians" by the fruits they produce. This is not entirely off-base. Jesus plainly taught that *"no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit"* (Lk. 6:43-44). So then the thinking goes that if I do good things, I must be a good tree, and if I do bad things, I must be a bad tree. But who decides what counts as "good" and what counts as "bad"?

What happens is that each person decides in his or her own mind what is "good" and "bad," and the definition is always skewed. I will naturally define as "good" the way I live my life and how I like to operate. On the other hand, my definition of "bad" is when other people do things I don't like or when they contradict or criticize my plans and desires. But a self-made set of principles or rules to live by, is no way to produce the righteousness that God requires.

Jesus said, *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* The scribes and Pharisees were regarded as the "holy people" among the Jews. They followed the rules. They set the standard. But theirs was an empty righteousness. Their obedience to God's Law was only external; it did not come from hearts of faith. They were something like our Amish neighbors, who are careful to follow strict rules of lifestyle and behavior, and who imagine that it is this which pleases God.

But Jesus said that the righteousness that gains the kingdom of heaven must *exceed* such outward righteousness. No matter how "good" a person is, it is not enough. God requires perfection—perfect righteousness in everything we think, do, and say. To test His listeners to see how they thought of themselves, Jesus applied the Ten Commandments in ways the people were not used to hearing. To begin with, Jesus said that it is not simply murderers who fall under the condemnation of the Fifth Commandment. It is also those who store up anger toward someone, or who refuse to admit the wrongs they have done.

Then He taught about the Sixth Commandment that it is broken not just by those who commit adultery, but also by those who have lustful thoughts about someone else (Mt. 5:27-30), and by those who stubbornly file for divorce (vv. 31-32). The Second and Eighth Commandments are broken by taking foolish oaths (vv. 33-37). The Fifth Commandment is again broken by those who seek revenge (vv. 38-42), and who think it is proper to *"love your neighbor and hate your enemy"* (v. 43). But Jesus said that children of God should *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* (v. 44).

These examples are enough to show us how much we lack the righteousness God requires of us. If we imagine that we are “good enough” to get into heaven by our own works, we will pay the eternal consequence for this arrogant thinking. Jesus says that not one bit of God’s Law is considered fulfilled by us unless all of it is kept (5:18). And if it is not all kept, eternal payment is required. We might not care about a penny on the ground, but the righteous God demands a full payment for our sins, even down to *“the last penny.”*

If our sins were pennies, the last thing we would want to do is gather them up. We usually act like they are not even there. When we do feel guilty about one sin or another, we just let them be or kick them aside and hope that time will wash them away. But if our sins were collected day by day, throughout our lives, this would be no small amount. Our sins are like piles – or more likely, mountains – of pennies that cannot be pushed aside and that keep us from reaching our heavenly goal. We wish we could forget about our sin, but like a financial debt, it doesn’t just go away. The wages of sin must be paid (Rom. 6:23), and we haven’t got the funds.

II

This is why the Gospel is nothing to take for granted or ignore. The Gospel is the good news of what Jesus did to save us. He said, *“I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them”* (Mt. 5:17). He did not come to change God’s standard of perfection or to remove it. As we can see by today’s reading, He put a sharper point on the Law than people were accustomed to (7:28-29). He wanted to show that no one has produced the righteousness God requires. None can get to heaven on their own. Another must do for us what we cannot do.

The Apostle Paul wrote that *“you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich”* (2Cor. 8:9). How was our Lord rich? He was rich in righteousness and life. From eternity, God the Son shared perfection and glory with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It was in His image of perfect righteousness that God created man and woman. When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost their holiness and were separated from God. But God still loved them and all who would be born from them. He promised to send a Savior.

This Savior was God’s Son, born of the Virgin Mary. He came in total humility, not making full and constant use of His divine power. He subjected Himself to the requirements of the Law and diligently kept it in every detail. He did this for you and me. He kept God’s Law in our place, so that we might inherit His eternal riches. *“For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (5:21). Our sins were placed on Jesus like an immeasurable weight of bag after bag of pennies, and He accounted for each of our terrible sins through His suffering and death. He also now places His perfect righteousness on us and on all who believe in Him. He was rich and became poor, so that we who were spiritually impoverished would become rich.

The riches of righteousness and life that He produced are all we need. They are our only hope for salvation. They are the only lifeline there is between us and God. What Jesus has done, the Holy Spirit graciously brings to us through Word and Sacraments. Through the Law, He impresses upon us our great debt of sin and our need for salvation. Through the Gospel, He brings us the full forgiveness of our sins and strengthens our faith in Jesus.

We are saved entirely by grace, and not by our own righteousness. The place for our works is not in earning or contributing toward our salvation. We live according to God's will and want to keep His Commandments out of love for Him and out of thankfulness for His grace. We do not carry the burden of having to prove ourselves to God, or of trying to win His favor. We are already righteous in His sight by faith in His Son. We will enter the kingdom of heaven because of Jesus' righteousness, because He did for us what we could not do.

So the question that every sinner should be concerned with is this: **In What Do You Put Your Trust?** If your trust is in your own righteousness, then the words of Paul to the Galatians apply to you, "*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace*" (Gal. 5:4). But if your trust is in Christ alone, in Jesus only, then your righteousness does exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, because then you have Jesus' righteousness credited to you.

Whether or not you make it a habit to pick up pennies off the ground is up to you. But if you do, take a moment to read our national motto printed there, "In God We Trust." Think of why the true God is to be trusted, and think of what any alternative to His grace would be. Then humbly repent of your sins and hold tightly to His promises. Say with the psalmist, "*In You, O LORD, I put my trust; Let me never be ashamed; Deliver me in Your righteousness*" (Ps. 31:1, NKJV). With such a faith, you will receive rich blessings from a gracious God, who loves you and gave Himself for you.

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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