

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity  
St. Matthew 5:20-26: "What Makes a Person Righteous?"  
July 10/11, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

+ + +

Holy and righteous God, teach us to know the seriousness and severity of Your Law, so that we see our sin and truly repent. And teach us to believe in Christ's fulfilling of the Law for us, so that we receive the adoption of sons and have the Law written in our heart. Pour out Your love in our hearts by Your Holy Spirit for Jesus' sake. Amen. (*Book of Family Prayer*, p. 464).

*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. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, whose righteous life fulfilled every detail of God's holy law for you and for all people, dear fellow redeemed:

If I were to have a major injury, like multiple broken bones in my leg, there are two ways I could approach the recovery. I could wrap up and mobilize my leg as well as I could and hope for everything to heal up on its own. This might result in my being able to walk again but probably not without difficulties. The bones would not be set quite right.

The other option would be to go and see a doctor who specializes in broken bones. He could put everything back in place, apply plates and screws as needed, and monitor the progress. Given enough time, the bones would likely heal just as they were before. It seems obvious what choice I should make. I should not trust what I can do. I should trust the specialist who is confident he can save my leg and make it all right again.

But in the area of righteousness before God, many people take the opposite approach. They think they can fix what is broken on their own, and it only makes the problem worse. Righteousness before God is when my life matches up with God's requirements for my life. His

Ten Commandments establish the boundary markers for what is correct, upright behavior. His law shows whether the things I have done, said, and thought are justifiable before Him.

So it is clear that we will not be able to understand righteousness unless we understand God's law. This is Jesus' focus in His words today from the Sermon on the Mount. Just before today's text, Jesus said that He did not come to abolish or destroy *"the Law and the Prophets,"* but to fulfill them (Mat. 5:17). He did not come to relax God's standard, to make it more comfortable for sinners to remain in their sins. He came to sharpen the law, or to sharpen the people's consciences in response to the law.

He sounded a clear warning, *"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" (v. 19).* And before the people could imagine that they were among the "great" ones in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said, *"unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

That was a shocking statement. The scribes and Pharisees were widely seen as the "good people," the ones who scrupulously followed God's law. And now Jesus was saying that even such a disciplined, committed life was not sufficient. God demands more. A good life does not fulfill His law. God requires a perfect life (v. 48).

The old Adam, our sinful nature, cannot tolerate this. It tells us that God has set the bar too high. He can't really expect us to be perfect! After all, God loves us, and it isn't loving to make rules that no one can follow. So then we do the very thing Jesus said He would not do. We abolish the law, or at least we set it aside whenever it suits us. Or we reinterpret the law so that it can accommodate our sins.

All of us have done this. We got caught doing or saying something we shouldn't have, but we were quick to justify the wrong:

- "I lost my temper because they kept provoking me!"
- "I hit him because he hit me first!"
- "I took that because they owed me!"

This week I became aware of a Pew Research Center report which was released less than a year ago (8/31/20). The topic was sex outside of marriage. 57% of Christians surveyed – more than half – said that "sex between unmarried adults in a committed relationship" is acceptable. Slightly less of the Christians surveyed, 50% of them, said that "casual sex between consenting adults" is acceptable. This is not at all what the Bible says. The Bible says that sex is a gift from God that is to be exercised within marriage only. So either the Christians surveyed don't know what God's Word teaches, or they don't think it is all that serious or important.

So we Christians go forward thinking that we have lived a pretty good life and have little to be ashamed of. But Jesus says, "If you think you have lived a righteous life, let's take a closer look at what God's law demands." He points to the Fifth Commandment. Haven't you and I kept that one – "You shall not murder"? Jesus says this commandment is also broken by those who have been angry with a brother, or insulted someone, or spoken harshly toward someone.

Do you find yourself justifying your anger? Maybe someone crossed a line you told them not to cross. Maybe someone you trusted betrayed you. Maybe you've been bullied. You were sinned against in these circumstances, and that isn't right. But it does not give you the right to be angry. It does not give you the right to speak harshly toward and about another. It does not give you the right to treat somebody like dirt.

Jesus says, *"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."* Jesus does not say that we should wait for others to come to us. He does not say we should hold their sins against them. He says that if we have sinned in any way against someone else—even if they committed the greater sin—we should apologize and seek to be reconciled.

This is really hard. This runs against our own idea of justice, which often looks a lot like revenge. Our failure to love our neighbor as God commands should show us that we are not capable of fixing everything we have broken. Most of us don't have the knowledge and ability to properly set our own broken bones. None of us has the ability to fix our breaking of God's holy law.

But there is an expert Fixer, a Specialist who is able to set things right again. Jesus said He came to fulfill the law. He came to keep it, every detail. He was able to do this because He was not a man who inherited Adam's sin like the rest of us. He was a man without sin. He was God incarnate, God in the flesh. Because God became Man, He was obligated to keep His own law. This was not for His own benefit—He was already righteous from eternity. Jesus kept the law for your benefit and mine.

The righteousness that the law demands was supplied for us by our Savior Jesus. He is the one who perfectly honored His parents. He is the one who never wronged His neighbor. He is the one who lived a sexually pure life. All the ways we have broken God's law, Jesus set right with His own perfect life.

Does that mean everyone in the world is now righteous before God? Jesus kept the law for everyone, but not everyone is credited with His righteousness. Some have no remorse for their sins. They don't care what God commands, and they fully intend to continue in their sins. Others recognize their sins, but they think they can supply the righteousness that God requires. They think they can make up for the bad; they can balance out their bad with their good. These sinners are outside of God's grace. They will have to answer for their own unrighteousness.

But all who trust in Jesus alone for righteousness are righteous. St. Paul writes that *"if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe"* (Gal. 3:21-22). And again, *"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"* (Rom. 10:4). So the righteousness you need is obtained by faith in Jesus.

This faith was given to you at your Baptism, which means that Jesus' righteousness was given to you at your Baptism. Today's Epistle lesson from Romans 6 says that through Baptism your

sins were buried. You died to sin and were raised with Jesus, so that now you walk in newness of life. Now you walk in His life.

**What Makes a Person Righteous** is his or her connection to Jesus. Jesus is the only one who is righteous by His own doing. He lived that righteous life for you, and then He died to erase all the wrongs you have done. The standard of righteousness before God has never changed and never will change. Jesus met that standard for you.

And He meets you now through His Word and Sacraments to keep delivering His righteousness and forgiveness to you. There is no justification for your sinning. There is no good excuse for the wrong you have done. But Jesus wants you to know that He is not angry with you. He does not condemn you for your sins. He died for you. He looks upon you now as though you never sinned against Him. And He promises to help you look at the sinners around you in the same way.

You will not find justice in this life for all the wrongs that have been done to you. And you will not be able to fix all the wrongs you have done to others. But you will always find forgiveness and healing in Jesus. You will find strength through Him to show love and kindness to others whether or not love and kindness have been shown to you.

Even when your best intentions and your best efforts fail, you stand righteous before God for Jesus' sake. By faith in Him, you have a righteousness that satisfies the requirement of God's holy law, a righteousness that guarantees that you will enter the kingdom of heaven.

*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.*

+ + +