

SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY (70TH SUNDAY)

MATTHEW 5:17-26

NO CONFIDENCE IN PERSONAL PERFORMANCE

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle [one dot or stroke] will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' [term of contempt] shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Have you ever thought that you “aced” something, only to find out that you did poorly—whether a test, a competition, a project at work or at home? Our text from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount stresses the same thing—only in regard to keeping God’s commandments and will. No matter how proud of your performance you may be, realize that in His eyes, your performance is lackluster. He does not just judge on the surface, but He looks at the heart.

Jesus had made it very clear that He had come to rescue sinners from the impossible demands of God’s Law. This did not mean that He had come to take the commands of God to the dump heap. *I did not come to destroy but to fulfill . . . Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle [one dot or stroke] will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.* He came to rescue sinners by fulfilling the law—by keeping it 100%. God’s commands stand. He doesn’t change or bend the rules, or make exceptions for anyone, not even you. We like to think in terms of exceptions. “Because I have paid all my bills on time with business XYZ, they will make an exception for one late payment. Because I haven’t overdrawn my bank account for 8 years, they’ll make an exception. Because I have not had an accident for 14 years, I’ll get some accident forgiveness. Because I really didn’t mean to make that play on the checker board, I’ll get to take it back.” God’s Law does not operate with exceptions, whether it’s misusing His name (“I say it without even thinking; I don’t really mean it”), whether its pandering to sinful thoughts (“a person can’t be good all the time”), whether it’s lying (“I will prevent a lot of heartache if I conceal the truth”). God’s law stands. Wrong is wrong. *Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.* No excuses, not for breaking just one of the least of His commandments. *And teaching others so.* Well, maybe you feel better, because you at least don’t teach others to do so. Don’t you? Not in a seminar or a classroom, but every time you rationalize your wrong conduct to yourself and others, you’re seeking to convince that it’s ok.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. The scribes and the Pharisees were highly noted for their meticulous lives under all God’s rules of the Old Testament. They prided themselves in their performance. They even counted out a tenth of their “mint and rue and all manner of herbs” (Luke 11:42) lest they shortchange God. (I guess they never thought of simply giving more than 10% !) To please God, even more than what they did is required. Can you? Now what?

Now what? Whose performance is good enough? Anybody here? The Law’s requirements stand until *all the Law is fulfilled*. But someone has fulfilled the Law perfectly. Jesus, God’s Son, true God, also true man, did no sin. The Father was well pleased with Him, as was said on the mount of Transfiguration. Jesus fulfilled the whole law—for us, even taking death for our sin. He came forth alive from the tomb, victorious! On Him were all the demands and the curse of the law laid, and in Him they have been fulfilled and lifted. You are forgiven and have life! *Whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* Jesus “does” them and Jesus “teaches” them, and through faith in Jesus, you are great in God’s kingdom! Success through Jesus!

The Sermon on the Mount continues with Jesus giving examples of how it seems easy to keep the law, and yet we are such miserable failures. He speaks of sins hidden below the surface in connection with murder, adultery, divorce, God's Name, loving one's neighbor, charitable deeds, prayers, treasures on earth, judging others, hearing the Word. We look at just the very first one today—murder.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that . . . whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' [term of contempt] shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool' shall be in danger of hell fire. These are very jolting words! Murder itself is easy to see—it ends someone's life. It ends someone's time to come to know the Savior and to grow stronger in the Savior. The murderer acts as if he is God—"Time's up." ---- But, *Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment?* How far away from murder is anger? Anger, like murder, stems from an unloving heart. "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer. And you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (I John 3:15). When "hot" with anger against someone, hatred is in the heart—you don't care if the person dies. Such anger is wrong. ---- There is also a righteous anger. God has righteous anger, when He deals with gross sinners. This verse is not talking about righteous anger; then it would be calling God a sinner. But Beware! Righteous anger can turn into hateful anger.

What about name calling? "Raca" empty head, numbskull! "Fool" careless, senseless, godless good-for-nothing! What about these? When names are used to tear someone down, lack of love rules the day. It is a sin. "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (I John 4:20). God is not pleased with loveless words toward a neighbor, especially a brother in the faith.

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. God looks for peace between His children. If you have made someone angry, if someone has made you angry, if there is a falling-out and parting-of-the-ways, Jesus says, Re-establish peace. Be reconciled, Do not just ignore or brush it off--whether against a friend or family member. It's easy to say, "He'll get over it. She'll eventually forget it." And move on. But with such a solution, the hurt caused seems to "go away," the painful memory seems to be "buried," but the issue is not settled. It won't take much for the wound to re-open or the memory to return. It's easy to say, "I've forgiven; but if they haven't forgiven me, that's their problem." Is that what the Lord says? *Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.* Make peace with one another.

It's not just a matter of peace between people. It's also a matter of peace between a person and God. How can one hope to have a right relationship with God, if sin is not left behind? Tell me about the person who comes to worship seeking peace with God while working at an abortion clinic, while scamming funds from someone or some agency? Something's wrong! Does this passage also refer to standing before the Lord at Holy Communion? How can one say, "Lord I seek your forgiveness," while there is an issue that has not been brought to peace between two children of God? If one contends the word "gift" in this passage is not talking about someone "seeking forgiveness" but wishing to bring a gift to God for past forgiveness, is there really any difference? To seek being in God's fellowship, while not being "at one" with another, is a contradiction. Someone may also contend, "It's forgiveness from God that motivates us to be forgiving and peaceable with one another." That is true, but Jesus' words are not addressed to new seekers of forgiveness. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to disciples, who already knew the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of God. You also are not new seekers of forgiveness from God. When coming to the Lord's Supper, be at peace with your "brother."

Do you hear this sermon and exclaim, "That's telling them, Pastor!"? If so, you missed it. This sermon is talking to each of you, and to me too. Is there something between someone and you, that has not been settled and reconciled? If so, you need to deal with it posthaste. If your husband or your wife made you angry this morning, or yesterday, and the matter has not been resolved and reconciled, *leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

In the end, how wretched we are. Take heart. Included in the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer. And included in the Lord's Prayer are the words, "Father, . . . forgive us our trespasses." These verses speak to you also. There is mercy and forgiveness in Jesus, for your sins too. Through Jesus, the Father takes you in His arms with love. "You are all children [sons] of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). You are accounted righteous and just in Christ. Through Jesus, you have "aced" God's law. Rejoice!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---