

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity | St. Matthew 5:20-26
July 12, 2015 | Parkland Evangelical Lutheran Church

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 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, the stern Law-giver and gentle Savior, dear fellow redeemed:

What is the measure of a life well-lived? Some measure a good life by how much they have been able to accumulate in their bank accounts. Others measure it by the legacy they leave behind—maybe they were innovators in their field, climbed the corporate ladder, had name recognition. Others define it in terms of family: If I can get my kids through college and into good-paying jobs, that’s the mark of my success.

But a person’s own measure of himself and his measure from his neighbor’s perspective, are not always the same thing. The man who built a fortune is seen as greedy. The woman who “made it to the top” also made plenty of enemies along the way. The one who put his kids through college wearies his acquaintances with his incessant boasting. We remember the rich man who ran out of room to store his abundant crops. He pulled down the old barns and built larger ones, so that he could “*relax, eat, drink, be merry.*” He considered himself a great success. God called him a “fool” (Lk. 12:16-21).

It is not safe to measure our own successes. Others can do that for us if they like. God calls us to assess our lives by the standard of Jesus' life. **Jesus Is the Measure of Our Righteousness.** He applies the law to convict us of our sin, and applies His life and work to our credit.

I

All of us like to be recognized for our hard work. We love it when others cheer for us, when they tell us that no one can get the job done like we can. There is nothing wrong with receiving such recognition for good effort. There is something wrong if good effort is dependent on recognition. If doing the right thing depended on the praise of others, society would be in a bad state. And in fact it is. The unbeliever rarely does good unless he sees some personal benefit in it or if he is trying to dodge punishment. How many famous people support causes that nobody knows about? Even if they are among the most self-centered people on the planet, their charitable giving is trotted out as the evidence of how concerned they are for others.

But it is not just the unbelievers who do this. Christians do too. We want to be known for our kindness and charity. We want to be regarded like faithful Dorcas, who when she died was surrounded by people holding all the tunics and garments she had generously produced for the needy (Ac. 9:36-43). Except that we want people to say these things about us *before* we die, so we can enjoy the glory. We want people to talk about our generosity, our compassion, our gentle spirit. When they make reference to a "good Christian," we want them to picture us.

But then we each have to ask ourselves: Why do I do what I do? Is it out of love for God and my neighbor? Or is it out of love for myself? When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians about marriage, he did not tell them to show love only if it benefited them. He said that wives should submit to their husbands out of reverence for Christ (5:22), and that husbands should love their wives as they love themselves (v. 28). In the same letter, he urged slaves to obey their masters *"with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man"* (6:5-7).

When we work and give and apply ourselves primarily for the praise of others, Jesus reminds us, *"[U]nless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* In other words, if you think you are so good, so worthy to be glorified and honored, such a Christian as most could only hope to be, you are not filled with the Holy Spirit, but with yourself. That is a harsh judgment. But the best medicine for a pride-filled heart is the law of God. Jesus talks us through it in today's text: "Oh, so you are not as bad as the murderers! But have you ever spoken an unkind word? Failed to put the best construction on someone's actions? Have you ever felt anger toward another person? Then you are no more righteous than the murderer."

He goes on to say that if you want to be a Christian, you should not take strife with another Christian lightly. There is no room here for stubbornness - "She started it!" "He wronged me more than I wronged him!" "If they don't like what I said, that's their problem!" Jesus says, *"[B]e reconciled to your brother."* This is just what He also taught in the Lord's Prayer: *"[F]orgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* If we come to God in prayer asking for His forgiveness, we should be ready to forgive others.

Everyone present here today has become angry toward another, nursed grudges, and been unkind. While we want others to think highly of us, we have often preoccupied ourselves with their failings. Instead of recognizing the good they do, we magnify the flaws. We may even file away their transgressions in case we can use them to promote ourselves later.

II

Measured by the law of our Lord, we fall far short of this holy standard. Our righteousness is nothing compared to the perfect righteousness of Jesus. While that statement condemns us, it also comforts us. We are condemned by the law because we know we should be better. We know that a Christian who *"walks in newness of life"* through Baptism, should no longer walk in sin (Rom. 6:3-11). But we also know that our salvation is not dependent on our own righteousness and works. Our salvation is entirely dependent on Jesus' righteousness.

How does His righteousness measure up? We find in the Scriptures that He was obedient to His parents and was well-respected by others (Lk. 2:51-52). He certainly did a great deal of good. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, cast out demons, and even brought the dead back to life. But was all that good enough? There were times He seemed to lose His temper. Twice, He violently cleared the temple of the buyers and sellers. He insulted the Pharisees and scribes. His tone was not always gentle. But even in these things He did not sin.

Jesus condemns anger in today's text, but not all anger. He condemns anger that does not come from love. There is a loving anger. I would be properly angry with a Christian friend who willfully and persistently sinned, passing it off as "no big deal." It is a big deal! Sin put Jesus on the cross! If you will not repent, you will not be saved! That is a warning of love. In the same way, it was proper for Jesus to clear the temple of the ungodly business conducted there. Out of love, He was reminding the people what God's house was for. So you see that the alternative to righteous anger in defense of God and His Word, is a spirit of permissiveness that lets anything go.

Jesus upheld every bit of the perfect law of God. Right before the words of today's text 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. 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). What meticulous attention to every detail of righteousness! Who is more worthy of praise and honor than Jesus? And yet, notice His demeanor. Did He go around doing good so others would think what a nice guy He was? Did He refuse to show kindness when He knew there would be no thankfulness?

Never have such amazing deeds been done with such humility. The perfectly righteous Son of God made Himself nothing to save the totally unrighteous. If you and I think that our self-made righteousness is sufficient before God, then Jesus is not for us. He did not come *"to call the righteous but sinners to repentance"* (Lk. 5:32). He came for those who know their wayward hearts, who are ashamed for their unholy thoughts. He came for the ones who shudder at the things they have done and said against God's Word. He came not for the spiritually healthy, but for the sick.

If you are one of those, Jesus came for you. He came to exchange His humility for your pride, His holiness for your sin, His kindness for your hatred. All of the charges counted against you by the law of God were applied to Jesus. All of His righteousness obtained through His fulfillment of the law is applied to you. Through Jesus' perfect, selfless work, God now sees you, a sinner, as a saint. You will indeed *"enter the kingdom of heaven,"* covered not in your righteousness, but in Jesus' righteousness. Your moments of anger, your unkind words, your unloving thoughts—all of these are atoned for. All of these are forgiven and forgotten by your heavenly Father.

Since God measures you by Jesus' righteousness finding you without fault through faith in Him, what higher honor could those around you give than to recognize Him in you? Paul wrote to the Galatians, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (2:20). The good things you do are good things that Jesus does through you. The successes you can point to are all gifts from Him. Humbly give glory to Him whenever you are praised and honored by others.

Your life has been well-lived because Jesus lived a perfect life for you. He did everything for you that you failed to do for Him. His righteousness is the measure of your worth; His righteousness is the measure of your glory. The world may never know or care who you are, but God does. He counts you as one of His own who will be with Him forever.

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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