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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

February 16, 2014

Text: Matthew 5:21–37

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Lutheranism is known for her emphasis on Law and Gospel. Every sermon should be a proclamation of God's Law and God's Gospel. Both are God's Word equally given by God, equally inspired by God. But they serve different functions. The Law reveals God's holy will for our lives, how we should think, feel, and act. The Law is good and holy. The problem is that we are not good and holy, at least, not in our selves.

God's Law reveals that we have a deeper problem than just doing bad, sinful things. We are sinners by virtue of our inherited original sin. Our sinful actions are bad enough but even if we don't actually do something against God's Law, our heart may in fact, be filled with all kinds of evil. Before almighty God, the feelings of our heart, the thoughts of the mind, the intentions of our soul are as true and real as any outward action. You must know this, dear saints, in the sight of God the outward and inward are exactly the same. Jesus makes this abundantly clear in today's reading from Matthew 5, a portion of the Lord's Sermon on the Mount.

Catechism students are taught to listen for both Law and Gospel in sermons. I think it would be safe to say that the portion of the Lord's Sermon included in today's reading falls squarely under "the Law." There are 4 topics in today's gospel reading, each one corresponding to one of the 10 Commandments. They are:

- 1) murder and hatred (5<sup>th</sup> commandment),
- 2) adultery (6<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> commandments),
- 3) marriage and divorce (6<sup>th</sup> commandment)
- 4) taking oaths and speaking the truth (2<sup>nd</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> commandments).

The work of the Law can be quite painful. But it is good and necessary for it leads us to the glorious good news of the Gospel, that is, the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

We begin with vs. 21–22, Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said 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.

Most people in Jesus’ day (and ours too!) think murder is the actual taking of human life. That’s certainly true but that only speaks to the outward action. Jesus delves deeper to the root cause, to the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of the heart. Harboring hatred and malice against a person makes you a murderer before God.

This is so important for Jesus that He says reconciliation must happen before worshipping God! Look at vs.23–24,

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.

In other words, before coming to Church to pray, sing, give offerings or receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Holy Supper, do what you can to be reconciled to anyone who is at odds with you. That is the way of God’s Law, which commands reconciliation, and God’s Gospel, which actually gives peace and reconciliation.

The second topic is adultery. Once again, in Jesus’ day (and ours too!), the 6<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> Commandments were only broken if a married person had sexual relations with someone who wasn’t his/her spouse. This is true, to be sure, but it doesn’t include the heart, mind, and intentions. Listen to Jesus in vs. 28, “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Harboring lust in your heart makes you a covetous adulterer before God even if the actual action never occurred.

We must not fall into the trap of saying that only my actions really matter. Cast out that thought henceforth and forever. The eternal consequences of our thoughts and intentions will be most severe, so severe that it would be better to suffer the direst punishment in this life than to allow our sins to pass into eternity. Listen to Jesus in vs. 29–30,

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Jesus is certainly exaggerating in order to make His point. We aren't to maim ourselves. Be that as it may, don't play around with sin in the heart and mind or body and hand lest you enter into the judgment of hell. Dear saints of God, avoid sexual sins of every sort. Soft and hard core pornography are celebrated and encouraged almost universally in our day and age. Anything that incites the imagination to think lustfully must be avoided, on the peril of your eternal soul.

The third topic regarding marriage and divorce is related to the subject of adultery just considered. Again, it appears that many in Jesus' day (and ours too!) were more concerned with divorcing legally rather than the harm afflicted upon society by the dissolution of the family. The chief concern was to divorce in the right way, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" (vs. 31).

But Jesus teaches that divorce always violates God's will for marriage. Divorce as such, is equivalent to adultery because it destroys marriage and the one flesh union of one man with one woman. The family is destroyed. Listen to Jesus in vs. 32, "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Jesus' teaching here is not comprehensive and does not address every situation. But our Lord's authoritative teaching is that divorce is a sin resulting in adultery, which breaks the sanctity of marriage and family.

The fourth topic concerns the taking of oaths and speaking the truth. Again, in Jesus' day (and ours too!), the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Commandments were broken only if you failed to fulfill a vow (or maybe a signed contract). The everyday, garden variety lie didn't seem to be all that important. Jesus gives three examples of oaths taken by heaven, by earth, and by your own head (vs. 34–36). These kinds of oaths are of binding force and we must keep our oaths. But for God's people they are unnecessary. The Law demand for truth applies not only to our formal oaths, which we are required to take from time to time, but to every word we speak.

Listen to Jesus in vs. 37, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' and 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." Our words are no trifling matter. What you say carries weight and significance whether they are spoken in an oath or not. Before God, lying or deceiving in thoughts, words, and actions is as damnable as the breaking of a formal oath.

But for Christ's holy people, we are called to speak the truth – always – but to speak it in love. Our yes means yes and our no means no in all circumstances. For when we speak, we speak not only the truth, but truth covered and soaked in the love of Jesus.

Through the inspired Scriptures, we are presented with 4 topics from God's Law. They are challenging and convicting. Who of us has not felt the sting of God's Law today? My catechism students are probably wondering "Where is the Gospel?" We must remember that today's reading is only a portion of Jesus' entire sermon. Last week, we heard Jesus say (Matthew 5:17), "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."

Jesus filled up the Law with His complete and perfect, divine righteousness. Yes, the "Law is but a mirror bright to bring the inbred sin to light that lurks within our nature" (LSB 555 st. 3). But the Law is also filled up with Jesus. Our righteous standing before God in thought, word, deed, and intention is established in our Savior Jesus.

We are declared righteous before God through our gospel connection to Jesus. In baptism, you died with Christ so that you might live in His righteous, resurrection life. Your sins have been absolved, forgiven. And in their place, the righteousness of Jesus is given in its complete perfection. In Jesus, not only has your anger, lust, lies, and whatever other sin you may have committed, been washed away and cleansed but our Lord's perfection has been bountifully bestowed to your heart, mind, and body. Receiving Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper is not a trifling matter. Through these holy gifts received in simple faith, the righteous requirements of the Law are not only given, but given in the fullness of Jesus, the Divine Son of God.

God's Law reveals that unjust anger, lustful thoughts, divorce, and deceit of every kind are indeed exceedingly sinful. God's Gospel, manifested in God's Son, reveals that these righteous requirements are fulfilled and graciously given to any and everyone who will receive them by faith in Jesus. Dear saints, you stand forgiven and righteous because of Jesus. Pure and simple. And now, let us depart in the peace of Jesus and live under Him and receive day by day, moment by moment, His righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.