

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 6 – July 16, 2023
Matthew 5:17-26 – The Law is Fulfilled
Pastor Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Psalm 19 is a hymn of praise for God's law. "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the just decrees of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

Like Psalm 19, today's readings are a celebration of the precious gift we have in God's law. The Old Testament reading was Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments. It's good to hear the commandments read out in their fullness, along with their promises. Like the great promise of the opening words: "God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" The Lord is declaring that he is our saving God. The God who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt is also our God, who works mighty salvation for us. He has chosen us and made us his own through baptism. As our God, he shows steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. As our God, he gives us this day, the Sabbath day, a day for worship and meditation on his word. And as our God, the God who gave the good land of Canaan to Israel also gives us the inheritance of eternal life in paradise. Those who honor their father and mother will surely live forever in that heavenly land.

Like Psalm 19, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is full of praise for God's perfect law. "Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Keeping God's law, treasuring it and obeying it with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, this is how you can truly love your God and thank him for making you his own. As Luther taught in the catechism, "God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands."

The law of the Lord is perfect, and in keeping it there is great reward. Perfect. Without defect. Not one iota shall pass away. It lacks nothing, promising everything: The steadfast love of the Lord to a thousand generations.

The law is perfect, yet we do not keep it. The fault is not with the law, but with ourselves. The law always accuses, but its accusation is good and right. If we hated the law for its accusation, we would be as foolish as a child hating the rules because he disobeyed them. No, we ought to love the law, meditate upon it day and night, and seek to do it.

But when we meditate on God's perfect law, we see that we do not measure up. Do you think you have kept the law? You may have never committed murder, but are your hands clean? Jesus exposes our sin, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, he focuses on the sin of anger. Anger is not explicitly mentioned in the Ten Commandments, but Jesus says it's the same as murder. For out of hatred toward our neighbor comes the desire for their death. And anger is so common. We easily lash out in irritation against those closest to us, against the ones we should love the most. Against our spouse, children, parents, and relatives. We lose patience with their quirks and inconsistencies. We lash out in frustration and harsh words. We speak ill of them behind their backs, slandering when we ought to speak well of them. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to 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."

In the same way, to even look at a woman with lust is to commit adultery with her in your heart. And to swear an oath needlessly is evil. Simply let your yes be yes and your no be no. Be perfect, as your heavenly Father

is perfect.

Yes, the law is perfect, even as the lawgiver is perfect. The only fault lies with us. In sin did my mother conceive me.

But in one respect, the law is not perfect. It lacks one thing. The law cannot give any power to keep the law. Only the gospel can do that. So when Jesus said, "I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them," this isn't law, but gospel. He came to keep the law, because he is greater than the law. He came to fulfill the law. He fulfilled it perfectly on your behalf, to save you from its condemnation. He came to be your God, to work salvation for you by actively doing all that the law requires, actively keeping every command. And he came to passively suffer on the cross the penalty for all your disobedience. In him you have life.

Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He fulfilled it so that in him we might begin to live according to it. And that is a gift of baptism. "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Having died to sin, we are set free from it. Having died with Christ, we will also live with him. "For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

This all means that through baptism, Jesus credits all his perfect, righteous deeds to you. And through baptism, he credits all his payment for your sins on the cross. It's as if you were bankrupt, and he paid all your debt, and then on top of that he gave you an enormous inheritance. Not only are you no longer broke, you're rich. Because Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, and to apply it to you through baptism.

You see that the law is perfect, but the gospel is even more perfect. Apart from the gospel, we could not receive the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us and teaches us to live according to the law. Only the Holy Spirit is able to work in our hearts, enabling us to live rightly. Only then do we begin to do God-pleasing deeds with a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. For the righteousness bestowed by the gospel is the righteousness of our God himself. A righteousness that exceeds the best of human efforts. God gives us the new garment of baptism that clothes us with Jesus and his righteousness.

On the other hand, the baptismal life is not easy or automatic. We don't get baptized and immediately know what to do. Obedience and righteous living require diligent training, discipline, constant instruction in God's word. It takes effort. A lifelong struggle against sin, always repenting and being forgiven and resolving to do better. It takes the continual work of the Holy Spirit in the church. It takes hearing preaching and God's word, meditating on it day and night in your homes, disciplining yourself against temptation, and praying for God's deliverance from it. And it takes constantly returning to the Lord's Table, to receive forgiveness in his body and blood, heavenly food that strengthens you to walk according to God's word.

May the Lord teach us to live according to all his teaching – both law and gospel – all the days of our lives. May he teach us to love the law, which he has fulfilled in his steadfast love. By his precepts may he revive the soul, make wise the simple, rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes. May he give you joy in his instruction all your days. May he give you a clean heart, clothe you in his righteousness, and give you life forever. May his words be to you like fine gold, sweeter than honey and drippings from the honeycomb. May they warn you and keep you from all evil, and form you into a good and faithful servant of Jesus. Amen.

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