

The Fifth Sunday after Holy Trinity
Matthew 5:17-26

I must begin today by begging for your indulgence. I have been convicted lately that I need to do my sermons differently. I basically “read” my sermons to you. This is a modern invention necessitated by too much public education. Traditionally sermons weren’t read. Preaching is supposed to be a “live” event. But this doesn’t mean I shouldn’t write out my sermons either. The writing process is foundational for preaching. It forces me to work out what I’m saying before I say it. I will continue to write out my sermons. But if I read them to you, as I have been doing, then I’m not serving as well as I could or should.

This isn’t the first time I’ve wrestled with this. For a time, I preached from outlines so I could be more “live.” But that leads to way too many repetitive phrases. The act of wrestling with the sermon makes it less repetitive. Traditionally, sermons were memorized. This allowed the preacher the skill of tailoring the sermon to the response of the hearers. I will work on my memorization skills, but it will take quite some time for me to get there and hence my request for your indulgence.

I will still provide written manuscripts, but I will attempt to preach them “live” so I may go off script from time to time. And, naturally, I will lose my place from time to time. Now there will be times when I read a Bible verse or quote to you, but I will attempt to be more lively. I believe the end result will be well worth the hiccups along the way. The sermon text and audio will still be available on our website.

Today we are looking at God’s Law.

Jesus says, “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. 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.” (vv. 17-18)

Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law. The Law of God is demanding. Yes, even impossible. You and I have the same problem with the Law that the Pharisees did... we cannot keep it. How are we supposed to relate to God’s impossible Law?

Being good Lutherans, you know there are three uses of the Law. Or, a better way to say it, is that the Holy Spirit applies the Law in three different ways. Our shorthand for them is 1) curb, 2) mirror, and 3) guide. But what does that actually mean?

[curb]

The use of “curb” to describe the first use of the Law may be a little tame. It actually works to restrain the evil of men. Way too many atrocities have happened in both history and our current day to show the evil that can happen when evil men go unchecked. You probably know about the atrocities of Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, and Adolf Hitler who were responsible for 60 million, 40 million, and 30 million murders, respectively. But Zedong, Stalin, and Hitler didn’t personally kill that many people with their bare hands. Their evil will was carried out by weak and evil men. Government is supposed to reward good and punish evil and thereby act as a curb. And when they do the opposite, untold tragedy occurs. China, Russia, and Germany have basically recovered but they all still bear the scars of evil men.

Consider this though. Our government, by its policies, is punishing marriage and families and rewarding single motherhood and the killing of unborn babies. But the members of our government aren’t personally breaking up families or killing babies with their bare hands, but weak and evil men are. The government is God’s institution to implement the curb of the Law. And when the government fails to reward good and punish evil, weak and evil men prosper in their wickedness.

And lets be clear, all legislation pushes a morality. The question is not whether or not legislation pushes morality, but *what* morality is the legislation pushing. And this brings me to my main question concerning the first use of God’s Law. What do you look to for your sense of right and wrong? Are you aware of how the media you consume shapes your sense of right and wrong?

Just to date myself, Frasier, Friends, and Will & Grace all were highly successful television shows that normalized behaviors that we should find repugnant. Every manner of popular radio music from the Beatles to disco to soft rock to hard rock normalize behaviors that we should find repugnant. C.F.W. Walther, one of our

founding LCMS fathers, found Shakespeare to be too enticing for the old sinful man. Imagine what he would say about television or radio today! These normalize us to accept repugnant behaviors more than we would like to admit. We cannot avoid media that isn't somehow tainted by sin, but we should be more careful with what we devote our time and attention to.

The Law of God is written on the heart of man by God so that everyone has some sense of right or wrong. But the Law of God written on the heart of man is found in the Bible also. The Law of God written on our hearts is obscured by original sin and actual sin and needs to be reinforced by reading and meditating on the Bible. Luther has a wonderful quote about this in his preface to the Large Catechism.

“It must be true that whoever knows the Ten Commandments perfectly must know all the Scriptures. So, in all matters and cases, he can advise, help, comfort, judge, and decide both spiritual and temporal matters. Such a person must be qualified to sit in judgment over all doctrines, estates, spirits, laws, and whatever else is in the world.” (LC Preface.17)

Knowing God's Law makes you wise to judge not only spiritual matters but also worldly matters. We need strong young men and women who know the Word and Law of God to represent us in our government. We rightly want to attract more men to become pastors, but I think it's just as important to raise up godly men and women who can serve in public office whether its local, regional, or national. But even more, each one of us should be able to discern right from wrong not as we define it, but as God defines it.

[mirror]

Mirror may be too mild a word to describe the second use of God's Law. Imagine the most perfectly clear mirror and the harshest bright light as it shows all the flaws of your skin and body and you barely begin to comprehend the harshness of God's judgment. The preacher of Hebrews puts it this way:

“For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and

discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:12-13)

And this use of the Law doesn't go away when you are a Christian. Actually, it's heightened so that it's even more intense. It seems to me that unbelievers care very little about their sin. They care about the consequences but seem to give little thought to the sin that produced the consequences. The consequences are used by the Holy Spirit to wake them up so that they repent, but it seem so very few do repent. They just find ways to mask the pain of the consequences. But as a Christian, you feel the weight of the Law even more and even to the point of unbeatability.

How are we to respond to this unbearable weight of the Law?

One way is the way of the Pharisees. They effectively lessened the requirements of the Law. They failed to see that the unbearable weight of the Law was mostly a matter of the heart and its intentions rather than external behavior. External behavior always flows from the intentions of the heart. The Pharisees focused on external behavior and even worse, they lessened the demands of the Law. Jesus calls them and us out on this in our Gospel passage today.

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; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (vv. 21-22)

As I was driving around this week, I was hyper-aware of how much I was breaking the fifth commandment, ‘You shall not murder.’ I really don't know if I actually was breaking it more often than any other week, but I was certainly aware that I was breaking it. “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner” became less of an automatic response and more of an impassioned plea for mercy.

Now there certainly is such a thing as righteous anger like when Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the temple, but Jesus, Paul, and James make it abundantly clear that we cannot use our anger in a righteous way! Even as a Christian. Especially as a Christian. Dare I harm the reputation of my Lord Jesus Christ?

When I look to the Law in it's harsh light and I look at my heart and actions, I have reason to despair. And despair is the second option to try and handle the weightiness of the Law. Despair has crushed so many people.

But God doesn't desire either Pharisaical pride or hopeless despair for you. Either option leads to you trying to carry your own load. Your shoulders aren't big enough and your lower back isn't strong enough for you to carry your own load.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus carried the full weight of the Law perfectly to the cross where He bore the sins of all mankind and nailed them to the cross. This did two things for you. One, it paid the price for your sinful heart and for all your actual sins that you have committed or ever will commit. You cannot and you must not try carry the weight of your own sin. You will be crushed. Second, Jesus gives you His righteousness in your baptism. You cannot even bear the weight of your own righteousness. And you mustn't try. You will utterly fail.

This is why our Epistle reading today is about Baptism. Baptism is the most beautiful event in your life where God gives you both forgiveness and righteousness. Baptism applies the blood of Jesus to your sins so that you are washed clean. Baptism also applies the righteousness of Christ to you so that you are fully righteous before your Father in heaven on account of Christ! When you feel the weight of the Law, turn to your baptism to find relief. When you feel the weight of your efforts to become righteous, turn to your baptism for relief.

[guide/trellis]

Since you are a Christian. Since you have the Holy Spirit, the Law now acts as a guide. The Law will always accuse you this side of glory, but at the same time, the Holy Spirit instructs you with the Law. Guide may be too weak a word. My vicarage supervisor really liked using trellis instead of guide. You probably know what a trellis is. It's a structure you put into place so that a plant will grow the right way. God the Holy Spirit uses the Law as a trellis so that you grow the right way.

When God saves you in Holy Baptism, He doesn't remove you from the world. God's command to Adam and Eve still applies to you.

God commanded Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:28, c.f. Genesis 9:1-7)

You are still to be about the business of filling the earth and subduing it. God gives you three spheres to operate in: the church, the family, and society. You have duties in each sphere. You are to be busy in each sphere. Not busybodies, but busy. Your work is meant to be directed not towards God, but towards your neighbor. You have neighbors in each of the spheres that you're supposed to serve in love. Love is fleshed out by the Ten Commandments.

The world says that love is supposed to fulfill your own heart and desires. The neighbor serves as someone who is supposed to love you.

God says that love is supposed to fulfill the hearts and desires of others. The neighbor serves as someone who is supposed to be loved by you.

Let's consider a worthy example, especially in our day of crumbling families. Listen to what God says about husband and wife through St. Paul:

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should

submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her... husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves His wife loves himself.” (Ephesians 5:22-25, 28)

I know this grates against some of you the wrong way. If this does truly bother you, it shows that you have swallowed some of the poisoned fruit of feminism. God is very clear here. Wives are to submit to their husbands. Submit and obey are synonymous here. God doesn't say to submit to your husband *if he's like Christ*, but says submit to your husband *as to Christ*.

Husbands, this passage should bother you more. You are supposed to love your wife as Christ loved the church. And, of course, God doesn't say you only have to love her if she's loveable. This is a much higher standard. Wives aren't commanded to love their husbands, but to respect their husbands. Husbands are commanded to love their wives with a self-sacrificing love that is Christ-like. What did Christ hold back from the church? Nothing! Husbands are to do likewise.

Husbands and wives fail each other all the time. And instead of going to their pastors for absolution and biblical counsel, they go to counselors. And it seems to me the focus is on fixing the other person instead of fixing their own heart and behavior. The book “Love and Respect” by Dr. Emerson Eggerich is an excellent resource for marriages. Dr. Eggerich is a Biblical counselor who's been counseling married couples for a long time. His research and experience have led him to the conclusion that the Bible is right. Imagine that! It's all about love and respect. Husbands loving their wives and wives respecting their husbands. He also makes this observation. If a husband wants his wife to be more respectful, he focuses on himself and attempts to act loving towards his wife. If a wife wants her husband to love her more, she focuses on herself and attempts to respect him more. This brings actual healing to the marriage.

The Bible truly is sufficient for life and salvation. What the world says only leads to death and damnation. You must meditate on the Bible. You must hear the preaching of the Word. You must even make these things a priority. And the Holy Spirit will convince you that Christ is still on His throne enacting His Law as a

curb. He will convict you of your sin so that you might receive the balm of forgiveness found especially in your baptism. And He will convert your heart so that you serve your neighbor with the love of Christ.

And finally, when your last hour comes, He will carry you to the bosom of your Father in heaven. There, the Law will no longer be a burden, but a delight. May God preserve all of us in our baptismal grace until that day.