

Epiphany 6-February 12, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, Matthew 5:21-37,48

"Your Solution" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

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

How do you like the scriptures for today? Do you like the first reading for today and the choice that Moses seems to be giving you? Moses seems to draw a clear line between life and death and blessings and curses and Moses claims that ending up on the right side of the line between these two endings seems to be within your control. Many churches and people call this choice that you can make your "free will". But who wouldn't want life instead of death or a blessing from God rather than a curse? Moses even removes any question so you don't step on the wrong side of the dividing line by directing you on what you must do to receive these blessings and life. Moses says, **if** you love the Lord, walk in his ways, observe his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, **then** the Lord will bless you. If you do this, then the Lord will do that. It's up to you. Well best wishes to you as you work to make these good choices.

How about the words from the Psalm for today? Did these words make you happy as the Psalmist suggested they would? If you were, you must have been walking blamelessly in the law of the Lord this week, today, or at least while this Psalm was being read. If you were happy while hearing this psalm, you must have never done anything wrong and have always walked in all the right ways of the Lord. If you were happy while hearing this psalm you must have **fully** kept **all** the Lord's commandments. You might have felt a little at ease in listening to this Psalm if you were at least comparing yourself with some of the sinners sitting next to you today or someone that you know has not kept the commandments as good as you have. And if the person you were comparing yourself to isn't here today, you must at least be better at keeping the Sabbath day holy than they are today. But if you are like me, after hearing this Psalm, you will not be happy, but instead will feel accused that you have not kept any of the commandments and will utter the same words as the author of this psalmist as he ended this prayer for mercy by imploring to the Lord, "Do not utterly forsake me."

Maybe you don't think the commandments pertain to you. Maybe you think since they were given to the Jews, they have no impact on you. Maybe you think the church should only be preaching grace. There is a name for this. It is called Antinomianism which means without the law. This has been a source of controversy between Christians ever since Jesus died on the cross for you. But Jesus does not support this doctrine of the elimination of the law. We just heard last week that Jesus did not come to abolish the law, he came to fulfill the law. Jesus also said in his sermon on the mount that until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of the letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Jesus knows how the law can make you feel, and it doesn't feel good.

When I teach confirmation students, unlike what Jesus did today, we take the commandments in order. These students often try their best to defend themselves on how they have not broken certain commandments. They often want to believe that since they belong to a denomination that believes in One God that they don't have any other gods. Their hopes of keeping this one is easily dashed as they can name many other things that will choose over God such as their school and family activities. They believe that Jesus has made a loophole in the first commandment by placing their family above everything else. One by one as we go through each commandment students learn that they cannot keep a single commandment. And adults are no different. If you or I had lost our bible and our cell phone, I suspect the first place we would go would be to the nearest Verizon store.

When Jesus does this same kind of teaching, he is teaching people that Paul describes as "infants in Christ" who are not ready for solid food or the gospel. Jesus doesn't start with the first commandment but skips the whole first table of commandments and goes to the fifth commandment, "You shall not kill". Like many confirmation students, these infants in Christ believe that if they have not taken the life of anyone with their hands, then they have kept this commandment. Infants in Christ also believe that if they have not had sexual relations with another married person, then they have not committed adultery.

Infants in Christ also believe that if you say something bad about someone else, but at least you are not saying these things to their faces, then you have not broken the 8th commandment of bearing false witness against your neighbor.

However Jesus gives these infants in Christ some solid food that is difficult to swallow when he says that whoever is angry against his neighbor has already broken the 5th commandment "you shall not kill." Jesus says that whoever looks with lust at a woman or man (and all of us will have opportunities to do this as we watch the cheerleaders and half-time entertainment of the Super Bowl today) has already broken the 6th commandment, "You shall not commit adultery". Jesus says that if your word cannot be trusted without placing your hand on a bible and swearing on it is the only way to ensure you will tell the truth, you have already broken the 8th commandment, "You shall not bear false witness". If you would like a longer sermon today, we can go through more of the commandments, but these three were enough to convince the people that Jesus was talking too, and I suspect we don't need to go through the remaining seven commandments to convince you that you have not kept every stroke of the letters of these commandments.

It might sound that Jesus has made the commandments that were first given to Moses more difficult to keep. It may sound as if Jesus had to close some of the loopholes and escape clauses of these commandments by adding something to them. You sometimes hear that Jesus is turning up the heat when he delivers these commands so you will know that you cannot keep them. But if you recall, Jesus said that not one letter or stroke of the letter of these commandments will be added to or subtracted from. Jesus does not need to add a few bylaws to the commandments as they were previously written for you to keep them. God's people have never been able to keep the commandments ever since Moses first handed them to the Israelites. No matter how many times Moses commanded his people to keep them, their choice or their will was not free from sin, but it was bound to sin.

Jesus did not teach the commandments in a different way so that these people that were hearing them would become righteous. Understanding the commandments does not make any of us more righteous. When Jesus taught about these commandments, his light did not shine on these people's sinful hands, eyes, and feet. His light illuminated the place where the desire to sin comes from, their hearts. Every one of our sins begins with a desire to sin, not an action of sinfulness. Our sinfulness begins before it reaches our hands or eyes or feet. Cutting a hand or foot or eye from your body will still leave you with a desire to sin and you might be surprised what trouble a one eyed, one handed, one footed sinner can still get into.

I don't know if we need to go much further for you to understand that you and I have a problem. It isn't that we need to brush up on making better choices. The people after the flood at the time of Noah did not make any better choices after they repopulated the earth. Writing the commandments on stone tablets instead of speaking these words didn't make these commandments easier to keep. It isn't that we need longer sermons that cover more of the commandments and teach you how to become more righteous so that Jesus doesn't have so much work to do. You and I have only one solution to the law that convicts us that we are sinners. The law does have a purpose and it isn't to make you feel good. It is to drive you to Jesus who does not **teach us about righteousness, but who is our righteousness**. Our righteousness that cannot be earned but is given to you as a gift.

The solution to the commandments for you and I is to hear that your sins are forgiven. This is the absolute solution to our sin which we also call the absolution. These words are repeated Sunday after Sunday as we begin each worship service because we need to hear them again and again. Now you have been given some real food from God to chew on. His gospel, which is the good news that your sins are forgiven, and it is Jesus who chose to do this for you. Amen