

*Living in Christ*

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

July 16, 2023

Matthew 5:20–26

In the verses before our Gospel reading our Lord says that He has come to fulfill all the Scriptures. His teaching today of how we live can be expressed with what the apostle Paul says in First Corinthians: “You are not your own, you were bought with a price.” This is another way of saying that you are in Christ. Jesus is showing us just this in today’s Gospel reading. We do not live to ourselves but to Christ and for others.

But how do we do this? How Jesus describes it seems an impossible standard. The Pharisees and scribes were as spiritually and morally upright as you could get. And yet Jesus says that unless your righteousness exceeds theirs you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

He further shows the impossibility of this in speaking of the Fifth Commandment, You shall not murder. That seems easy enough. Most Christians have not unlawfully taken the life of another individual. But Jesus shows that murder is not just the physical act but also what is in your heart and in your thoughts. If you are angry with your fellow Christian according to Jesus you have committed murder. When you turn toward hostility against someone who wrongs you then you are under the same condemnation as the one who has acted on those thoughts. If you even insult someone or call them a fool then you are deserving of hell.

Can you live up to such a standard? If we think the Old Testament is harsh in its condemnation of sin, Jesus ups the ante. There is no wiggle room here. Jesus does not let us off with sins we think do not compare to cold-blooded murder. We deserve hell.

In fleshing out the Fifth Commandment Jesus speaks of things we should not do. We are familiar with this kind of exhortation because we’re familiar with the Ten Commandments. But we should back up. God is not just scolding us with the things we shouldn’t do. He is showing us how to live. And even more He is showing us how to live as who we are in Him.

When we think of the Ten Commandments we usually just start at the First Commandment, You shall have no other gods. But God does not begin that way. As we see in the Old Testament reading He begins by telling His people who He is and what He has done for them. He who is the creator is also the redeemer. He not only created His people He also saved His people. He rescued them from their bondage of slavery to the Egyptians. They now had new life because He had given them new life.

The Ten Commandments do not express only what we are not to do. By extension they also show us what we are to do. So, as the Small Catechism expresses the meaning of the Fifth Commandment, “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body but help and support him in every physical need.” We should not rest easy just because we have not harmed our neighbor. We also need to help our neighbor.

But we don’t love others as we ought. We may not take their life in cold blood but we can’t keep the thoughts of anger from coming forth when someone harms us or treats us shamefully. But Christ can. And He has. He harbored no evil thoughts toward others. He kept true to His teaching that we ought to love not only those who love us but even our enemies. Jesus did not retaliate when He was treated shamefully. He rather prayed for His enemies and did what was best for them.

*[over]*

He did this. We have not. And we continue to not. Not as long as we are on this earth. Not as long as we live and breathe and are wrapped in this sinful flesh of ours. But Jesus is not just laying down heavy-handed Law. By His very speaking of the words He is also bringing about for us the perfect righteousness that He has.

Only Christ has exceeded this kind of perfect moral and virtuous living. Without Him we would never attain eternal life. Our life is in Christ. This means that we actually live in the way God called His people to live in the Ten Commandments. We actually live in the way Christ calls us to live in the Gospel reading. Because we live in Christ. He lives in us and we love others and do what is good for them.

How are you able to do this? Because you are not your own. You were bought with a price. The price is the shed blood of Christ. This means sacrifice. Though He was perfect in righteousness all our unrighteousness was laid upon Him. Our murderous thoughts and even actions were counted as if He had thought them and as if He had acted on them. This was on the cross of Calvary. It was the ultimate altar and He was the ultimate sacrifice.

An altar is a place of sacrifice. A gift is given and then its blood is shed in the place of the person offering up the gift. But your standing before God is not only between you and God. What you do in regard to others matters. Jesus says that if you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother or sister in Christ has something against you you need to leave your gift at the altar and go and reconcile with him or her. You dare not offer your gift to God if you have unresolved sin.

Now for us the altar is no longer the place of sacrifice. The altar is primarily the place of the Lord's Supper. But note well that sacrifice is still involved. No, we are not offering up a gift or a sacrifice. And the sacrifice of the Lamb of God is not being offered up over and over again. But Christ's sacrifice is being delivered to you. Because He was sacrificed on the altar of Calvary you are now forgiven of your sins in the bodily eating and drinking of His very body and blood at this very altar. And this meal is not just about each of us individually. It is even more about us together as it is truly a Holy Communion. We are communing with one another, not just each of us individually communing at the same time. This means we need to be reconciled with each other. We need to be of one heart and mind in our beliefs.

You and I cannot do this on our own. But we are able to do it. We are actually able to do it because we are in Christ. We live not to ourselves but to Christ and for others. How He tells us how to live is what He has already done. And we are in Him. Amen.

SDG