

This Sunday's texts:

Exodus 19:16-20; 20:1-17

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Matthew 5:17-20

God's People

Pastor Jim Cords

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The Holy Gospel comes to us today from Matthew 5:

[Jesus 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 tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpassed that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we are grateful this day that You have claimed us, and have made us Your own and we pray that You will have us grow in our understanding of what it means to be Your people and how we might serve and honor You in our lives as we experience Your love, Your grace, Your power, and Your direction. In Jesus' name. Amen.

When I met with Pastor Joe to talk about where we were going to be going in the sermon themes in this new year, I do not remember pushing the Gospel of Matthew, but I remember taking great delight that we were of one mind to begin the year digging into the Gospel of Matthew because I love the Gospel of Matthew. It is in that Gospel that I discovered in the most powerful way God's love for me. So I am delighted that we're getting into it.

I listened to Pastor Joe's sermon online and I heard that last week Pastor Joe talked about the thrilling genealogy that honestly if we're not hyper-partisan in our perspective toward King David, we would recognize that today Jesus' ancestors had some lack in their character and their lifestyles. It isn't this phenomenal lineage that just shows how much blessing God pours out on His people because of their faithfulness, because of the obedience. You can just see that line of obedience and how God just blesses and blesses. In fact, it might even be the opposite. One of the key people in that lineage is David who is a murderer and an adulterer. One of the ways that lineage continues is through the fruit of that adultery which is mind-boggling. And the fact that God chose David in the first place, the youngest son, not

the oldest son, totally messes the whole thing up. But it teaches us that God can use whoever God chooses to use, including you and I. And the Gospel of Matthew uses that lineage, among other things, to clearly show us that Jesus is the Messiah. And he begins to unfold exactly what that means and he begins to expand their understanding of what the Messiah means. It is clear that God is remaining faithful to His people, the ancestors of Abraham and David. But it is also clear that God will fulfill His promise to Abraham, that all the nations of the world will be blessed through him. It is good news.

There is something else about Matthew that I noticed Pastor Joe didn't mention last week. I'm just going to throw it in as a continuing introduction this week. Do you know who wrote Matthew? Let me hear it. [Matthew] Matthew! Very good! That was excellent. There is some debate about that, of course, as there always is because all the gospels are anonymous. But it's pretty clear that tradition has accepted Matthew as the writer of the Gospel. Does anybody know what Matthew did as a profession before he followed Jesus? Tax Collector, otherwise known as Levi. You, of course, know that Levi as a tax collector was financially very successful and you probably know that he was held in the highest esteem among his ... the *lowest* esteem of his Jewish relatives. He was successful, but he was marginalized. He was treated as a traitor and unclean. So it's very interesting that this marginalized traitor of God's people becomes the writer of the primary Gospel *to those people*. It shows once again, as with the genealogy, that God is able to use whom God will use, that God redeems for Himself a people, gifts and uses them to continue this blessing to His chosen people and to all the people of the world. I think that journey for Matthew colors, that is, gives brilliance to the Gospel he wrote because in it, you discover over and over again God's willingness to choose and to bless the marginalized and to call into question those that are esteemed for their status who may not be understanding the way of God, the way He wants it understood.

So brothers and sisters in Christ, we, through Christ and this good news of the Gospel, we believers in Jesus are God's people. We want to explore how that is defined and unpacked in the Gospel of Matthew and in the scripture. One of the things we see in the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is set up over and against Moses. We heard in the reading of the first lesson today that Moses was God's chosen person to deliver the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and as they went out into the wilderness and up onto Mount Sinai, God gave his people the Ten Commandments, the instructions for how now they should live together as the people of God. Those Ten Commandments continue to be taught every year in the

confirmation curriculum of the Lutheran Church and in many churches, and it's important that they are.

So Moses led the people out of the camp, it says, as they're moving toward the mountain, and, it says this, "Moses led the people out of camp to meet with God."¹ [Pastor] Joe, I wonder if that ought not to be our theme for worship - to lead the people to meet with God. We recognize in the words of Jesus that "where two or three gathered in My name, there I am in the midst of them,"² that as we come into worship, we come into the presence of the Living God. We're led into a meeting with God.

There's an interesting element of the Ten Commandments. It's how it starts. It doesn't just start by saying "I'm God. Don't mess with Me." It does say that in a sense, but what it really says is "I'm the God who brought you out of Egypt. I'm the God who rescues you. I'm the God who makes a way possible when the way for you is not possible. I'm a God who protects. I'm a God who provides. I am your God. Follow me." I want to suggest to you that will God is saying here, although later the creations clearly come up and perhaps we should worship God because he's the creator of the universe and all that exists, but what He says in this language of the early part of the Ten Commandments is "I love you. I rescued you. I've chosen you, therefore live this life. That is My intention for you and as My intention for you so that all of the nations will be blessed for you. Do this that I have asked you to do in how you live together in this new community, My community." So we have this tension, this give-and-take of Law and Grace.

I want to just remind you, in case you're confused, as I in my life have often been confused. I want to just remind you that when the people had the Ten Commandments that they were supposed to live in obedience to, they also had the sacrifice, so that they could say to God I'm sorry and be atoned for when they failed to live in obedience to those Ten Commandments. Quite frankly, I don't read anywhere in the Old Testament that if you perfectly follow the Ten Commandments, you get eternal life. That wasn't the promise that was given there, not to say that they're not important. But just to say this idea of Law and Grace is held in tension.

As Pastor Joe mentioned last week, the promise came before the Law. There is abundant grace throughout the Old Testament, where we hear words like "God's mercies ... are new every morning,"³ and "the steadfast love of the Lord endures

¹ Exodus 19:17

² Matthew 18:20

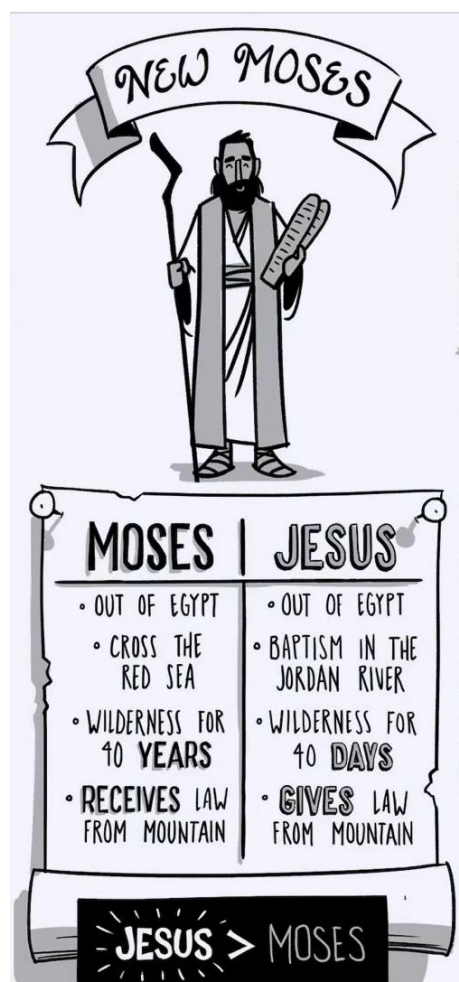
³ Lamentations 3:22-23

forever.”⁴ Even in the Ten Commandments themselves, there's grace upon grace poured out as a better way the way is laid before the people of God than they knew in Egypt and the invitation to be in relationship with a God who says you are my people and I am your God.

Matthew then sets up a movement that puts Jesus connected to Moses. It establishes this move to Sinai is now modeled with this move to the Sermon on the Mount. The words we hear coming from God through Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount establish again what it means to be a people who are in the kingdom of God and how those people are supposed to live. There are five parts in the gospel of Matthew that are set up in parallel to the five books of Moses. What we will discover if we look carefully is that Jesus is being placed alongside Moses and Jesus is being revealed as greater than Moses, and greater than Abraham, and greater than David. Now you might not be able to read that, but it shows the same thing, that Jesus came out of Egypt as Moses came out of Egypt, that Moses crosses through the Red Sea and Jesus crosses through the water and baptism, that the people of Israel were forty years in the wilderness and Jesus was forty days tempted by the devil, that the laws received on the mountain and Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount from the mountain Then there's this beautiful contrast setup, along with later in the book, where we see the Transfiguration where Jesus is with Moses and the prophet, and God says “listen to My Son.”⁵

So Jesus is worthy of praise and Jesus is worthy of our allegiance, that He is the Leader to be followed. He is the Messiah King under whom we are subjects, servants of the new kingdom, and as so, in that Sermon on the Mount, we hear these words, “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.”⁶

Now some people are of the notion that the new Covenant does away with the old Covenant. I



⁴ So many references to His steadfast love enduring, particularly Psalm 136

⁵ Matthew 17

⁶ Matthew 5:17

was even hearing some of our, let's call them, televangelists today that were suggesting that the gospel in the New Testament really means the Old Testament is really not necessary and probably is not authoritative; it's just kind of a history that man made up and we shouldn't pay attention to that, which, by the way, is heresy. That is not the teaching of the recognized Christian church and certainly not the Lutheran Church. We believe that the word of God is authoritative in the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus says, "I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it" and then He goes on to say this, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁷ Okay ... I don't know how you have heard that in your life, but that text has often scared me. I heard lots of things about Pharisees and how carefully they followed the Law, how they even set up laws around the Law to make sure that they didn't get too close to breaking the Law itself. But that's not unlike Jesus.

Jesus cited various laws from the Old Testament, but instead of quoting the interpretation of other rabbis, He radically intensified their meaning. Some Christians today assume that Jesus lessened the Law, that Jesus lightened the Law, or even set it aside altogether. The Law is just not important. We have Grace and, therefore, we don't need the Law. The Law is passé. But that's not what we hear Jesus say, especially here in the Sermon on the Mount.

What we hear Jesus say here is that murder is not just taking someone's life, but it's essentially anything we say that diminishes their identity as a beloved child of God. What?!? I'm happy to say that I have never killed anybody. I'm pretty sure that's a true fact. I don't know that, you know, somebody behind me that maybe I'm not, you know accidents. Well, I don't think I've killed anybody. But I can also tell you with absolutely as much assurance and probably more that I've said some things that have maybe been a little bit degrading about other people. It's been known to slip from my mouth things that call other people's heritage into question, their value, their wisdom, their belonging. I'm guilty. But He's not done! Here we go. Adultery is not just sex outside of marriage, but even imagining it with someone besides your spouse. Okay.

What is Jesus doing heightening the requirements of the Law? Jesus says He intends to fulfill the heart of the Law and not to abandon it. And the heart of the Law applies to His people in this new kingdom. Is anyone starting to squirm? It's easy to read these words. It honestly is easy to read these words, even in a Lutheran Church, and assume that Jesus is setting up a stringent new legal system

⁷ Matthew 5:20

for his followers. We've got to do it right. If we're going to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ, we need to live right. We need to follow the deepest meaning of the Law and not simply the letter of the law. And we need to do that in order to stay in a relationship with God. I think early in his life Martin Luther believed that. I think it's the very reason that early in his life Martin Luther spent hours every day in confession, trying to figure out how could God possibly forgive him when every other moment I have a wrong thought, a wrong motivation, a wrong action. He pleaded with God for forgiveness and tried to remember every possible sin he could confess in order to receive forgiveness, until he discovered the heart of grace and the reality of what it means for Jesus to fulfill the Law in His own life, in His own death, in his own resurrection to continue to express this grace of God.

If we try to live up to the vision of the Kingdom through our own moral willpower, we will fall miserably short and we will be liable to the same religious legalism and two-faced hypocrisy that Jesus pointed out in the Pharisees and the Sadducees. If we take this easy reading of the text and assume it means we need to be even more legalistic than the Pharisees, we clearly are not understanding the values that caused Jesus to criticize those Pharisees. He wasn't just saying you need to live even more legalistic. He was saying you need to understand the heart of God, the love of God for His people, a love that breaks His heart when people are treated poorly, not according to these rules. Rather than using the rules to excuse pushing people to the margins, like tax collectors and adulterers, Jesus showed amazing grace to them, even as He shows amazing grace to you and me.

If we embrace Jesus' vision of a Kingdom, where we live in inward and outward harmony with the will of God and yet admit that we cannot do it by our own strength, we will be in a good place to receive the Grace which alone can transform us from the inside out. Jesus, by inviting us to walk with him, by inviting us to learn from him, is inviting us to have the Holy Spirit which is at work every day in our lives, transforming us, so that the mark of the follower of Jesus is a daily repentance and a daily dependence on the power and guidance of the Spirit for us to live as His children. Jesus called us to inwardly embody the principles expressed in each Law, rather than just an external obedience to the letter of the Law. This new covenant is foretold by Jeremiah this way, "I will put my teaching within them and write it in their hearts."⁸ That is God's intent, to live and dwell in us, so that He can give us the strength and power each day to reflect His goodness and witness to others, including that goodness which is in the grace we receive when we admit the error of our ways in our walk.

⁸ Jeremiah 31:33

So the New Testament, the epistle writer for today, Paul in Corinthians says this, “If the ministry that brought condemnation [the Ten Commandments] was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness.”⁹ Why so much emphasis here, Pastor? Why are you now walking up and walking across and walking close to us? Why do you need us to hear that? Because I need you to believe and understand that in Jesus, you are righteous. Lutherans have grabbed that and they've said “we're Justified” without understanding that being justified is being righteous. God has claimed you as His own people. He has made you righteous and He's now living out and making real the presence of His Kingdom in and through His people, translated, in and through you and me, even in our imperfection, even in our brokenness.

And the words again of Paul in Corinthians is this, “Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.”¹⁰ Now notice it doesn't say arrogant. Notice it doesn't say proud. It says bold because our confidence is in what Jesus has done and will do for us and what Jesus can and will do through us to bring this life-transforming Grace and His presence into our midst and into our lives, to transform us and transform his world, yes brothers and sisters in Christ, through His Church. God is at work. There are good works for us to do. [Pastor gasps] I'm a Lutheran Pastor, I promise. It's good works that flow from the Grace of God and the goodness of God, not our goodness but the goodness that God is able to do in and through us.

So we, like David, might say, “Wait, I'm the youngest brother. I can't be king.” Or we, like David, might say, “Look, I really blew it with Uriah. I'm out.” Or Moses, the murderer. Or the murderer who just talked badly about a brother or sister. Or the adulterer who just lets their imagination go. That's guilty of breaking those Commandments in the words of Jesus. We can be bold.

So the key to reading the Sermon on the Mount, as a Jesus-shaped follower, a disciple, is refusing to compromise the vision of living according to the Kingdom in which God's perfect will is done on Earth as it is in heaven, while at the same time, recognizing our daily need for God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to shape us one step of faith at a time more into the image and likeness of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is not finished with you yet. He would do miraculous things through you, through His strength, through His Spirit, as we daily humbly bow to serve our Messiah King. Through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, we live by God's grace and the power of His Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:9

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:12