

Trinity VI

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Date: 24 July 2022

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[0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Please be seated. Of all the sermons that have been preached from the beginning of the church until now, whether written or not, the most famous is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Not only is it the most famous sermon, it includes the most well-known teachings of Jesus, whether someone has read it or heard of it or not. Unfortunately, that also means that it is the most widely misunderstood teaching and also the most disobeyed teaching that our Lord has given to his followers.

In our gospel text today, our Lord tells us that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, we will not see the kingdom of heaven. This is quite the radical claim, and it will become clear once we understand a bit more about the Pharisees.

It's easy to get a very negative opinion of the Pharisees as a whole when we're reading the gospels. And the number of times that Jesus has altercations with them seals the deal that these guys are legalistic and they don't really care about righteousness, at least the way that Jesus describes it.

[1 : 18] However, this is not historically true. Jesus was right in condemning them for their actions, but he didn't condemn them because they weren't following the law of Moses. In fact, the Pharisees would have been the most rigorous followers of the Mosaic law.

They were primarily concerned with practicing the religion and the politics of the Torah, the Old Testament law. They had good precedent to do so. In fact, there are many examples in Exodus and the book of Deuteronomy, where God tells the Israelites that they will be blessed or cursed based on how they live out the precepts of the law.

Some of the most descriptive words that God says about his longsuffering and his patience towards Israel come after a time of rebellion from the law of Moses. The Pharisees before the time of Jesus had seen foreign nations come and defile the temple of God by erecting pagan altars upon the altar in their temple.

They knew that the reason why God punished Israel in the past was because of their disobedience to the greatest revelation of his character, which was the law. St. Paul, one who was trained as a Pharisee, saw the law as something very good.

He learned this from his predecessors. Therefore, if he were to examine their lives in accordance with the law, well, they would have been righteous. How can we, as Jesus says, have a greater righteousness than the Pharisees if they were the ones most concerned about following the law?

[2 : 47] Well, following the law was the way a Jewish person could be blessed and the way that the whole nation was to be blessed and also to bless the other nations that came into contact with them. So what could Jesus mean then?

You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you 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. To be clear, Jesus was not changing the commandment against murder.

After all, just before this text, in verse 17, Jesus makes clear that he has not come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it. Neither an iota or a dot will pass from the law until heaven and earth pass away.

Rather, what he was doing was giving the spirit behind the law. He was showing the kind of internal life or character that was necessary to truly live out the law. Another way of understanding his

teaching is him saying, You've heard it said that you shall not murder.

[3 : 58] I tell you that you're correct. And you must also not be angry with your brother. Or you have also not lived up to the precepts of the law. So what Jesus says here is not without any kind of Old Testament support.

When Moses is renewing the covenant with Israel, after the unfaithful generation caused them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, he tells them that if they obey the law that was given through Moses, he will circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants, so that they may love the Lord with all of their heart and all their soul.

God always desired a right character and intention. For his people. Not just the actions. And that is precisely what Jesus is telling us. He does not just desire us to follow the rules as if we can check off the box, wipe our hands clean and say, I've done all I need to do.

I'm done here. What Jesus is calling his disciples and us to do is to be concerned about our character, about our intentions towards other people. This is what it means to have true righteousness.

To see beyond the letter of the law towards the spiritual reality. This spiritual reality that the law witnesses to is a character that is the same as Jesus Christ.

[5 : 14] So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift.

Anger has no place in the Christian towards his brother or sister who has been reconciled to them. Another way of saying it is this. The primary way that we operate in the church, the body of baptized Christians who have renounced our old ways of living with grudges against our neighbors, is by forgiving each other.

After all, no student is greater than his master. Our master, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in love offered himself on the cross so that we may be reconciled to God.

How foolish would it be for us to say that we have a right to be angry with someone else and wish them ill? Jesus did not do that. And if anyone has the right to do that, it would have been him.

He was crucified by his own people, and the Roman government was complicit in this act. Both the people of Israel and the people of Rome turned their backs on Jesus, the God who offered them life and a way towards true righteousness.

[6 : 28] If anyone has the right to be angry, it is the eternal God who was betrayed. Yet, that is not how it goes. God has offered a way of redemption for us in his Son, Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we have died to our old ways of living. We have been born again with the holy water of God in our baptism, and our old man has died. It has no true power over us.

We have been given a power in our baptism, and this power is the ability to forgive other people, to forgive our offenders. Even those who have done us the greatest wrongs can be forgiven, because we have been raised with Christ in his resurrection to live a new life, a life of forgiveness.

When you look upon Christ in the sacrament today, and when you consume him, know that you are gazing upon and consuming the God who forgives you and commands you also to do the same.

This is how we become like Christ, by dying to ourselves and living in Christ, who dwells in us and we in him. This is what it means to have a greater righteousness in the Pharisees, to be wholly consumed with love for even our greatest enemies.

[7 : 47] In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.