

FULFILLING THE LAW

Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday in Epiphany (Series A)

February 5, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 13 through 20. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 5, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³“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.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

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

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are certain things in life where, if you're missing one piece of information, it can ruin the whole thing or leave you in great confusion. For example, if you're baking a cake, and you miss the part about how you're supposed to mix the ingredients, you'll have a very crumbly cake, and not in the way that cakes are normally crumbly. Imagine if you baked a cake without mixing the ingredients. One part would be very eggy, another part would just be a clump of flour, and one bite would be extremely salty. The mixing step is essential.

Or suppose you're a child, and you're learning multiplication for the first time. The teacher starts with two times two. It equals four. And you think to yourself, *This is easy, it's just like addition. I already know this.* So you stop paying attention. Then on your next math test you only get one question right out of fifty. You thought you aced it, so you have no idea how you got so many wrong, or why the teacher thinks one right is two percent. You're missing something, and it's very confusing.

And Jesus teaches us something in this passage, which, if we miss it, could leave us confused or just plain wrong. It's where he says, **“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”** (5:17). If we do not understand

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this about Jesus, he will be a very confusing character, and we will have no chance of rightly understanding Christian doctrine.

Because, at one moment, Jesus seems to care about obedience to the Law more than anything else in the entire universe. And at another moment, he acts as if the Law doesn't matter at all. And when we use the word "Law," by the way, we mean God's commandments. "The Law is the divine Word which tells us what we must do" (H.U. Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*, q. 11). If we're missing part of the formula, it can be very confusing. Jesus might appear as a strict master one moment and a hippie the next moment. But, in reality, he is neither.

On the strict side, Jesus says things like, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Or a little later he gets even stricter than what we thought the Law originally was. He says, "You have heard that it was said ..., 'You shall not murder.' ... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; ... and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire" (5:21-22). That's really strict. That's a moral standard that condemns us all to hell in the blink of an eye. And there are many more statements like this. He applies the same intensity to the sin of adultery, saying, "That everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (5:28). And, again, the penalty for this is hell (5:29-30).

But then, at other times, Jesus seems very accepting. He forgives sins before people even confess them. For example, some people bring a paralytic to Jesus. And before the guy even says anything, Jesus says, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt. 9:2). On another occasion, he walks up to an adulterous woman at a well and offers her eternal life, before she even confesses that she has a problem (John 4:10). Another time, the scribes and Pharisees brought to him a woman who was caught in adultery. This was kind of a challenge to Jesus. *You claim to care about the Law? Here you go. What are you going to do with this woman who was caught breaking the Law?* And Jesus does not condemn her (John 8:3-11). At other times, Jesus welcomes tax collectors, prostitutes, and various other sinners. He accepts them, and he dines with them.

It's all very confusing. It's like we have two different Jesuses, one that values the Law above all things, and another who accepts people so freely that he doesn't even seem to care about the Law. And so it's like there are two different Christian religions, one that judges all sinners, and another that accepts all people and every behavior.

So what gives? We might think that the truth is somewhere in the middle, like we should find a happy medium, like there's a hot water tap and cold water tap, and we just need to find the balance between the two. Then we'll find the real Jesus and the real Christian religion. No! Banish that temptation from your mind! All we would have then is a lukewarm Jesus who's no good to anybody. And it would not explain why Jesus speaks one way at one time, and another way at another time. The real Jesus, who is serious about the Law in one moment, and accepting toward sinners in the next moment, does not fit into a happy medium. The answer must be some way that both of these extremes are true at the same time. And it's this: "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."

Jesus takes the Law very seriously, and we should too. When we consider the conflict that Jesus often had with the scribes and Pharisees in his day, it might seem that the scribes and Pharisees just took the Law too seriously. But this is false. They did not take the Law too seriously. That's impossible to do. Jesus took the Law more seriously than they did. If anything,

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they were too relaxed with the Law. They were not strict enough. The basic problem was that they thought the Law was attainable. They thought that if they tried hard enough, they could do it. They saw the Law as a test, one which, if we pass, God will grant us eternal life. And they thought the test was passable. This is why they created extra traditions and commandments. It's why they added instructions about how far you could walk on the Sabbath day or how to make your divorce acceptable. They felt the need to explain exactly how a person could keep the Law, and to what extent a person had to obey each commandment in order to pass the test. So they attempted to explain how each commandment is attainable. They really had too low a view of the Law. But Jesus has a much higher view of the Law. So he knows that we are not capable of keeping it, but he still commands us to keep it.

Believing that we can earn eternal life or a higher status in God's eyes by keeping the commandments is legalism. Sometimes this word gets used wrongly, especially when people are arguing about the Law. It happens on the internet a lot, but sometimes in real life too. If one person thinks another person is being too strict or taking the Law too seriously, they'll say, "You're being a legalist." I've been called a legalist in this way. What does that mean? It usually means that you're too insistent on obedience to the Law. But it is impossible to be too insistent on the Law, because the Law is good. It is impossible to take it too seriously. We should all take it much more seriously than we really do. If someone is doing something that is a sin, it is absolutely right to tell them not to do it. Now, there is a right way and a wrong way to go about it. But telling a person not to sin is good. And it's not legalism, either. Legalism is not taking the Law too seriously. Legalism is believing that, by observing the Law, we can earn eternal life or achieve a higher status in the Kingdom of God. That's legalism, and it's actually a low view of the Law, and a high view of man's ability. But it is certainly not taking the Law too seriously.

On the other side is what we could call "antinomianism." That's a fancy theological word. If you don't remember it, that's okay. It comes from the Greek word νόμος (*nomos*), which means, "Law." Antinomianism means to be against the Law. It means that you oppose the Law, you want to abolish it, or maybe you just kind of ignore it. This is what some thought Jesus was doing when he accepted sinners. Or, at least, it seems that way if we're missing the key part of the formula. It seemed like Jesus was too accepting of certain people. But, just like taking the Law too seriously, that's impossible to do. You cannot really be too accepting of a person, because every person is a precious eternal soul, created in the image of God, and he loves each person to an unfathomable extent.

But if we only notice that Jesus is accepting of all people, and we ignore how serious he is about the Law, and if we miss the part about him fulfilling the Law, we might think that Jesus accepts all people because all people are good.

So why did Jesus accept people? Why did he accept those adulterous women, prostitutes, tax collectors, and all kinds of sinners? Was it because their sin wasn't really that bad? That's how the world treats sin today. They say things like, "Love is love." What does that mean? Literally, it doesn't mean anything, but people do mean something when they say it. And I think they mean that nobody has a right to define what love means for someone else. If someone calls something "love," you have to accept that. And "love," however someone wants to define it, is always good. That, I think, is what they mean when they say, "Love is love." So everyone gets to decide for themselves what is love and what is good. Part of the problem with this way of thinking, though, is that God actually does get to define what love is, and he has. His commandments define what love is. It also flips the entire concept of love on its head. Instead of being self-

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sacrificial, love is whatever we want it to be. It takes selfishness and self-indulgence and calls it love, when that is the exact opposite of love.

One of the ironies of antinomianism is that it usually ends up being very moralistic. You get rid of certain laws, but a world without laws is a moral vacuum. You thought that getting rid of those laws would make the world better. But it's not better, so something must still be wrong with it, and you can't help but create different laws to fill the void. So you try to make a law out of tolerance, and it ironically ends up being very intolerant, because you have to silence anyone who's not tolerant in the way you want them to be tolerant.

The really ironic thing, though, is that it makes acceptance very weak. And the downright tragic thing is that it makes forgiveness irrelevant. If everyone is good, and if everyone's choices are good, then what's really so great about accepting all of this? Is it really all that hard to accept something that's good? It even makes Jesus' acceptance rather shallow. I mean, if Jesus looks at us and thinks, *Eh, they're not so bad, and I can understand where they're coming from*, then it doesn't really cost him very much to accept us.

But we need to understand why Jesus accepted all people. And we also need to recognize the extent to which Jesus accepted all people. Jesus did not accept all people because we are really good. He accepted all people because we are really bad, and we need him to take us. And so Jesus' acceptance does not stop at saying, "Hey, you're okay. It's fine to commit adultery, sluff off at work, and mock your parents, because they don't really 'get it' anyway." If Jesus accepts us because we're not really that bad, and others don't understand us, but he gets us, then his acceptance doesn't really have that much depth or value to it.

But Jesus doesn't say that we're okay. To the woman who was caught in adultery, he said, **"Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more"** (John 8:11). Jesus can, at the same time, wholeheartedly accept a person and tell them they're a moral mess. And he does both as an act of love, because it is not good for us to be a moral mess, and Jesus wants what is good for us.

So for Jesus to accept you does not mean that he pretends your sin is okay. Nor does he tolerate it. For him to accept you means that he accepts it as his own. He takes it into himself. This is a much more extreme kind of acceptance than the world ever expected. He hates our sin so much that he accepts it as his own so he can get rid of it.

This is what Jesus means when he says, **"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."** He has fulfilled the Law for us. He kept every commandment perfectly. He fulfilled the Law in himself, and he fulfilled it for our sake. This is why he accepts all people. He accepted us. He accepted our sin as his own. He took it into his own body, and he accepted the consequence of it: death. And it was a brutal death. He was forsaken by his Father, because that is the consequence of sin. He did all this willingly and joyfully for you, so that he, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, can accept you as a redeemed and forgiven child. Because Jesus has kept every commandment perfectly, and because he has taken your sin away from you, he gives you his perfect righteousness in its place. He fulfilled the Law, and he gives that fulfillment to you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.