

Sermon for February 5, 2017 - 5th Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 5:17-20 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: **The Christian's Relationship with the Commandments.**

- 1) *Christ has fulfilled all of them for us.*
- 2) *We uphold all of them out of love for Christ.*

¹⁷“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled. ¹⁹So whoever breaks 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

A Lutheran once bragged to his Catholic friend about how he planned to get drunk at a party. The Catholic asked how any Christian could plan on doing something like that. The Lutheran answered: “Because I’m saved by grace, through faith in Christ. As long as I repent of my sin, I am free to do whatever I want.”

What do you think about this response? On the one hand, the Bible does say: *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith . . . not by works, so that no one can boast.*ⁱ But does this mean that we can ignore God’s law – or choose when, where and how we follow it? What exactly is a Christian's relationship with God’s law? Let us listen to Jesus answer this question for us, under the theme: **The Christian's Relationship with the Commandments is this:** 1) *Christ has fulfilled all of them for us.* 2) *We uphold all of them out of love for Christ.*

Part One: *Christ has fulfilled all of them for us.*

Our sermon text is part of Jesus famous sermon on the Mount: a discourse meant to instruct his disciples as to how they should live their lives in the peace of God’s forgiveness. Right before our text, Jesus speaks a series of blessings over those who humble themselves before God – hungering and thirsting for his mercy. Through faith in Christ, God blesses all such people with the salvation and peace they seek. More than that, he honors believers by making them his representatives – his “salt” and “light” to the world.

Jesus knew that it was of the utmost importance that his disciples have a correct understanding of the law. Why? Because the religious leaders of Israel misinterpreted the law for so long that Jesus’ preaching of repentance and forgiveness would seem like a radical departure from God’s Word. Jesus needed to correct this thinking, lest the disciples also supposed that he came to annul the law.

Jesus says: ¹⁷“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸Amen I tell you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled.

Jesus did not come into the world to change or nullify any law, command or teaching of the Old Testament. He came to fulfill them.

To understand what this means we need to understand the purpose of the Old Testament. Is it merely a collection of laws showing how we can please God and earn eternal life? This is how the religious leaders in Jesus’ day viewed the Old Testament; but Jesus knew otherwise. On another occasion, Jesus once said: “*These are the Scriptures that testify about me.*”ⁱⁱ In other words, all the laws, teachings and stories of the Old Testament, in some way or another, point to Christ.

Take the Ten Commandments, for example. This moral law teaches us what righteousness is. If we were able to keep the commandments perfectly, we would be as holy as the angels and earn eternal life. But we can’t do it. We’re too sinful. The Ten Commandments, therefore, stand as a mirror: showing us that we need a Savior.

Jesus did not come to abolish the law, he came to fulfill it. Every Old Testament sacrifice, ceremonial law, and prophecy prepared and pointed to him. Jesus kept the Ten Commandments perfectly in our place – never sinning against them. By doing this, he won the righteousness we need to stand before God. Jesus also willingly took all our sins upon himself in order that he might offer himself up as a sacrifice for their forgiveness. Therefore, Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it so that the condemnations that stood against us for not keeping the law might be taken away.

Let me use an illustration to explain what I mean: imagine that a civil court found you guilty of some crime and placed a heavy fine on you – one that you were unable to pay. Now imagine that the judge pitied you and decided to personally pay your hefty fine. In doing this, he is not calling the law unjust or trying to annul it, rather his payment upholds the law and, at the same time, frees you from the fine. Jesus did something similar for us. By means of his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection Christ freed us from the condemnation that threaten us. In this way, he “cancelled the written code”ⁱⁱⁱ that was against us. At the same time, his actions show that the law was just. He didn’t just annul the law. He upheld and fulfilled it.

Through faith in Christ Jesus, we are free from all sin. The law has been fulfilled, and can no longer condemn us. So, does this mean we can do whatever we want because we are under grace, and not under law? No, it doesn’t. Rather, out of love for the God who saved us, we will want to uphold law.

Part Two: *We uphold all of them out of love for Christ.*

Just because the LORD saved us from the consequences our sins had earned, doesn't mean that he "changed" or "softened" his law. He himself declares: *"I the LORD do not change."*^{iv} His law, therefore, will always remain the righteous standard by which all things will be judged.

This is why Jesus says: *¹⁹So whoever breaks 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 practices and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

Let's go back to the illustration of the judge who paid our fine. Why do you think he did it? So that we can go back to doing the same things that got us into trouble in the first place? No, he paid our fine that we might go free. He, in no way, wants us to go back doing the things that got us in trouble. We honor and thank him by staying out of trouble.

In a similar way, Jesus didn't forgive our sins so that we might return to them. He forgave our sins so that we might be righteous and holy in his sight. He gave us a new spirit that wants to keep God's law out of thankfulness for everything he has done – all the while acknowledging that his commands are meant for our good.

This is why God will not tolerate anyone who willingly breaks his law, or teaches others to do the same. To willingly and continually do so shows a lack of faith. And this is exactly what the Pharisees did in Jesus day.

"What?" someone might say, "How can that be? Weren't they the ones who said that you had to keep the law in order to be saved?" Yes they were. But, God's law is so righteous that no person (save Jesus) can keep God's law as perfectly as He demands. This is why the Pharisees "reinterpreted" God's law – claiming that things like lustful thoughts, greed, and hatred aren't really sin. They tried to reduce God's law into something they could keep. In doing this, they failed to understand the law, and how it related to the Messiah.

Many false teaching churches do the same thing today that the Pharisees did in Jesus' day. Some, for example, will say that divorce, living together outside of marriage, or homosexuality are no longer sin. Others will claim that God is not concerned about our thoughts, but only our actions. I once met a woman who, in all seriousness said to me: "I don't sin anymore, God damn it." When I pointed out to her that she just broke the second commandment by using God's name in vain, she, in all seriousness, claimed that this was not a sin – that God doesn't look at stuff like that, but only at big stuff, like drinking, smoking and fooling around.

These churches don't get it. By minimizing what sin is, they fail to see the true purpose of God's law. They see the Commandments as a way to earn God's favor instead of what they truly are: a mirror that shows our utter sinfulness and complete need for a Savior, so that we come running to him for forgiveness.

This is why Jesus says: *²⁰Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

God will not accept those who are merely outwardly obedient to His law. No, He only accepts those who are as holy as he – perfect in thought, word and deed.

So where does that leave us? I don't know about you, but it leaves me at the foot of Jesus' cross, praying for his mercy and forgiveness. And do you know what? As I turn to him in repentance and faith, Christ covers me with a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees. Christ covers me with the salvation he won, because of which God opens heaven to me – not because of anything I have done, but all for Christ's sake. And the mercy God offers me in Christ, he offers to all who truly repent of their sins and trust in his Son for forgiveness.

But how will people turn to Christ in repentance unless they acknowledge their sins and need for him? And how will people acknowledge their sins and need for him if we water down his law? And how will people take our call to repentance seriously if we don't, in the peace of Christ's forgiveness, keep God's law out of thankfulness for what he has done?

So, what is the Christian's relationship with the commandments? We uphold them out of love for God and as a testimony to the world. We do this – not to earn God's love and favor. We could never do that! Rather, in the peace of Christ's forgiveness, we uphold Christ's commandments as a testimony to who God is, and the change He brings about in the heart of the believer. No, we aren't perfect, but we are forgiven. And the lives we live in the peace of this forgiveness are a light to the world: calling those around us to repentance and faith, so they too might have the same hope we have in Christ.

Therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice not only in the Gospel, but also in God's law. It leads you to repentance and faith in Christ by showing your need for him. It serves as a way you can both thank God for his forgiveness and offer a testimony to God's grace by loving others as he has loved us. May the LORD ever help us to that end – all to the glory of his name. Amen.

ⁱ Eph 2:8,9 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Joh 5:39 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Colossians 2:14

^{iv} Mal 3:6 NIV84