

Sixth Sunday after Trinity, July 16, 2023

Readings: *Exodus 20: 1-17, Romans 6: 1-11, Matthew 5: 17-26*

Our Only Hope Is in Christ's Righteousness

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). God demands nothing less than perfection and holiness from you in regard to His commandments (Ex. 20:1–17). Your only hope, then, is not in your own goodness but in the goodness of Christ, who did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them for you. In Christ, your righteousness does indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. For you have been baptized into Christ's death and your sinful nature crucified. Therefore, he who has died has been freed from sin (Rom. 6:1–11). You are now raised with Christ to walk in newness of life and to share in His resurrection on the Last Day. Christ has brought you through the baptismal sea "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). Therefore, "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).

Sermon Transcript

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, they have given us such a rich group of text today, I've got about four hours of sermon, so we should be done by two or so. Now, seriously, there is so much in here, it's hard to imagine. I could preach like five sermons and still not plumb the depths of what we have in these passages, but we'll try and get as much as we can.

Let's start off with the Gospel, and I always find it interesting when the Gospel ends with something that doesn't sound all that "Gospely", and that's what we have here. "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'll be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you've paid the last penny." This is the Gospel. I'm not hearing a whole lot of Gospel there in that section, but this is an extremely important text that we need to understand. Jesus is telling us what He has come here for and what we should expect. Notice He begins this by saying, "I've not come to abolish the law of the prophets, I've come to fulfill it." See the law as we've read, especially in the 10 Commandments that we've read in the first reading, tell us very clearly what it is that God demands, and lest we question whether or not we're able to live up to them. Paul makes it very clear in Romans that we have died to sin and Jesus makes it very clear that we not only need to avoid, let's say just murder, okay? I'm pretty safe in saying I've never murdered anybody, at least not in the literal sense, but Jesus then brings that down. He says, "If you've said you hate your brother, you've committed murder and you're liable to judgment. If you insult your brother, you're liable to judgment. If you say, you fool, you're liable to judgment." Now, that really broadens that definition of what we are judged by. I mean, I'd like to think that I'm a fairly reasonable man and a holy and upright man, and then somebody messes up the order in line and somebody has like 50 items in the 20 or less, and suddenly I'm not so gracious anymore. Suddenly the sinful nature comes out and I start saying, you fool. Or let's just drive down 301 for a couple of minutes. Either way, we realize that our patience and our love of our neighbor is not as profound as we would like to think.

See, our righteousness has to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Now, admittedly the scribes and Pharisees were hypocritical in the day, but everybody else looked up to them and said, wow, those people know what they're doing. They're holy. And Jesus says, oh yeah, you think that's good? That's barely scratching the surface. You got to be better than them. And everybody's going, oh, woe is me. I'm lost. There's nothing I can do. And then just to make sure we understand where we stand, He gives this parable at the end,

"Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to court." I don't think that's just him talking about if you're in a lawsuit, try and settle it quickly before you get to court. This is really talking about our life with God. Who's our accuser? What judge do we stand before? And that would be God Himself. And notice He doesn't think that maybe we might get out of it. He just assumes that we're guilty and we're going to be handed over and go into prison because the wages of sin is death and all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So if we do not come to terms quickly with our judge, He's going to judge us guilty. He's going to hand us over to the guard. We're going to be sent to prison. Hell, in other words, and as He says, "You'll not get out until you pay every last penny, until you earn your forgiveness." Now, we all know that none of us can earn our forgiveness. In other words, without Christ's intervention, it makes it very clear we are condemned.

Luther picks up on this when he defines the 10 commandments, when he answers the question, what does this mean? He takes those commandments and he draws it down to the way Christ did. If you commit murder, it's also hating your brother. If you commit adultery, it's also looking lustfully at somebody. If you lie, it's also not doing the right thing. It's not defending your neighbor. I mean it's more than just the plain facts. It goes deeper into our attitude and our behaviors and our nature. And these three passages combined make it very clear that we fall short, that we are condemned by God.

Even when Paul is writing to the Romans and he's in chapter six now, so he's already gone through sin and forgiveness and grace and how much God loves us and the mercy He gives us, and He loves to forgive us, and He knows human nature because he says very clearly, now, that does not mean that we should sin all the more that grace may abound because He knows our sinful nature. Well, if God loves to forgive me, let's give Him every opportunity to do so. Let's see how much I can do that He needs to forgive. I mean, that's our human nature. He knows we're going to see, oh, here's the line. Let's see. Do you really mean here or do you mean here, or do you mean way over here? We like to push the boundaries all the time. That's our human nature. That's the sin within us. And God understands it because we look at God's commands and we think God is just limiting our activities, but the reality of the matter is we do not fully understand what God desires for us. When we look back at the 10 Commandments, they don't start with "You should have no other gods before Me." That's how we often, most of us think they start, but look at what the words actually say. God spoke all these words same, so what is the first word that God gives us? "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." That's the first Word. He gives us His Gospel first. You have been freed by God. Paul makes it clear. How have you been freed? You've been freed in your baptism. Your sin has been buried, has been drowned in the waters of baptism, and you've been raised a new life. You've been brought out of the land of slavery, out of the house of sin. You are now My children in baptism and I love you. Now, this is how we can have a really good relationship between us and God and between us and each other. You only have one God, that's Me. You don't misuse My name. You use it properly. You call upon Me in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks. You honor the Sabbath day. You come and hear My Word and are refreshed and restored by that word, and because of that, then you don't commit murder or hate your brother or call him a fool or adultery or steal or false witness or coveting.

See, God gives us these commands. He tells us that our sin has been buried by Christ because He wants us to understand these commands are His gift to us of what it means to be in a good relationship with God and with each other. Ideally, they're meant to guide us, to keep us from falling off the cliff and going into the quicksand and getting mired in the mud. This is what keeps us safe and secure in the loving arms of God. What a joy it is to have these 10 commandments. That's how we are called to look at it because our sin has been dealt with. Though it is great, though we deserve the judgment that He promises, for the sake of Christ, we know we are free. Some of the last words that Jesus spoke on the cross were these. "It is finished." What was finished? The forgiveness of our sins, the righteousness, salvation that He gives to us freely was accomplished on the cross. He suffered hell for us so that we would not have to. Now we look at the bloody image of Christ with the nails in His hands and His feet and the spear in his side, and we think, oh, and the whipping, and we think, oh, how

awful and painful that must have been, how much He suffered, but that suffering was nothing compared to the moment when God, the Father, turned His back on His Son. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" How can the Father forsake the Son? They're eternal. They're God. I don't know, but He did, and the Son suffered an absence of His Father's presence in His life. That is hell. And in that moment, He paid our price for our guilt. See, the tomb is empty. He rose from the dead. But the tomb is empty, not just because His body's not there. The tomb is empty because our sin is not there anymore either. It was buried with Him and it was gotten rid of. As far as the east is from the west is our sin from God. The tomb is empty of His body because He rose from the dead, and it's empty of our sin because it's forgiven and wiped out. That's the joy. That's the hope. That's the promise that we have so that we might live not testing where God's line isn't seen, how close we can get without going over, but trusting His Word to guide us to the best life that we can have, the best relationship that we can have with Him and with each other. That's what we're called to look at the 10 Commandments as. After it condemns us, and it does, the very next thing we hear in the catechism is the creed, where we hear what God has done for us.

That's why Luther put the 10 Commandments at the very beginning of his catechism so that we might be condemned with no uncertainty whatsoever, that we cannot be righteous in and of ourselves, but he didn't let us stay there. Immediately following that, he gives us the creed where we find out that God created, He justified, and He sanctified us, and He keeps us in the one true faith unto life everlasting. And then we are called then to do what? To thank and praise and serve and obey Him for what He has done and what better way than to seek to live in grace, to seek to follow His commands, because that's the best life that we can have. That's the way we have the best relationship with each other. That's the way we are reconciled before God. So let us be certain, absolutely certain that our sins are buried in Christ and they're gone, and we have been raised to new life in our baptisms. We are now His children. And so when we come to face the judge, we've come to terms with Him because He came to terms with us. He came to us and baptized us. He came to us and claimed us as His children. He came to us and said, your sin is forgiven and we are free.

May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.