

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 6 – July 7, 2024
Matthew 5:17-26 – In Praise of the Law
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we thank and praise our God for the blessing of his good and perfect law, given and summarized in the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are a blessing. What a gift that God has not only created and redeemed us, but he's shown us exactly how to live in a way that pleases him. There's no need to hope or guess what it takes to please our God. You know for sure. Keeping his law, treasuring it and obeying it with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, this is how you can truly love your God and thank him for making you his own.

No wife deserves her husband's love, no husband deserves the love of his wife. How much less do we, the bride of Christ in the church, deserve the love of our Lord? We deserve nothing, but what a privilege that he teaches us to honor him by keeping his commands. What a joy to obey him in thanksgiving for his grace.

Therefore Psalm 19, the appointed psalm for today, is a hymn of praise for the law. "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the just decrees of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

Another psalm in praise of the law is Psalm 119. "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day... Righteous are you, O LORD, and right are your rules... Your righteousness is righteous forever, and your law is true... Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules. Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble."

And yet, there are many who despise God's law. Liberal denominations often preach that the law is oppressive. They say the spirit of the Ten Commandments is good, but we need to bring it up to date. When the sixth commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery," it no longer applies like it did for ancient Israel. So they offer their own modern interpretation, an interpretation that's appealing to society. Adultery has nothing to do with cohabitation, they say, or homosexuality, or pornography, it just means you should be faithful to your partner. Whatever feels right is acceptable to God, as long as it doesn't harm anyone. Mutual consent is all that matters.

This is terrible. The moral law of God never changes. We know that the civil laws of ancient Israel no longer apply, and the ceremonial feasts and sacrifices were all fulfilled and superseded in Jesus, but the moral law is timeless. It cannot be rewritten to suit the whims of the age.

Even if cohabitation and homosexuality seem harmless, such things are still sins against your own body. And remember that your body is not your own. You are members of the body of Christ. Your body is created by God, redeemed and bought with the price of his blood, so honor him with your body.

Yet liberalism continues abusing the law. It says, "Since the gospel sets us free from the oppressive demands of the law, then all are welcome. We won't judge or rebuke anyone." Well, it's true, all are welcome in the church. But remember that when Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors, he also said to them, "Go and sin no more."

Another abuse of the law is when churches refuse to preach it to Christians. They say there's no need to teach believers how to live a God-pleasing life, because when Jesus forgives us, good works are naturally bound to follow. This is just as bad as liberalism. The law still has tremendous value for Christians, since the life of faith is not automatic. We still need to hear God's instructions daily. The Holy Spirit works through the law to teach us how to live before God in righteousness and faith.

Really, in the Christian life of faith, obedience and righteous living require diligent training, discipline, constant instruction in God's law. It takes effort. A lifelong struggle against sin, always repenting and being forgiven and resolving to do better. It takes the continual work of the Holy Spirit in the church. It takes hearing preaching and God's word, meditating on it day and night in your homes, disciplining yourself against temptation, and praying for God's deliverance from it. And it takes constantly returning to the Lord's Table, to receive

forgiveness in his body and blood, heavenly food that strengthens you to walk according to God's word.

So even among Christians, we should never hesitate to speak the law to one another. We can say to those who have stopped coming to church, "Remember the Sabbath day." We can tell gossipers, "You shall not bear false witness." We can tell those who harbor resentment, "You shall not murder." And we can tell the ungenerous, "You shall not covet."

When we hear rebukes like these, we should never get upset or defensive. We should never say, "Don't judge me!" Because speaking the law is not the same as passing judgment. Any Christian can rebuke and exhort his neighbor, in love.

If people feel judged when they hear the law, it's only because the law is doing its work. Only the unrepentant hate good laws and get angry. For the chief purpose of the law is to show us our sin and bring us to repentance. Showing our sin is a great blessing. It's no bad thing to expose and confront wrongdoing. In fact, it's a good and loving thing to do, so sinners may turn and repent and find help and salvation in the blood of Jesus.

Thanks be to our perfect lawgiver, Jesus Christ, who comes to preach the law in his Sermon on the Mount, so we can learn to repent. Jesus explains that the commandments are not a matter of external obedience, but an attitude of the heart. They're not a matter of what feels good – subjectively – in our own eyes, but what actually is good – objectively – in the sight of God. They're all inclusive, says Jesus. Adultery includes all sexual sin of any kind. Murder includes all anger. Obedience and reconciliation are more pleasing to God than sacrifice.

So we must never be upset or uncomfortable when Jesus preaches the law. Our Lord interprets the deep meaning of the Ten Commandments, showing us that fulfilling the law goes far deeper than we think. It may not be hard to obey the external commandment, "You shall not murder." But Jesus says even being angry with your brother is murdering him in your heart. It may not be hard to obey the external commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." But Jesus says even looking at a woman lustfully is committing adultery with her in your heart.

The law cuts beneath all the surface level externals, down to the heart and marrow of our sinful nature. It shows how we're all utterly sinful, deserving death, helpless to save ourselves. And since the law good and perfect, it demands perfection, and perfect justice. "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."

Yet as holy as it is, the law lacks one thing. It's powerless to save. It was never intended for saving; only for bringing sinners to repentance and teaching God's people. The law cannot save, only the gospel does that.

So listen to the gospel. In his love, our heavenly bridegroom knew our frailty, that we could never keep the law for ourselves. So this is the greatest blessing of the law, that our Lord came not to abolish it, but to fulfill it for us. Jesus alone kept the law in every detail on our behalf, actively and passively. He did everything the law commands in his perfect life, and he also suffered every penalty that the law demands, in his perfect death, in our place.

Everything about the law is in service to the gospel. The law calls us to repentance so we may turn by faith to the gospel. And for those who are in Christ Jesus, baptized into his death, who died to sin and are raised to live with him, now the law shines out as a beautiful guide, a perfect teacher. Obeying the gospel is no burden, but a joy for those who live under the grace of Jesus.

Grant us faith, heavenly Father, faith to trust your law, to accept its conviction, and come before you in humble repentance. But then make us look to your dear Son, to his perfect life of obedience to the law and his perfect death on our behalf. Apart from him we would perish eternally. So give us faith in your forgiveness. And give us faith to love your good law and strive to obey it. We know our weak efforts to serve you merit nothing, but give us faith and credit us with the perfect righteousness of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.