

## Trinity VI

### Collect of the Day

Lord of all power and might, author and giver of all good things, graft into our hearts the love of Your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of your great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*The prayer starts off by saying something important about the power and might of God – he has all of it. That is a very important and somewhat audacious thing to say. For some folks it will get you crossways with the Problem of Evil pretty quickly. After all, if God has all the power, why doesn't he use some of it to alleviate suffering in the world? It is a fair question to which we need to have a better answer than just a shrug of our shoulders.*

*The next phrase is critical to any answer we give, but it is not likely that most of us have been trained to see this. These prayers rose in the context of medieval theology and some assumptions were made there which may not always work for us. God is the author and giver of all good things. Sounds alright but who then is giving all the bad stuff? If you jump to the obvious candidate, the Devil, you are dangerously close to a form of dualism. You may want to think that through very carefully. On one level it works OK, but the problem is when you start thinking about it very much.*

*The Devil is just not a creative sort of being, at least not in the technical sense. He can make nothing that is real, he can only spoil the good things that are out there. He doesn't work as a dualistic equal to God, not even an inferior sort of being. He is in a completely different category and cannot create.*

*The statement that God is the creator of good things was formulated in the context of a very different idea of evil, namely that evil is not really a thing, but an absence of a thing. Like a shadow is not a thing, but an absence of light. Evil is not a positive thing which exists but it is always a deficiency of good. Illness is a lack of health. Moral sins are the lack of morality and good works. Death is a lack of life, not a thing unto itself.*

*Good, the stuff that God makes, has been somehow rendered less good, that is what makes it evil. You can see how this can apply – an abusive sexual relationship is not because sex is bad, but because it is lacking in the goodness which God intends for it, a mutual loving relationship. We might think a murder is an evil thing, but it is really a lack of goodness in the interpersonal relationship.*

*One has to be careful here. The bible does not always talk this way and we have to let that language shape our preaching and teaching. But this philosophical idea seems to have shaped this prayer. God is not responsible/liable for evil, but only for the good. So the prayer asks that God start to address our own deficiencies of heart and life, graft the love of God's name into our hearts, increase true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and keep us in these same things.*

*That makes a lot more sense when you realize that the deficiencies of these very things are the definition of evil.*

Exodus 20:1-17 *The Ten Commandments show up in the three year lection on Lent 3, in series B. my notes and the sermon below are taken from the last time we reflected on this passage.*

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words, saying,

<sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> “You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

<sup>18</sup> *Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him*

*may be before you, that you may not sin.”<sup>21</sup> The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.*

*How do we preach these things and how do we hear them ourselves? The world around us chaffs at the idea of a moral absolute. There is no right or wrong in the current regime of tolerance. There is no moral position on which one can stand to offer up a moral absolute. There is only my interpretation and your interpretation. We would never want to impose our morality on another and suppress the expression of their individual needs. We have outgrown these ideas. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we have progressed past this.*

*Of course, such ideas run headlong into the Word of God, the unchangeable truth which we confess. What does this say to us and to a world in which we live?*

- 1. There are moral absolutes. The parishioner who is confronted with a culture which demands moral relativism needs to hear this.*
- 2. Is this therapeutic? Certainly these commandments, if followed, will lead to a healthier and better life. This is a revelation of what God has in mind for us. Followed, this is keeping us from the landmines of life which will maim and harm us. But this is third use of the Law. It is not the primary uses of the Law. Every pagan also knows this and most cultures have a similar list. In a sense this is a form of natural law. We can come up with all sorts of rational reasons to do this, but do we preach that? Does that actually tap into the real message there? I don't think so.*
- 3. They are commandments – they speak of the demands that God has. It might be a witness to the fact that we have a father who expects something of us. Silence would be the alternative, a deadly silence.*
- 4. They are an enumeration of the covenantal expectations. This is the listing of the basic stipulations of God's covenant with us. In this sense, this would be similar to the “New Perspective on Paul.” This is describing what we do now that we have God's favor, now that the covenant is established. They describe us more than they prescribe behaviors for us. But this also has a weakness in that we will always have some part of us which is hearing this as prescription and the old man hates these impositions upon us.*
- 5. As commandments they are not unique, but the starting point is unique. This starts by describing what God has done. Every culture has rules like these, not every culture starts with God rescuing enslaved Israelites. That is the real distinctive here.*
- 6. This then might lead to the next point – These commandments perfectly describe Jesus. Last week we heard that suffering is redefined for us – suffering makes me look a little like Jesus. Here again, we find Christ in an unsuspected spot. Any proclamation which ends with us completing or not completing these commandments is missing the larger point of the Bible. The Law condemns us and describes Christ. Is the real law here that*

*we imagine that this is all about me and my obedience. Have we displaced Christ from the center of this picture, quite naturally, but it is natural only because our nature is crooked? Is the law development here that we have thought we were just too important. That God's joy was somehow hinging on whether we kept or broke these commandments.*

- 7. The commandments need to be proclaimed and heard in the context of God's great love for his creation. While it is true the Law serves to terrify the complacent conscience, the purpose of that terror is always the ensuing comfort.*

*Ten Commandments – what are these things? Actually the Hebrew is “Ten Words.” The Torah is pretty consistent in its labeling of this list: Ten Words. They are also repeated in Deuteronomy, which is why that is called the “second law.”*

*Of course, if you address this in a Bible study, you will probably encounter the reality that our brothers and sisters in the Reformed tradition have a different enumeration of the commandments. If you want a much more in depth study of this, there was quite a conversation about this in the Concordia Journal a number of years ago (1990's).*

*The gist of it is this. A careful reading reveals that there are really only nine commandments in here. You have to split one to make it ten. And since we all have heard about the Ten Commandments, we can hardly only offer up nine of them. Traditionally, the split came in the last commandment about coveting. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when Zwingli threw out everything and decided to start over with a “fresh” reading of the Bible on which he would base a new Christianity, he elected to divide the first commandment into a proscription of other gods and a second proscription on graven images. This would work great evil in the Church as a new wave of iconoclasm swept over Europe, smashing beautiful works of art in the name of purging the idols. To this day most Baptist churches are very plain. They have no graven images and many of that tradition are deeply suspicious of art. It is gratifying to see that in recent years the reformed movement in North America has started to embrace art as “Word” again.*

*The dispute over the numbering seems to be intractable, at least if you are insistent on Ten Commandments. There are not actually ten commands. But there are Ten Words. The Hebrew “dabar” or word, is much more like Logos in Greek. It can mean concept, idea, or even a whole book. Most logically, I would think that that the first “Word” here is not a commandment at all, but the second verse of this chapter. “I am YHWH who brought out of slavery in Egypt.” Not a commandment for us to do, but a statement of who God is. That is the first “word” of the ten, God is our rescuer, he is our savior, and he is our deliverer from bondage. The other nine, which are expressed here as commandments, are actually the conclusions which one must draw from this fact. I will have no other Gods, I will use his name appropriately, I will listen to him, I will listen to his representatives, I will not murder, I will not disrupt my neighbors marriage, I will not take my neighbor's property, lie about him, or even think the evil thought in my mind which is really coveting what he has and hating him for it.*

*As law, the commandments function terribly in our lives. They accuse us, they are a dreadful burden, a load we cannot carry. The preacher needs to be sensitive to the fact that his congregation who hears these may not be able to hear much after they hit the one which accuses them, at least not before the preacher actually deals with that fact.*

*In the rite of confession and absolution at the beginning of a communion service the rubric calls for a moment of silent reflection. I always observe that period of silence. My parishioners often asked how long that was. My answer was always the same. Long enough for the preacher to recite the Ten Commandments to himself slowly, deliberately, and carefully. To help them with that, I sometimes would print those commandments. Sometimes, in the season after the Pentecost, I would print them in order with Luther's explanations, one commandment per week, in the margin next to the words of the confession of sins in the bulletin.*

*I did all this because these commandments have power, real power, to accuse people and prepare them to hear the Gospel. Today we get the chance to see them all together.*

*But there is something else going on here. Remember how these are the ten words and the first word may in fact be the word of salvation, making all subsequent words derivative from that first word? Of course the Word of the Lord appeared to all those prophets who came after Moses. And of course, that Word of the Lord became flesh and dwelt among us.*

*Are the Ten Commandments burdens laid upon us or are they actually a perfect description of the Word made Flesh? Jesus kept them all perfectly, you see. He is the fulfillment of the whole law. Was Moses telling us what to do or was he telling us about Jesus? Of course, the answer is "Yes." He was doing both. We have too often, however, stopped at the Law part and gotten on to the Gospel part in this, and that is a shame. We can learn a great deal about Jesus from these words.*

**Sermon Idea:** I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt...The commandments of the LORD... are sweeter than honey, sweeter than the honeycomb. (from the Psalm and OT - That the hearer rejoice to see the perfection of Christ given to him/her and transformation of his/her life into his perfection.)

The preacher will want to keep a certain Marcionite tendency in mind. Many of our people will come to church with a preconception that the OT is filled with harsh and judgmental messages. But they miss the great love of God for his people which is the real message of these texts.

These Ten Commandments present us with a terrible burden. Not only are we supposed to do them, but we really are supposed to like doing them. If I only can hear them as that burden, they always will be hateful to me. But the Psalmist calls these very commandments of God sweet, sweeter than honey itself. Is he nuts? No, of course not, but he sees something here, which we delight to see as well. These commandments which lay such a burden on us are also the very truth of Jesus. They point to my sin, but they also describe him perfectly. So far, that is not yet reason to call them sweeter than honey, but it might be the start of it. For the righteousness that Jesus has and which I need, is also given to me in his death for me on a cross. In a few short

weeks we will observe the holy days of holy week. Jesus will ride into Jerusalem, he will be betrayed, tried, scourged, crucified, died, buried, and raised again. It is the great Passover of Christianity, the moment of our liberation from the slavery imposed on us by the evil taskmasters sin and death.

The commandments begin with the affirmation that God is the God who rescues from slavery. The commandments themselves are not conditions for God's love, but responses to God's great love. Likewise for us, they are not the things we do so that God will love us, but because Christ has loved us, what is more, they are empowered by the very love of Christ which he has poured into our hearts. The commandments which once were the terrible burden, the accusing finger which threatened us with death and destruction at the hands of an angry God have become the very sweetness of God. They are the description of Jesus, and because Jesus has given his life to me, they have become the very description of me as well.

Now I know that I am not a perfect man in your eyes and you are not in mine, but in God's eyes, the eyes which really count, by the gift of Christ, I am a perfect man. I can embrace these commandments as a true description of Christ and the rightness which is mine and I can eagerly ask how they might become the definition of my life today. They are the sweetness I desire, the joy of my life. The irony of this is that the commandments put Jesus on that cross, and his life and death and resurrection took them off my back.

#### Psalm 19

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

<sup>2</sup> Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.

<sup>4</sup> Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun,

<sup>5</sup> which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,  
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

<sup>6</sup> Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them,  
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;

<sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right,  
    rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
    enlightening the eyes;  
<sup>9</sup> the fear of the LORD is clean,  
    enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
    and righteous altogether.  
<sup>10</sup> More to be desired are they than gold,  
    even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey  
    and drippings of the honeycomb.  
<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by them is your servant warned;  
    in keeping them there is great reward.  
<sup>12</sup> Who can discern his errors?  
    Declare me innocent from hidden faults.  
<sup>13</sup> Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;  
    let them not have dominion over me!  
Then I shall be blameless,  
    and innocent of great transgression.  
<sup>14</sup> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
    be acceptable in your sight,  
    O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

*In case you were wondering about the interpretation of the Commandments which I offered up earlier, the interpretation in which I said that this was also a description of Jesus, just try and read verse 7 and 8 and not go there. If you insist that the commandments are only prescriptive, you will end up a Methodist. Now, please don't get me wrong, Methodists are fine people. I am sure I am related to some, somewhere. But it is often in the discernment of the Law in this situation that we can tell the difference. The American Arminian bent has taken the third use of the law and turned into the primary use of the law. God's Word has become the owner's manual of life, the manufacturer's instruction book for proper use of the product. It is that, surely, but that use of the text is like reading the Odyssey of Homer as a guide to ancient sailing practices. They are there, of a sort, but the book is an exploration of the character of Odysseus and to miss that point is to miss real point of the book. Likewise, to imagine that the Bible is given to us in order to tell us how to live is to miss the point – the Bible is a witness to Christ.*

Romans 6:(1-2) 3-11 Baptism of our Lord ABC

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

*This is one of the most important passages in all of Paul's literature and especially for those of us who hear these things sacramentally. I teach a class on the Lutheran Confessions and I am becoming increasingly distressed by just how Calvinist we American Lutherans have really become. My most Lutheran students reflect their American Protestantism far more than they do their Lutheran Catechism. We read this as a Calvinist and seem only to be able to hear a burden laid upon us to some sort of holiness of life. We imagine that the sinful corpse can somehow still manage to please God, and thereby close our eyes to the new life which He has created within us in Christ.*

*The solution to this is not to be found in our own willful reorganization of our own minds, but in Christ's rule of our mind. "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." Philippians 2:5 Or as Paul says later in Romans itself, in chapter 12,*

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.  
<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

*This passage calls on us to rethink our own very life and the deeds and things which flow out of our very being. Paul is dealing with the whole question of why we do the good things that God would have us do, the obedience that comes from faith which is found in the opening and closing words of this letter. Why do we do good? Paul's answer is that we have been utterly transformed, brought to death in baptism and raised a totally different sort of person from that water.*

*Yes, Paul appeals to us to change our sinful ways as John did, but Paul is appealing to the redeemed person, to the person whose life is defined by the Christ event so he speaks with a different sort of hope than John did. John spoke only of realizing our sinfulness before the*



*presence of God. Paul speaks of that same realization plus the realization that God has indeed done something about that sinfulness in Christ. Now, connected to the cross through the waters baptism, united with Christ in his death, I am a person who lives a completely different sort of life. I am no longer living as if the scale balancing is something that I must do. I am freed from the petty needs and self-serving ways of this world. That is all behind me because Christ has put it behind me.*

*This changes the way I preach about good works too. I am no longer in the business of peddling holiness and righteousness in steps. I am about a flood of righteousness, an outpouring of God's perfection on the people to whom I speak. They are not transformed as they react to my words and put their minds to what I have to say, my words themselves are the instruments of God's holiness to come to them. The water I splash, the meal I serve, not because I did it but because he does it, these things become the instruments of change.*

*The real question becomes how does one speak to that redeemed man? Paul struggles with this in the next chapter as he acknowledges that he is himself quite conflicted in this regard. There is a war going on inside of his mind and his body. The good he wants to do, the good his redeemed self resolves to do, is often not what he does, and the evil he abhors is the very thing he finds himself doing. Ultimately, who will free him? Praise to Christ, he has freed Paul and he will resolve that same tension in our own lives.*

*We too must consider ourselves dead to sin. That is a mental act. That is where this all starts. We cannot get the holiness or the goodness, or Paul's preferred word, righteousness, by doing it. It starts with who we are, not what we do. We are human beings, not human doings. Paul calls us to consider ourselves dead to sin, because Christ has achieved that.*

1. **Be who you are** (That the hearer would confess the reality of Christ in us, authentically living out the reality of Christ's presence in our lives.)

This sermon will confront head on a cultural sense that we need simply to express our real self and that means I can do whatever I want to do. That has led to a great deal of mischief in our world as folks have often gone off the rails in the name of simply being themselves. A trip through the grocery checkout and a look at the tabloids will likely be all you need to see that.

We want to proclaim another reality, however, the reality that Christ has come to live in us. He who kept the commandments perfectly and who gave himself in sacrifice for me and the whole world, that Jesus has come inside me. Great sacramental connection there. Jesus has come inside of us, not metaphorically, but really!

This reality gives authenticity to our good deeds, our repentance, and our service. This is not me living in response to some divine goodness, this is divine goodness living in me. My life in all its goodness is authentic because it is Christ in me.

Christians, be authentic – live out your Jesus!

2. **Alive to God in Christ Jesus or Baptized into New Life** (That the Spirit of God would slay the old man in Baptismal remembrance and enervate the new man once more to live a new life of hope in Christ.)

This sermon might focus more specifically on vs 4 of the Epistle which speaks of being raised with Christ to walk in a newness of life. This sermon might simply ask why we repent. (See the notes at the end of the opening essay.) If Christ has won for us the salvation which is free and clear, graciously given to us, why should we be sorry for our sins? Why should we try to do better? Why should we do the good thing even when it is hard to do or expensive or unpopular? If Jesus really has done it all, and today we even see him repenting for us, why should we do any of these things?

The answer is not that we might earn something from God. We are not in that old buy and sell relationship which the old man understood so well. (John 5:24 – those who believe have passed from death to life). We do not repent so that we please him. We repent because he has already accepted us. We repent because Jesus has come to live in our lives. The old man who had a God problem is drown in the waters of Baptism. Our problem is no longer a problem with God. We are made anew. We are the regenerate human whom God has raised up from the waters of Baptism, we are the heirs of eternal life. We don't have a God problem we need to fix.

We have a human problem now. Repenting, doing the good, living the life to which God calls us is not saving us or make us more saved, but it is living out that which God has already created in us. It is looking more like Jesus because Jesus is already here. It is simply becoming more and more the people we are by his creative word spoken at the waters of our baptism. We can easily be discouraged when we don't see this. But this text proclaims that Christ is empowering that new man. I will not be a new man by the force of my will or dint of my perseverance. Christ creates, Christ empowers, Christ makes this happen.

The preacher needs to remember that these words of Paul are addressed to the New Man, the regenerate person whom God has created/resurrected anew in baptism. In chapter 7 of Romans Paul takes up the issue of that old stinker who hangs on so tightly to us. He admits (7:27) that only Jesus can free him from this struggle. You cannot only address that new man. The Old Man will completely take advantage of such language and use it as a license to sin, the very problem Paul is addressing here. When we would use the gospel as a license to sin, we are simply not on God's wavelength, we are not in tune with him. We are in tune with the old man, and the old man is dying.

At the same time, the real power over that old man is only found in the Gospel which we here proclaim. The fact is we don't really look like that New Man, sometimes less than other times. But God's Word is Creative (Genesis 1!) The baptismal formulation is not just wishful thinking but it is the same creative voice ringing out in our lives. The new man does exist, even though we often find him hard to see.

The proclaimed word then has the power to enervate that new man who languishes too often under the control of that old stinker who clings too tightly to us. This text proclaims that we are connected to the very life/power of the universe. We have been united with Christ in his death and his resurrection. He has taken up residence in us.

Our obedience then is not some old economy of buy and sell, but it is the new economy of grace. Jesus is breaking out all over the place in our lives. The new man whom he created is showing up. (It would be really good if you had something in your community/congregation to point to at this juncture of the sermon!)

Now the old crusty who clings so tightly is no longer a matter of our discouragement and despair. I know that his fate was sealed on the day of my baptism. God, who began a good work in me (Philippians 1:6) will bring it to completion. The day comes, I count on it, I have hope, the day comes when only this new man shall be seen. I yearn for that day and until then I strive for it. but I strive and yearn in hope. I shall not bring it about, but he will.

(This idea came from one of our regular Tuesday evening interlocutors. Here is Tom's prompt for this sermon:) I was looking at the Romans text with this thought in mind – That the hearer will know that in Christ our old self has died beyond the point of all return, and we have a new life of hope in Jesus. I wanted to work the sermon off of the dying to sin and why we die to sin (Baptism drowns the old Adam), and that because we are connected to Jesus in our Baptism we have new life in him. That is as far as I have gotten in putting an outline together. Just a thought to throw out there if the group is looking for another idea for a sermon.

Matthew 5:(17-19) 20-26 *This reading is heard in the three year series on Epiphany 5 in Series A but with a slightly longer reading. I have included the longer reading as the notes below will reflect that reading.*

<sup>13</sup> *“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.*

<sup>14</sup> *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

<sup>17</sup> *“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. <sup>18</sup> For 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

### **Luther**

1. In this Gospel we see that our der Lord Jesus Christ wants to teach his Christians, assuming they believe and are baptized and now bear the name and the glory of being called Christians and have become recipients of many spiritual blessings and gifts, that they bear in mind that they ought to live uprightly with one another, being neither false nor hypocritical. For he has not given us a counterfeit grace; nor are the sins God has forgiven us imaginary sins; they sins from which he has redeemed us are right deadly. In short, his grace is very serious, real, and vital matter. Therefore, we should be deeply concerned not to deal deceitfully, but faithfully and honestly, with our neighbor, just as God has dealt with us on account of our sins.

5. So now in this Gospel Christ intends to make a distinction between true saints and hypocrites. His point is: Here in this world, false and true saints are running about everywhere; but I am a righteous God, and I help in righteous manner. Whoever wants to be in my kingdom and glory in my grace must likewise be righteous. Whoever refuses to be righteous will not be one of my people, and I do not want to be his God. The scribes and Pharisees seek to do good hypocritically; but these false saints I do not accept in my kingdom.

6. Therefore, let everyone learn, first of all, that he must believe in Christ, thank, praise, and extol God, and confess is faith before all the world. As regards worship forms, these are sufficient and a person needs no more, except that he ought to assist other people also enter in.

11. Then God also wants us seriously to take hold of ourselves and quickly bridle anger; but if we cannot instantly rid the heart of it, then at least grapple with it so that the animosity still harbored in the heart may not manifest itself on the face and the tongue, much less with the fist. Whoever wants to be a true Christian should say to God, Dear God, in this commandment you have poured out your heart and will, as to how I should conduct myself toward my neighbor; that is your Word and truth. Well then, dear God, I want to treat my neighbor kindly and help him; grant me your grace, power, and Spirit so that I may bring it to pass. If our attitude is composed in this way, we then have a gracious God and Father, and he then finds us to be grateful and obedient children. He has thrown us all together so that we might help and not harm one another, neither with fist, demeanor, nor tongue.

15. We must, therefore, keep the place of secular authority properly distinguished in its relationship to the fifth commandment. In the kingdom of Christ there is to be no anger, only kindness and love; the heart is not to be bitter against anyone, and neither mouth nor hand are to cause anyone grief. But in the kingdom of the world, in secular and domestic headship, there mouth, tongue, and hand, in accord with each person's rank and function, should act,

reprimand, and punish all who do what is wrong and refuse to perform what they are commanded. If they refuse, then punishment is in order, not indulgence and mercy. Moreover, whoever hesitates to punish gives occasion for the highest judge, God himself, to come and administer punishment. There one has little choice. For when God comes, it is indeed with force and power.

*(Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils Vol. 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker, 1996. 320-326.)*

*I have never quite understood why so many people love the Sermon on the Mount. (My grammar editor in MSWord even knows to capitalize it!) It is not that I have a problem with the content, but the purpose of what Jesus says here. It seems designed to crush me. Just take a look at the last verses of our reading for today. If my righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, I won't enter heaven. These guys gave new meaning to religious zeal. They tithed from the mint plants in their gardens and had Bible studies that lasted all day. If my righteousness does not exceed theirs, I won't get in. Even they are not good enough.*

*The earlier verses don't do much to build me up either. I am salt, and if it don't do the salty thing, I might just get used as gravel. I am light, and the whole world is supposed to see me and give glory to God. Yet, whenever I got cut off by a car in traffic in Salt Lake City, it always seemed they had a fish emblem on their bumper. (This was how the Christians identified themselves in that culture.)*

*Jesus has not come to abolish the Law and Prophets, yet, as soon as I raise this issue, the Seventh Day Adventist is in my face with his claim that I have done just that by not observing a Saturday Sabbath.*

*Do I really want to preach this text?*

*Yes, I do, and so do you. This is where it is really good to be a Lutheran. That old Law and Gospel dynamic is a blessing when you come to a text like this. Because it categorizes this work of Christ as his necessary and loving work of breaking my pride and crushing my sin, it allows my eyes to be opened to the powerful Gospel contained in this passage. Jesus has not come to overthrow and abolish the Law and Prophets, far from it, he has come himself to keep them, himself to fulfill them. God's righteous demand, the horror of my own failure in this regard, has been met by his loving gift in Christ.*

*Jesus can speak this hard word to me, he can make this a terror to anyone, because the answer is also right here in front of us. He has not come give me some new rules that I can keep this time. He is not interested in my obedience just for that obedience's sake. The one speaking these words is also the one who has kept this law, perfectly, without blemish or stain. He has not abolished it, he has fulfilled it. One might play with the idea of "fulfill" here – full and then filled? Jesus is not merely the keeper of the Law, but the one who has brought it to completion and perfection. There simply is not more law to be kept once he has done it.*

*The careful interpreter of the text will also notice something here. The Bible is more than an owner's manual of life, it is much more than a regular maintenance schedule and a list of things we should do. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's great love and promise, made to the first parents in the garden so long ago. This is God restoring that which was lost. Mankind fell into sin, and a man, a perfect man, is the way out of that morass. This isn't about us getting it right, it is all about God getting it right.*

*I imagine this is pretty obvious to you, but you might be surprised at just how surprising this is to so many folks. I remember sitting in a seminar with a Presbyterian oriented guy in St. Andrews a few years ago. We were in a good theological conversation but we were simply talking past one another. I could not figure it out until I realized that he was using the word "authority" very differently from me. He used the word to mean God's authority to tell me how to live my life. I did not disagree that God had such authority, but that is a small part of God's authority. The much more significant authority possessed by God is the authority to define my life, to call it into being, to create it. He could only see God as the authority to make the rules. I was talking about the authority to make the life itself. We never did quite see eye to eye.*

**Sermon Idea:** A Righteousness Which Exceeds That of the Scribes and Pharisees (OT and Gospel Lessons: That God would comfort and empower the hearers – he has given them the demanded righteousness in Christ which now empowers a life which truly worships and bears beautiful testimony to Christ.)

This sermon has a twofold goal, really, perhaps too ambitious, but I think the first part can be taken care of quite easily. The question which the preacher wants to ask in this case is whether he wants to get through it easily. If you remove this tension too quickly, you might wonder if there is any energy for the second part. But I believe that it can still be done, and the tension can move from destructive to healthy.

The first part of this really hangs on the words of Jesus and Isaiah to their communities. Jesus speaks of a righteousness which exceeds the holiest people of his day. Isaiah notices that the church going folk of his time are repulsive to God in their worship. Both of them set up a terrible scenario for the religiously motivated person. There is no way to please God. Please note that this will not be a problem for the atheist. He doesn't think there is a God to please. But for the person who is certain of God's existence, this presents a terrible quandary.

The answer is easy, but as I said the preacher may not want it to be. The righteousness which exceeds the scribal and pharisaical righteousness is given in Christ. He fulfills the law as even they do not. He gives us that righteousness in his death and resurrection, in the baptism by which he touches us and the Sacrament by which he feeds us. God is our help; he has heard our cry and answered "here I am."

But for too many of us this has become an excuse for why I don't need to do much instead of an empowerment to do more. Such a reaction to the gift of God is nothing less than faithless and we need to examine that reality. It was the church goers that Isaiah scolded, and he really is

suggesting that they are not the people of God. Jesus is destroying the hope of the people who are already pretty sure that they have been confirmed, know the catechism, and are surely on the roster of heaven's invited guests.

That said, look at the lives of the people who believed what Jesus said here and held that he was indeed the very righteousness and salvation of God. The disciples to a man would spend their lives in his service and shed their blood on his account. This was not of their doing, it was Christ living and dying in them and through them. He empowered them to be these people because he was right there, present.

The gift of Jesus does not release us to lives of sloth and indolence, grousing about getting up on Sunday and begrudging every moment of service to our fellow human being. The gift of Jesus empowers our worship. We have the promise that God hears us. He is here to forgive us and loves us. He unites himself to us and walks out those doors with us into the world in which we live. His presence empowers our service, now every moment of every day is lived for him, for he has purchased them all and filled every moment with his overflowing goodness.