

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

So, are we going to hell if we call someone a fool? There's a question to get us started today. Honestly, we have all probably called someone something much worse. Today, Eagles and Chiefs fans and other fans will be calling each other fools today, maybe even the officials? Now, we don't need to list all of the unacceptable words that we use against others in anger. Just use your imagination.

We insult classmates at school, people in the pews with us, neighbors, our own family members. Is God going to judge us if we use angry words against them? And the answer, from Jesus, seems to be, *yes*. And His answer should leave us all a little nervous.

Building on Jesus' call last week for our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus now gets into the 5th Commandment—*You shall not murder*. In the Small Catechism, Luther explains the depths of this commandment in this way, "We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need." It is not just going out and taking another person's life.

But notice how Jesus applies this text. It has implications for being angry with someone—for insulting—for swearing—for name calling—for hatred in our hearts—for longstanding grudges. And although the insults and curses roll off of our tongues so easily, there are dire consequences for such words. So, how do we read this text?

In our reading, from Matthew chapter 5, we continue with Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. We have been talking about the sermon these last few weeks. And let's notice again the location. Mountains are significant in Matthew's Gospel. And this setting will help us understand what Jesus is saying.

Next week we will talk about the transfiguration. The transfiguration likely occurs on Mount Hermon which is the highest mountain in the region, at over nine thousand feet. But the *Sermon on the Mount* happens near Capernaum along the Sea of Galilee. This location—up on this small mountain—will allow many people to hear Jesus. It will allow many people to see Jesus.

But there is a unique significance here. Jesus' preaching brings to mind Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai—to receive the Law—the Torah—God's instructions. You remember the story from Exodus 19-20.

The Israelites were rescued from slavery in Egypt. God was leading them to the promised land. But they stop at Sinai—and God makes an appearance. He tells them His name. He makes a covenant with His chosen people. And it is marked by thunder and lightning—thick clouds and a trumpet blast. And the whole mountain trembled. God spoke to His people there. It's quite a scene. A lot better than the halftime show today at the Super Bowl. And it all begins with the Ten Commandments.

Matthew wants us to think of Moses and Sinai as we encounter this text. The Gospel of Matthew contains five major teaching sessions. This is the first one. And Matthew's Hebrew readers—his first intended audience—would notice that this coincides with the Hebrew Torah—the books of Moses—the first five books of the Old Testament.

From this perspective, Matthew's *mount* becomes shorthand for Sinai. In a sense, Jesus reprises the role of Moses. He completes and perfects and fulfills that role. Moses had always been a sign foreshadowing the Christ who was to come. Jesus is the greater Moses.

Keeping all of this in mind, we start to understand what Jesus is saying so much better. As we have already seen over the last few weeks, the *Sermon on the Mount* is so much more than a suggestion for a better life. Even more, Jesus comments don't just intend to make us feel guilty. Although it is hard not to feel some remorse when reading this text. We are all sinners in need of a Savior.

But really, this isn't how the Ten Commandments functioned in the Old Testament either. Remember that as God gives His commands, He begins with deliverance. He chose this people for Himself. He remembers His covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He has rescued His people from slavery and

oppression in Egypt. He reveals to them His name—the divine name of God—*Yahweh*—before He makes the first demand. And He even talks with them about atonement for sin—forgiveness—in this same chapter.

So, as we read Matthew 5, if we make Jesus' commands the central point—when we make this all about morality—a Protestant work ethic—do your best—try harder—we miss the true blessing. We make this text about us, rather than about Christ. And in doing so, Jesus becomes more like a psychologist than a Messiah. He becomes a life coach—an influencer—a wiseman.

But we hear lots of advice in our culture. And Jesus' voice gets drowned out in all of the media pouring into our lives through our screens. Even worse, we often value our own opinions—our own intuitions and feelings—over the teachings of our Savior.

In this sermon, we will briefly sketch how we might rightly handle the word of truth here in this section of the *Sermon on the Mount*. The main focus needs to be on Jesus as we read. We will take His teaching seriously. In addition, the blessings with which the whole sermon began—the beatitudes—should be central in our thinking. Just like with the 10 Commandments, Jesus begins with what God has done for His people. The Gospel is of first importance, the most important!

Now admittedly, Jesus' commands are not difficult to find in this passage. And they are shockingly demanding. Five times in the sermon, we hear Jesus say something like, “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.”

And with these words, Jesus takes on the false ideas of the first century Jewish culture—and especially the Pharisees. They were the influencers of their day. They shaped the culture in fundamental ways. They fashioned the conversation in the marketplace of ideas—very much like actors and athletes and talking heads on YouTube do today.

Throughout Jesus' sermon, many think that Jesus is expanding the ethical horizon of the moral Law. He is turning the Law up a notch. He pulls back the curtain on the issues of anger and murder, lust and adultery, marriage and divorce. And admittedly, the way He reads the Law is demanding.

But remember last week when Jesus said that He had not come “to abolish the Law and the Prophets.” And maybe it is better to say that this is just what the moral Law intended all along. God intended more than a minimalist understanding of these commandments. He is not interested in all of our excuses and qualification when it comes to His commands. And the popular opinions of Jesus' day simply attempted to dull the Law's sharp edge. In fact, they thought they knew the Law better than God.

For Jesus, the moral Law shows us His perfect intention for society—for us. Even more, the Law judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart. What we find here is the will of God for all of humanity. It describes a right relationship with our God. It describes healthy relationships with one another. And it looks at life in light of the new covenant that Jesus comes to put in place.

Again, Jesus said that He came to fulfill God's Law—ALL OF IT! His life is the Perfect One. It is His righteousness that shines through all of this. And the good news of this sermon rings out loudly with this confession. These are the most comforting words since His beatitudes. Christ came to fulfill the Law.

Now, the Law is holy and righteous and good—even good for us. We may not transgress it in any of the ways defined in our passage today. We cannot speak about our neighbors and friends and family members with hateful and coarse language.

In the beginning, God gave His own image to humanity. Then sin came, and the image was dulled down. But in Christ, that image is beginning to be restored. And so, we should respect the people He has placed around us because of the dignity that God gives to each one of us. We should think of one another as God's special creation—with a God-given dignity and value.

And this extends to all of the content of our reading today—anger, lust, unnecessary divorces, ungodly oaths. And it leaves us with no place to hide. But just because it accuses us is not a reason to discard it. The Law is not something to ignore because it is demanding. We cannot live as if there is no moral Law—any more than we can live as if God didn't exist. Just as Superman can use x-ray vision to seek out a villain trying to hide from him, so we cannot live as if God does not see our sin.

But again, Jesus' purpose here is not to abolish, but to fulfill the Law. And that is a very different thing. Since He is holy and perfect, He does not need to fulfill the Law for Himself. Remember that He is the one who gave the Mosaic Law in the first place. Instead, Jesus does what He does so that His perfect obedience may be credited to those who receive Him. Even to those who are unable to keep the Law's demands.

Lutheran scholar David Scaer says this about the *Sermon on the Mount*, "The message of the Sermon is not a demand, driving the Christian to an impossible moral perfection, but it comes to the Christian as a demand fulfilled already in Christ and which is now made possible for believers, since it has first reached its demands in Christ."

From this approach, the Law's requirements are not openly disregarded but fulfilled. Jesus' preaching will not allow us to snub our noses at God. Instead, the Law becomes a point of joyful reception. And in this fulfillment, we confess that Jesus is the Messiah—the One to whom the Law and the Prophets were pointing all along.

The thought that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees—heard in a first-century context—would have been devastating. We often use the term *Pharisee* to suggest *hypocrisy*. We know of Jesus' later confrontation of their thinking and way of life. Read Matthew 23 and Jesus' Woe statements to them.

Jesus says, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." They practiced not what they preached.

But this isn't how the crowd would have viewed them—not yet anyway. The Pharisees were thought to have reached the height of holiness. They were the keepers of the Law. They sat on Moses' seat.

But from Jesus' vantage, theirs was a righteousness that fell well below what God would accept. Most especially, this was because "apart from faith it is impossible to please God." They snubbed their nose at Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, and thus everything else fell apart.

Those who teach that people merit God's righteousness by works of the Law commit the worst of errors. Paul tells us that "by the works of the Law no flesh shall be justified." The righteousness of which Jesus speaks is qualitatively different from that of the Pharisees. It is a gift appropriated by faith alone. And faith—if it is faith—leads to obedience—every time.

But after everything we have said today about hearing this preaching as a Word of grace—as a Word of Christ for you—let's not miss that this is what God wants for us—even demands of us. And now, because of grace we are free to receive such a word with gratitude for His wisdom.

We are even empowered by His Word. And His Word does what it says. It does what it says in us. The Gospel can rightly function to magnify the Law. And the Law is far more spiritual than we suppose. Christ is bidding us to spell out in our lives the implications of our new existence in Him.

So, the Sermon on the Mount must be interpreted in light of its primary recipients—the disciples—those Christ has called to follow Him in the way of the cross. Those He has taken out of the crowd to walk in His footsteps. We cannot take these verses and divorce them from the rest of Matthew's Gospel. Hope you got that pun today.

And thus, we can see that Jesus is not just giving a new set of rules. He is not just turning up the heat on a world full of sinners. He fulfills the Law of Moses—but also the promises to Abraham, David, and the Prophets. Matthew certainly includes hints of Moses and Sinai throughout this passage. But Jesus is so much more than a new Lawgiver or a second Moses. Jesus is Savior and Lord. And Jesus came to make disciples.

But this also means that Jesus did not come to sit on the sidelines of our lives and be our coach. He isn't cheering us on as we do things our way—like some fan at the Super Bowl. This view leads to reckless immorality. Rather, Jesus took the field in our place because we need what only He can offer—a righteousness that looks like the one He describes in our text—a righteousness that is His by nature—that is ours by faith—that becomes active in our lives by the Spirit's presence in our hearts. He is our Most Valuable Player in our lives, for He redeems us by grace.

And on account of this, we are freed from the Law's mere accusation. We are able to walk by faith in the Spirit—bearing good fruit—fruit that looks like these words of Jesus in our text. So, of course we can't go along calling people fools—or other angry names. He empowers us to see our family members, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors as those for whom He died. And thus, all this harsh language for others—that comes so easily to us in anger—has so place.

As Christ's disciples we must always look first to His provision, not our personal performance. Our obedience is not the basis of our relationship with God. Instead, it reflects the relationship God has graciously bestowed in Christ. And in this new situation—created by Christ's call—we are able to grapple with the Law as God's holy will for us.

So, speak well to one another. Be reconciled to one another. Extend the grace that Christ has extended to you. And may God continue to teach us by the Holy Spirit—in the school of experience—the high art of rightfully handling His Word of truth. May we receive His instruction with appreciation, even if confronts us. And may we recognize that even when God's Word demands so much of us, it always offers even more. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

+Soli Deo Gloria+