

INI - SDG

7th Sunday a. Epiphany

February 20, 2011

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

Hecla, SD

Text: Matthew 5:17-20 *“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 say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away 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.”*

Theme: JESUS SHEDS LIGHT ON THE LAW

- By His teaching
- By His living and dying

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus, fellow believers who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, grace and peace to you in His name!

“Where in the Bible can you find the Law and where in the Bible can you find the Gospel?” This is one of those trick questions that pastors like to ask their confirmation students. We teach that the Law and the Gospel are the two main teachings of the Bible. Simply put, the Law is any commandment God tells us to do or do not do. The Gospel is the good news of God loving us and sending His Son Jesus to save us. Anytime we are told to do something in the Bible, that is Law - such as the 10 Commandments. Anytime we are promised something out of God’s grace, that is Gospel. Most confirmation students figure that since God gave His 10 Commandments in the Old Testament and Jesus lived in the New Testament, that this means that the Law is found in the Old Testament and the Gospel in the New Testament.

But this cannot be true, as we see in our text for today. Jesus in the New Testament speaks about the Law of God. Actually, His entire Sermon on the Mount is basically all Law. Furthermore, the Old Testament is full of Gospel promises - from the promise of a serpent crusher who would undo the effects of sin in Genesis 3 to the Prophet Isaiah expounding on the sacrifice Jesus would make as He was wounded for our transgressions. So the Law and Gospel are contained in both Old and New Testaments.

As we continue to look at portions of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we hear this morning of Jesus the great Prophet, speaking about the Law of God. Jesus came to shed light on the Law given in the Old Testament. He did so by His teaching, and also by His

living and dying. May the Holy Spirit work mightily in us through His Word, that we might better understand the will of God for our lives and live according to it.

BY HIS TEACHING

When Jesus began His teaching ministry, there was a common misconception - namely that He had come to change things. The Jewish people thought of the Scribes and the Pharisees as the religious authority of the day. Both were very well versed in the Law. The Scribes were professional students of the law and supposed to be experts in its understanding. In a way, we might compare them to professors of the Old Testament. When the Wise Men visited King Herod looking for the new born King of the Jews, one of the groups Herod consulted was the scribes. The scribes knew their Scripture and would have known where the Messiah was to be born. If your wife burnt your dinner and you needed a certificate of divorce, you would go to the scribes to present your case to receive approval and a certificate.

The Pharisees were a sect of Jews that emphasized the strictest observance of the law. They were the ones that would watch your life to see if you were obeying not only the Mosaic moral laws and ceremonial laws, but also the traditions of the Jewish elders. They were always focused on the external keeping of the law. When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were ready to accuse Him of sinning against the Sabbath by doing work. When Jesus' disciples picked some grain from a field to eat on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath by doing work. After all, they were harvesting the wheat, grinding it with their hands, and preparing it for food! After Jesus healed another man on the Sabbath, He told that man to pick up the mat his crippled body had been lying on, and go home. When the Pharisees saw this man carrying his mat on the Sabbath, they accused him of sin because he was doing work by moving furniture on the Sabbath.

In both the scribes and the Pharisees, the people saw men that were leading outwardly very religious lives. They knew all the commandments of God and they were very zealous in living and enforcing that Law. Maybe we could compare them to the monks of today. Men who dedicate their lives to the service of God and live outwardly righteous lives. Men whom we would look at and say, "Now that is a person who is really committed to their religion!" Indeed they were very zealous in their beliefs.

But when Jesus began His ministry, He seemed to bring a teaching that was different from the religious leaders of the day. Since the scribes and the Pharisees were such authorities on the Law, they thought Jesus was doing away with all of the Old Testament with His "new" teachings. Here in our text, Jesus says that this couldn't be further from the truth. ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away from the Law until all is accomplished."***

Jesus did not come to undo those 39 books of the Old Testament. Not at all. Much rather, Jesus came to expound on them. He came to shed light on them. His

teaching WAS quite different from that of the Scribes and Pharisees, but not because He was teaching something new. What Jesus was teaching, was the Law and the Prophets as God had intended them to be understood.

The scribes and the Pharisees had gotten away from the heart of the Law. They were focused on the externals. God is not interested in beings who simply go through the outward motions of His Law. God is interested in hearts. The Apostle Paul gets at the heart of the Law when he writes to the Romans, ***“Love is the fulfillment of the law.”*** (Rom 13:10b) Love is at the very heart of the Law. Love for God above all things, and love for neighbor as self.

Jesus came to shed light on the Law by His teachings. As Jesus goes on in His Sermon on the Mount He teaches just this, that love is the very centerpiece of the Law of God. Jesus says of the 5th Commandment, that God wasn't just addressing the act of killing someone. Rather Jesus teaches, ***“I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.”*** (5:22) With regards to the 6th Commandment and committing adultery, Jesus teaches that God was not just addressing cheating spouses. Rather Jesus teaches, ***“Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery.”*** (5:28) And rather than seeking revenge on those who wrong you, Jesus teaches, ***“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”*** (5:43-44a)

So, you see, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to teach it in all its fullness. To shed light on the truth of the Law that God is not interested in outward acts, but a loving heart that expresses itself in loving acts. And Jesus says that this will never change. This has always been God's intention with the Law and it will remain so until the end of time. This is the light that Jesus shed on the Law by His teaching.

BY HIS LIVING AND DYING

When our confirmation students study the difference between the Law and the Gospel, they learn that the Law accuses and condemns. The Law says, “Do this, don't do that. And if you disobey God, you will be punished eternally.” Paul writes of the Law, ***“Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”*** (Gal 3:10) How does your life measure up to God's high standards? Jesus says in our text, ***“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** God is looking for more than the empty, outward observance of the regulations of His law, such as the scribes and Pharisees did. God is looking to your heart. And what does He find there? Does He find a heart warmed with love toward Him and toward our neighbor?

If love is to be the motivating factor in obeying the law and those who do not obey the law of God are cursed, we are left to ask with the disciples, ***“Who then can be saved?”*** (Mt 19:25) The law has done its job. It has shown us our sin, our failure to love our God above everything else, and our failure to love our neighbor as ourselves. ***“By the law is the knowledge of sin.”*** (Rom 3:20b) And it has condemned us for failing to

live up to God's high standards. And if our righteousness needs to exceed that of the outward righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, indeed who then can be saved?

We return to Jesus. Jesus whose Epiphany sheds light on the law. But when it comes to the Law, Jesus did not just talk the talk, He walked the walk, as the saying goes. In fact, He walked the walk all the way to the cross. As the eternal Son of God, He was the author of the Law and as such He was above the Law. Yet Jesus humbled Himself and was born under the Law to redeem us who were under the curse of the Law. He came to be our Substitute under the Law. And Jesus lived His life the way God intended with the Law.

Jesus fulfilled the law with His love. While Jesus never used His divine power as the Son of God for His own benefit, when He saw someone sick, paralyzed, or demon possessed He would use that power to help them in every bodily need - even when He was tired or hungry. When He saw the only son of the widow of Nain lying dead on a cot, He raised that son to life and returned him to his mother.

Even when Jesus was spit upon, mocked, and beaten, He loved His enemies. He blessed them that cursed Him. He prayed for them that spitefully used Him and persecuted Him. He literally loved them to death as prayed that the Father would forgive them and laid down His life to save them. He loved us to death as well. He became our sin. He became our curse. ***"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')."*** (Gal 3:13)

And it is in Jesus that our righteousness exceeds that external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Paul writes to the Corinthians, ***"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."*** Jesus who alone had such exceeding righteousness, takes our sins on Himself and gives us His righteousness. This was the law of love seen in its greatest action as Jesus lived and died for His neighbor, because He loved them.

Jesus did not change anything in the Law. He came to shed light on the true meaning and depth of the Law and Prophets. And what Jesus teaches us does not change. As His redeemed children He desires that we teach and live this way. In doing so we flavor the earth as the salt of the earth and we light of our faith shine, through the love in our hearts shown in acts of love for one another, even as Jesus has loved us, lived for us, and died for us. ***"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*** (Jn 13:34-35) Praise be to Jesus! Amen.