

Matthew 5:21-37
6th Sunday after the Epiphany
February 16, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

Two Sundays ago, our Gospel readings began a course through the longest section of red letters in the Bible. This is Jesus' sermon on the mount. It began with the beatitudes, those statements of blessing from Jesus. The poor in spirit are blessed. Those who mourn are blessed. Those who are meek are blessed. Those thirsty and hungry for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the Christians who are persecuted for the sake of Christ. All of them are blessed, in Christ, by Christ, and because of Christ. We won't get to cover all of these red letter words because next Sunday we have the Transfiguration and then we move into Lent. But perhaps it is because of some of these words as Jesus corrected things in the sermon on the mount, and certainly because of many others, that many thought Jesus was just coming to stir up trouble, to rebel against the establishment, to twist the Law around to ways that were foreign to their ears and their practices.

But then last week He followed it with 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."** And He ended that section with these words, **"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."**

The Law Jesus is laying down isn't new. Sometimes it seems harsher, like Jesus is adding more burden. But the reality is that He is just restoring the proper understanding of His Law, because, like it or not, for the Pharisees and the scribes (and even for us), life is filled with loopholes and technicalities. They and we are continually looking for those escape clauses in the contract. We're looking for the easy way out, a way in which the Law of God does not apply to our particular circumstance. And we are so turned in on ourselves, that while we want the loophole for ourselves, we also want the "catch" that keeps the other person in the wrong so we can compare ourselves to them and feel better, to feel "not so bad" or even "pretty good."

But with Jesus' final words from last week and His words this morning, He is saying, if you *want* the Law *abolished*, check with the Pharisees. If you want the Law *relaxed*, check with the scribes. If you want a "pass" for a certain circumstance in your life, check with those guys. They'll bend it, twist it, and break it to suit your needs...as long as they like you. Otherwise, watch out. Because they'll also bend it, and twist it, and break it so *they* can look more righteous as they use *you* as an example, a cautionary tale. But if you want to know what I really meant when I gave those words to Moses on another mountain top, listen up!

You may think you have kept the Law because you haven't murdered. You may think you have kept the Law because you haven't stepped out on your spouse. You may think you have kept the Law because you followed the proper procedures for divorce. And you may even think that you have kept the Law because you made your promises at the right time of day, in the right way, in front of the right person. You may think you have done all of these things properly in accordance with the Mishna. But I am telling you, these outward acts do not fulfill the Law because your hearts are still rotten. In your hearts you have violated these and all of My commandments. And while you can relax your outward standards, and twist and bend and break my Law to appear righteous before men, My Father searches the heart.

Jesus makes it very clear that outward sin starts in the heart. Murder, lust, adultery, slander and lying, (along with all the others, coveting, theft, dishonoring parents, and dishonoring God along with His name and His holy day,) all of these sins begin in the heart. Even if they haven't borne outward fruit of sin, they are still offenses against God's Law.

And Jesus tells us what to do about it. **"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole**

body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

Jesus words today are similar to last week when He talked about salt losing flavor or when He mentioned hiding a light that is meant to brighten the room. It’s an argument *ad ridiculum*, an implausible circumstance. Of course, salt is always salt. Of course, nobody hides the lamp. And of course, you are not going to chop off any body parts.

But what if we took Jesus’ words seriously? What if we hungered and thirsted for righteousness so much that we were willing to get rid of whatever was causing us to sin? We could gouge out an eye or two. We could even lop off a hand and get someone else to do the other one. Our feet, our arms, our legs—all of them could be removed if they caused us to sin. But what do we do when the offending body part is the heart? We can’t remove our heart! That would kill us! What hope do we have? That’s exactly the point! We can’t do any of this. We could be left with nothing but a torso due to all the outward offenses we are prone to commit, but the inward cause would remain.

While Jesus is using hyperbole and isn’t saying we should actually cut off body parts, He is saying we should take radical action. And that action is taking His Law seriously. When we focus on His original spirit of His Law rather than our human letter of the Law with all our twisting and bending and loophole making, we will see that we have broken His Law in thought as well as in word and deed. And when we take it seriously, we will find ourselves broken. We will find ourselves crushed by the Law. We will find ourselves poor in spirit. And when we do, we will find ourselves in good company.

Our OT hero David also had a rotten heart. He lusted after another man’s wife. He schemed to get her by having her husband killed. All of his outward sin flowed from his inward sin. But when confronted with his sin he didn’t try to find a loophole. That’s what got him into his mess. Instead he acknowledged his sin and repented. And he found the blessing of forgiveness.

1 John 1 tells us **If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [But] if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

So we also, when we are crushed by the Law and when we are hungering and thirsting for righteousness can also cry out as David did:

**“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment...**

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” Psalm 51:1-4, 10-12

We won’t find any loopholes in God’s Law. But in repentance, when we take His Law seriously, when we see that we have not kept it in our actions or even in our thoughts, when we come to Him poor in spirit, mourning over our sin, hungering and thirsting for His righteousness, we will find that He has already fulfilled the Law for us. And we will find that He has already taken our filthy hearts and cleansed them with His blood at the cross and has given us a new and pure heart filled with His Spirit. And we will find that each and every time we come to Him. No loopholes, just grace and blessing from the cross and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.