

“Christ and the Fulfillment of the Law”

Matthew 5:17-26

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity 2022: July 24, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning, God’s law is in focus. The reading from Exodus 20 gives us the Ten Commandments. In the Gospel reading, Jesus applies the fifth commandment to our hearts and wills and teaches us about it. Before He does that, however, He says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mat. 5:17 ESV). So we need to talk about what Jesus means by having come to fulfill the law.

Let’s talk about Jesus fulfilling the law in three ways. First, we could say that Jesus fulfills the law in that He teaches and applies it. Second, Jesus fulfills the Law as our redeemer. Third, Jesus fulfills the law in how He lives in us and through us.

The fifth commandment is “you shall not murder” (Exodus. 20:13; Matthew 5:21). Jesus applies it when He says: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’” He goes on to say, “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” (Matthew 5:21-22 ESV).

In His teaching and application of this commandment, Jesus is doing something quite important. He applies the fifth commandment not only to our outward, physical actions, but to the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of the heart. We could call this applying the commandment spiritually. (Jesus also does this with the sixth commandment regarding adultery in Matthew 5:27-30.)

Jesus teaches about the fifth commandment spiritually because most people think that since they haven’t actually murdered anyone in physical action (or committed adultery), then they are okay with God with respect to God’s Law. In fact, they may think that they are actually good people and acceptable to God on that basis. But Jesus says, “If any one is angry with one’s brother or sister; if anyone says something insulting and mean to one’s brother or sister, then that person is worthy of the same penalty as actually physically killing someone. This is because saying something mean and insulting reveals a condition of the heart, the same condition that produces murder. This condition is hate, or meanness, or malice, or revenge, or self-righteous superiority. Jesus is teaching us that physical actions have a source. The source of killing is the meanness, malice, revenge, and self-righteous superiority that is in the heart, making this condition sinful against the fifth commandment. This makes it so that we cannot hide the source, that is, the malice and hatred, the self-righteous judgements and vindictiveness, poison in the heart, behind the argument that I haven’t actually done it physically, so I am okay with God. Jesus is applying the commandment the way God does, because God looks on the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

But isn’t it interesting, how Jesus ties these conditions of the heart to speech? What is going on in one’s heart manifests itself in speech, as it can also manifest itself in physical action of murder.

Jesus as the author of the law speaks the warning of the law in fulfilling the law: that a person whose heart is full of such things is liable to the same judgments in God’s sight as

murder. He does this to bring sin hidden in the heart to light, and to lead us to be sorry for it and turn to Him for help in turning away from it. So Jesus fulfills the law by teaching it and applying it to us, not only to our outward conduct, but to the feelings, thoughts, motivations, and intentions of the heart.

The second way that Jesus fulfills the law has to do with Jesus Himself being our redeemer. He is our redeemer by being our righteousness before God by which we are justified in God's sight. It is as the prophet Jeremiah said about the Messiah: He shall be called "the LORD is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6). This is also as the Apostle Paul says: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). So Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets.

Jesus fulfilling the law for us in this way has to do with our justification before God, meaning the reason why God can regard us as righteous and claim us as His own sons and daughters because of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law in this way for us because He perfectly and actively obeyed it. We call this His active obedience for us as our Redeemer and Savior. In His active obedience, Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. He has brought the law to its completion. When the Apostle Paul says that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes," the word he used in Greek for our English word "end" is the word "telos." We could say that "telos" means goal or complete accomplishment. It is the "end" in this sense. So Jesus Himself is the end of the law in this sense, that He is its complete accomplishment.

He is this for the purpose of being our righteousness. And He is this righteousness not for Himself, but for us, since Jesus was without sin. He Himself is righteousness for those who believe in Him, for you and me. Jesus' righteousness is given to you as gift, to your faith, and God sees you as righteous in Him because you believe in Him.

Praise God, with our whole beings. Praise Him all the angels and heavenly beings and all those human beings, our brothers and sisters in Christ, that are now in the congregation of the heavenly hosts, redeemed by Jesus. Praise Him with all our might, we who are here on the pilgrim's way to the glory of the heavenly congregation. Praise God's Son in human flesh appearing; obeying, suffering, and rising out of death into indestructible life; speaking to us peace and joy; being God's gift of righteousness to us by which God receives us into the heavenly mansions, into the Great Congregation, into the world to come.

How could we not serve Him with everything we are and have? How could His word and Sacrament not be the highest priorities and values in our lives, since it is by these things that we know and live in Jesus as our righteousness for us? How could we not lay down our injuries and grievances to be swallowed up in His redemption, forever?

The third way that Jesus fulfills the law is by what He does through us. I am thinking here of the Apostle Paul's words, where he says by the Holy Spirit: "Owe no one anything but to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, do not commit adult adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and if there is an other commandment"—such as, do not bear false witness against your neighbor; that is, do not tell lies about your neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation; but speak well of him and defend him and put the best construction on (Martin Luther's Small Catechism, explanation to the Eighth Commandment). Back to the Apostle Paul: "If there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love works no evil or harm toward the neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10)

Jesus would fulfill the law in this way through you. But there is something we need to

notice here. Love is not a feeling without content. It is not whatever we make of it. It is full of content. It's content is revealed in the law. In this sense, love has concrete expression. The Apostle defines love here as doing no evil to one's neighbor in the various circumstances of life. Do you want to know how to do this? The answer is found in God's instructions in the law, in the commandments. The commandments teach what it means not to do harm or evil to your neighbor.

The law, however, cannot itself give the motivation and desire and will that love is. The law cannot give the new heart. Jeremiah also spoke of this in connection with the ministry of the Messiah: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33 NKJV).

This new heart, this motivation, and desire and will is Jesus Himself in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit being the love of God poured into our hearts through repentance and faith in Christ (Romans 5:5). It comes to us through Jesus as the redemption that takes away our sin in God's forgiveness.

This new heart or new human being by faith in Christ has a certain attitude toward God, because it loves God above all things, because we have been loved by God sacrificially and redemptively in Jesus. This attitude is something like this: "Heavenly Father, whatever you command me is my joy and delight; and more precious to me than gold and more sweet than the honey in the honeycomb (Psalm 19:10). So I will meditate on Your instruction in the law. You, my Lord and God are my supreme love; and to please you is my supreme desire. It is this way because You have given Jesus for me; putting to death my selfishness in His death; raising in me new life in His resurrection from the dead. You have given Jesus to me and these realities in Holy Baptism, in Your Gospel, and in the Sacrament of His body and blood." The old man, corrupted by sin, does not think this way, but the new man renewed in Christ does. We have the struggle between both within us.

And then the new heart has this attitude to one's neighbor, that is, to any other human being, whether regarded as friend, stranger, or foe: to do them well; to do them no harm; to be faithful to them; to give up one's injuries and grievances and ill-will.

Jesus Himself is this new heart, living in you and through you. So Jesus Himself is the fulfillment of the law in your life in this way. He is always working in you toward these ends.

How do these last two ways of how Jesus fulfills the law relate to each other? We start by saying that Jesus as the fulfillment as our justification comes first, and Jesus as the new heart in us comes second, as the fruit of faith and justification. But we must always say that Jesus as the gift of righteousness to us is where the new life starts and always finds its source and power.

But then we do need to embrace that Jesus really does intend to fulfill the law in us and through us in the way the Apostle describes. This must be said so that we do not think that Jesus being our righteousness before God as a gift, relieves us of Jesus really working to fulfill the law in and through us as the Apostle says (Romans 6:1-11). We cannot disregard the law's instruction and commands with respect to how we live motivated by love, as if the law no longer applies because we have been justified by grace. Let us not resist the sanctifying work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

But then we also realize that we do not manifest Jesus as the new heart in us as the fruit of faith perfectly and as we ought, more often than we would like. So we always need Jesus to be the fulfillment of the law for us as our justification, because we need once again God's forgiveness and Christ's strength in the Holy Spirit. These things come to us always because

Jesus has done it. Our sanctification is not our justification. Jesus Himself always is our justification.

We give praise and thanksgiving to Jesus for being our righteousness before God that can never fail us. It is also our constant prayer through faith in Him as our redeemer, that He would manifest Himself as our new heart through faith in Him, in our lives, toward our neighbor and toward our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thanks be to God for Jesus as our gift of righteousness. May Jesus live ever more wonderfully through us by His Spirit according to God's word. Amen.