

"The Full Law"

Matthew 5:21-37

February 13, 2011

6th Sunday After the Epiphany

A stereotype is a generalization about a person or a group of persons. It can be positive or negative. For example, people will say that the Irish are drunks or blacks are superior athletes. Often, stereotypes prove to be dead wrong. And nowhere is that more true than in a very popular Biblical stereotype.

When I was a kid in Sunday School, I remember hearing stories about the Pharisees and teachers of the law. I envisioned them as having black beards and scowls on their faces. They were all about laws and strict obedience to them. Jesus, on the other hand, I envisioned having a brown beard and a kindly look. He was all about freedom from the law and simple love.

It wasn't until much later that I found these to be stereotypes (erroneous stereotypes to boot). The stereotypical view of the Pharisees and teachers of the law is the first to go. Not too long ago, I heard someone say that it was actually the Pharisees and teachers of the law who had a weak understanding of the Law of God. I wondered what that meant. The person said that the Pharisees and teachers of the law watered down God's Law by making it "do-able." While it may be difficult, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law thought you could merit God's favor and attain to the resurrection of the dead by virtue of your righteous living.

I think that's where many of us are at today. Every activity in which we participate – from school to sports to our jobs – is based on merit. You gain favor and rewards by how good you do something. It's easy to let this attitude slip into our relationship with God. Although we talk about grace a lot, we still look at God's Law and think it's "doable". We see the Ten Commandments and figure, "Well, I haven't murdered anybody or committed adultery. I guess I'm doing pretty good."

Perhaps this is why worship attendance is sometimes low. We don't see it as something we urgently need. We see it as a spiritual tune-up which we *may* need from time to time. Other than that, we can pretty much handle things on our own.

The stereotype of Jesus as meek and mild and not concerned about law, but only about love also falls apart in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus is preaching the Law and He pulls no punches. He is not preaching the Law in the way that His disciples had heard it before. He begins each section by saying, "You have heard it said...." These are the interpretations which the Pharisees proclaimed and the teachers of the Law taught. They either made the Law doable by seeing it only in its broadest terms or by watering it down so that it could be obeyed. Jesus says, "But I say unto you..." He will give the true explanation of His Law in all of its specificity and severity.

"You have heard it was said to those of old," Jesus begins. "You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment." We're comfortable with that Law because we can do it. None of us have taken a human life. So we feel pretty good about that.

"But I say unto you," Jesus goes on, "that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Wow! This is something completely different. "You can 'murder' someone in your heart or with your words. Bitter insults partake of the same poisonous root as murder and bitter insults all can lead down the road to eternal damnation. It is an especially grievous matter when a disciple treats a fellow Christian, a 'brother' in this way." (Gibbs, p.282) That hits a little closer to home.

Jesus goes on, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" Ok, another "big" sin there. We can handle that Law. But then Jesus says, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Can we handle that full interpretation of God's Law? With the filth in movies and the low standards in television programs not only existing but being accepted as normal, even by some Christians, who has not been exposed to sexually inappropriate material or even sought it out? With the internet pumping raw sexually explicit material into our homes through our computers, who has not had lustful thoughts? Yet these thoughts, desires, and actions are worthy of hell, Jesus says, just as much as the physical act of adultery itself. That makes us a little uncomfortable.

Jesus moves on to handle a different way in which God's Law had misunderstood and misapplied. Jesus says, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Like today, the predominant view of that time was that divorce was morally acceptable and an available and acceptable option. "The really important thing was to divorce in the right way." (Gibbs, p.293) Make sure you give your wife this certificate so she can legally get married again. "But I say to you," Jesus says, "that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." The teachers of that time, like many in our day, had watered down God's Law to make it easier. Divorce is okay as long as you do it in the right way. That is wrong. What is sinful was not divorcing in the wrong way. What is sinful is divorce itself. Wow...that can make us really uncomfortable.

Finally, Jesus takes up the 8th commandment. He says, "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'" In other words, like with divorce, it's not that swearing is sinful but how you swear can be sinful. The teachers of the Law were saying, "Do not break oaths. Rather, be sure to honor the oaths that are sworn directly to the Lord, for these have a more binding force than oaths that are sworn by something else." (Gibbs, p.299)

"But I say to you," Jesus continues, "Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." Not only is there no need to make sure you keep the right oaths or swear by the right thing; there is no need to swear at all. Instead of calling God or anything else to support the truthfulness of your statement, simply say "yes" or "no". "The tendency to use words carelessly, to break promises, and to exalt oneself by means of one's words come from one certain source: 'the evil one', Satan himself, the father of broken and misleading and empty promises." (Gibson, p.299)

How's that "obedience thing" going for you now? By the words of the Son of God Himself, we see that God's Law is much more than a few major rules which govern our actions. God's Law

governs not only our actions, but our words, our emotions, and our thoughts. God's Law cannot be watered down so that it agrees with our desired behavior or the morals of our culture.

Such an extensive and all inclusive Law can produce two reactions in us. First, you might be angry, especially if Jesus' condemnations touch behavior in which you are now engaged or which you have justified in the past. "How can God possibly expect all that of us?" you might hotly exclaim. Yet it is what Jesus says

Or, you may be full of fear and guilt. "How can I possibly live up to all of that?" you might whisper. You have a hard enough time controlling your behavior. How hard it is – even impossible – to control every one of your words and every one of your thoughts every day of your lives. The threat of hell fire promised by Jesus for such ordinary offenses as getting angry, insulting someone, being turned on by a sexy member of the opposite sex, getting divorced, or swearing can be truly frightening.

We stand condemned but it is not the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who condemns us. It is Jesus – more specifically, His Law in all of its specificity – which condemns us. You have heard it was said that sin – violations of God's Law, not only in actions, but in thought, attitude, and words – condemns us. Every violation of God's Law – not just the "big sin" – will damn us all to hells. This applies to us and not just to "those people" out there who are sinners. Jesus was talking to His disciples of the 1st century when He originally preached this. He is preaching it to disciples of the 21st century now.

But I say unto you this burden of sin, whether big sins or small sins, sin of action, sin of thought, sin of word – all of it has been taken on by Jesus. The condemnation of those sins was taken by Jesus when He was condemned to the cross. The punishment for those sins was experienced by Jesus when He suffered all, including the pangs of hell, and died on that cross. The debt of those sins has been paid in full when Jesus said, "It is finished" – "It is paid in full." Every

violation of the Law, big or small, thought, word, or deed has been paid for by Christ. That payment was ratified and the receipt given for it when Jesus rose victorious from the grave to life again.

What about the righteousness demanded of Jesus in His exposition of the Law? Does He just say, “Oh, forgot about that now. It doesn’t matter what you do. I love you just the way you are”? By no means. Just prior to our text, Jesus said, “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.” The Law for us is not abolished. It is fulfilled for us by Jesus Christ.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:19) Not only do we have the forgiveness for all past offenses by Jesus’ death on the cross, we have His perfect holiness for the future by virtue of His perfect life. We are joined to that holiness in our baptism and it becomes ours.

This turns our lives upside down. Sin is much more than big sins of action which we think we can handle. Sin infects our thoughts, our words, our attitudes, and our emotions.

Jesus’ work for us is more than dying on the cross to forgive a few bad sins. Jesus’ work is giving us His complete holiness and taking away the complete wretchedness of our sin by His perfect life, His bearing of our sin, His suffering of hell itself, and His agonizing death.

Worship is more than religious entertainment which we may or may not want or a spiritual tune-up which we may or may not need. Worship is the life blood of a Christian. For with sin as huge of a problem that it is (bigger than we may have realized), we literally cling to Christ as we hear His Word and feast upon His body and blood so that sin may not sweep us away. Worship is not an option. It is a blessed necessity, a life-line to eternity.

Life is more than “being good” and not doing any bad sins. Living is seeing all aspects of our existence – thought, word, and deed – as being governed by God’s expectations for us. It is living by the power of the Holy Spirit received in Word and Sacrament. It is living in the forgiveness of sins

won for us by Jesus' death on the cross. It is living in the life everlasting won for us by Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which we enjoy right here and now and will continue to do so for all eternity.

There are no stereotypes in Jesus. The Law is not directions about a few big sins or rules watered down so that we might obey them. It as severe and all encompassing as He describes it. The Gospel of God's love for us in Jesus Christ is not some schmaltzy feeling for weak people who can't make it on their own. It is the power of God to save those who are condemned to eternal death by the Law and to bring them to everlasting life in heaven. Thanks be to God for that! Amen.